



# POSITION STATEMENT

## **Responsiveness to ALL Children, Families, and Professionals: Integrating Cultural and Linguistic Diversity into Policy and Practice**

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### **Introduction**

For optimal development and learning of all children, individuals who work with children must respect, value, and support the culture, values, beliefs, and languages of each home and promote the meaningful, relevant, and active participation of all families. Legislation and recommended practices call for individualized approaches to serving infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities and their families. Individualized services begin with responsiveness to differences in race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, education, income, family configuration, geographic location, ability, and other characteristics that contribute to human uniqueness (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

### **Personal and Organizational Responsiveness**

Responsiveness grows from interpersonal relationships that reflect a mutual respect and appreciation for an individual's culture, values, and language. Responsiveness must be both personal and organizational for optimal outcomes of development and intervention services. Responsive early childhood programs and professionals honor the values and practices within the families being served as well as among people providing the services.

In this concept paper, we will extend these commitments to explicitly address implications for culturally and linguistically practices. The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has adopted the following seven (7) characteristics of responsive organizations:

1. Respect for the values and practices of all members;
2. Encouragement of multiple viewpoints to enrich the whole organization;
3. Seeking ways to extend competence of the leadership as well as practitioners, with regard to differences in family cultures, values, and languages;
4. Development, implementation, and review of policies and procedures in recruitment and leadership development at all levels of service to ensure meaningful local, state, national, and international representation and participation of people from different cultural, ethnic, and language backgrounds;
5. Encouragement and support of the development and dissemination of products that address family cultures, values, and languages;
6. Meetings and conference presentations that incorporate the impact of family cultures, values, and languages in all early childhood activities and services; and
7. Incorporating evidence-based practices with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These practices are critical to assessment and intervention, including practices with young children who are dual language learners and those who speak various dialects of English.

### **DEC strongly believes in respecting the values and practices of all members.**

Respecting diverse values and practices is an ongoing commitment of DEC. This commitment is made explicit in DEC's Code of Ethics: "Demonstrate our respect and concern for children and families, colleagues and others with

whom we work, honoring their beliefs, values, customs, and culture" (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000, p. 163). Respect, however, can be difficult to communicate across diverse cultural and linguistic parameters. What is considered respectful within one culture may not be perceived as such within other cultures (Barrera, 2000; Lynch & Hanson, 2004). Often, underlying differences in cultural beliefs and practices contribute to ineffective or disrespectful interactions between individuals (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999). Barrera and Kramer (2009) identify two qualities essential to effectively communicating respect: *reciprocity* and *responsiveness*. These two qualities give insight into how to increase the probability that actions are perceived as respectful, even across diverse cultural and linguistic parameters (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2000). To further increase this probability, we suggest that an atmosphere of respect across culture and language parameters requires an active commitment to dialogue.

**DEC strongly encourages multiple viewpoints to enrich the whole organization.**

Many professional organizations seek to “move beyond merely valuing diversity to building an inclusive, high-performing organization. In the process, diversity ceases to be merely a human resource initiative and becomes a fundamental competency: Diversity and inclusiveness become the responsibility of everyone in the organization” (Norris & Lofton, 1995, p. 2). Organizations and service programs should seek not to merely focus on differences, but to build inclusiveness around a shared set of values and beliefs articulated in the organization’s mission statement, position statements, strategic plan, and other documents. For example, the DEC Executive Board recently adopted a five-year strategic plan that includes goals and objectives that relate to planning, developing, and implementing activities, products, and outreach efforts that promote the inclusion of multiple viewpoints and the increased participation of historically underrepresented populations within the field of ECSE.

**DEC strongly believes in seeking ways to extend the competence of its leadership (e.g., families, governance, practitioners), as well as acknowledge different leadership styles with regard to understanding similarities and differences in family cultures, values, and languages.**

DEC believes that leadership development is key to creating quality EI/ECSE programs. Members (e.g., service providers, family members, students, faculty and trainers, Subdivision members, etc.) need not be in formally appointed supervisory, administrative, or organizational roles to be considered “leaders” and to exercise leadership that creates system change. DEC believes its membership can and should exercise leadership at the local, state, and national levels to impact practice and policy in the field. However, as a professional organization, DEC does provide vital leadership to its members as well as in the larger national political context. Given the diverse nature of global, national, and local professional environments, it is critical to ensure that appointed leadership in organizations and service programs is also culturally responsive and culturally informed. Further increasing the diversity of those in appointed leadership positions makes a positive statement about the cultural capacity of an organization. Three critical components emerge and are valued by DEC in developing a culturally responsive and culturally informed leadership at all levels, whether as direct service providers or as members in professional organizations. The first is continually exploring diverse paradigms; the second is supporting opportunities for diverse voices to be heard; and the third is finding avenues for integrating the diverse contributions those voices can make (Norris & Lofton, 1995; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

**DEC strongly believes in the development, implementation, and review of policies and procedures in recruitment and leadership at all levels of service to ensure meaningful local, state, national, and international representation and participation of people from different cultures, values, and languages.**

The meaningful participation of diverse individuals is critical if we are to effect change in services for all children and families (Horn-Wingerd, & Hyson, 2000). Thus, it is important that policies and procedures related to recruitment and leadership at all levels of service reflect a degree of commitment to achieve participation of diverse individuals. This includes local schools and programs, state and federal agencies, institutions of higher education, and national organizations such as DEC. This commitment could in turn help to increase interest and

membership of diverse individuals in the early intervention (EI) and early childhood special education (ECSE) profession.

There is a critical need in our field for leaders from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds who can serve as mentors to young professionals (Elliott et al. 1999a; Fenichel, 1992; Hood & Boyce, 1997). Issues of fragmented health, education, and social service systems; low wages; lack of career paths; and limited access to formal training, higher education and professional development contribute to the lack of diverse personnel advancing into leadership positions (Elliott et al. 1999a; Kagan & Bowman, 1997). In a publication about creating a viable career development system for practitioners, Elliott and colleagues noted that to be able to better address the needs of children and families, professionals need to reflect and represent the communities they serve (Elliott et al. 1999b, p. 2).

The shortage of qualified personnel to work in Early Intervention (EI), Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), and special education continues (23rd Annual Report to Congress, 2001). This shortage is accentuated by the need for qualified personnel of different cultures, values, and languages. Hanson (2004) found that even with the increasing number of nonwhite, non-Anglo-European children and their families being served in EI, there is still a disproportionately low representation of workers of non-Anglo-European cultures being prepared to serve these children and families. Similarly, few higher education preparation programs are responsive to ethnic and language diversity (Gay, 2002; Isenberg, 2000; Kushner & Ortiz, 2000) or have diverse faculty (American Psychological Association, 1996a and 1996b).

According to Elliott and colleagues, many who advance into early childhood leadership positions lack the necessary support and training to allow them to address the needs of the communities they serve. Often disparities between the backgrounds of early childhood leaders and members of the communities they serve lead to policies and practices that are inconsistent and inappropriate with the values and needs of those communities. In addition, the diversity of professional preparation and professional roles is much greater in early childhood fields than in other areas of education (Horn-Wingerd, & Hyson, 2000).

In order to address these disparities, the American Council on Education identified four key issues for advancing leadership in higher education: (1) leadership development, (2) career advancement, (3) workplace and campus climate, and (4) mentoring (Brown, Ummersen, & Hill, 2002). In essence, these areas apply to all members of the EI/ECSE field (from various backgrounds, race/ethnicity, income levels, disciplines, skill levels, etc.). Organizations and service programs have the opportunity to establish a blueprint or guide for promoting the untapped potential for new and emerging leaders as well as supporting existing leaders and their advancement. Diversity among leadership throughout EI/ECSE is essential to ensuring educational equity for all children and families (Moore, 1997; Sánchez, & Thorp, 2008).

**DEC strongly encourages and supports the development and dissemination of practices and products that address family cultures, values, and languages.**

To meet the needs of an increasingly diverse number of children, families, and professionals in the early childhood field, it is important that **our practices**, materials, and products reflect and address different family cultures, values, and languages (Santos, Fowler, Corso, & Bruns. 2000). Practices that are culturally responsive, linguistically appropriate, and based on current research on Dual Language Learners need to be disseminated to practitioners in the field through structured professional development opportunities so that they can be incorporated into practice. The dynamic nature of our field also warrants the development of materials and products that reflect current and state-of-the-art evidence- and value-based practices. The impact of differing values, beliefs, and practices must be addressed and infused across all relevant topics in DEC products. A separate section on “diversity” is often insufficient in addressing the full impact on practices and, in fact, carries the danger of

perpetuating a dominant culture/other paradigm. For example, a booklet for families on transition should address how individual family values, beliefs, and practices may influence their participation in the transition process, choices of programs, expectations of children's readiness and overall development, and families' relationships with professionals. Finally, it is critical that material developers consider and address cultural and linguistic factors that impact accessibility, appropriateness, and adaptability, not only in terms of the format of materials, but also in the information and practices promoted in the products.

Organizations and programs must also give equal importance to creating and implementing an effective dissemination plan. Multiple venues to disseminate information and products must be considered to ensure that needed information reaches all possible audiences.

Accessibility is key to the success of any dissemination activity. Thus, developers of materials must consider the accessibility of their products not only in terms of disability access (e.g., Braille), but also in terms of languages (e.g., Spanish, American Sign Language, and other languages) and formats (e.g., video, audio, Web-based) in an effort to emphasize readability and comprehensibility.

Likewise, at the organizational level, dissemination in multiple formats is also desirable in order to reach diverse audiences. For example, information gathering for strategic planning might include specific target groups (e.g., family members, direct service providers, higher education faculty, etc.) and formats for input and discussion might vary (e.g., focus groups, online surveys, conference meetings, Web-based discussion groups, etc.).

As consumers, we need to encourage product developers to bring together a wide range of diverse voices to conceptualize, develop, implement, evaluate, and disseminate products. This is an important first step to ensure that materials address different family cultures, values and languages (Corso, Santos, & Roof, 2002). A flexible yet systematic plan must be in place to ensure that multiple perspectives are considered and addressed in all phases of product development, implementation, and dissemination. This plan should include concrete steps to recruit and retain individuals from a variety of backgrounds who will participate in all aspects of the development and dissemination of products. For example, a work panel composed of diverse stakeholders could provide continuous feedback to developers on the content and format of the product. Members of the panel could be recruited through agencies that serve diverse children and families who would benefit from the product being developed. The plan also should include a clearly conceptualized formative and summative evaluation plan that promotes and supports meaningful consumer participation. Developers should consider evaluation questions that examine the extent to which their products address the needs of families and children from a variety of backgrounds.

**DEC strongly believes in training and dissemination activities (e.g., meetings, events, conferences, and publications) that incorporate the impact of family cultures, values, and languages.**

Professional organizations such as DEC play a key role in promoting the transformation of the educational pipeline (from high school through postdoctoral and continuing education) so that the student population reflects the changing demographics of the population at large. Higher education and continuing education programs must embed multicultural competence in training, research, and practice issues. Within higher education, scholars acknowledge that professionals will not become culturally competent and inclusive until programs are reflective of those values (American Psychological Association, 1997; Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2008; Morey & Kitano, 1997; Phillips, 1993; Ponterotto, 1996). DEC professional development and personnel preparation activities seek to incorporate family cultures, values and languages. For example, explicit review criteria for conference proposals and publications are steps to ensure that multiple voices contribute to these activities. The translation of materials is a positive step toward addressing the needs of a linguistically diverse population.

Organizations and service programs should continuously examine and take steps to make necessary changes to ensure that what is projected to the larger community, such as policies, position statements, and products, reflect the value placed on the multiple viewpoints that its diverse membership contributes. Stakeholders take key values with them as they move within and across systems and organizations. The process of inclusion permeates the organization or service program's product development (e.g., journals, publications, Web site, brochures, etc.), conference planning, meetings, and communication styles at local, state, and national levels. For example, human services systems (Focal Point, 1994; Hernandez & Isaacs, 1998), child welfare systems (Child Welfare League of America, 1993), schools (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Lipman, 1998; Nieto, 1999) and communities (Pang, Gay, & Stanley, 1995) recognize a growing need on the part of agencies and institutions to examine their systems with respect to serving increasingly diverse populations. Thus, it is critical that organizations and service programs commit themselves to continuous improvement with regard to family cultures, values, and languages. Furthermore, organizations and service programs must engage in a process of ongoing monitoring and recalibration to assure adjustments that reflect our ever-growing appreciation and understanding of how to be responsive.

**DEC strongly believes in the use of respectful, responsive, and evidence-based practices with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These practices are critical to assessment and intervention, including practices with young children who are dual language learners and those who speak various dialects of English. These practices ensure that children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have equal access to educational services and learning opportunities. Equally important is that access occurs without diversity being viewed from a deficit perspective.**

#### Assessment

Conducting assessments with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds requires special attention to procedures, tools, and outcomes. Importantly, families should be an integral part of the assessment process including assessment planning, procedures, and interpretation. When standardized assessments are implemented, early educators must ensure that the instruments are reliable and valid for the population with whom they are being used and used in a way that the instruments are designed for. Additionally, if standardized assessment instruments are translated into the language of the child and family, early educators must recognize and acknowledge this in their assessment interpretation and in subsequent conclusions about the child's abilities. ***Importantly, because of the limitations in the use of standardized assessments with this population of children and families, other data sources must be collected and used to inform the interpretation of standardized scores*** (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Baca & Cervantes, Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004) For example, observations across environments, interviews with family and service providers, and discussions with cultural and linguistic informants are important to obtain a more accurate understanding of the family and the child's competencies. Observations need to be conducted across multiple environments to *record what language(s) is/are being used and by whom and how the child responds in each language to complete a valid language history in all languages*. Special attention should be paid to ensure that children are not assumed to have a disability if they have greater proficiency in their home language than in English or if their exposure to culture-based activities and beliefs is different from mainstream culture.

More specific recommendations around assessment are found in DEC's Recommended Practices.

#### Interventions

Children and families come to early intervention with different ways of behaving and communicating. Therefore, intervention planning and implementation should incorporate the family's language and culture to support and honor family practices. Dual language learners, including those children with disabilities, should be afforded the opportunity to maintain their home language while also learning English as there is no scientific evidence that

being bilingual causes or leads to language delay (Cheatham, Santos & Ro, 2007; Genesee et al., 2004; Kohnert & Derr, 2004; Kohnert, Yim, Nett, Kan, & Durán, 2005). Supporting a child's home language in fact acts as a linguistic resource and bridge to learning another language, even for children with disabilities. Research confirms that immersing DLLs fully in English when they are still in the active process of learning their home language actually has negative ramifications such as the inability to communicate with parents and relatives, preference for English and depressed academic and reading achievement in English in later school years (August & Shanahan, 2006; Espinosa, 2008; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). Similarly, children who speak diverse English varieties (e.g., Southern English, African American English, Appalachian English, Hawaiian Creole) should have their communication styles acknowledged and respected. Ideally, it is important that each effort to communicate be acknowledged and reinforced. Rather than being viewed as deficits, culture-based communication and behavior must be seen as resources from which the child's repertoire of communication and behaviors can be increased to support functioning in multiple cultural and linguistic communities (Cheatham, Armstrong & Santos, 2009). Importantly, all interventions for children and families must respect families' wishes and priorities as a component of family-based service provision (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000).

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

In an effort to provide the field of EI and ECSE with a common understanding of concepts, including culture, cultural and linguistic diversity, inclusiveness, multiculturalism, and values, the following is a glossary of selected terms. Many fields have long traditions of debate and dialogue to establish shared definitions and understandings of concepts around culture and language and these conversations continue. Since EI and ECSE are relatively young fields of study, such conversations are just emerging and a general consensus of common understanding is yet to be developed. In fact, many concepts related to culture and language may be unfamiliar or underdeveloped for readers. This section provides definitions of selected terms which the field has borrowed from various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and counseling. It is important to note that there are local, regional, and state differences on which terms are used, how they are used, and how they are interpreted within and across contexts. Each term carries various nuances depending on the user and listener. While this list is not exhaustive, it is our intention to define key terminology that can serve as the basis for establishing a common understanding among EI and ECSE researchers and practitioners around issues of cultural and linguistic diversity.

**Culture** refers to “shared and learned ideas and products of a society. It is the shared way of life of a people, including their beliefs, their technology, their values and norms, all of which are transmitted down through the generations by learning and observation” (Small, 1998, p. 72). It also refers to the “ideations, symbols behaviors — values, and beliefs that are shared by a human group” (Banks & Banks, 2001, p. 428). All individuals have a culture. “Culture is not a static phenomenon. It is sustained, challenged, or modified over time.” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 69). “Central to greater understanding [of culture] is the need to identify the diverse and frequently overlapping elements of ethnicity, which include national origin, race, minority status, language, and religion. Ethnicity can be an amalgam of any or all of these . . .” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 63). In addition, it is important to recognize that culture is a continuum and even though a family may self-identify as part of a particular culture, they may not ascribe to all of the practices and beliefs of that culture. Indeed, *“There exists no generic entity which may be dubbed the Southeast Asian family, the Native American family... each of these categories encompasses numerous cultures, their individual members may share tendencies in some areas and not in others. Individuals and families will be found to lie along different points of their cultural continuum (from traditional, for example, to fully bicultural). These are valid cultural distinctions only in the very broadest sense of the term”* (Anderson & Fenichel, 1989).

**Cultural linguistic diversity** refers to “behavioral, value, linguistic, and other differences ascribed to people's cultural backgrounds. Cultural diversity almost invariably includes some level of diversity in how language is

understood and used . . . [the terms] cultural diversity and cultural linguistic diversity [are often used] synonymously” (Barrera, Corso, & Macpherson, 2003).

**Dual Language Learners** refers to “both *simultaneous* and *sequential bilinguals*” (Genesee, et al., 2004, P. 4; Stechuk, Burns, & Yandian, 2006, p. 11). In recent years, this has become the preferred term for describing both young children who are learning two or more languages simultaneously and children who are introduced to a second language sometime between the ages of eighteen months and three years. The term “dual language learners” encompasses other terms frequently used, such as Limited English Proficient (LEP), bilingual, English language learners (ELL), English learners (EL), and children who speak a language other than English (LOTE) (Office of Head Start, 2008). The term *dual language learner* acknowledges that young children are in the process of acquiring language, not a particular language. The term is preferred to *English Language Learner*, which conveys an implicit assumption that the acquisition of English is the task for the child.

**Simultaneous bilinguals** are “children who learn two or more languages from birth or start within one year after being born” (Genesee, et al., 2004, p. 4).

**Sequential bilinguals** are generally “children who begin to learn an additional language after 3 years of age.” (Genesee, et al., 2004, p.4). However, some researchers suggest that a child who is introduced to a second language around eighteen months should also be considered a type of sequential bilingual, because they are undergoing a process of “early second language acquisition” (DeHouwer, 2009).

Both simultaneous and sequential bilinguals can be further divided into two groups:

a) The bilingual from a **majority ethno-linguistic community**:

The language and culture of the majority are either formally or unofficially recognized as “official”, while the acquisition of L2 is supported and valued (e.g., English/French in Montreal). These children are likely to achieve a high degree of bilingual proficiency.

b) The bilingual from a **minority ethno-linguistic community**:

The language and culture of the group is not reflected in the community at large and, in most cases, is not supported or valued (e.g., speakers of any other language other than English in the USA). These children need numerous enriched opportunities to speak and be exposed to the non-majority language (in the case of young children, often the home language) in order to reach proficiency. (Genesee, et al., 2004, p.7)

**Varieties of English** (e.g., African American English, Hawaiian Creole, Hispanic English, Southern Mountain English) are varied forms of the American English language and can include characteristic phonology, grammar, and accent none of which are intrinsically inferior (Corson, 2001).

**Inclusiveness** “is the act of encouraging belonging. Leaders of an inclusive organization do more than value diversity — they understand and aggressively eliminate barriers to performance that fall unevenly on different groups. In addition to creating a pluralistic culture, they establish standards of behavior that affirm inclusiveness” (Norris & Lofton, 1995, pp. 5–6).

**Multiculturalism** “refers to a condition in which the organization represents, values, understands, and respects several distinct cultures. ” (Norris & Lofton, 1995, p. 5).

**Multicultural Education** “A major goal of multicultural education, as stated by specialists in the field, is to reform the schools and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality. Multicultural education theorists are increasingly interested in how the interaction of race, class, and gender influences education” (Banks, 2004, p. 3).

**Values** refer to aspects of one's culture (e.g., behaviors, beliefs, language) that are given high positive weight, esteem and/or significance. For example, common values in cultures with Northern European roots include competition, autonomy and individualism. Cultures with roots in South American and many other non-European countries value intimacy, dignity and deference to elders (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000).

### **Summary**

In summary, DEC is committed to supporting and advocating for responsiveness to ALL children, families, and professionals by integrating cultural and linguistic diversity into policy and practice. These goals are central to DEC's overall mission of promoting policies and advancing evidence-based practices that support families and enhance the optimal development of all young children who have or are at risk for being identified with developmental delays and disabilities.

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**Division for Early Childhood**

**27 Fort Missoula Road • Missoula, MT • 59804 • Phone: 406-543-0872 • Fax:**

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