Cultural Competence and Sensitivity

There are several ways to think about being culturally competent and culturally sensitive. Cultural competence refers to a process that recognizes and responds to cultural differences. A culturally competent person or agency recognizes the importance of culture, assesses cross-cultural relations, is vigilant in watching for the dynamics that result from cultural differences, expands their cultural knowledge, and adapts services to meet culturally unique needs (Cross, 1988). Being culturally competent can go a long way in alleviating misunderstandings about people from various cultures.

Cultural competence is a developmental process and a way of responding to cultural differences. There are five essential elements that contribute to the cultural competence of an individual, system, business, or agency. These include —

• Valuing diversity.
• Having the capacity for cultural self-assessment.
• Being conscious of the dynamics when cultures interact.
• Having institutional cultural knowledge.
• Developing adaptations to diversity.

Cultural sensitivity suggests an awareness that cultural differences and similarities exist. It also means being aware of the cultures represented.

Culture
Culture is defined as the integrated patterns of human behavior that include thought, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a community or population.

Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, 1981.
Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Co.

Cultural Diversity
Cultural diversity deals with the differences in how people of various cultures go about meeting their needs.
News From the State

Greetings!
Each year the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning does an Annual Needs Assessment. The assessment follows a three-year cycle with the focus of the assessment varying from year to year. One year the focus is parents, the next year it is the teachers and administrators, and in the final year the assessment focuses on paraprofessionals. And so the cycle continues. This year we are in the third year phase of the assessment cycle which focuses on the needs and issues of paraprofessionals.

Most of you have received the Paraprofessional Survey, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your prompt response. We have received a very high return rate and for that we are indeed very thankful. The information gathered as a result of the survey will help in prioritizing our efforts in future staff development efforts and long-range planning for paraprofessionals. It will also assist us in ascertaining the degree to which schools are complying with the current paraprofessional staff development and suppression legislation. Since this is the third cycle of paraprofessional needs assessment data, we will have a more accurate picture of the current status of paraprofessional staff development issues and efforts. This, in turn, will further guide us in our planning and will assist the special education department of monitoring and compliance in helping schools to be in compliance with the paraprofessional legislation.

Happy spring,
Barbara Jo Stahl,
Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning

Minnesota Paraprofessional Guide
A guide for teachers, related service personnel, administrators, paraprofessionals, and others charged with assisting in the development of Minnesota’s paraprofessional workforce. It contains information and strategies to build strong, effective, and supportive teams that ensure successful educational services for all students. To order, send a check or purchase order for $8.00 per copy to —
Publications Office
Institute on Community Integration
University of Minnesota
109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455
Bilingual Paras of the Year

Each year, two paraprofessionals (one from greater Minnesota and one from the Twin Cities) are recognized as bilingual paraprofessionals of the year. The award is co-sponsored by the Comprehensive Center for Region VI, Hamline University (located in St. Paul), and the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning. Each winner is given free tuition for a two-credit course at the graduate school of education, Hamline University.

The 1999 Bilingual paraprofessionals of the year are —

Nadia Crooker
Bilingual Educational Aide, Long Prairie-Grey Eagle Elementary and Middle Schools

Nadia Crooker is a bilingual educational aide in the Long Prairie-Grey Eagle Elementary and Middle Schools. Here are some of the attributes as described by her colleagues that make her a distinguished bilingual paraprofessional. She possesses outstanding skills as an educator, communicator, mentor, advocate, and liaison for the Spanish-speaking students in the school. Through her work, students in the school gain a greater understanding and acceptance of, as well as tolerance for, differences. Some of her outstanding qualities include her professionalism, her interest and commitment to every student, her dedication and hard work, her warm and kind heart, her versatility, and her ability to work with all kinds of staff and students. As one of the teachers put it so appropriately, “Nadia is an important asset in making this school run efficiently and we would not know what to do without her.”

Long Her
Special Education Interpreter, St. Paul Public Schools

Long Her has served the students and parents of St. Paul Public Schools as a Special Education Hmong/English interpreter for 10 years. Some of his attributes as described by Margie Robinson, the special educator, include his excellent work ethic, self-directness, his willingness to go the extra mile, his advocacy skills, and his highly-skilled cultural sensitivities. Mr. Her is exceptional in his interpreting abilities and in his command of both Hmong and English. It is for these reasons that he is actively sought after by many to provide consultation on written translation. With his valuable input, the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning has come up with the new Hmong/English Dictionary of Special Education Terms. Mr. Long is a valuable asset to the Minnesota education community and as the special educator aptly put it, he is truly deserving of the recognition and honor of being the bilingual paraprofessional of the year.

Congratulations!

Contributed by Elizabeth Watkins, ELL and Minority Issues, Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning.
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Do you have an idea for an upcoming ParaLink?

Tell us about it!

Fax: (612) 624-9344
paralink@icimail.coled.umn.edu
Culture as a Learning Tool

Change is usually perceived as an opportunity or a threat. Minnesota schools are changing in that they continue to grow more and more culturally diverse. Is this looked upon as an opportunity for your school? Or is it a threat? What can you do to capitalize on cultural diversity as the opportunity that it truly is?

There are national and regional cultures. There is big ‘C’ Culture (the fine arts); there is little ‘c’ culture (norms of interaction). There are religious cultures and political cultures. There is the counter-culture. There is a teacher culture, a paraprofessional culture, and a student culture, and cliques within teacher, paraprofessional, and student cultures.

Culture is constantly evolving, constantly being created, constantly being reassembled. Culture is a moving target. Culture is implicitly understood by everyone, but difficult for any two individuals to define together.

Cultural diversity is a huge opportunity — if it is regularly discussed in school. It isn’t something to be wary of, nor something to tip-toe around. It is something to explore, to wonder about. It is something to talk openly about, because no one is sure exactly what it is, just as everyone is equally as sure that it is.

In your work with the cultures of your school — as part of the culture of your school — no one expects you to know everything about every culture, since it’s impossible to define what is and isn’t a culture in the first place. But your students will appreciate it immensely if you show an interest in their culture — whether it be the culture of the neighborhood just one block from the school or the seemingly far-away culture of an ESL student.

Showing an interest in culture does not mean agreeing or disagreeing with that culture. It simply means showing interest. Ask students about what they do and why they do it. Get students talking to each other about how they view culture and how they think it affects them. Ask other teachers about their impressions. Keeping an open mind about culture isn’t agreeing or disagreeing; it’s being a learner along with everyone else.

Contributed by Paul Magnuson, LEP Education Specialist, Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning. Phone: (651) 582-8649, Email: Paul.Magnuson@state.mn.us

Try This

- Ask students to catalog misunderstandings due to differences in culture in a “conflict notebook.” Give them a week’s time. Find out what they discover. Does their definition of culture change?
- Present two students with a situation and give each of them a role. Situation: late homework; Roles: para and student. Ask the two students to have a conversation, in character, about the situation. Ask other students to listen to what the two say and how they say it. What does the conversation tell everyone about how we interact? Think of other situations to role play.
- Talk about television. How does TV present different cultures? Is TV biased? If so, how?
- Hold a culture fair for a class, a group of classes, or the entire school. Ask students to demonstrate games and customs from around the world. Invite other classes; invite the community.
- Stage a full-scale culture simulation. There are many available commercially (Bafa Bafa is one). How do students feel after the simulation?
- Decorate the room with pictures, language, and artifacts from a “culture of the month.” Encourage students to sign up to decorate the room next month.
Use Inclusive Language

Language can and does often play a great role in perpetuating different types of biases and stereotypes, and does negatively affect people we work with and about whom we speak. In order to remedy that, it is crucial to use inclusive language — language that includes everyone. Here are some ideas about using inclusive language —

Use non-labeling, non-sexist language

Instead of saying... You might say....
“Him” or “he” “She or he” or “him or her”
“Joe, the disabled kid” “Joe is a person with a disability”
“That homosexual” “John, who identifies himself as being gay”
“Our neighbors, the Jews” “The Smiths who practice the Jewish faith”

Avoid culturally offensive phrases, words, and jokes

Instead of... You might...
Assuming that Jane has a husband Ask about Jane’s partner or significant other
Assuming that Omar lives with his parents Ask about Omar’s care providers
Saying “Merry Christmas” to Barry Ask if Barry celebrates Christmas
Repeating the joke you heard at a party Think first if the joke is offensive or perpetuates stereotypes

Use appropriate nonverbal language

Instead of .... You might ... 
Assuming it is alright to extend your hand to a new person you meet Observe how they act nonverbally; it may be offensive to touch them
Assuming that it is fine to make direct eye contact Observe the eye contact the person makes with you and what they appear to be comfortable with

Listen to the person with whom you are communicating; avoid making assumptions and judgments

Instead of .... You might ...
Speaking in your usual manner Listen to the intensity and amount of words the other person uses
Using words that you traditionally use e.g. “husband” or “wife” Listen to the words the other person uses. e.g. “partner” or “significant other”

“Anything and everything” is the motto of many paraprofessionals. “Anything and everything and in 3 languages” describes the daily routine for hundreds of paraprofessionals in Minnesota who speak two, three or even more languages. Minnesota has about 30,000 students whose native language is not English. This number increased by almost 150% from 1990. About one-third of these students speak Hmong. The next most common language is Spanish, spoken by 22% of students. Other common languages are Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, Somali, and Russian.

Because of the shortage of licensed bilingual staff, schools rely heavily on paraprofessionals to communicate with students and families. Bilingual paraprofessionals need to have excellent skills in their native language and in English. They also need tremendous knowledge of cultural differences. Bilingual paraprofessionals help to bridge the gap between two worlds: families’ traditional culture and language, and the language and culture of schools. Parents, students, and teachers depend upon them in many ways. In one day, bilingual staff may help a mother make an appointment to get her child’s eyes checked, explain how school lunch works to kids who are new to the country, or help teachers get parent permission for a class field trip.

Bilingual paraprofessionals are employed through many different school programs: English as a Second Language, Bilingual Education, Title I, and Migrant Education, as well as Special Education. There is no way to accurately count the number of bilingual paraprofessionals in Minnesota. Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Schools, the two districts with the largest enrollment of students learning English as a second language, employ about 1400 bilingual paraprofessionals.

Many bilingual paraprofessionals spend part of the day helping students in classrooms, just like other paraprofessionals. In addition, they will spend time on the phone or in meetings interpreting for parents, staff and teachers. In some schools, the bilingual paraprofessional is expected to be “resident expert” on all issues involving culture or language. As one can imagine, job expectations and workload are significant issues.

A few districts assign one or more bilingual paraprofessionals to the special education department to interpret just for special education assessments and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. These staff become experts in the terminology and

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**Resources for Bilingual Paraprofessionals**

**Minneapolis Public Schools resources** —

English-Spanish Glossary of Special Education Terminology. Contact Dorothy Slegman, (612) 627-3088.

**Minnesota Department of Children, Families, & Learning resources** —

- Staff development for bilingual paraprofessionals working in special education: Contact elizabeth.watkins@state.mn.us
- Online, searchable database of bilingual interpreters: [http://cfl.state.mn.us/interpreter/index.html](http://cfl.state.mn.us/interpreter/index.html)
- Online translations of due process forms: [http://cfl.state.mn.us/SPECED/guidelines.html](http://cfl.state.mn.us/SPECED/guidelines.html)
- English-Hmong Dictionary of Special Education Terminology: Available online at [http://cfl.state.mn.us/SPECED/guidelines.html](http://cfl.state.mn.us/SPECED/guidelines.html) or contact elizabeth.watkins@state.mn.us.
Communication: Less Can be More

Recently, while travelling, I observed the following incident at an airport check-in counter. Three men from Vietnam were checking their luggage and boxes. They didn’t fully understand everything the receptionist was saying, so she tried repeating herself. She did that again and again and every time louder and louder. This appears to be a typical scene, something we have all either witnessed or participated in, often with very limited success.

Given the increasing diversity that we observe in our neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, how do we enhance our communication with the diverse populations with whom we come into contact? Simplifying our language both in the spoken and written form is the key to enhance our communication. We have to start thinking of the message that we want to communicate and then figure out how to get it across in a shorter and a less complicated way. Most of us normally don’t think about how we say things. However, if you are working with individuals or groups from other countries, it is worth the effort to look at the language you use and the manner in which you use it.

After all, communicating well with all parents and children will result in a higher degree of inclusion, comfort, and understanding for everyone involved.

Here are some tips for modifying our communication. Consider them when you find yourself in a situation like the one I observed at the airport check-in counter —

Always remember:
Simpler, not louder
• Decide what is the main point you want to communicate.
• Determine the sequence of an explanation and stay with it. Don’t introduce too many contingencies, and if you need to, use simple “if” statements.
• Simplify the explanation; use simple words but do not use broken English. Use shorter sentences.
• Use consistent terminology; it’s good to repeat the same words.
• Emphasize key words.
• Speak slowly but not so slowly that you come across as condescending.
• Avoid idioms, acronyms, and slang. You cannot assume that the person you are talking to is familiar with your lingo.
• Avoid statements that begin with question words (For example, “What I want to say is…. ” or “Where you will find this is…. ”). It is, of course, alright to start questions with question words.
• Be aware of reductions in English and avoid them whenever possible (“J’eeet yet?” for “Did you eat yet?”)
• Have the person you are communicating with repeat the information you presented rather than asking them, “Do you understand?” Often, the answer to that question will be yes even if someone doesn’t understand.

This is a quick and short list, but try a few of these and it will lead to greater self-awareness and will help foster a few new ideas of your own.

Contributed by Diane Pecoraro, ABE/ESL Program Specialist, Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning, Phone: (651) 582-8424 Email: diane.pecoraro@state.mn.us
Minnesota Cultural Diversity Center (MCDC)
MCDC provides multiple resources to individuals, communities, corporations and, non-profit government and educational organizations needing assistance in the area of cultural diversity. Some of the resources include monthly cultural events; quarterly “Sharing Diversity” forums; national video conferences; MCDC News, a newsletter focusing on cultural diversity; and Cultural Diversity Almanac, a resource bulletin. For more information, contact —
Minnesota Cultural Diversity Center
First Bank Building
9633 Lyndale Ave. S.
Bloomington, MN 55420
Phone: (612) 881-6090
Email: info@mcdc.org

National Multicultural Institute (NMCI)
NMCI provides several services including national conferences, individualized training, consulting programs, and resource materials to address issues of multiculturalism in our society. Their upcoming conference is Making Choices as a Diverse Society: Taking Responsibility for a Promising Future being held from June 1-4, 2000 at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill, in Washington, DC. For more information, contact —
National Multi-Cultural Institute
3000 Connecticut Ave. NW Suite 438
Washington, DC 20008-2556
Phone: (202) 483-0700
Email: nmci@nmci.org
Web: http://www.nmci.org

Teacher Talk
Teacher Talk is a newsletter published by the Center for Adolescent Studies at the School of Education, Indiana University. It provides classroom ideas, lesson plans, and other information of interest to educators. Volume 2, Issue 2 deals with cultural diversity in the classroom. For more information, contact —
The Center for Adolescent Studies
School of Education
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405-1006
Phone: (812) 856-8113
Email: ingersol@indiana.edu

A World of Differences: Understanding Cross-Cultural Communication
This video examines different ways that people from two different cultures can experience communication failures and conflict. Examples include mistranslation; the difficulty of understanding idioms from another culture; cultural differences in personal space; patterns of touch, etiquette, and ritual; the expression of emotions; ideas of food; gestures; courtship differences; and parent-child interactions. The video comes with a detailed instructor’s guide. To obtain the video, contact —
University of California Extension Center for Media
2000 Center Street
4th floor
Berkeley, CA 94704
Phone: (510) 642-0460
Email: cmil@uclink.berkeley.edu

Edited by Eleanor W. Lynch, Ph.D., & Marci J. Hanson, Ph.D.
This book provides information and practical advice to professionals working with children and families from diverse cultural and linguistic
backgrounds. It includes facts about the influence of culture on people’s beliefs, values and behaviors; descriptions of the challenges families may have adapting to a different culture; and strategies for fostering respectful and effective interactions. (ISBN 1-55766-331-9). Cost $39.95. To order, call (800) 638-3775 or visit the Website at http://www.pbrookes.com/orderinfo/orderform.htm

Websites Publishing
Special Education Materials

Brookes Publishing (http://www.brookespublishing.com)
Brookes publishes highly respected resources in the following fields: early childhood, early intervention, inclusive and special education, developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, communication and language, behavior, and mental health. Titles range from graduate- and undergraduate-level textbooks, professional references, and practical resources to curricula, assessment tools, family guidebooks and videos.

Inclusion Press (http://www.inclusion.com)
Inclusion Press is a small, independent press striving to produce readable, accessible, user-friendly books and resources about full inclusion in school, work, and community. Their books are excellent resources for courses and conferences. Contact Inclusion Press for information regarding bulk rates for schools and volunteer/advocacy organizations. They can recommend packets of materials for your conferences, workshops, staff-development seminars and events.

Agency for Instructional Technology (AIT) (http://www.ait.net)
AIT is a nonprofit education organization established in 1962 to develop, acquire, and distribute quality technology-based resources and to provide leadership to the educational technology policy community. AIT fulfills this mission by being the largest single provider of instructional television programs and by being a major player in the development of curriculum products. AIT has established a national model for contextual learning materials.

Many teachers and paraprofessionals that work in Minnesota schools are the descendents of immigrants from Scandinavia, Germany, or other countries. Some towns had schools taught in immigrants’ native languages. In many places, however, children had to sink or swim in English. The world is much more complicated now. Schools have more responsibilities; students have to learn much more — and learn it quickly — in order to be successful adults. Bilingual paraprofessionals are critical and necessary staff who keep students and schools afloat!

Contributed by Elizabeth Watkins, ELL and Minority Issues, Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning.
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presented in one’s state or region, learning about some of the general parameters of those cultures, and realizing that cultural diversity will affect an individual’s (and family’s) participation in any given program. Cultural knowledge helps a paraprofessional to be aware of possible cultural differences and be ready to respond to these differences appropriately (Lynch & Hanson, 1992). It must be noted that cultural sensitivity does not mean that you have to know everything about every culture represented in a population.

The Cultural Competence Continuum (Cross, 1988) can be a very useful tool in identifying areas that you want to focus on when trying to better understand culture and diversity. There are six stages along this continuum: These include —

- Cultural destructiveness.
- Cultural incapacity.
- Cultural inattention.
- Cultural pre-competence.
- Basic cultural competence.
- Advanced cultural competence.

Each of the stages highlights characteristics that an institution or a person possesses. One must always be aware that being culturally competent is a learning process. It is important to remember that you and the school/agency where you work might currently be at the same stage along the continuum and together may desire to move to other stages along the continuum. It could also be very possible that you may be at one stage and your school/agency may be at a different one. It is important to remember that moving along the continuum requires a great deal of commitment and life experience. The following section will briefly highlight each of the stages along the continuum.

### Cultural Destructiveness
Attitudes, policies, and behaviors are actively destructive or dehumanizing to cultures or individuals within the culture at this stage of the continuum. There is a feeling of superiority of one culture over others, and the superior culture dominates or exploits the non-superior culture.

### Cultural Incapacity
Cultural Incapacity implies that at this stage, there is a lack of capacity to work with people of other cultures. There is belief in superiority of one culture over others and maintenance of stereotypes about other cultures. People at this stage of the continuum often have unrealistic fears, are unwilling to accept or welcome diversity, and have lower expectations of people from outside their culture.

### Cultural Inattention
At this stage of the continuum, there is an expression of a lack of bias toward members not only of the dominant culture, but also the belief that culture, color, and ability make no difference at all. People at this stage function under the idea that everyone should be treated
the same way. This approach ignores the strengths that diverse cultures provide, covertly encourages assimilation of the dominant culture, and ends up blaming people rather than cultural biases for their problems.

Cultural Pre-competence
Persons at this stage recognize that they have had weaknesses in serving members of cultural minority groups and attempt to improve the way they work with people of a divergent population. They ask, “What can I do?” Persons at this stage have begun the process of becoming culturally competent, but often lack information of what is possible and how to proceed.

Basic Cultural Competence
At this point in the continuum, the person accepts and respects difference while continuing to assess her or his own culture. The person continues to pay close attention to dynamics of difference and to expand her or his own cultural knowledge and resources. The person varies the way she or he provides service to people with whom she or he works in order to meet their needs and their cultural identity.

Advanced Cultural Competence
The person at this point in the continuum seeks to add to the cultural knowledge she or he already has. She or he holds culture in high esteem, can identify discrimination based on culture, and advocates for cultural competence in the agencies and systems in which she or he works.

It is important to identify our own level of cultural competence according to the Cultural Competence Continuum. The ideal situation would be being at the advanced cultural competence stage. It is advisable to identify at what stage of the continuum we are and to develop our own individual plan for continuous learning process as we continue our journey toward cultural competence.

Given the increasing diversity in the classrooms and society in general, it is crucial for paraprofessionals to examine the cultural and individual practices of the people and families with whom they work. An individual’s culture and practices can influence all of our interactions. We should also examine the local community and agency cultural practices because these too will influence how to interact with the people with whom we work. Although people may be of the same cultural background, often times they do not all behave the same. It is important not to make assumptions about someone based on their ethnicity, native language or cultural affiliation. In order to ensure that the people we work with get the greatest benefits of our services, it is crucially important to be culturally competent and provide culturally sensitive services.


The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium Website has lots of resources for paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators. View previous issues of ParaLink, find out about conferences and awards, or visit the Para Chatroom.