Center *for the* Study *of* Social Policy
Ideas into Action

Culturally Responsive Early Care and Education

Lessons from Programs and Providers

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A child's earliest years, from birth to five, are a critical period that forms the foundation for their lifelong development. During these years, children are establishing their sense of themselves as individuals and as members of their families and larger communities. Research shows that not only do children begin to develop a cultural identity during this period, but around ages three and four children start to internalize even subtle social biases.[1] Recognizing this, early care and education programs across the country are adapting their programming and curriculum to provide culturally responsive care, meeting the specific needs of the children and families they serve and helping children build positive images of themselves, their families and communities, and the diverse world around them.[2] As children often spend a significant amount of their time in early care and education, the decisions early educators make to provide culturally responsive care can profoundly impact children's trajectories for years to come.

Parents value culturally responsive child care and want it for their children. In research the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) conducted with families, caregivers, and child care providers, we heard how parents' child care decisions were often shaped by a desire for care to respect and affirm their families' cultures—and in some cases reinforce their home language as well. Parents described the importance of culturally responsive care for supporting their children's growing self-confidence, protecting children against feelings of marginalization, and helping children feel they (and others) belong. Diane*, a mother in New Mexico whose son attends a culturally immersive program for children in her Pueblo, told us she chose the program because "I'm proud of my culture and I want that for him." Lisa, a mother from Massachusetts, praised programs that respect diversity, saying that it is important to make sure that children do not feel "left out or [that] their religion or their culture is incorrect or that's not what we do here in America." Valerie, a mother of six in Massachusetts, told us that she appreciated that her children's child care program could support "a lot of children from different cultures… [and] take into consideration what it is that you need and apply that to the care that they provide to your child." Time and time again, parents expressed that cultural responsiveness is one of their priorities when choosing child care—and part of how they define quality child care.

Early care and education programs take different approaches to responding to and nurturing the development of children's cultural identities. As part of our recent research, we interviewed directors, owners, teachers, and staff of early care and education programs across the country that have a reputation in their communities for providing culturally responsive care to children and their families. (For more about our research, see "About the Research" on page 2). The findings from our interviews with providers offer important lessons about how early care and education programs can effectively provide the responsive and affirming care families want and children need so they can grow in confidence and thrive.

In this brief we provide a snapshot of what we learned from early educators about how they are nurturing the development of children's cultural identities across a variety of communities and care settings, both home-based and center-based. We spoke to providers who

* *All of the names in this report are pseudonyms, to protect the privacy of the individuals interviewed.*

are caring for children who share the same ethnic and cultural background, some of whom have a distinct cultural focus as part of the care they offer. Others we spoke to care for a diverse population of children, including children of immigrants from different countries. These providers are responding to the diverse cultural identities of the children they serve, and their practices can change based on the shifting demographics of the children enrolled.

Across these otherwise quite different programs, we observed early educators who are tailoring care according to the distinct cultural needs of the children and families they serve. They work to build trust with families, thoughtfully incorporate languages that are important to families into their programming, respect and foster cultural traditions, and create welcoming spaces where parents can build community. Their efforts bolster young children's self-esteem, stability, and development. When a child learns in their earliest years that they, their family, and their community matter, they gain a more stable foundation that helps them learn and grow as confident members of society. Seeing the cultures of their classmates recognized and valued also sets the foundation for young children to build strong and respectful relationships with their peers, while simultaneously teaching them about the diverse, multicultural society they are growing up to be a part of—imparting critical life lessons about how to respect and interact with others that will not only strengthen their future relationships but also strengthen entire communities.



About the Research

In 2024, CSSP conducted qualitative research to better understand how caregivers and early educators are providing responsive care to young children, families' experiences with that care, and the resources and supports that families and child care providers need to best support young children and set them up for the future.[3] We interviewed parents and primary caregivers, as well as family members and friends who provide regular care for young children, and licensed home-based and center based child care providers. In total, we conducted more than 70 in-person and virtual interviews, including interviews with 51 parents and primary caregivers; seven uncles, grandmothers, and neighbors who provide care informally to young children; and staff of 13 early care and education programs in Massachusetts (three), New Mexico (five), and North Carolina (five).

The early care and education programs we learned from are all licensed, including both child care centers and family child care homes. They are in urban and rural communities, serving between four children in one program to over sixty in others. Some of these programs are bilingual or multilingual, one was a full language immersion program in an Indigenous language, and other programs provide instruction predominantly in English. We conducted in-person site visits of seven of these programs, and the others we interviewed virtually.

Building a Foundation of Trust with Families

The foundation of educators' efforts to provide culturally responsive care is the trusting relationships they form with parents and other family members. Building this trust requires strong communication and family engagement. Providers shared how attention to language and culture is critical for effective communication and engagement, so providers can learn from parents what a child's needs are and how to best support them.

To foster strong communication with families, many programs are intentional about creating opportunities for parents to speak directly to their children's teachers on



a regular basis. One child care center in Massachusetts that provides various wrap-around services to enrolled families intentionally does not offer a transportation service, because parents dropping off and picking up their children every day creates important opportunities for parents and teachers to connect directly. For some programs, enabling this regular and direct communication requires hiring teachers who speak the same language as the families they serve. A center in Massachusetts that has significant numbers of Latine and Haitian families facilitates communication with parents by heavily recruiting teachers and staff who speak Spanish and Haitian-Creole. If, for example, a parent speaks Spanish and needs to communicate with a teacher who speaks English, other Spanish-speaking teachers can translate.

Strong communication and family engagement allow programs to navigate the specific cultural values and perspectives that parents may hold. In some programs, dedicated family engagement staff do much of this work. One child care center in Massachusetts that serves large numbers of Vietnamese families has hired a Vietnamese family engagement specialist to work with parents. The support she offers is not just to translate information about available resources into a language they know, but also to help parents address critical issues for successfully supporting young children. Through her shared cultural background, the family engagement specialist can also understand the culturally rooted ideas the parents may hold about their children's development and any delays or disabilities they might have— a relatability that "helps to take that stigma away" for worried parents, the center director shared.

In other programs, teachers or administrators who share the same cultural background of the children and families they serve connect with families in a similar way so all of the caregivers in children's lives are aligned on how to support their growth and development. Sarah, who is a long-time resident of the Massachusetts neighborhood where she is now the director of a child care center, told us that she had a similar upbringing to many of the parents of the children she now cares for. The parents know that she can relate to how they were raised, so when Sarah talks about healthy child development and parenting practices, parents respect what she says because there is "an understanding that you knew what I'm talking about."

For providers, understanding and relating to the culture and backgrounds of the families they serve is essential to engaging and communicating with parents—and building the trust that is necessary so they can provide care and put in place services that effectively meets the needs of young children.

Caring for Children

Attention to language and culture is important not only in how educators relate to and communicate with families, but also in their everyday care of children, to support children's healthy development and set them up for success in school and in life.

Using children's home languages to support emotional regulation and school readiness

Many of the programs we studied were thoughtful about how they used children's home languages in the classroom to nurture children and help them develop the skills necessary to regulate their emotions. At one center-based program in North Carolina that offers bilingual early care and education to Latine children**, a teacher told us that though she normally teaches in English while her co-teacher teaches in Spanish, she will always address a child in their dominant language—whether it is English or Spanish— when they are "having a hard time

** Most children enrolled in this program are either monolingual or bilingual Spanish speakers. Some of the children predominantly speak English.

managing their feelings or things like that… because the first number one rule for us was to regulate the child, and obviously in the comfort of their language." Similarly, in Massachusetts, we spoke to a program where each class has at least one teacher who can also speak Spanish or Haitian Creole, languages that many children's families speak at home. When children become dysregulated or upset, there is always a teacher who can comfort them in their home language. When staff speak the languages that children speak at home, they can create an environment that makes children feel supported and secure.

Educators who provide bilingual care also shared how the approach can support academic learning and school readiness. Elizabeth, a home-based provider in New Mexico, provides bilingual care in Spanish and English to Latine children, and all of the families she currently serves have immigrated from the same Spanish-speaking country where she was raised. Elizabeth told us that she started her bilingual program when she observed that the Spanish-speaking children in her community were labeled as "knowing absolutely nothing" when they started kindergarten because their learning assessments were in English. She explained that instructing children who spoke Spanish at home in both Spanish and English has the advantage of respecting and reinforcing children's home language while also providing them the knowledge of English they need to be successful when they start elementary school.



Similarly, Laura, who teaches at the bilingual program in North Carolina, said the program's goal is to prepare children for success in an English-speaking country while "be[ing] respectful and be[ing] able to have the children continue learning in their home language because they already come with a lot of information [in Spanish]." Through their respective programs, these educators are creating environments that respect the value of children's primary languages, trying to give children the affirmation they might not receive when they enter the English-dominant school system while preparing them to be successful in that system.

Using language and culture to support identity development and self-esteem

The early educators we interviewed also structure their programs to respect and affirm young children's identity and culture, helping children build a strong sense of self and cultivate pride in who they are. Their actions not only support children's long-term wellbeing but also help children learn that other cultures also have value and deserve respect.

One critical way that early educators achieve this is by bringing cultural traditions into their programming. Anne, a director of a child care program in North Carolina serving almost exclusively Black children, explained that every morning one of the staff members leads the children in a rendition of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," sometimes called the Black national anthem, which Black communities have sung since the early twentieth century.[4] The program has instituted this practice because it wants the children it serves to feel proud of who they are. Anne was proud to share that the children knew all the verses by heart.

In two different Pueblos in New Mexico, we spoke to early care and education programs that incorporate their traditions and language to help children develop a positive Pueblo identity. This active cultural affirmation is necessary in these Pueblos because, much like in many other Tribal communities, generations of residents have experienced marginalization and forced assimilation by the government. In both Pueblos, these experiences have led to concerted cultural revitalization efforts, including through child care programs focused on nurturing and strengthening young children's connection to their culture. One of the programs supports children's cultural education by offering bilingual instruction in both English and their native language, as well as by teaching children Pueblo practices. For example, the program

hosts an annual Feast Day event, a celebration that is an important part of Pueblo communal life. At this event, the children showcase dances that they have learned, performing in front of family, friends, neighbors, and guests from other tribes. Aya, a teacher we interviewed, said the program's goal in hosting this event is to "[try] to keep that culture alive," including by instilling in the children a distinct sense of themselves as important members of their Pueblo community.

Similarly, early educators at another Pueblo program seek to revitalize their culture by fostering a strong sense of identity in children through cultural education. The teachers completely immerse the children in Pueblo culture, teaching them their traditional songs and dances, cooking them Pueblo foods, teaching them about Pueblo values, and only speaking to the children in their native language. Shannon, who heads the program, told us "that's what we want in the environment for the babies and infants, toddlers. And every time I walk into their learning space, there's always our traditional songs playing and [them] being immersed in that." Through this deep cultural affirmation, the program's teachers intend to not only facilitate children's cultural connection, but also to teach the children that their culture is valuable and they should be proud of who they are. Ultimately, these two programs regard culturally responsive care as critical both for supporting healthy child development and for advancing a larger project of cultural restoration in their communities. As Shannon said, "it's not just the community over here and then the school. We're all in it together and we're doing our part to support the initiative of revitalizing the language and not be a separate thing or separate mission."

While Anne in North Carolina, and Aya and Shannon in New Mexico are serving children who share a similar cultural background, other educators are serving children from diverse backgrounds or cultures. The programs we studied serving diverse communities tailor their programs to ensure all children see their identities recognized and learn to respect the culture and traditions of their peers. When deciding what holidays to celebrate, many educators try to incorporate the holidays celebrated by the families they serve. Megan, a director at a preschool in New Mexico, shared that her preschool has "different world holidays represented, especially holidays or customs that are reflective of our current student population." Elizabeth, a provider in New Mexico, shared that when she worked at a child care center serving children who had different ethnicities, religions, and national origins, she and other teachers made space



for the holidays that were important to each child and their families: "[The children] celebrated certain holidays. They celebrated the most important moments or dates of each country, and we respected and tried to take their needs into account." Educators are also careful to respect families' traditions when making decisions about classroom activities and curriculum. For example, Megan shared that her program does not have reptiles as class pets because certain reptiles have great cultural significance to the Navajo families she serves and having them in the classroom would be culturally inappropriate and make children and families feel offended or unsafe.

Providers shared that respecting and incorporating families' traditions protects children against feelings of marginalization and helps them feel included. Elizabeth told us that the goal of supporting children in celebrating their traditions is to "make them feel welcome, accepted, and show them that we respect their cultures." As Megan put it, educators that create a respectful environment for children of different backgrounds can prevent a child from feeling "awkward or uncomfortable" if the child's traditions are different from those of other children in the classroom. These demonstrations of support teach the children both that their backgrounds are important and that other children's backgrounds matter, too. When early educators model respectful behavior for young children, they create opportunities for children to learn how to behave toward others and how they deserve to be treated.

Supporting the Whole Family Through Culture and Language

For many programs we studied, their efforts to affirm and strengthen culture extend to the work they do with children's families. Beyond their efforts to build trust with families so they can more effectively educate children, providers and early educators see culturally-relevant and responsive family engagement as a way to help strengthen the "village" surrounding and supporting children, to encourage parents' advocacy for their children, and to support parents in reinforcing the language and cultural lessons that children learn at school when they are back at home.

Many programs are attentive to language and culture in their family engagement programming to help strengthen families' social connections. One of the centers in Massachusetts has created specific cultural affinity groups for parents, which are spaces where parents can connect with each other over their shared racial and ethnic background, their immigrant status, or their language. Similarly, the bilingual program in North Carolina also organizes groups for parents to connect socially. The teacher we spoke to told us that these groups are particularly important to immigrant parents who face additional acculturation challenges and "don't know anybody [and] just came in the country." Early care and education programs that foster these opportunities help parents build community, making connections with other parents who can relate to some of the challenges they experience, the cultural values they hold, and the cultural background that informs their parenting.

Early educators also engage families to support their growth as advocates for their children in the classroom. In North Carolina, another goal of the parent groups at the bilingual program is that they help parents grow as leaders. Laura, the teacher we spoke to, told us that the program's family engagement team regards the groups as opportunities "to have families become their own leaders…we want to see them become the advocates… it promotes that, like I said, that autonomy, that leadership in those parents to also participate in the classrooms." In Massachusetts, the child care center mentioned above organizes a parent leadership group that, through meetings conducted in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole, helps shape the program's decisions concerning children's care. By creating culturally relevant opportunities for parents' leadership development, these providers are encouraging parents to act as partners in their children's education, helping ensure young children's needs are met.



Another way that culturally responsive early educators support children through family engagement is by helping parents reinforce their children's growth and learning. The bilingual Pueblo program in New Mexico we studied creates culturally-related resources, such as educational games and other activities, for parents to further their children's education at home. The program hosts family nights where educators "introduce some type of [native language activity] to the family… like how to introduce yourself… How to do the r*ed light, green light, yellow light*, and then we send that out. We did how to play Simon Says [in the language]." The program is also creating a teeth-brushing guide in their native language for parents to use with their children. The language immersion Pueblo program we interviewed also supports parents in furthering their children's education through voluntary monthly language seminars for parents. These seminars are conducted in the Pueblo's language and demonstrate the program's immersion approach to parents so that they have a better understanding of their child's regular classroom experience and can learn language education strategies to apply at home. As Shannon, the head of the immersion program, told us, the seminars enable parents "to continue that language at home… a lot of the homes don't have a fluent speaker… [but] they can at least communicate some words in [the language] with commands or thinking of just little things like, 'You need to get ready for bed. You need to brush your teeth.'" Through these additional resources, early educators create daily opportunities for parents to practice speaking the language with their children, which provides greater consistency between the classroom and home and deepens children's learning.

Infusing culture into family engagement efforts helps create a more consistent and supportive environment for children, where the relationships, cultural values,

and learning experiences that shape their development are reinforced across home and early care and education. When parents feel connected, supported, and empowered to advocate for their children, they are better positioned to nurture their children's growth, strengthen their sense of identity and belonging, and support their learning. This consistency between what children experience at home and in their child care programs is especially important in the early years, when a secure sense of belonging and opportunities to build language and cultural identity lay the foundation for healthy social-emotional development, confidence, and lifelong learning.

Conclusion

The early educators CSSP spoke to offer important lessons regarding how early care and education programs can create environments that support children's growth and identity development in the critical early years. Whether building respectful communication with families, supporting children's home languages, holidays, and traditions, or creating space for parents to build connections and support their children's education, early care and education programs have a wide variety of ways to help the children and families they serve feel supported and accepted in the care setting.

Whether a program serves more diverse communities or cares for a specific cultural community, providers shared that what matters most is the foundation of respect and thoughtful attention to children's needs, which creates an environment that communicates to children that everyone belongs. Providers were also clear that they are most effective at supporting children when they work closely with their families to help ensure the culturally inclusive lessons children learn in school are reinforced at home, and that the early learning programs effectively support the lessons children are already learning at home.

Ultimately, while the community contexts and specific practices will vary, all early learning programs have an opportunity to build on these lessons and support children's cultural identities—so children can grow up to be healthy, happy, and successful.



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Endnotes

1 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2019). *Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education.* https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/equity_ps_final.pdf.

2 Skinner, A. L., Olson, K. R., & Meltzoff, A. N. (2020). Acquiring group bias: Observing other people's nonverbal signals can create social group biases. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 119(4), 824–838;* Rennels, J. L., & Langlois, J. H. (2015). Children's beliefs in reciprocation of biases and flexibility. *Journal of experimental child psychology, 137, 39–56.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2015.03.007.

3 For more about this research, see "Caregiving Research": https://cssp.org/project/caregiving-research/.

4 *Lift Every Voice and Sing.* NAACP. (2023, February 17). https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing.