PATHWAY FOUR: RESPECTING DIVERSITY

Regular celebration, reflection, and responsiveness to the experiences and backgrounds of children, families, and communities ensure that children have the best and most enriching learning experiences. When schools are ready for children and families from diverse backgrounds with diverse experiences, schools will be successful for all.

Key Understandings

The notion of diversity is complex. It includes: race/ethnicity, culture, language, socioeconomic status, cognitive and physical ability, and disparities in early education experiences to name a few. To better understand the Respecting Diversity Pathway, consider the following:

›   When schools and teachers are respectful of and responsive to children's cultural backgrounds and learning styles, then schools and teachers are in the best position to help them achieve at the highest level.

›   The population of each school and classroom needs to be assessed to ensure that all children, including those who are culturally, linguistically, academically, mentally, physically, and economically diverse feel welcome and supported.

›   The desired results of inclusive experiences for diverse children and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning that encourage children to reach their full potential.

›   Celebration of, reflection of, and responsiveness to the experiences and cultures of children, families, and communities at multiple levels through multiple methods ensure that children have the best and most enriching learning experiences.

> [Schools] are responsible for creating a welcoming environment that respects diversity, supports children's ties to their families and community, and promotes both second language acquisition and preservation of children's home languages and cultural identities. Linguistic and cultural diversity is an asset, not a deficit, for young children.
>
> – National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009

Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

Schools and communities may wish to reflect on the following questions as they engage in the Ready Schools Assessment Process. These questions, along with suggested tools, may help further the collaborative work of schools, families, and communities delving deeper into this pathway:

➤ Are the assessments you use comprehensive enough to assess all children's skills, strengths, and weaknesses?

➤ Does the curriculum integrate the knowledge and traditions of different aspects of diversity throughout the entire curriculum (i.e., are students with disabilities included in the general curriculum)? Does the curriculum immerse children in other cultures and ways of life that are not stereotypical?

➤ Are the "leaders" of the school and staff culturally competent, and conscious, of diversity issues, and do they understand the experiences of the diverse group they communicate with and serve?

➤ Do instructional practices reflect the diverse learning styles of children?

➤ Do instructional practices reflect an understanding of how culture may influence children's learning and engagement?

➤ Are teachers and school staff reflective of the community (i.e., are there procedures in place to achieve the goal of a culturally and linguistically competent workforce that include recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion)?

➤ Do instructional materials recognize diverse cultures and experiences within cultures?

Diversity Resources

Promoting Cultural and Linguistic Competency: Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Settings. This seven-page self-assessment document is for teachers and others providing services in early intervention and early childhood settings. It asks about the usage frequency and quantity of culturally-relevant materials and resources, varied communication styles, and certain values and attitudes. It provides concrete examples of the kinds of practices that foster such an environment.

Equity in Special Education Placement: A School Self- Assessment Guide for Culturally Responsive Practice. This is a comprehensive measure for administrators and is similar to the High/Scope Ready School Assessment with a particular focus on equity and culturally responsive practices.

Cultural and Linguistic Competence Policy Assessment. Although this assessment is focused on health disparities, the questions are also applicable to education disparities. These questions ask about an organization's (i.e., school's) cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills, as well as the organization's ability to sustain a diverse workforce that is culturally competent.

DEC Recommended Practice: Parent Checklist. This checklist is designed for parents to help evaluate programs for their children with special needs.

Creating an Anti-bias Learning Environment. This is a checklist that can be done by a variety of individuals, including teachers, staff, and families on whether the learning environment has diverse images and provides varied experiences through policies and curriculum.

Taking Action

The following guiding questions and activities can help schools and districts begin or further their work in respecting diversity and being more culturally competent.

> How can schools become more understanding and accepting of differences?

> Know who your students and families are by conducting a cultural inventory and examination.

> What are the culture/ethnicity/language of your students, families, and staff?

> Who participates and who does not in all aspects of your schools' leadership?

> What cultural images are represented throughout the school and does it match your children, families, and community?

> Are there outreach and events that occur in the community?

Create a Welcoming Atmosphere for All Families and Children

Create an atmosphere that is representative of the community and students. Take time to learn more about the diversity within your community and/or school, and determine ways to incorporate the diversity into the everyday school experiences of the children. Try some of these strategies (Ohio Department of Education, 2008):

> Learn about the language, daily rituals, and customs that students practice at home and incorporate them into school routines.

> Ask families to share their cultural heritage in a variety of ways, both within the classroom and across the school.

> Facilitate interactions and promote friendships between children with and without disabilities.

> Provide equipment that supports children with physical disabilities.

> Facilitate friendship between children from different backgrounds (this may also create a friendship between the families).

> Be mindful of and adjust to children whose home environment may be different from the school environment (e.g., children who are not used to routines at home may need help adjusting to routines at school; children who are not allowed to touch things at home may not be familiar with the use of touch as a way to learn).

Ready Schools in Action: Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools: Supporting English Language Learners

Carrboro Elementary, which has been implementing a dual language program from K–5 for several years, decided to begin a PreK dual language classroom in 2008. The implementation of this program has focused on the following aspects:

♀ Language distribution: How will the languages be used in the classroom? How much time will be devoted to each language? How will high status be accorded to both languages? How will the languages be used in the routines and activities during the day?

♀ Curriculum: What are the goals and objectives of the program? How do teachers integrate the Creative Curriculum into the dual language program? How do teachers use sheltered English and Spanish strategies in their instruction? What kinds of materials are necessary to implement the Creative Curriculum in a dual language program?

♀ Assessment: How do teachers integrate the Creative Curriculum assessment into the dual language program? Do other assessments need to be included to address specific areas of language development? How can teachers take language samples and use them to understand where children are in their language development?

♀ Language use throughout the day: How to use sheltered English and Spanish teaching strategies, and what materials are appropriate? How to assess children in both English and Spanish.

➤ Communicate verbally and in writing with families and community members in their native language.

» Translate written communication into native languages.

» Print materials in easy to read, picture and symbol formats.

» Train bilingual mentors to work effectively with families.

➤ Begin relationships with families prior to when the children start school.

➤ Conduct needs assessments to determine what families expect from the school community.

➤ Create a family and staff committee that meets regularly to enhance parent-school community relationships.

Strategies for Creating Learning Environments that Meet the Needs of All Learners

Professional Development:

Ongoing professional development is critical to providing information and ongoing support to educators who are working to increase their cultural competence. Professional development topics that will support increased attention to diverse populations include:

➤ Learning to choose and use assessments to develop Individualized Education Plans (IEP).

➤ Determining how alternative assessments help account for children's language acquisition, dialect, etc. and reduce the potential for bias.

➤ Becoming familiar with research-based strategies for working with diverse learners (academic, gender, socio-economic, non-English language learners, ability level).

➤ Focusing on what children communicate rather than how they communicate.

➤ Understanding the second language acquisition process.

➤ Re-examining classroom practice based on brain research about boys and girls.

➤ Adapting instruction for English Language Learners by:

» Paying attention to pacing and articulation when speaking and use other methods to convey meaning such as intonation and gestures.

» Using pictures and objects to support understanding.

» Utilizing peers as models.

- Understanding and acknowledging the impact of race, prejudice, and discrimination on the school experiences of children:

    » Addressing the role of socio-cultural history and the impact on children's learning and home environment (e.g., low expectations).

    » Questioning stereotypic images or perceptions of particular children's ability and learning level (e.g., black boys are aggressive, non-English speaking children cannot communicate with English-speaking children, physically challenged children are unable to be active).

- Choosing appropriate program design for second language learners, (i.e., dual immersion, transitional bilingual, content-based).

- Developing a broad repertoire of approaches to give learners multiple ways to acquire skills and knowledge.

- Developing multiple means for learners to express information and knowledge.

- Providing opportunities and structures for teachers and school staff to safely discuss their values and beliefs.

    » Beliefs and concepts of mental health or emotional well-being, particularly for infants and young children, vary significantly from culture to culture, and approaches to disciplining children are influenced by culture.

    » Different cultures have different expectations of their children for acquiring toileting, dressing, reading, writing, feeding, and other skills.

    » The definition of 'family' differs by culture (e.g., extended family members, fictive kin, god-parents).

    » Male-female roles in families may vary significantly among different cultures (e.g. who makes major decisions for the family, play and social interactions expected of male and female children).

    » Children may not have exposure to the same learning opportunities because of economics (e.g., knowing what a pencil is, how to hold a book, sense of learned helplessness, etc.).

Collaboration:

Find opportunities not only among adults but between children to collaborate. For example:

- Regularly collaborate with families in planning how to meet the needs of children at home and school.

- Provide opportunities for peer assisted learning to occur within the classroom.

- Meet regularly with teachers, staff, parents, and community leaders to come to shared understandings specific to particular groups of children (e.g., English language learners, black children, special needs children, poor children, etc.).