

Component Four: Diversity Connections

“We must never forget this global system is made up of billions of individuals each of whom has a face, a voice, and a right to participate.”

Queen Noor of Jordan (August, 2000)

“We are for difference: for respecting difference, for allowing difference, for encouraging difference, until difference no longer makes a difference.”

Johnetta B. Cole, President Spellman College (1990)

The Montana Early Literacy Project Model is based on the foundation that cultural and developmental factors play a critical role in the learning process. Children come to school with cultural-linguistic diversity and possess varying cognitive, linguistic, social, and physical abilities. These characteristics of the learner are recognized as assets and acknowledged as vehicles through which literacy can be taught and learned. Ensuring equity in literacy instruction is knowing and responding individually to the child’s unique cultural background and experience and to their individual learning styles and abilities. Component Four of the model describes the importance of embracing cultural and linguistic diversity and addressing individual diverse abilities. Components for creating school and classroom climates and assessing the level of success are discussed.

Embracing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Components for student success. Culturally inclusive learning opportunities set the stage for life-long learning. Early literacy activities that are inclusive of each child’s culture and ability help build individual strengths. Children use their strengths and what they bring to the learning environment, in the form of prior knowledge, to construct cognitive bridges to new learning. Early literacy educators have the responsibility of making every effort to include and integrate the students’ culture(s) and language into the preschool classroom by facilitating a

diverse array of instructional strategies and learning approaches and implementing literacy materials that reflect a variety of cultural experiences (See Appendix D for Key Understandings: Culture and Language Handouts). Children develop a strong sense of identity and sense of belonging when their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are recognized as a strength to be fostered and respected (See Appendix D for Native Student Identity Handout).

School and classroom climate. A culturally responsive curriculum is integrated into all curricular areas. It does not rely on one-time activities, but instead relies on consistent, ongoing, culturally responsive instructional strategies, materials, and teaching throughout the entire school year. It requires a building-wide implementation, which is supported by appropriate staff development and preparation. It is based on the notion that the “hidden curriculum” can be a powerful ally or a powerful enemy. The hidden curriculum refers to the prevailing attitudes and beliefs of the people working within the school setting. This affects the way a child’s cultural diversity is perceived. Depending on the viewpoints held by the majority of the staff, the hidden beliefs and attitudes have an adverse effect on the child or a positive effect on the child. Cultural continuity exists when the classroom climate and school setting reflect the culture of the students in an integrated, natural, consistent manner. Cultural discontinuity exists when the school setting and the classroom climate do not accommodate or are not compatible with the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students.

Culturally relevant materials. Culturally relevant materials represent distinct groups of people. It is the responsibility of the educator to explicitly state the name of the group and if possible use a map or a globe to show the homeland of the group. Human resources such as elders, parents, and community members serve as partners in learning. They can visit classrooms and present information in the form of storytelling, sharing personal experiences, bringing in artifacts and talking about them, or integrating art, dance, and music activities.

Careful examination of cultural materials and activities takes serious thought and reflection on the part of the teacher. Activities that are contrived and generic do not allow the students to get a true picture of the culture. The selection of literature requires some of the following considerations:

- ✓ Is the literature developmentally appropriate?
- ✓ Are the stories written from the specific culture's point of view?
- ✓ Do the artifacts and images represent the specific cultural group?
- ✓ Are there stereotypic generalizations?
- ✓ Do the narratives or pictures objectify members of the ethnic group?

Children's literature can help children understand our multicultural society: First, literature can show how we are connected to one another through our emotions, our needs, our desires, and experiences common to all. Second, books can help us to understand, appreciate, and celebrate the differences among us - those things that make each cultural group special and enrich the larger society. Third, literature can help develop an understanding of social issues and their effects in everyday lives.

Culturally responsive instructional strategies and materials. Culturally responsive teaching requires cultural sensitivity and knowledge. The perspectives and attitudes of teachers in the classroom have a significant impact on the success of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Teachers who value culturally responsive teaching develop skills, actively seek out accurate information, and use appropriate resources to tap into students' interests in reading and writing. Teachers become the bridge between the environment of the school and the other parts of the children's world and make every effort to include and integrate the student's culture into their teaching. A "pedagogy for empowerment" requires educators to adopt a willingness to encourage active use of written and oral language so that students can develop their language

and literacy skills in the process of sharing their experiences and insights with their peers and adults (Cummins, 1991). Cultural relativism is a teaching approach that gives children opportunities to view the world through a cultural lens and participate in cross-cultural activities. The child's first contact with ethnic and racial diversity is powerful and meaningful and can bring about acceptance and celebration for diversity. When content, concepts, and events are studied from many points of view, all students will be ready to play their roles in the life of the nation (**Banks, 1996**).

Abundant and diverse opportunities for speaking, listening, reading, and writing guide children through the learning process, as they engage with their peers. When children actively participate in developmentally appropriate activities and culturally responsive instructional strategies, they become involved in their academic world and feel a sense of belonging and purpose. Engagement occurs when learners are given the time and opportunity to use and practice new learning tasks.

Literacy activities that include a variety of instructional techniques such as cooperative learning, flexible grouping, hands-on learning, direct instruction, free-play, and creative expression serve to meet the needs of culturally diverse students. Discovery, inquiry, reflection, and constructivist learning approaches develop critical thinking skills. Recognition of the multiple intelligences and diverse learning styles help teachers to utilize varying cultural practices in building a child's self-esteem. "Teachers need to be sensitive to individual as well as cultural differences in how children learn" (**Pung, 1991**).

Montana Early Literacy Project staff at Cherry Valley Elementary School located in Polson, Montana on the Flathead Indian Reservation developed culturally responsive curricula and produced the literacy tub *Native American Stories*. (See Appendix D for guidelines,

vocabulary, sample activities, recipes, and so forth that are included as part of the Native American Stories literacy tub.)

Culturally responsive curricula include materials from the child's culture and history that illustrate viewpoints, principles, and concepts. Culturally sensitive materials, when presented in consistent and sustained ways, provide children with a broad view of perspectives. An authentic cultural story, poem, or song can open young minds to new ways of knowing and thinking and seeing the world. When children are exposed to alternative ways of interpretation, they develop a sense of freedom to think. They will begin the journey to understanding that knowledge is changing and dynamic, to be interpreted from different experiences and perspectives (**Banks, 1996**).

Culturally relevant materials represent distinct groups of people. Knowledge and feedback that is generated from elders and parents is real, genuine, and an invaluable resource. Careful deliberation of materials takes serious thought and study in identifying culturally responsive materials. Locating authentic materials and resources to help facilitate learning in a cultural context requires some of the following considerations:

- ✓ Is the literature developmentally appropriate?
- ✓ Are the stories written from the specific culture's point of view?
- ✓ Do the artifacts and images represent the specific cultural group?
- ✓ Are there stereotypic generalizations?
- ✓ Are there cartoon representations of a certain group?
- ✓ Do the narratives or pictures objectify members of the ethnic group?

Assessment. Authentic assessment is focused on the child's entire learning environment including home and school. It is important to consider the factors that determine authentic assessment: 1) the extent to which the student's language and culture have been incorporated

within the learning environment; 2) the extent to which students are encouraged to use language within the classroom; and 3) the extent to which teachers collaborate with parents as partners in learning (Rehyner, 1988).

Longitudinal monitoring and data collection by the teacher demonstrates progress over time. Teacher observations focus on the students' ability to express and reflect upon their own experiences, and build their knowledge base during interaction with peers and adults. Children's active use of written and oral language provides teachers with a rich database for assessing educational progress and potential difficulties.

Embracing Diverse Abilities

Teachers speak of meeting children at their own developmental level, of valuing differences, and of celebrating diversity. The philosophy is heartfelt; the method of attaining it is more problematic. When children of many ability levels are in the same classroom, it takes careful planning to implement a curriculum that serves all students.

Many of the methods for designing a curriculum rich in language and literacy that meets the needs of all students are identical to those described elsewhere in this work. This section will highlight particular means for developing accommodations, modifications, and adaptations for students whose developmental levels are significantly different from those of their peers. Suggestions will be offered for meeting the needs of students with physical and perceptual differences. These adaptations will be offered within the general classroom setting with age-appropriate peers to the greatest extent possible.

Components for student success. It is important to include youngsters who learn differently in the general education setting. Not only do they learn from appropriate models how to speak and to listen, and how to share and to take turns, they teach their peers an acceptance of diversity in the world.

When children who are developmentally delayed are placed with an age-appropriate group of peers, certain components will support their successful inclusion. Providing a positive classroom climate, thoughtfully preparing the physical arrangement of the room, planning for effective communication, employing cooperative learning groups, and using individual rather than group means of measuring children's progress are the most common of the components. Additionally, educational settings in which student diversity thrives typically encourage efforts of teachers to work in teams, provide resources of time and money for collaboration, and make a philosophical commitment to relevant professional development and support. They seek to include parents as a vital part of the educational team.

School and classroom climate. The climate of the school and classroom in which children with disabilities are included with children without disabilities is all-important in fostering a sense of belonging. It is the administrative leadership and the classroom teachers who set the tone for the school and classrooms that welcome all learners. Teacher attitudes determine the degree to which students will accept one another. In an atmosphere that values the unique perspectives of each child, all will thrive.

Such a classroom emphasizes open-mindedness to new ideas, welcomes discussions of differences, and builds an atmosphere that celebrates those differences. The teachers invite children to explore both (or all!) sides of any issue and are careful not to arrive at a single "right" conclusion.

Before Mac, a child with Down syndrome, began his preschool career, his parents, Phil and Molly, introduced him to the teacher before school began. They brought along a scrapbook of all the things Mac could do. Phil and Molly were determined that the teachers and other students would get to know Mac, the person, not Mac, the boy with a syndrome. The portfolio became a wonderful tool that supported Mac as he pointed to pictures of himself doing all the things other kids did: picnicking with his family, helping with the family pets, and enjoying his birthday party.

Initially, the classroom teacher was hesitant about her ability to meet Mac's needs, manage his behavior, and successfully include him with his peers. With the consistent support of Mac's parents, the teacher relaxed. The other students learned to support Mac during puppet plays, to listen actively while Mac's assistant and he "read" a paragraph aloud when it was their turn, and to gently guide Mac back to class after recess.

Physical arrangement. Classrooms that include students with and without disabilities look different than classrooms that are not inclusive. Demonstrations of class membership are everywhere. Names of every student appear on class lists, on job charts, and on bulletin board displays. Pictures of children and their work include everyone. Each student has a turn at being first and at being last. Skill levels are seldom the rationale for grouping children; their interests in a variety of topics guides group membership. The composition of groups is changed regularly so that students have the opportunity of working with a variety of peers.

Shelly Knight's classroom is a cheerful place. It contains pods of desks in one section of the room, tables and countertops for projects in another. There is a sink for messy work and cleanup. One corner has soft seating for cozy reading times. Under a pair of study carrels rest two floor mats.

The floor mats are there for Sam, a boy who has cerebral palsy, and his physical therapist, who visits the classroom twice a week. When Shelly learned that Sam was supposed to leave class for therapy sessions, she put her foot down. "No way," she exclaimed. "He will be missing science and he loves science!" She proceeded to design a unit of study about the human body and worked with the therapist to present age-appropriate vocabulary and information to the whole class.

Sam began to belong to the class in a new way. Other students volunteered to help him when his name came up on the class job list. They interacted with him in class and on the playground, taking turns to push his wheel chair back from recess. They learned gentle, appropriate ways of touching his tight muscles. They learned to accept physical differences.

Communication. A variety of tools to aid the communication of children with disabilities may be used in the classroom. Helping students without disabilities learn to use communication

boards, talking computers, or sign language will demystify this equipment and encourage interactive communication with the child with a disability. The speech-language pathologist or a student's paraprofessional may take part in classroom activities that support language exchanges between verbal and non-verbal children. The class may study sign language as a means of communicating with a child who is deaf.

In preparing a language and literacy-rich environment, it is important for children to see themselves as a vital part of the setting. One method for establishing individual importance is to work with children and families to produce "Me" books. This picture book, with actual photos of the individual student, becomes a valued tool between home, school, and friends. It serves as an introduction for prospective teachers who need to understand more about a child's differences, needs, and successes.

Communication can take many forms. Language and literacy, typically thought of as talking and listening, reading and writing, involves the use of words, oral and written. The concept may also be broadened to include the transfer of thought from one person to another.

Pam is a tiny, nonverbal girl with multiple disabilities. When her teachers and peers want to communicate with her, they use a language board. Pam's mother and teachers have worked together to create a page of pictures that show a variety of activities: toileting, eating, playing with puzzles, napping, and drinking. Pam pushes one of the pictures to activate a pre-recorded verbal message such as, "I'm thirsty."

Sometimes it is Pam's turn to say the good morning greeting or the weather for calendar time. Her assistant will have worked with her to agree on what the message should be, and will prepare a taped version of Pam's desired response. When the teacher calls on Pam, she hits the switch on the tape recorder to give her answer. Other students frequently are paired with her to record the responses. This activity with other children delights Pam and invites interactions and friendships.

Cooperative learning groups. Preschool settings typically use the classroom structures of small and large groups. Children with learning differences may be effectively included in these groups. The typically developing students serve as powerful models in the areas of language and

behavior. The teacher initiates a group activity, then works to support individual student success as interactions take place within the group.

Teacher Shannon, at The University of Montana's CO-TEACH Preschool for 3-5 year old children, emphasizes the strategy "Tell, Show, Help, Praise" which is a sequence of instructional supports for the twenty four children with and without disabilities. University students from the fields of psychology, education, physical therapy, and social work learn to give each child the necessary support, but no more, to be successful. In the learning environment, children with speech and language delays, cognitive disabilities, autism, and learning disabilities interact with appropriate-aged peers to learn to ask for a toy, to share, to take turns, and even to begin early writing skills.

"Have you been to kindergarten?" Teacher Shannon asks a rapt group of youngsters. "No," they respond with gleeful shakes of the head. "Or have you been to high school? Or to college?" she continues. "No," they chorus. "Of course not! So, should your writing look like mine?" Again, a chorus of "No" fills the room. "Is that okay? Yes, you bet!" She goes on to explain that it is exactly right for them to be making wiggly lines or a series of marks, dots and dashes under their picture. An adult will then listen to their story and write it in 'grown up' writing under the children's writing.

The students scramble to tables with their peers and the university students to create their first story. The children draw a picture and write their story. Then they read their story to an adult and nearby children. With lots of praise on every side, they watch with pride as the adult at their table transcribes their words into conventional text. Students turn to one another and share what their story is about. It is an exciting day for everyone in class.

Any "I can't" or "I don't know how" is met with the gentle, consistent pattern of an adult supporting the child by first telling how, then showing (shadow writing in the air or on the paper with a finger), then the offer of hand-over hand helping, and finally the praise for a job well done.

Assessment

When a classroom is comprised of diversely abled children, each child's progress is measured individually, based upon their abilities and skill levels. While it must be emphasized that multiple forms of formal and informal assessments should be used to gather the most comprehensive and accurate information about a child's strengths and needs, one of the most common assessment methods is that of a portfolio of student products, selected with the student's input and carefully dated to demonstrate progress. Through the use of portfolios, educators can gather writing samples such as Picture Story/Word Stories or journals, numbers,

alphabet, name, and meaningful and familiar words. These writing samples help to determine a child's print development progress over time. The practice of including the student in product selection and the use of authentic assessment adds to the relevance of the assessment.

As mentioned in Component Two, it is imperative that educators and service providers use a variety of both informal and formal assessment tools to determine children's individual present levels of literacy and language skills, rather than using one assessment to determine a child's skills. An example of a formal assessment is the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary* standardized test. Some examples of informal assessments are parent interviews, portfolios with samples of student work, language samples, the *Emerging Literacy Checklist*, and the *Emerging Literacy Screening* (Paulson et al, 2001).

Teacher Stacia smiles warmly as Tanner, a tiny four-year-old boy, wiggles into a comfortable position in the child-sized chair across from her in the Head Start office. "Are you a reader?" she asks, handing him a copy of *Brown Bear Brown Bear* upside down and backwards. He nods shyly and does not reposition the book correctly as she asks him to find the first page. She waits, then gently turns the book. Tanner still has difficulty with the concept of 'first page' and points at words in random order as she reads the first sentence to him. Stacia acknowledges what Tanner is able to do, and she supports him with generous praise saying, "You know about books, don't you? You really use that finger. You are learning."

"Can you sing the ABC song?" (Head shake, No) "Would you like to hear me do it first?" Teacher Stacia sings the song to a delighted boy, "You did a good job," said Tanner, but he still refuses to sing along.

Stacia is using a screening assessment "The Emerging Literacy Screening" from *Building Early Literacy Skills* (Paulson, et. al., 2001), that she and others at the Division of Educational Research and Service in the School of Education at The University of Montana, developed to assess emerging literacy skills. This instrument helps early childhood educators look at children's current skill level. It begins with simple tasks to determine book awareness and moves to more complex activities such as writing a story to explain a picture that the child has drawn. It affords the teacher the opportunity to observe the child's ability to use language, phonological awareness, and print skills.

Appropriately administered, the "The Emerging Literacy Screening" allows the teacher to be very supportive of the child's efforts to use emerging reading and writing skills while giving the teacher accurate and observable information about the child's individual progress toward literacy competence.