

# Preparing Culturally Competent Early Childhood Teachers

**E**ARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS ARE FAR FROM HOMOGENOUS. Today, 43 percent of children in the United States under age five are of a race or ethnicity other than White. The number of young children with disabilities is on the rise and classrooms frequently have at least one child with special needs. Children often have a language, culture, and religion different from their teachers.

While the demographic characteristics of young children have become more diverse, their teachers have not. The vast majority of teachers (68 percent) are White as is 80 percent of higher education faculty in early childhood programs.

A study published in the *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* and named the “Distinguished Article of 2005” examines how early childhood personnel preparation programs are preparing professionals to develop a much-needed cultural competency. The study, “Diversity competencies within early childhood teacher preparation: Innovative practices and future directions” examined the literature on innovative models focusing on cultural and ability diversity. The authors, Chih Ing Lim and Harriet Able-Boone from FPG Child Development Institute, identified promising practices that could be adapted by other teacher educators in the field.

Such practices are essential for teachers to create high quality learning environments for all children. In fact, recommended practices by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Division of Early Childhood emphasize that teachers need a thorough understanding and knowledge of the diverse needs and characteristics of families, children, and their communities.



## Cultural Diversity

Simply having a culture-specific class or two is not sufficient to prepare teachers to meet the needs of today’s diverse young children and their families. The literature review identified four strategies as the promising key features of programs that effectively address cultural diversity.

- **INFUSION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY INTO CURRICULUM.**

New Mexico provides a good example. Because the state license requires cultural competence, early childhood teacher preparation programs use all courses to address diversity in culture, language, socioeconomic status, and ability.

- **FIELD EXPERIENCES PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES TO WORK WITH DIVERSE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.**

Students need hands-on experience working outside of their comfort zones. For example, a program in South Carolina placed early childhood teachers in homeless shelters. Students engaged in reflective problem solving and kept journals to understand and confront their biases and values.

- **LEARNING EXPERIENCES DESIGNED FOR STUDENTS TO CONFRONT THEIR BIASES, VALUES, AND CULTURE.**

Students’ culture, values and biases are often so subtle that they do not realize the impact on their behavior (Lynch and Hanson 2004). To overcome such biases, some programs have students compare their family’s child-rearing practices and developmental milestones to those of a different culture or ethnic group. Others use role playing practice dilemmas to teach application and problem-solving skills.

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**FPG Snapshot**  
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• **COMMUNITY–UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS.**

All programs reviewed recognized the importance of fostering working relationships with community-based programs. For example, in one program a group of professionals, paraprofessionals, community members and families provided student teachers with multiple perspectives in working with young diverse learners.

## Diverse Abilities

A survey published in 2005 of those overseeing early childhood teacher preparation programs revealed that even though early intervention and special education is part of many programs' missions, coursework and training often fall short (Chang, Early and Winton).

Lim and Boone's review identified that unified or blended programs prepare teachers to work with both typically developing children and children with special needs. Key components of such programs include:

- General early childhood education faculty and early childhood special education faculty collaborate to plan and implement the program;
- In-depth courses providing students with knowledge and skills to support all children;
- Internships providing opportunities to work with children with and without disabilities;
- Students' assessment based on standards from both early childhood education and early childhood special education; and
- A blended early childhood license offered by the state.

Studies of blended programs show that students in blended programs were most competent in knowledge about child development theory, observing and understanding child development, and designing and modifying learning environments and strategies to meet individual children's needs. In addition, faculty in blended programs has more interdisciplinary meetings to plan program requirements.

## Conclusion

Several promising initiatives were seen repeatedly in the review. First, building a program based on recommended standards is critical. Infusing cultural diversity into all coursework and field experiences also proved to be a promising approach. Offering students opportunities to confront biases, values, and culture can help teachers develop knowledge and sensitivity to differences in child-rearing beliefs and developmental expectations. And early childhood faculty needs to collaborate with those in other disciplines and in the community to ensure students gain information from different disciplines and perspectives. ■

### Methodology

The authors searched educational article databases using the keywords, "diversity" or "multicultural" with either "early childhood professional development" or "early childhood teacher training." The search was limited to early childhood peer-reviewed journals. Edited publications by national organizations and agencies (e.g., U.S. Department of Education's New Teachers for a New Century) also were reviewed. More than 40 articles were included in the study.

### Recommendations

- This study was limited to culture diversity and children with special needs. Other aspects of diversity also warrant attention. Parents' sexual orientation, citizenship, religion, and age need to be addressed in teacher preparation programs.
- To ensure diverse leadership and faculty, programs need to provide fellowships, training grants or graduate scholarships to non-White students.
- There is a need for an evaluation tool that can measure effectiveness of personnel preparation programs that includes a longitudinal design and involves multiple approaches. A scale that can measure the quality of teacher preparation programs should be developed.

## To Learn More

Lim, C.I., & Able-Boone, H. (2005). Diversity competencies within early childhood teacher preparation: Innovative practices and future directions. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 26, 225-238.