BARBARA KAISER, JUDY SKLAR RASMINSKY

Everything we think, say, and do is processed through our own cultural backgrounds. But because culture is absorbed and passed down from generation to generation rather than explicitly taught, we're seldom aware of it.

Culture shapes not only our values and beliefs, but also our gender roles, family structures, languages, dress, food, etiquette, approaches to disabilities, child-rearing practices, and even our expectations for children's behavior. In this way, culture creates diversity.

Cultural diversity and teachers

For teachers, it is essential to see and understand your own culture in order to see and understand how the cultures of children and their families influence children's behavior. Only then can you give every child a fair chance to succeed.

Think about your own upbringing. How did your family's expectations affect what you did? Were your parents, siblings, and other relatives close or distant? Were they strict, lenient, or somewhere in between? Were your school's expectations any different? All of this, and more, plays a part in how you view the behavior of the children you teach.

These ideas lie at the heart of NAEYC's position statement *Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education*. Its guiding principles include

- Recognizing that "self-awareness, humility, respect, and a willingness to learn are key to becoming a teacher who equitably and effectively supports all children and families"
- Developing a strong understanding of culture and diversity
- Understanding that "families are the primary context for children's development and learning"

One major takeaway from the position statement is that early childhood educators must support consistently warm and caring relationships between families and their children, respect families' languages and cultures, and incorporate those languages and cultures into the curriculum, their teaching practices, and the learning environment.

Cultural diversity and young children

Children bring their own set of culturally based expectations, skills, talents, abilities, and values with them into the classroom. And they begin to develop their self-concept (at least in part) from how others see them. To form positive self-concepts, children must honor and respect their own families and cultures and have others honor and respect these key facets of their identities too. If the classroom doesn't reflect and validate their families and cultures, children may feel invisible, unimportant, incompetent, and ashamed of who they are.

Many people, including educators, have long believed it is better to act colorblind and/or "culture blind"—that is, to not acknowledge color or culture. But research has shown that this artificial blindness keeps us from recognizing, acknowledging, and appreciating important differences. Worse, it may lead to unintentional bias toward or disrespect for those who are different from us.

We know now that acknowledgments of color and culture are essential for legitimizing differences. Color and culture make each one of us special and enable us to offer unique gifts and opportunities to groups we are part of. At the same time, color and culture help children learn about each other and the world. In short, color and culture enrich classrooms.

To appreciate what each child can contribute to the class, teachers need to learn about each family's cultural values. Helping children to see themselves in your pedagogy, curriculum, environment, and materials enables them (and their families) to feel welcomed and valued.

Take a look around your classroom.

- Does the artwork on the walls accurately reflect the children's lives, or are the walls covered with store-bought, stereotypical images?
    - Why not have the children create their own posters with their own artwork, things from home, and photos families can supply?
- Are labels (and other child-focused texts) repeated in each child's home language, or are they in English only?
    - Why not forge connections and support children's learning by asking family members to help children use their home languages throughout the room?

It’s important to see cultural and linguistic differences as resources, not as deficits. As NAEYC’s equity position statement puts it, “Children’s learning is facilitated when teaching practices, curricula, and learning environments build on children’s strengths and are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for each child.”

The difference between equitable and equal

Equal is not the same as equitable. Every child in your group has different needs, skills, interests, and abilities. *Equal* would mean giving all children the same activities, materials, and books. *Equitable* means ensuring that you consider each child’s strengths, context, and needs and provide all children with the opportunities that will support them in reaching their potential.

It’s crucial to recognize the inequities that children and their families face—in school and out. The position statement reminds us that “dominant social biases are rooted in the social, political, and economic structures of the United States. Powerful messages—conveyed through the media, symbols, attitudes, and actions—continue to reflect and promote both explicit and implicit bias.” For example, research conducted by Yale University professor Walter Gilliam clearly shows that young African American boys are subject to higher rates of suspension and expulsion than their White European American peers.

How cultural diversity shapes behavior

Your culture and the children’s cultures aren’t the only cultures at work in your classroom. Every school and early childhood education program has a culture too. The cultures of most American schools are based on White European American values. As the makeup of the US population becomes more diverse, there is more cultural dissonance—which impacts children’s behavior.

White European American culture has an individual orientation that teaches children to function independently, stand out, talk about themselves, and view property as personal. In contrast, many other cultures value interdependence, fitting in, helping others and being helped, being modest, and sharing property. In fact, some languages have no words for *I, me,* or *mine*.

Children who find themselves in an unfamiliar environment—such as a classroom that reflects a culture different from their home culture—are likely to feel confused, isolated, alienated, conflicted, and less competent because what they've learned so far in their home culture simply doesn't apply. They may not understand the rules, or they may be unable to communicate their needs in the school's language.

Rethinking challenging behavior

Because your responses to children's conflicts and challenging behavior are culture bound, it is all too easy to misinterpret children's words or actions. The next time a child seems defiant, ask yourself, is that behavior culturally influenced? Could I be misunderstanding the child's words or actions?

For example, White European Americans tend to use implicit commands, such as, "Johnny, can you please put the blocks away?" Children raised in the White European American culture understand that they are being told to put away the blocks. But children raised in the African American culture may interpret this utterance differently. In their culture, adult commands are usually explicit: "DuShane, put away the blocks." To African American children, an implicit command in the form of a question may seem to offer a choice about how to behave.

Culture also defines personal space, including how much space feels appropriate in the block area, at circle/meeting time, and in the dramatic play area. In some cultures, children feel comfortable playing close to one another; in others, the same space may feel claustrophobic and lead children to hit or shove a playmate who seems too near. Similarly, you may

stand too close or too far away, depending on children's cultures. For example, if Cadence doesn't pay attention to your request to keep the sand in the sandbox, you may be too far away to connect with her.

In White European American culture, teachers expect children to sit still and maintain eye contact to show that they're paying attention. But in other cultures, children might show their interest by joining in; they may learn through hearing or telling a story, watching others, or using trial and error. If they don't understand the lesson, they might have a hard time paying attention. Or they may be paying attention in a different way.

Culture counts

There are many rewards for teachers who take culture into account. You can form authentic, caring relationships with children and families; build connections between what children already know and what they need to know; select activities, materials, and instructional strategies that honor children's cultures and life experiences; and teach children the skills they need to succeed in a global society.