

HOME LANGUAGES AND CULTURES IN EARLY AND EDUCATION SETTINGS:

A Positive Identity Development Perspective Using the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Program

By: Ed T. Yonamine, M.Ed.

March 2004

Children with healthy social-emotional development perform better in school and life (p.7).¹ A sense of confidence, curiosity, competence, self-control, relating to others, trust and cooperation are traits for those children who exhibit positive self-esteem and develop a positive self-identity. (p.193-194).² Parents, childcare providers, and preschool teachers greatly affect how these key ingredients prepare a child for learning (p.194).³

In our current times, school performance is a major societal goal that influences how we instruct a young child. Thus, it is important to maintain strategies, interactions and activities that contribute to a young child's social-emotional development. This is critically important for those children whose home language is not English and/or have recently migrated with their families to the United States.

Early care and education practitioners believe that social experiences and daily interactions within group settings contribute to shaping a child's efficacy, positive self-identity, and biculturalism (p.70-71).⁴

What are the universal components of a high quality early care and education program that reflect and support a child's home language and culture?

Five universal qualities in early care and educational settings are (Devereux, 1999)⁵

1. Supportive interactions
2. Partnership with families
3. Activities and experiences
4. Daily program
5. Environment

Using these universal qualities, we can expand and begin to identify specific strategies or activities to frame and promote early care and education programming that support children to be bilingual and bicultural in the United States.

SUPPORTIVE INTERACTIONS AND NUTURING RELATIONSHIPS

- Understand that proper use and pronunciation of children's names reflect the base foundation for personal identity. Names identify who you are, reveal family traditions, establish birth order, or reflect historical references.⁶ Proper pronunciation of names that may be difficult or unfamiliar (even honest intentions) acknowledges respect and reception. Attachment begins with a simple feeling of belonging.

- Initiate learning simple words or phrases from children and families. This can offer opportunities for families to connect with program staff, and establish mutual trust and respect (p.62-71).⁷
- Tailor positive strategies to fit the child and situation (p.91)⁸ in context to cultural practices that are not harmful or hurtful.
- Consider non-verbal, visual environmental cues that reflect children from different linguistic or ethnic backgrounds.
- Talk to children at close proximity and eye level (not necessarily eye contact) in calm tones and adequate volume.
- Model pronunciation of difficult names for other children, and use proper names when in doubt.
- Individualization strategies are consistent in classroom practices.
- Classroom environment reflects ethnic and cultural traits of children present (on shelves with safe materials and objects, and on walls with appropriate visual displays).

PARTNERSHIP WITH FAMILIES/COMMUNITIES

- Be knowledgeable about a family's home culture-if you do not know, ask your families.⁹
- Help parents feel included and valued in the classroom or program, talk with parents.
- Beware of "cultural disconnection" issues and read up on bilingualism issues.
- Exhibit sensitivity, trust, and be willing to learn and value a child's culture and language(s).
- Ask parents for input in developing their child's program goals or educational goals (1999).¹⁰
- Use children's home languages at the program (p.100).¹¹
- Establish an ongoing system for exchanging information about each child with his or her family as well as to give families information about typical developmental skills and behaviors of young children (p.100).¹² It is also essential that program staff members are aware of and understand cultural contexts and differences in "typical development" of young children. Common cultural conflicts occur from a lack of awareness, training, or education around childrearing practices of other cultural groups.
- Establish and maintain funding in program budget for translation or interpretation services including printed material translations.
- Seek cultural or ethnic group assistance to best understand the social, political, and historical context related to a particular language and literacy, education, migratory history, etc. This ensures appropriate use of verbal and visual approaches, i.e., oral language use in contrast to print literacy.

ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES

- Incorporate home culture into typical play environment such as props, kitchen equipment, stories, music, mealtime practices, etc. – idea of "everyday" experiences.
- Offer children outdoor or indoor games, songs, etc., from their culture.

- Expand use of first and/or second language in classroom through auditory and visual (sounds and print) materials such as a "homemade" tape recording, books with audiocassettes, compact discs, software programs, "homemade" books in child's home language, and common label signs such as Handwashing or Art Center in child's home language.
- Practice safe and healthy routines, consistently, during the first couple weeks when a child enters a classroom/program – ask questions, show them how, and help them remind each other. The use of nonverbal gestures and physical directions (holding child's hands) help when child is not able to understand languages used in classroom (i.e., Spanish or English).
- Provide many opportunities for children to build language skills (p.78)¹³ in home language(s) as well as in English. It is a common construct in bilingual education that children will learn concepts such as letters, shapes, colors, etc., in their first language instead of a second language (p.29).¹⁴

DAILY PROGRAM AND PROGRAM DESIGN

- Maintain child/staff ratio and group size allowing children and staff to interact frequently through conversation and on-to-one assistance or interactions.
- Encourage community responsiveness to avoid isolation of a child from a specific cultural or ethnic group.
- Have predictable routines and schedules (p.68).¹⁵
- Communicate clear expectations and limits to all children especially when a child is not familiar with an American care and education setting. It is important to retain a bilingual staff member or a community translator or have parent(s) assist you with their child.
- Encourage families or children to bring their home culture into the daily program.
- Develop awareness and recognize culturally-based health practices.
- Provide specialized training for program staff when families are different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups especially in anti-bias education or multicultural approaches.
- Reflect on and examine program values and attitudes and taking action to maintain cultural relevancy and multiculturalism in practice and philosophy.
- When possible have program staff reflect the home language and culture of children and families. Programs can benefit because they are: familiar with the home language and culture, understand the ways of a particular cultural or ethnic group, and can ensure linguistic and/or cultural continuity.

ENVIRONMENT

- Create a home-like atmosphere that reflects children's families, home languages, and cultures (p.52).¹⁶
- Place at main entrance(s), a welcome or greeting banner or border art in different languages including English.
- Offer materials and activities/experiences that promote cooperation and group play as well as individual work and belongings (p.52).¹⁷
- Include items that support children's development of a sense of self (p.52)¹⁸, not just a day for a child, but for everyday.

- Foster children's individuality through individual cubbies, art folders, coat hangers, toothbrushes, etc.
- Develop materials such as lotto and matching cards, one-to-one correspondence, unit of sets, puzzles from simple to complex or knob-to-floor size formats, visual signs for personal hygiene and self-help routines (i.e. handwashing, toothbrushing, using restroom) in children's home language(s).

In college courses¹⁹, students explore and examine four fundamental questions to support positive identity development and promote home cultures and languages of children and families:

1. Who is in my care?
2. How are children represented in my environment?
3. Is a child seen, heard, or is him or herself in my environment?
4. Do I provide a fair and just environment where ALL children can flourish and grow?

The course curriculum goals built from these questions extend out to thinking about the five universal domains found in high-quality care and education settings. Therefore, with the goals of scaffolding, cultural relevancy, anti-bias education and bilingualism can be included to:²⁰

1. Affirm a sense of self and positive identity formation.
2. Nurture empathy and care for other peoples' home languages and cultures.
3. Develop critical thinking to stand up to biases, stereotypes, prejudices and oppression for self and others.
4. Act to resist biases, stereotyping, and prejudices.

The outcome is to always provide a fair and just environment where all children can flourish and grow. In this environment, children with home languages other than English or with different cultural values and assumptions other than American²¹, would be healthy socially and emotionally. It will take purposeful and intentional planning to make this happen. As a result, I believe children will be creative, optimistic, hopeful, persistent, active, problem-solvers, engaged, confident, leaders, empathetic to others and self-starters.²²

Through the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Program, teachers and administrators can continue improving their program quality with linguistically and culturally diverse children and families. The DECA Program provides resources, strategies, tools, and a systematic way to accomplish outcomes for healthy attachment, self-control and initiative. However, "...a single critical component to quality...rests in the relationship between the child and the teacher/caregiver, and in the ability of the adult to be responsive to the child (p.16).²³

For children with different home languages and cultures, a relationship is vital and a supportive response makes a difference to that child and his or her family.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Raver, C. & Knitzer, J. (2002). *What research tells policymakers about strategies to promote social and emotional school readiness among three-and four-year old children*. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty. Available at <http://www.nccp.org/media/pew02c-text.pdf>.
- ² Goldman D. (1994). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York, NY.: Bantam Books
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Dardner, A. (1991). *Culture and Power in the Classroom: A Critical Found for Bicultural Education*. Westport, CT.: Bergin & Garvey.
- ⁵ Devereux Foundation (1999). The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Program. Retrieved March 15, 2004 from <http://www.devereuxearlychild.org/>
- ⁶ Marrow, R.D. (1989). What's in a name? In particular, a Southeast Asian name? *Young Children*. Washington D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- ⁷ Yonamine, R. (2001). *Supporting Culture and Home Languages in an Early Childhood Setting: Learning from the Voices of Families and Teachers*. Unpublished master's thesis, Pacific Oaks College, Pasadena, CA.
- ⁸ Koralek, D. (1999). *Classroom Strategies to Promote Children's Social and Emotional Development*. The Devereux Foundation: Lewisville, NC.: Kaplan Press.
- ⁹ Cortez, J. (1999). *Infant and Toddler Caregiving: A Guide to Culturally Sensitive Care*. San Francisco, CA.: FarWest Lab (now know as WestEd).
- ¹⁰ CTED Children's Service Unit-Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). Retrieved on March 15, 2004 from the ECEAP Performance Standards documents: <http://cted.wa.gov/DesktopModules/Documents/ViewDocuments.aspx?DocumentID=852#3.150%Education%20Records%20and@20Planning>.
- ¹¹ Koralek, D. (1999). *Classroom Strategies to Promote Children's Social and Emotional Development*. The Devereux Foundation: Lewisville, NC: Kaplan Press.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Massachusetts Department of Education (1991). *Young Lives: Many Languages, Many Cultures* (Publication No. 17, 138-79-4000-5-92-1.93-C.R.). Boston, MA: Massachusetts Board of Education.

¹⁵ Koralek, D. (1999). *Classroom Strategies to Promote Children's Social and Emotional Development*. The Devereux Foundation: Lewisville, NC.: Kaplan Press.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Child & Family Studies 280: *Methods in Cultural Relevancy & Anti-Bias Education* at Seattle Central Community College. Developed by Fran Davidson, M.A., and Ed T. Yonamine, M.Ed. Education 240: *Multiculturalism/Anti-Bias* at Green River Community College. Developed by Rebecca M. Yonamine, M.A., and Ed T. Yonamine, M.Ed.

²⁰ Derman-Sparks, L. (1189). *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. Washington D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

²¹ Lynch, E.W., and Hanson, M.J. (1992). *Developing Cross-Competence: A Guide for Working with Young Children and Their Families*. Baltimore, MD.: Brookes Publishing.

²² Devereux Foundation (1999). The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Program. Retrieved March 15, 2004 from <http://www.devereuxearlychildhood.org/>

²³ National Research Council. (2000). *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers (Executive Summary)*. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press.