



Young children’s healthy development and learning in a diverse society:

An outline for designing a culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive and competent early childhood education system

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About this document

Young children are developing their orientation to the world as they begin to interact with other children and adults outside of their own families. How they are treated and how they are taught to treat others in these earliest years helps to set their expectations and opportunities – and their future.

Ensuring that children are not subject to bias or discrimination or learning that bias – by ethnicity, culture, language, appearance, gender, disability, sexual orientation or family background – is key to healthy development in American society. In short, understanding, valuing and respecting diversity in all its forms is central to developing high quality early childhood programs and systems.

“ In the United States, more than 60% of all children from birth to age five spend time in the care of someone other than their parents.

This *living document* was produced by a group of practitioners, researchers and advocates to describe where the early childhood field currently is in developing ethnically, culturally and linguistically responsive early childhood systems. It focuses specifically upon issues of ethnicity, culture and language, as these deserve their own discussion and emphasis. That is the area of particular expertise and emphasis of many of those contributing to the document. This in no way implies that other issues of diversity do not require attention, but simply that this is the particular focus of this document.

The living document is provided in statement form. Some of these are value statements, or *a priori truths*. Others are assessments of current research and knowledge in the field. Others are assertions about what

The BUILD Initiative helps states better coordinate their services, policies and programs to prepare young children aged birth to five to succeed. With our support, state leaders from the public and private sectors collaborate to help families access high quality early learning and family and parenting support.



we know and need to find out. It seeks to assemble, in one place, much of the best thinking, research and practice in early childhood education systems building as it relates to cultural and linguistic relevance, appropriateness and competence.¹

This living document also assesses the state of current policies and practices as they relate to addressing issues of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity in describing the state of the field. It is organized around a number of distinct elements of an early childhood system, particularly as reflected in work to develop quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS).

These elements are access points and opportunities to develop more ethnically, culturally and linguistically responsive systems. In the end, however, this requires that practitioners, administrators and policymakers embed this attention to diversity in all their work. Regulations, guidelines, monitoring processes, curricula, or other materials alone cannot be adopted to ensure this attention. Developing ethnically, culturally and linguistically responsive early childhood systems requires leadership, reflective practice, and ongoing commitment to continuous learning and growth by all those involved with young children.

¹ Different people use different terms to define *culture* and *language* and to assess the degree to which programs and practices reflect attention to them. In this document, we generally use the terms *relevant*, *responsive*, and *competent* to describe the goals for programs and practices.

“ This living document assesses the state of current policies and practices as they relate to addressing issues of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity in describing the state of the field.

We thank the BUILD Initiative, the Indigo Cultural Center, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children for bringing us together in December 2011 to discuss the current state of the early childhood education field – and where it needs to go in addressing issues of race, language and culture. Our particular focus was upon developing QRIS. An earlier iteration of this document provided background to that discussion.

Since that meeting, we have expanded and modified the background document, based upon written comments and interviews with participants. Individually (or organizationally), we may not agree with or endorse all the statements contained here. We provide our names as contributors to the document and as early care and education peers committed to working further to incorporate issues of race, language and culture into QRIS development and overall early childhood systems building.

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Introduction

The United States is becoming more diverse as a nation, and young children (birth to kindergarten age) are leading the way. By 2020, there will be no majority group among the youngest members of our society.

One in five young children today is a dual language learner. Designing culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive and competent early child services is key to both these children's and the nation's future.

While the nation has become more diverse, there has been little explicit policy attention given to developing early childhood education systems that respond specifically to this diversity and to the country's multiethnic society. Much of the research, program and policy development has been silent, or *color blind*, in this respect.

While cultural and linguistic responsiveness or competence often is set as a goal or objective, there is little to guide policymakers, administrators, practitioners and families in what that means in how early childhood education programs are designed, implemented, operated, monitored and supported.

As states and the nation continue to develop their early childhood education programs and systems,

there is an opportunity to do so in a culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive and competent way. These issues need to be addressed across *all* aspects of a system's development.

This living document presents the current state of knowledge and understanding of why developing culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive, and competent early childhood education systems is critical to healthy child development and children's school success. It also provides a snapshot of where the early childhood field is currently, and where it needs to go in developing quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) that embody these traits. This outline draws from the best available research and evidence, and cites that research in the review.

The first section offers a description of young children's development in the United States' multiethnic society in the context of ethnicity, language and culture, and our country's values. The second section goes into more detail regarding what we currently know about the inclusion of these issues into early childhood systems development, drawing upon the QRIS framework for systems development.

Throughout, this document contends that one central aspect of *quality* is the degree to which early care and education programs – and the systems that support them – are culturally and linguistically relevant, appropriate and competent.



Section one: Young child development in the context of ethnicity, language and culture:

The basis for early childhood education systems development

Overview

The basis for early childhood education systems development

How children learn and grow. Children learn, grow and develop in the context of their family, language and culture. This begins at the earliest years and forms the scaffolding for future growth.

Child development in an open, democratic and inclusive society. Children begin to establish their civic identity in the early years, supported by inclusive environments that recognize and value difference and combat discrimination. Conversely, children's civic identity is adversely affected by personal, institutional or structural discrimination and exclusion – whether occurring in the home or in other settings.



The reality of exclusion and its impact upon young children and their development. Currently, profound disparities exist among young children – across health, economic security, safety, and learning and development – that are interconnected and require comprehensive responses. These include, but go beyond, early childhood education services, and involve addressing socioeconomic inequities as well as ethnic, cultural and language inequities.

Roles of early childhood educators. Early childhood educators need to be equipped to respond to the diverse cultures and languages of the children they serve. They need also to ensure inclusion and prevent or counter bias and discrimination.

Implications for early childhood education systems building. Concerted, intentional and focused attention is needed to develop early childhood education systems that respond to the diversity of the young child population. This includes all aspects of early learning systems development. It also includes a significant research and learning agenda devoted to issues of culture and language as well as planning and governance structures which themselves are more inclusive and representative.

Key points

The basis for early childhood education systems development

How children learn and grow

At birth, children begin to explore their world and grow and learn the language, customs and culture of their family and society. They also develop the skills and knowledge needed to live in that society.

The concept of family and the roles of different family and community members in supporting

their children's growth and development vary from one culture to another. In particular, the role and authority assigned to grandparents and elders is much more prominent in some cultures than others, as is the use and reliance upon *family, friend and neighbor* caregiving and support.

Children begin to see differences between themselves and others – by gender, skin color, dress, language and behavior – in the early developmental years (18 months to five years). They learn how to respond to these differences from the guidance and actions of others around them.

The five domains of child development (physical health and social development, language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional development, and approaches to learning) are universal. Different cultures and societies place different emphases upon:

- Individual versus collective identity
- Personal versus group achievement
- Context rich versus verbal communication
- Role of parents and other family members in children's development
- What knowledge must be acquired and how it is used
- Teacher-directed versus child directed learning

” The concept of family and the roles of different family and community members in supporting their children's growth and development vary from one culture to another.





- The value of material versus spiritual achievement
- Adherence to democratic and egalitarian principles

Children benefit from being exposed to, and learning, two or more languages at an early age. The key to future literacy is acquisition of a rich vocabulary and oral comprehension and communication within at least one language (not necessarily English).

Child development in an open, democratic and inclusive society

Laws and dominant culture values – in terms of civic identity in the United States – reflect equal opportunity, inclusion and tolerance. Public and social institutions generally are required to adhere to nondiscriminatory practices.

Different cultures around the world do have different expectations regarding gender differentiation, class differentiation, children's own rights as beings, adherence to authoritarian or democratic rule, and tolerance and treatment of difference. At the same time, there are international agreements regarding

children's rights and early childhood services that promote egalitarianism, inclusion and tolerance. (UNESCO, 2010)

In open and egalitarian societies, healthy growth and development are adversely affected when children experience exclusion or discrimination because of gender, ethnicity, language, culture, disability or other differences. Healthy growth and development also is adversely affected when children learn to practice exclusion or discrimination.

When children's home language, ethnicity or culture is different from that in larger society, children learn how to respond and navigate across these differences. They learn also how they are expected to behave and perform within the larger society. Children's own concepts of self are shaped by the degree to which they are valued both at home and in the larger society.

The reality of exclusion and its impact upon young children and their development

Disparities in what children know and can do (kindergarten readiness) are profound at the time of kindergarten entry as measured by socioeconomic status and by race/ethnicity. But such disparities also are profound throughout the period from birth to kindergarten, and show a life course trajectory toward inequities that start even before the birth of a child.

There are competing theories for why low-income ethnic minority children lag behind their white counterparts in school and in life (Perry, 2003). Examining how cultural and language interact with children's development in their early childhood settings is one key to better defining risk and resiliency and the achievement gap, more comprehensively (Shivers, Sanders & Westbrook, 2011).

Young children who experience high levels of stress (Shonkoff, et al., 2012), particularly with an absence of corresponding protective factors, are harmed in their development across all five domains. Discrimination and exclusion are factors that contribute to stress and early childhood mental health problems among young children.

Young children experience stress when their families do not have the resources to predictably meet essential food, shelter and safety needs. Lack of resources also constrains access to developmental services and environments. Children and their families benefit from intentional programs, policies and practices that ensure that they can meet essential basic living needs – housing, nutrition, health care and economic security. Such programs, policies and practices are needed as responses to socioeconomic disparities for all races and cultures.

The international literature on the social determinants of health is one evidenced-based framework that not only includes economic factors that lead to disparities in health but also social ones related to exclusion and discrimination (World Health Organization, 2003).

Roles of early childhood educators

Today's classrooms require educators to educate students varying in culture, language, abilities and many other characteristics (Gollnick & Chinn, 2008). Educators must create a classroom culture where all students, regardless of their ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, are welcomed, supported and included, and provided the best opportunities to learn (Richards, Brown & Forde, 2006).

Different cultures have different expectations for educators and the degree to which education should involve *teacher-centered* or *child-centered* learning, and the role that parents play outside the classroom in their child's education and

transmission of values. Educators need to work to learn about and bridge any differences. They also need to engage with and draw from the perspective of parents and family members with respect to the culture of the school and the culture of the family and community.

Children benefit from having role models and authority figures, including educators, who represent their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The field of early childhood educators should be representative of the cultures and languages of the children it serves.

Implications for early childhood education systems building

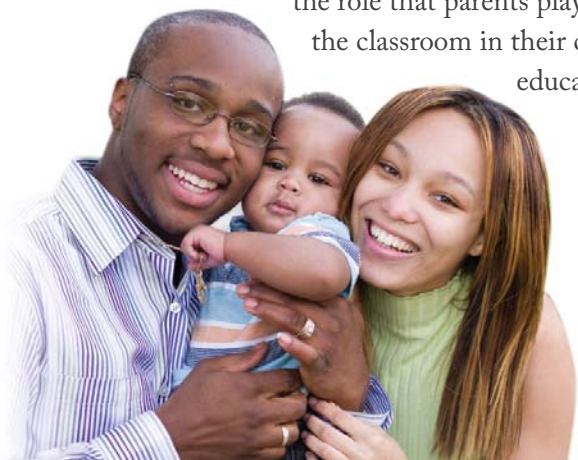
Much of what has been developed to date, in terms of early childhood systems development (learning standards, program standards, quality improvement efforts, pre-professional and in-service development programs, workforce recruitment and selection, and planning and governance) has been *color blind* and, therefore, dominant-culture-centric in its approach.

Limited research and few program evaluation designs have focused upon issues of culture and language. Much existing program research has been conducted on homogenous populations and program settings.

The professional early childhood field – credentialed and licensed preschool teachers, early childhood policymakers and advocates, technical assistance providers, etc. – are largely from the dominant culture and not reflective of the young child population demographics (School Readiness, Culture and Language Working Group of AECF, 2006).

Generally, early childhood planning and governance systems, while they may seek to involve parents and reflect diversity, do not have structures that give power and weight to those representatives. There exist both perceived and real power imbalances that need to be addressed to create structures where these issues can be addressed.

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Section two: Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) and ethnicity, language and culture

Overview

Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) as a framework for early care and education systems reform. QRIS development offers a lever for increasing the cultural and linguistic relevance, responsiveness and competence within early childhood education systems. This needs to be reflected in all aspects of a QRIS:

1. Quality standards for programs and practitioners
2. Support for continuous improvement
3. Planning, monitoring and accountability
4. Financial support for programs, practitioners and families
5. Engagement, outreach and promotion

This requires intentionality and embedding respect for diversity and a commitment to inclusion within all aspects of QRIS development.

Quality standards for programs and practitioners.

Early learning and development standards, practitioner standards, program standards, and

quality rating and improvement systems all provide guidance to programs, policymakers and practitioners. These standards need to incorporate cultural and linguistic relevance, responsiveness and competence in ways that support programs and practitioners in developing more culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive, and competent programs and practices.

Support for continuous improvement. Training, technical assistance, research and evaluation systems, and professional development systems need to be developed to promote culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive and competent programs. Particular emphasis should be placed on enlisting and supporting trainers, technical assistance providers, evaluators and early childhood educators who know and reflect the cultures and languages of the young children and families they serve.

Planning, monitoring and accountability. If issues of ethnicity, language and culture are to be addressed, planning structures need to include representatives and experts who reflect the cultures and languages of young children and their families. Monitoring and accountability systems need to be constructed in ways that are recognized as legitimate and culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive and competent. Assessments of children must be developed in the context of their race, gender, ethnicity, language and ability. Additionally, data systems should provide information on the ethnicity, language and culture of children and families as well as the early childhood workforce.

Financial support for programs, practitioners and families. Financial support needs to ensure that families have the resources to secure quality early childhood education services that are relevant, responsive and competent to their cultural and linguistic heritage. Financial support must ensure that programs are financially sustainable and that programs and practitioners of all cultural and linguistic backgrounds can build their skills across all aspects of quality.



Engagement, outreach and promotion. Families play the primary role of transmitting customs and cultural values to their children and must be recognized for their knowledge and their role. Policies, programs and practices must work to ensure family engagement and involvement in early childhood education programs. Early care and education policies, programs and practices must also help navigate and bridge any distances between the culture and practices in the early childhood setting and the culture and practices in the family and community.

” Early childhood educators must first recognize and understand their own world views in order to understand the world views of their students

the foundation for effective and high quality early childhood education. The ability to establish this relationship is dependent upon the educator valuing the child and, therefore in at least some measure, knowing and responding to the child’s environment – and being culturally and linguistically responsive and open (Early Childhood Initiative, 2011; Burchinal & Cryer, 2003; Colombo, 2005).

Early childhood educators must first recognize and understand their own world views in order to understand the world views of their students (Bennett, 1993). They must recognize the impact of white privilege and confront their own prejudices and biases, and be provided supportive environments in which to do so (Banks, 1996; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; RACE MATTERS, 2006). Educators must also learn about their students’ cultures, and work to perceive the world through diverse cultural lenses (Banks, 1996; Brunson-Day, 2006a).

Standards and principles for embedding this aspect of quality into early childhood education programs and practices have been articulated and can provide guidance in this work (NAEYC, 2009; Head Start, 2010; Working Group, 2006; Matthews & Ewen, 2010).

Cultural research in early childhood education is a complicated enterprise. Currently, much research on early childhood education and the development of children has been conducted without consideration of cultural or linguistic context. One of the reasons is the dominance of a Eurocentric, middle-class perspective that holds up the social, linguistic, motivational and cognitive patterns of mainstream white Americans as the goal of all development (Guerra and Jagers, 1998; Ogbu, 1994; Rogoff, 2003). As quality is defined within a quality rating and improvement system, attention must be given to different cultural and linguistic perspectives, and to ensuring that these perspectives are reflected in research and evaluation as well as in other aspects of a QRIS.

Key points

Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) as a framework for early care and education systems reform

Cultural and linguistic relevance, responsiveness and competence are not the only dimensions of quality in early childhood education programs and practitioners. They are, however, core dimensions of quality in an open, inclusive and diverse society. Intentionality and explicitness are required to incorporate these core dimensions within all aspects of QRIS development.

The quality of the relationship between the early childhood educator and the child ultimately sets

Although cultural and linguistic relevance, responsiveness and competence is frequently espoused as a principle in early childhood education systems and a goal for a QRIS, it requires much deeper understanding of the processes and practices needed to support early childhood educators and their programs in embedding it in practice.

Quality standards for programs and practitioners built on goals for children’s development and learning

Early learning and development standards

State early learning and development standards form a foundation for building quality in overall quality rating and improvement systems. They also provide an opportunity to describe developmental differences across cultural and linguistic groups as well as universal aspects of development.

While one can infer within the five domains of school readiness the need for cultural and linguistic relevance, responsiveness and competence, there is nothing within the five domains themselves or their definitions that are explicit to culture, ethnicity, gender, language or diversity (Bruner, Ray, Stover-Wright & Copeman, 2009; BUILD Working Group, 2006).

Some current state early learning and development standards include references to cultural and linguistic competence, but others do not. Model standards have not been developed to indicate how to reflect different learning trajectories for children of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Chang, 2006).

The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant emphasizes the importance of developing early learning standards and defines them as needing to be *culturally and linguistically responsive*. Washington state’s newly revised standards (on culture) and



California’s (on language) represent second-generation early learning standards that are explicit in their attention to cultural and linguistic relevance, responsiveness and competence.

Quality rating and improvement systems

The rating aspect of a quality rating and improvement system* is designed both to help programs assess where they are in terms of quality (and move up to the next level) and to help consumers make more

informed choices about and demands of their programs. The first generation of quality rating and improvement systems (usually akin to star rating systems, like for hotels and restaurants) generally did not include specific items or measures that address issues of diversity and inclusion or would award points to programs on this domain of quality (Bruner, Ray, Stover-Wright & Copeman, 2009). Second generation efforts by states and communities, however, are seeking to be more explicit in including some measures that recognize and support programs which seek to be culturally and linguistically responsive (Matthews, 2009; McDonald, 2009; Hawaii Careers with Young Children, 2001).

** This refers to the actual measurement tools used to rate programs, as opposed to the larger quality improvement system of which the ratings are a key component.*

“ Model standards have not been developed to indicate how to reflect different learning trajectories for children of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds

Classroom assessment tools such as ECERS-R, ITERS, CLASS and PAS, as well as NAEYC accreditation tools*, do contain some elements related to cultural and linguistic appropriateness and may be incorporated by reference into quality rating systems. Often, however, these tools address cultural and linguistic issues primarily at the higher end of their rankings. This means that programs doing particularly well on these issues do not receive much higher ratings than those that do not (Bruner et al., 2009).

There is limited research to show that quality rating systems actually distinguish among programs that positively impact relations between children and families and their providers, and child outcomes themselves (Zellman & Karoly, 2012; RAND, 2008). There also is limited research to show the extent to which diverse providers or programs serving diverse children participate in quality rating systems, at what levels they are likely to start their participation, to what degree they move up the rating system, and what supports are most helpful in doing so. There is limited research to show the degree to which parents from different cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds make use of the quality rating systems – or believe a QRIS is legitimate and reflects what the parents want for their own children in early care and education programs.

There is increased emphasis upon developing evidenced-based measures of quality and performance. Existing measures of quality in early childhood setting, which do include references to culture and language, often do so through the presence of materials (such as posters, books and toys) reflecting different cultures and gender roles in a positive light.

Models of culturally and linguistically responsive care underscore the importance of the characteristics of early childhood educators (including their own ethnicity and beliefs), the professional preparation they receive, the organizational climate in which they operate, and the interactions they have with children and families. Research focused upon developing and validating these measures is extremely limited (Shivers, Sanders & Westbrook, 2011).

Support for continuous improvement

Continuous improvement approaches. Studies of early care and education programs generally find large variations in the quality of the care provided, with much care being of mediocre or poor quality. This is, in large part, why states develop quality rating and improvement systems.

Child care is one of the lowest paid occupations in society and most of the people providing that direct care have limited education. Child care workers also much better reflect the diversity of the young child population than early childhood educators with B.A. degrees or early childhood teaching credentials. Raising the skill level and compensation of the existing early childhood workforce has potential multiple benefits:

- in improving early learning among children,
- in increasing the capacity of the workforce to economically provide for their own families and contribute to the local economy, and
- in creating new sources of leadership and strength within poor, disinvested communities (Ribeiro & Warner, 2004; Bruner, 2004).

* *ECERS-R (The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised); ITERS (Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale); CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System); PAS (Program Administration Scale); NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation)*





This requires explicit attention to engaging this workforce and providing opportunities for advancement in ways that are relevant to them (Chang, 2006).

Training and technical assistance. Training and technical assistance opportunities for early childhood programs and the workers within them must recognize the current realities of their businesses and their lives. Many are very interested in, motivated to, and capable of building their skills, provided this can be offered in a language, at a time and place, and at a level relevant to their current lives.

Training and technical assistance must provide multiple types of opportunities and supports and not be limited to traditional professional development actions (Chang, 2006; Bromer, 2009). It also must recognize the time required, particularly for pathways to professional credentialing, and the need for commensurate financial and social support.

Training and technical assistance workforce development. The current workforce, which provides training and technical assistance to programs and practitioners, often does not reflect the diversity of the programs and providers being served. One of the keys to success in a QRIS to promoting continuous improvement lies in the interaction and relationship that is developed between the quality improvement consultant and the programs.

Quality improvement support is relationship-based consultation driven by needs defined by the program. The recruitment, selection, training and staff

development of those who are providing training and technical assistance within QRIS must give attention to developing a diverse workforce and to providing initial and ongoing training and support in addressing cultural and linguistic elements within the QRIS.

Professional development. Existing pre-service professional development programs generally have limited emphasis upon addressing issues of ethnicity, language and culture in their curricula, either for establishing an anti-bias environment within the early childhood setting or understanding and responding to children from different ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Few graduates of such programs are themselves bilingual or multilingual, and they remain disproportionately white and non-Hispanic (Ray, Bowman & Robins, 2006; Chang, 2006).

There often is a lack of articulation between community college early childhood development degree programs and baccalaureate institutions for those who might seek to pursue higher degrees. Strengthening such efforts is essential to closing disparities in child development that can emanate from the absence of culturally responsive and appropriate practices (Ray & Brownwell, 2006).

Professional development. Research of both early childhood and kindergarten to grade 12 teacher preparation programs have noted that including components of diversity in both coursework and field experiences (or practical) are promising strategies to address the challenge of preparing teachers to work with children and families from diverse backgrounds (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Lim & Able-Boone, 2005).

There is no real agreement in the field about how much and what type of coursework should be required for teacher preparation in this area, however. Action research, evaluation and diffusion of promising practices need to be a part of building the professional education field in developing culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive, competent and diverse practitioners.

Research and evaluation. There is a large research and evaluation agenda on all of the preceding topics. Some

of that evaluation and continuous improvement requires participatory evaluation approaches and action research – and such work needs to be supported financially and valued scientifically. The established research community itself is not generally reflective of the diversity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds in society. And there need to be greater opportunities for professional development in this area, as well.

“ Even when the children being educated are homogenous, there is value in having early childhood educators who reflect different cultural, gender, linguistic & ethnic backgrounds.

to counter this is to ensure that information is transparent and that persons representing disadvantaged groups have access to its use (Bruner & Kot, 1999).

Accountability. Individual educators can be culturally aware, relevant, responsive and competent regardless of their own gender, ethnicity, culture and language background. It is difficult for programs overall to be culturally relevant, responsive and competent,

however, if they do not reflect the diversity of the children they serve and the society in which they reside.

Even when the children being educated are homogenous, there is value in having early childhood educators who reflect different cultural, gender, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Ultimately, there needs to be accountability to those in authority over resources and systems to make needed changes to ensure that early childhood education systems are culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive, and competent.

Planning, monitoring and accountability

Planning. There often are debates at state and local levels regarding whether addressing issues of ethnicity, language and culture should occur as their own focus or be included within all planning efforts. Both approaches can be used. Planning needs to include attention to these issues, and professionals involved in planning need to have the background, knowledge, and skills to address them.

Although states and communities often struggle to secure *authentic engagement*, there are exemplary practices in engaging, learning from and providing leadership roles for persons from different cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds. This also requires intentionality, time, training and support. It requires openness of those administering systems to themselves change and share authority and power.

Monitoring. Data systems need to be developed that can answer questions regarding the participation levels of children from different ethnic, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds in early care and education programs. These data systems also should provide information on the current early childhood program workforce and the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds of early care and education professionals (Bruner & Emarita, 2009).

There is rightful suspicion among some cultural and linguistic groups that research and data are being manipulated or used to justify social control. One way

Financial support for programs, practitioners, and families

Overall. Currently, public investments in early childhood growth and development are very small in comparison to those made for kindergarten to grade 12. This is despite the fact that families of young children generally have fewer resources to invest than



families of older children – and despite the evidence that the earliest years are critical to children’s healthy development. Young children are the age group that is most diverse in American society and most likely to be in poor households. It essential that attention be given to identifying the public financing needed to address children’s early development needs. (Bruner, 2009; Bruner, 2010; Matthews, 2009).

Availability. While finding consistently high quality early learning and development programs is a challenge for all families, access is differentially available by parental income and socioeconomic status, and by ethnicity, language and culture. Barriers can include income, language, culture, geography, hours of operation and flexibility of parental work schedules. If the purpose of quality rating and improvement systems is not only is to set a higher bar for early childhood education programs but to enable parents to make use of it to select such care, that higher care will need to be available and affordable.

On the supply side, there will need to be an intentional effort to create higher quality care, including the financing needed to do so, within poor neighborhoods where children of color are most concentrated. This must happen if a QRIS is to help close the disparities that exist rather than to perpetuate or exacerbate them (Bruner, Stover-Wright & Tirmizi, 2007).

Staffing. The early childhood workforce is diverse overall, but this does not apply to credentialed early childhood educators. To build a larger and more diverse field of credentialed educators requires multiple financial supports and incentives, and new approaches. This requires developing career pathways that are achievable, even if they may require years (or decades or generations) to complete. It also requires upgrading the support and financing to those who are providing care, so that remaining in early care and education is financial viable (Matthews, 2008).



Affordability. There is a mismatch between what most families can afford to pay for care and what it costs to ensure high quality care. Current public programs that include child care subsidy programs and tax policies fall far short of bridging this affordability gap. The highest rated early childhood education programs are likely to be well beyond the reach of the 40% of families with young children with incomes below 200% of poverty,



Young children are the age group that is most diverse in American society and most likely to be in poor households.

If quality rating and improvement systems are to be levers for reform in early childhood education and help to close current disparities and address inequities, QRIS will have to address the fundamental issue of making high quality care truly affordable to low-income, low socioeconomic status populations. A QRIS needs to have dual goals of improving quality and increasing access to it.

QRIS needs to have dual goals of improving quality and increasing access to it.

Engagement, outreach and promotion

Developing culturally and linguistically relevant, responsive and competent quality rating and improvement systems cannot be achieved without drawing upon and learning from the multiple communities that have different cultures and languages. At the community, program and practice level, this involves family engagement in a manner that is respectful and interactive.

This includes families sharing their expertise, and programs, practitioners and communities enriching their understanding and response as a result. Fundamental to engagement is this building of understanding, appreciation and trust. (Horton, C, 2003; CSSP, 2012; Family Support America, 1996).

Families themselves have talents and knowledge they can bring to enrich early childhood education programs and experiences. There are multiple ways to engage families as experts, which can enrich the early childhood education programs themselves (CSSP, 2012; Bruner, et al., 1998).

Family, friend and neighbor (FFN) care is the prevalent and the preferred form of care, particularly when children are very young and particularly within some cultural and linguistic groups. In most instances, FFN care already has the advantage of reflecting the cultural and linguistic background in the child's home.

There are multiple strategies for supporting and strengthening FFN care. In particular, however, it is important to reflect a family support approach to addressing the needs and desires of FFN caregivers (Chase, 2008), as well as to explore how the QRIS system can respond to the FFN caregivers, particularly when children are in both FFN and regulated care.

There is a great need to learn by doing and assessing and re-assessing. Addressing these complex and critically important issues of developing an early childhood education system for a diverse and inclusive society represents a continuous learning process that benefits from diverse involvement at all levels.

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