Cultural and Linguistic Connections
Linking What Matters to Families to What Matters for School Success

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Thomas Edison State College was founded in 1972 as one of New Jersey’s senior public institutions of higher learning and is regionally accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. The mission of Thomas Edison State College is to provide flexible, high-quality collegiate learning opportunities for self-directed adults. The College is dedicated to continuing its work to create academic opportunities designed specifically for adults that serve as alternatives to college classroom study and meet the unique need of adult learners.

The John S. Watson School of Public Service and Continuing Studies at Thomas Edison State College prepares professionals for leadership roles in a wide variety of public service-related settings. The Watson School is preparing the next generation of public policy and community service leaders in the following areas: Urban, Rural, and Regional Policy Studies; Non-profit Management; Environmental Policy/Environmental Justice; Information and Technology Management; Health Policy and Public Health Management; Early Childhood Education Leadership and Management; and Public Finance/Budget and Fiscal Management. The concentration areas of the School have been a direct result of the John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy work across the state with leaders in various sectors.

The John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy is a center of innovation and applied policy within the Watson School offering a new paradigm, applying the resources of higher education to public policy decisions in a practical and hands-on manner and in response to the expressed needs of decision makers, providing practical research, technical assistance, and other expertise. The Watson Institute is considered a “think and do tank,” versus a traditional “think tank.” It strives to develop long-term strategic partnerships that will effectuate the greatest level of change through its four thematic policy-based centers: the Center for Civic Engagement and Leadership Development, the Center for the Urban Environment, Center for Health Policy and the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children.

The Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children strives to bridge the voices of teachers, practitioners, and families with policy initiatives that impact the positive development of New Jersey’s children. The work of the CPDUC encompasses a holistic approach that utilizes best practices, policy analysis, and research to improve the health, well being, and educational outcomes for children and adults working with families. CPDUC goals are:

1. To review and advise on early childhood policy and initiatives that impact the positive development of urban children.
2. To utilize evidence-based practices and evaluations to influence best practices in the field of early childhood development, early learning and child health. Such practices focus on children’s socio-emotional development, teacher preparation, and support systems for diverse children and families.
3. To identify and promote economic messages to engage non-traditional champions for children within municipal government and the business sector.
4. To provide professional development opportunities that focus on parent engagement, socio-emotional development, supervision and mentoring of teachers, and working with diverse children and families.
5. To provide advisement to early childhood practitioners that guides them to career and academic options for becoming highly qualified and certified.
Lear ning to work with diverse children and families requires a concentrated effort: knowing yourself, your students, your communities, and why culture and language matters. The study of cultural competency and first-and second-language acquisition are not easy concepts to grasp. In fact, the development of cultural competence and racial awareness is painful, difficult, and frequently avoided by many people in general, and practitioners in particular: It requires opening oneself up to critical reflection, the harsh criticisms and condemning opinions of others, and it entails having to listen to the unflattering assessment of one’s own actions (Howard, 2010). What would make a practitioner engage in such reflection and assessment? Why are culture and language important? What is lost if culture and language are ignored in early childhood classrooms?

In 2007, the John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy of Thomas Edison State College established the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Summer Institute and Mentoring Program. The Summer Institute and Mentoring Program is designed for lead and assistant teachers from the same classroom to be trained and mentored together as a team. The program is in its fourth year of implementation and has trained and mentored 75 early childhood teachers in New Jersey. The program blends content, theory, practice, and simulations, coupled with mentoring and coaching – the perfect formula for achieving ideal classroom settings for diverse children and families. We have found that with specialized professional development and personalized mentoring/coaching, teachers can transform their thinking, provide enhanced literacy moments, integrate culture across curriculum areas, and become better equipped to use culture and language as anchors for child development (Berdecía & Kosec, 2011).

The Summer Institute/Mentoring Program is committed to finding solutions for early childhood teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse children by infusing strategies for incorporating children’s culture and home language into the daily curriculum and creating a learning environment that affirms positive self-concept/identity and greater family connections. Program participants receive three-days of intensive training in first-and second-language acquisition and cultural competency; are assigned a mentor who will work with the teaching team on a monthly basis for nine months to change classroom practices; and participate in quarterly teleconference calls that establish an on-going learning community for peers to share lessons learned.

As the faces in early childhood classrooms become more diverse in culture and language, teachers need specialized skills to shape children’s development, and engage
families. An effective way to impart best practices to early childhood teachers is to work alongside of teachers and show them the patterns for successful learning and teaching through focused professional development, coaching, and mentoring (Berdecía & Kosec, 2011). This report will share lessons learned and the results of two consecutive program years involving an innovative approach that supports early childhood teachers’ capacities to use culture and language as anchors for child development. This action research model has helped early childhood teachers in New Jersey transform their thinking and become trailblazers in areas that can potentially close the cultural and linguistic gaps between teachers and diverse children and families.

The Changing Faces of New Jersey English Language Learners

The population of infants, toddlers, and preschool children whose home language is a language other than English is growing at a significant rate (Espinosa, 2010). As our nation’s cultural diversity continues to increase, more than one in five students speaks a home language other than English (National Academy for Education, 2009). These young, linguistically diverse children represent one of the fastest growing segments of the nation’s population (Matthews & Ewen 2006). Between 1998 and 2008, the percentage of English Language Learners increased by an astounding 51 percent, now representing over 5 million students speaking over 350 languages (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011; Garcia, et. al, 2009).

More than half of these English Language Learner students are in elementary school, and 40 percent of these students are between the ages of three and eight (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011; and Liu, Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson & Kushner, 2008). This large population of early childhood English Language Learners requires improved instructional practices and classroom environments to support language and literacy development for young children.

This increasing linguistic diversity is clearly demonstrated in New Jersey classrooms, where in the 2008-2009 academic year, students identified 187 different languages as their home language. This represents the addition of nearly 20 more languages since the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program began in 2007. Mirroring national statistics, over 20 percent of all New Jersey public school students speak a home language other than English. However, this linguistic diversity is not spread evenly throughout the state. More than a third of children in low-income New Jersey school districts speak home languages other than English (New Jersey Department of Education, 2010).

Currently, the most common home languages of New Jersey students with limited English proficiency are Spanish, Arabic, Korean, Portuguese, Gujarati, Haitian Creole, Mandarin, Urdu, Polish, Tagalog, Bengali, and Vietnamese. The most common home language is Spanish, with 62 percent of all limited English proficiency students identifying Spanish as their native language (New Jersey Department of Education, 2010).

Despite the growing number of English Language Learner (ELL) students in New Jersey and throughout the nation, there is no generally accepted approach for preparing teachers to educate ELL students. Only the states
of New York, Arizona, and Florida require teachers to have some preparation for working with ELL students (Lucas, 2010). According to a 2008 study, most general education teachers have at least one ELL student in their classroom, but only 29.5 percent of those teachers have opportunities for professional development in working with such students (Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008).

Across the country, a majority of early childhood preparation programs spend only eight semester hours concentrating on diversity issues and the instruction of ELL students. This only represents 12 percent of the coursework needed for early childhood certification (Daniel & Friedman, 2005). As a result of limited professional development opportunities, educators have self-reported that they feel unprepared to work with linguistically diverse students and lack the necessary knowledge to support their language development. A 2006 survey of more than 1,200 teachers found that 57 percent of educators reported that they needed more information to work effectively with ELL students (Reeves, 2006). This lack of teacher preparation is especially troubling since research indicates that general education teachers who do not hold bilingual or English as a Second Language certification are not well prepared to meet the needs of ELL students (Alexander, Heaviside, & Farris; 1999 National Education Association, 2011).

Teaching English Language Learners

Because of a lack of knowledge and preparation to address the needs of diverse children, many early childhood educators share the common misconception that English-only teaching methods represent best practices. Uninformed educators often believe that learning more than one language could be overwhelming and detrimental to children’s development. However, research demonstrates that systematic, deliberate exposure to English during early childhood, combined with ongoing opportunities to learn important concepts in the home language results in the highest achievement in both the home language and English by the end of third grade. Furthermore, ELL students who receive systematic learning opportunities in their home language between ages of three and eight, consistently outperform those who attend English-only programs on measures of academic achievement in English during the middle and high school years (Espinosa, 2008 and 2010).

In their daily interactions with peers and adults, children receive messages about which characteristics are valued and encouraged in a particular context or situation and which are not. Attitudes and perceptions are infused into every interaction that we have and into everything that we do. Even if we are not aware of our own preconceived ideas and biases, we reflect them when we relate to the children in our care. For example, a teacher who pays less attention to a child who is speaking a language other than English in the classroom is sending this child the message that his or her home language is not valued. As a consequence, these ideas, and biases may negatively influence our relationship with particular families and, moreover, have a negative impact on children’s identity and self-esteem. Similarly, if the classroom environment does not incorporate cultural elements other than those related to mainstream culture, the message for culturally diverse children is that their cultural heritage is not valued (Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2011).
Understanding the importance of supporting students to develop both their home language and cultural identity, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends that early childhood programs create welcoming learning environments for students acquiring English. NAEYC’s recommendations emphasize that early childhood instruction should respect diversity, support children’s ties to their families and community, and promote both second language acquisition and preservation of children’s home languages and cultural identities (NAEYC, 2009). Operationally defined, cultural competence entails the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes, used in appropriate cultural settings in order to increase quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes (Davis, 1997; Howard, 2010). However, few programs provide educators with essential training on how to respect cultural differences and implement culturally competent practices.

The Summer Institute and Mentoring program provides early childhood educators with the specialized skills to support the development of ELL students, while also making cultural connections. The Summer Institute and Mentoring Program was founded after recognizing that, despite New Jersey’s growing student diversity, few if any programs were aiding teachers in understanding the curriculum and instruction required to successfully meet the needs of diverse children. Through the Summer Institute and Mentoring program, graduates learn to create culturally competent classrooms and implement practices that support the emotional and cognitive development of ELL students and welcome the participation of diverse families.

Parents Impart Cultural Tools for Learning and Connectivity to the Families

Passing down values, beliefs, and traditions is important to families. Family values and norms are what guide a person’s decision making. In the 2005 film “Spanglish,” there is a scene that evokes a mother’s desire to pass on her cultural tools to her daughter in the face of the influences of the mainstream culture. The mother, through tears and great emotion, asks her daughter a fundamental question about her identity, “Is that what you want for yourself, to become someone who is very different from me?” Most parents want their children to stay connected to their culture, language, family history, and values.

Culture and language are components of the legacy that is passed down from one generation to the next. Values, beliefs, customs, tra-
ditions, and past experiences all play a part in how parents raise their children (Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). Parents fear losing connection with their children and the commonality of a shared cultural identity. Parents’ goals and expectations for their children’s development are influenced by culture. Likewise, early childhood professionals’ views and expectations about children’s development are influenced by their own cultural background (Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2011).

“Learning to talk is one of the most significant expressions of human activity, and language is the most significant cultural tool for sharing knowledge, skills, and understanding and developing personal identity throughout early childhood. Children’s learning through participation in the daily activities of their families and peer groups is motivated by a strong sense of identity and belonging. Cultural learning is mediated by the arrangement of the children’s environment, as well as by social interactions; the environment ‘teaches’ the use of time and space, and the routines and relationships which shapes daily life. Young children’s close relationships offer the immediate context for all aspects of their development and learning, and introduces them to the cultural tools through which their knowledge and understanding grow, notably language” (Brooker & Woodhead, 2010).

Language is a strong marker of individual and collective identities, including membership in families and other groups (Murillo & Smith, 2011). In these formative years, young children can acquire a second language in a year or two simply by being in a setting where the language is in daily use. However, it is equally true that languages can be lost with equal ease during this same period, especially when the language they are learning is more highly valued than the language they already speak (Fillmore, 1991).

“When parents are unable to talk to their children, they cannot easily convey to them their values, beliefs, understandings, or wisdom about how to cope with their experiences. They cannot teach them about the meaning of work, or about personal responsibility, or what it means to be a moral and ethical person in a world with too many choices and too few guideposts to follow. What is lost are bits of advice (consejos) parents should be able to offer children in their everyday interaction with them. Talk is a crucial link between parents and children: It is how parents impart their cultures to their children and enable them to become the kind of men and women they want them to be. When parents lose the means for socializing and influencing their children, rifts develop and families lose the intimacy that comes from shared beliefs and understanding” (Murillo & Smith, 2011).

“...the school is very important since they are both responsible for the education of children. Between the family and school, there has to be a constant communication. The experience that I have had at Better Beginnings is that the teachers are sensitive to the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of others."

Jacqueline Pozuelos (Hightstown, NJ parent)
Loss of home language has potentially negative long-term consequences for the ELL child’s academic, social, and emotional development, as well as for his or her family dynamics (Espinosa, 2008). A culturally responsive classroom sends a powerful message to children and families that their home language and culture are not only accepted, but viewed as an asset in learning. According to Cummins (2000), the quality of the learning environment and experiences to which bilingual children are exposed determine their level of bilingual proficiency, and thus, how much they can benefit from being bilingual. Based on this information, it seems reasonable to conclude that in order to help children take advantage of the benefits of bilingualism, early childhood professionals and parents should provide experiences that help children reach advanced levels of proficiency in their two (or more) languages (Cummins, 2000; Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2011).

First-language loss or “first language attrition” is a gradual process that starts with a change in language preference, or language shift. Children will prefer to communicate in their second language and consequently will not continue developing their first language (Anderson, 2004). A negative consequence of first language loss in the early grades is that the children do not develop high levels of proficiency in either language.

If children are in an environment that does not offer opportunities or encourage the use of the first or home language, they gradually start losing their abilities in that language and become monolingual English speakers. When children lose their home language, they are losing not only the positive effects of first language development on second language learning and the cognitive benefits of bilingualism, they are also losing the possibility of enjoying the support of their family and learning about their family traditions and heritage. This can be devastating for children’s socio-emotional development, affecting their identity and self-esteem (Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2011).

Employing specific teaching strategies has the potential to close the cultural and linguistic gaps between teachers, administrators, children, and families. Families need to be informed that supporting their children in their home language does not negatively affect English learning. Indeed, developing strong language skills in their home language helps children acquire a second language more easily and supports bilingual skills development. Sending books home in the children’s first language and asking parents to read those books to their children reassures parents that reading in the home language is appropriate and beneficial for their child’s development. (Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2011). All children, regardless of their background, can benefit from multicultural education (National Association for Multicultural Education, 2006; Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2011).
The New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Summer Institute and Mentoring Program’s conceptual framework is based on the principles of participatory action research, which is a systematic process in solving educational problems and making improvements (Tomal, 2010). Participatory action research, is rooted in social psychology, and is based on social models developed in the early and mid 1900s by Kurt Lewin. It focuses on relationships among individuals, within networks and groups, and among networks and communities. The approach is undertaken by a group of people who face a real-life problem and are invested in finding a solution (Baker & Peterson, 2010). In participatory action research, the relevant stakeholders identify a problem and take action to correct it (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Reason & Bransbury, 2001; Wadsworth, 1998; Baker & Peterson, 2010).

Our participatory action research approach transforms teachers’ thinking, leading to improved practices in working with diverse children learning English as a second and/or a third language. The action research methodology follows a cycle of reflection, planning, action, and observation. The period of reflection takes place when the stakeholders identify a concern and, through inquiry and data gathering, define the goal and a plan to achieve it. Action is defined as the moment when the plan is implemented and desired improvements begin to emerge. Observation occurs when the group analyzes the data and evaluates the outcomes (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Baker & Peterson, 2010).

In the action research model, teachers are viewed as equal partners who embrace the opportunity to arrive at cooperative solutions and are often more committed to the implementation of a project when they have been involved in designing it (Borgia & Shuler, 1996). “Action research allows teachers to hope, dream, and desire—to be the architects of their own professional development” (Duganzic, Durrant, Finau, Firth, and Frank, 2009). Teachers are encouraged to investigate their own practices and are always in a reflective mode. Betty Gardener (1998) described the philosophy behind action research with the phrase “To learn is to change; to change is to create; and to create is to learn.”

Since the goal of action research is to solve a given problem and make improvements, it relies less on scientific inquiry and inductive reasoning than on reflection and the practicality and feasibility of addressing the problem (Tomal, 2010). Therefore, the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program participants examine the following questions: “How can I improve my teaching strategies? How is culture and language being used in my classroom? What results or changes have I seen since I have adopted these new teaching strategies?”

Although the curriculum and evaluation structure for the Summer Institute has been improved and expanded upon, the mission of the program remains the same – to prepare early childhood educators to provide culturally competent instruction and create welcoming classroom environment for young English Language Learners. The Summer Institute and Mentoring Program continues to
present an extraordinary opportunity for early childhood teachers to dig deeper into the frame of culture and language. Educators experience the wonder of cultural conversations from the perspective of very young children who are acquiring English as a second and/or a third language, while also learning the nuances of the American culture. The program’s distinctive approach intentionally targets classrooms with at least 50 percent ELL students, and the teaching team (both the lead teacher and the assistant) are required to enroll and function as a team for nine months of mentoring/coaching following the three-day Summer Institute. These requirements ensure that instructional changes can be seamlessly introduced into the classroom, with both teachers in agreement on the methodology and practices.

The three-day Summer Institute’s training includes one day on culture, a day-and-a-half on English Language Learners, and a half-day on creating an action plan for returning to the classroom. Each classroom team receives a tool box filled with materials to assist in creating a culturally and linguistically responsive classroom. In addition, participants have on-going opportunities to discuss the link between culture and language during quarterly cohort-based teleconferences. The teleconferences provide continued professional development for the teachers and cover topics such as promoting children’s well-being through routines and transitions, as well as expanding preschool vocabulary and language. This unique program feature allows for discussion of classroom strategies and peer learning as participants share their successes and explore new ideas with their cohort.

When they enter the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program, participants are assigned a mentor/coach who actively supports the infusion of culture and ELL theory and practice into the classroom. Each classroom receives an assessment visit prior to the Summer Institute, followed by three post-Institute supportive/mentoring visits and three observation visits to measure successful transformation from theory to practice. The Summer Institute and Mentoring Program is strongly based on the ability of experienced mentors to create meaningful relationships with the teaching teams to foster classroom improvements.

During the supportive visits, the mentor works with the teaching team to strengthen classroom improvements, bolster confidence, and demonstrate enhanced literacy moments, ELL strategies, cultural infusion techniques, and the patterns for successful learning and teaching. Mentoring and coaching is an evidence-based practice that can be used effectively to support adults who are involved in the lives of young children. Extensive research on the effects of coaching adult learners demonstrates that positive outcomes have been achieved across contexts (e.g., home, community, classrooms) and settings (e.g. early intervention; early childhood; elementary, middle, and high schools, universities) related to knowledge and skill acquisition and use (Rush & Sheldon, 2011).

Through extra funding (classroom enhancement dollars), the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program mentors are able to bring monthly gifts to the classroom that will aid the teaching teams in creating culturally welcoming learning environments for their diverse students. The gifts are based on the cultures and languages of the children enrolled in the classrooms. For example, some mentors may help purchase props and materials to help their classrooms create literacy corners that provide an inviting and supportive environment for English Language Learn-
Other mentors may purchase a CD player, cultural music, or teacher resources that address specific educational problems.

During the observation visit, the mentor assesses what changes have occurred across the curriculum since the supportive visits using a 5-point scale with 26 categories that evaluate the classroom design, teachers’ rhythm and temperament, and instructional strategies that use culture and language as assets to learning. The assessments are then used to determine the efficacy of the program to transform the teaching teams’ classroom environment and instructional practices.

The mentor acts as a change agent and a catalyst in collecting data and then working with the teaching teams in a collaborative effort to develop actions to address the issues (Tomal, 2010). Teachers are encouraged to reach their own solutions and conclusions (Ross, 1997). This process allows teachers to arrive at new questions about their teaching strategies and new perspectives about the role of the teacher. At the beginning of the program, participants often stated, “We do not know where to start.” At the end of the program, they do know where to start and feel confident implementing the strategies that support their ELL students.
Kurt Lewin coined the phrase “action research,” and he often referred to action research as a “spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflections” (Duganzie, Durrant, Finau, Firth, & Frank, 2009). This spiral process not only occurs with program participants, but with the program staff as well. Annually, the program director and the mentors hold a planning retreat to evaluate the Summer Institute’s curriculum and examine current best practices to create greater understanding of the strategies they can employ to be culturally and linguistically competent. During the 2009 retreat, two new features were added to the curriculum: a video training series produced by Teaching Strategies, Inc., titled “Starting Points: Teaching English Language Learners”; and language and literacy approach called, “Literacy Moments,” developed by Ana I. Berdecía, M.Ed. Both are described below.

Starting Points

The Starting Points: Teaching English Language Learners is a three-part video training series that presents evidence-based and teacher-tested strategies that support children’s language and literacy development in diverse classroom settings. The program focuses on aiding teachers to make manageable changes in their teaching to help diverse students feel accepted and ready to acquire a second language.

Part I of the video series, “I Don’t Know Where to Start,” addresses the concerns teachers often have about their lack of training, preparation, and support in working with culturally and linguistically diverse young children. The video demonstrates from the point of view of the students how stressful entering a school in a new culture can be for children, and how it can initially limit their ability and compromise learning. Through this video the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program participants learn strategies to help their students feel welcome and safe by nurturing a sense of trust and belonging in their classroom. The video also helps the educators understand the importance of creating a connection with children and their families and why this connection is essential to build a community of acceptance that validates all children.

Part II of the series, “Getting the Message Across,” demonstrates how baffling it is to try and understand simple messages in another language, especially when they are communicated with little emotion and few non-verbal cues. This video was of particular importance to the participants, as they were able to experience what it is like to walk in the shoes of an ELL child. The video simulates hearing directions in an unfamiliar foreign language, and the educators experienced the stress and fear of not being able to understand simple directions. The video repeats the same segment, but with the teacher now incorporating non-verbal cues such as facial expression, body language, gestures, visuals and modeling so that the educators could then begin to interpret some of the communication. From this video, the participants can understand firsthand how adding non-verbal cues and modeling can greatly improve comprehension. In addition, the educators learn how children need a respite from processing a new language and a chance to engage in other activities in their home language that can allow them to relax and prepare for additional instructional tasks.

The video training series concludes with Part III, “Bringing Language Alive,” which addresses the core elements of first and second language acquisition. From this series, the participants learn that the key to acquir-
ing both first and second languages is being able to hear the languages used in meaningful contexts. The educators also discover how to incorporate these meaningful experiences across the curriculum through information talk (describing the child’s actions, feelings, and efforts) and a wide variety of multisensory experiences. This video also presents information on the silent period, a time of intense language learning when children speak very little but communicate in other ways. In addition, the participants are introduced to the affective filter, an automatic response to stress that can limit a child’s ability to learn, and strategies for reducing students’ stress and frustration (Teaching Strategies, 2003; 2009).

The world of ELL students and the video strategies were then modeled by the mentors through the simulations and literacy moments built into the curriculum. Every part of the curriculum is connected to demonstrate to the participants the impact these strategies could have in their classrooms and how culture and language can be used as anchors for child development.

Literacy Moments

Today’s early childhood teachers are expected to implement more challenging and effective curricula in language and literacy and to assess and document student progress in increasingly complex ways (National Research Council, 2001). Therefore, teachers of young children need to know the importance of oral language competencies, early literacy experiences, and family literacy to student when they are learning to read. Literacy Moments is a language-development approach that models how to create engaging and enriching read-aloud activities to enhance literacy skills.

The literacy moments framework promotes the use of gestures, props, and objects to strengthen language comprehension and literacy skills. This instructional approach is based on research that demonstrates that the brain is “a pattern seeker” looking to create templates (schemas) that store information about people, places, and things. The literacy moment approach is aimed at increasing repetitive patterns in the brain to enhance the process of first- and second-language acquisition, while also supporting cultural connections.

Key to the literacy moment approach is a well-stocked collection of props that draw children into the read-aloud story and build understanding of the concepts presented in the book using gestures and non-verbal cues. The concepts of the read-aloud story are further reinforced through embedding the props and items from the story into learning centers across the curriculum, play activities, as well as through extended interactions with the classroom teachers and peers. The literacy moments provide teachers with instruction on how to conduct and/or create:

- Read-aloud stories using a well-stocked prop box;
- Activities that extend conversations in both English and the children’s home language about the concepts of the story;
- Special literacy-moment environments that are home-like and cozy with reading chairs, tables, floor lamps, and soft items that draw children into the world of imagination and learning.

Summer Institute 2009 A Literacy Moment led by mentor Liliana Gomez
In addition, teachers are provided with a literacy moment curriculum guide that lists various books, props, and activities that can extend the conversations about the concepts of the stories. Through the literacy moments framework, teachers are able to foster a wide range of instructional methods. Educators must be skilled in the ability to use multiple methods of monitoring children's literacy development and interpreting assessments in order to make sound instructional decisions (Neuman & Kamil, 2010; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007).

Mentors Impart Cultural Tools to Early Childhood Teachers

The heart of the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program is the mentoring component where the teaching teams are assigned a mentor who coaches them to make changes in the classrooms and in their teaching practices. Coaching is a reflective process of looking back in order to look forward (Daniels, 2002 and Rush & Sheldon, 2011). With the assistance of a trusted and experienced mentor/coach, teachers can be intentional about reflecting on practices and find solutions to problems that are impacting their work on a daily basis. This mentoring process acts as “a means of reaching a deeper understanding of what a person already knows and is doing. As a result, the person’s confidence is enhanced, causing him or her to continue to do what works, to try new possibilities, and to evaluate the effectiveness of all their actions” (Rush & Sheldon, 2011).

Our program also provides a “cultural coach” whose ultimate goal is to impart “cultural plays” and “cultural scripts” that can affirm and value diverse children and families. A cultural coach helps teachers develop cultural tools and strategies that integrate the children’s culture and language into all aspects of the curriculum. Becoming skilled in using cultural plays and cultural scripts can help teachers feel more confident about engaging children whose first language is not English and whose homeland is not the United States. Because training related to cultural diversity for early childhood interventionists is limited (Hanson, 2004; Lynch & Hanson, 1993), the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program understands that any professional development and mentoring must be based on the practitioner’s understanding of his or her own cultural beliefs, experiences, and biases (Harry, 1992).
Cultural plays or scripts are constructs that help the teacher use patterns, customs, and information directly from the children’s culture and language. For example, using cultural scripts, educators should address Tomas’ mother as “Doña Carmen” when she comes to the classroom. Cultural play could also include learning to play children’s games from different countries such as Dreidel (Israel); Blind Man (China); Dominoes (Puerto Rico and many other countries); Pachisi (India); Walnut (Turkey); and Mbube-Mbube or Ampe (Africa). Many children around the world invent games and that are then passed down from one generation to another. A great way to increase parent involvement and assure that the cultural plays and scripts are authentic, is to invite parents to teach the class their childhood songs and games. Cultural plays and scripts can help build a bridge between what matters to families and what matters for school success as the children’s culture and language are woven throughout the curriculum and everyday activities.

These cultural plays and scripts, as well as other culture nuances, can be imparted or researched by both mentors and teachers. The mentor provides a supportive and encouraging environment in which she and her mentee jointly examine and reflect on current practices, apply new skills and competencies with feedback, and solve challenging problems (Rush & Sheldon, 2011). The mentor and mentee relationship could not develop or thrive without mutual trust, transparency, shared experiences and discoveries that involves both mentors and mentees learning alongside each other, across classrooms, and within the cohort.

Coaching (mentoring) is a reciprocal process in which both the mentor and mentee bring knowledge and abilities to the relationship (Hanft, 2004). The coach/mentor must learn what the mentee knows, understands, and is doing, including his or her preconceived knowledge about coaching for change, and how potential changes might be applied and might affect the mentee’s current situation (Rush and Sheldon, 2011).

Meet the Teachers of the 2009-2010 Cohort and the 2010-2011 Cohort

In 2009-2010, the Summer Institute and Mentoring program trained teaching teams from eight classrooms (21 early childhood teachers) throughout New Jersey. Four classrooms were located in New Jersey’s southern region, three in the central region, and one in the northern region. The program participants represented the increasing diversity of New Jersey’s population with, 12 of the educators identifying themselves as Hispanic, seven as African American, and two
as Caucasian. The educators ranged in age from 20 to over 50 years old.

More than half the teachers had five or fewer years of experience as an early childhood educator. However, three participants had more than 20 years of experience in the field. The education range of participating teachers was diverse: 11 educators had a CDA credential or were CDA candidates, 7 possessed a bachelor’s degree, and three educators had an associate’s degree or some post-secondary education.

Through post-program interviews and surveys with the 2009-2010 cohort, the teachers reported excellent learning experiences during the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program and spoke highly of the quality of their mentors. Several participants commented that the Summer Institute provided engaging instruction and easy-to-implement ideas they could immediately incorporate in their classrooms. In her evaluation, one participant commented on her mentors, saying, “Everything you taught me in these three days and during the literacy moments was great. All of your stories and props made me want to go back to work and get started.” The participants also commented that they enjoyed the video series, and especially the information about the myths and facts that concern English Language Learners. One teacher commented that she could incorporate her new knowledge from the video in her classroom “right away.”

In 2010-2011, the Summer Institute and Mentoring program trained the teaching teams from seven classrooms (14 early childhood teachers) from throughout New Jersey. Four classrooms were located in the central region, two in the northern region and one in the southern region. The participants were diverse in their ethnicities, with nine educators identifying themselves as Hispanic, two as African American, two Caucasian, and one as Caribbean. The educators ranged in age from 25 to over 50 years old.

Half the teachers had fewer than four years of experience as an early childhood educator, and the other half of the participants had four-to-ten years of early childhood education experience. The education range of participating teachers was diverse: four educators had obtained a bachelor’s degree, five held a CDA credential, and four educators had an associate’s degree or some post-secondary education.

The 2010-2011 cohort overwhelmingly believed that the Summer Institute and Mentoring program was helpful in improving their teaching and practices. Multiple participants remarked that their mentors rated a 10 or higher (high above the 1-5 scale) because of their ability to connect with the both the educators and students to support positive change without criticism or judgment. One teacher noted that, “My mentor was so easy to talk to because she fit in with my classroom and understood the challenges I was facing. My mentor was always easy to access and she helped supply my classroom with cultural props, such as play food and
books.” Similarly, during post-program interviews, participants remarked on the helpfulness of the literacy moments curriculum. One teacher remarked, “It gave me wonderful ideas that I can use in the classrooms.” Other participants commented that the Summer Institute motivated them to find multicultural items for their classroom, beyond the materials provided in the cultural tool boxes they received at the training. Another expressed that the literacy moments curriculum guide allowed her to immediately incorporate new practices into her teaching when she implemented a lesson using the popular book titled, *Click, Clack, Moo Cows that Type* in English and Spanish after returning to her classroom from the Summer Institute. Another participant commented that her students were “ecstatic” when participating in literacy moments story activities that use props and multiple languages to help bring the story to life. These interviews indicate that the educators found the literacy moments to be one of the most helpful portions of the Summer Institute and Mentoring program.

### Evaluation Results Across Two Multiple Years

Overall, the results of the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Summer Institute and Mentoring Program is based on an analysis of assessment scores from the three post-Institute observational visits as compared to scores from the pre-Institute observation. During observational visits, the mentor assesses what changes occurred across the curriculum since their supportive visits. The mentors record their observations using a 5-point scale with 26 categories that evaluate the classroom design, teachers’ rhythm and temperament, and instructional strategies that use culture and language as assets for learning. The assessment scale includes items such as pictures/photos, use of print, learning-center arrangement, routines and transitions, small group instruction, co-teaching, talking while doing, use of props/gestures, extending and expanding concepts, building vocabulary in English and home language, use of English and home language for content and directions, extended conversations in both languages, etc.

Using this tool, the mentors rank the effectiveness of the teacher’s classroom and instructional practices on a 5 point scale, with five being the highest score and one the lowest. A score of one indicated the practice was not evident, two indicates the practice needs improvement, three indicates the practice was somewhat evident, four indicates the practice was evident, and five indicates that the teaching team excelled in implementing the practice.

**Results for 2009-2010**

The 2009-2010 data demonstrates clear and measurable improvement across the three core competencies: developmentally appropriate practices, ELL strategies, and culturally competent strategies. An analysis of the observation data indicates that the Summer Institute and Mentoring program had a positive effect on increasing the efficacy of English Language Learner instruction and culturally competent practices across the curriculum.

The strongest improvements reported by the mentors on the assessment tool in the 2009-2010 cohort indicate that the teaching rhythm and temperament of the participating teaching teams improved greatly over the course of three post-Institute evaluations when compared to the pre-Institute classroom assessments.
Program mentors focused on improving the teaching style and interaction between the members of the teaching teams during the Summer Institute and throughout the mentoring program. Teaching rhythm refers to how the lead and assistant teachers work cooperatively to support culture and language development through co-teaching and small group instruction. A successful teaching team uses the skill sets of each educator to provide additional attention and support to all learners in the classroom. The teaching temperament refers to the teachers’ degree of empathy and disposition towards students and parents who speak a language other than English. For example, a culturally competent instructor would incorporate modeling and visual cues, rather than raising his or her voices, to help a new ELL student understand the routines and procedures of the classroom.

When comparing the teaching rhythm and temperament assessment results from the pre-Institute observation with the assessment results of the final post-Institute observation, the data demonstrate improvements in all three competency areas. [Refer to Figure 1 for complete results.] The greatest improvement was demonstrated through the increasing incorporation of English Language Learner strategies. The mean score for culturally competent teaching rhythm and temperament strongly increased by 2.1 points on the five-point scale throughout the course of the program. Similarly, the mean score for incorporating English Language Learner strategies into teaching rhythm and temperament increased by 1.7 points. The data clearly demonstrated improvements in the areas of student interaction, as well as co-teaching and co-decision making between teaching members.

![Figure 1. 2009-2010 Overall Program Results](image-url)

**Teaching Rhythm and Temperament Domain**

- **Developmentally Appropriate Practices**
  - Pre-Institute: 2.9
  - 4 Month Observation: 3.5
  - 6 Month Observation: 3.8
  - Final Post-Institute: 4.2

- **ELL Strategies**
  - Pre-Institute: 2.5
  - 4 Month Observation: 3.5
  - 6 Month Observation: 3.8
  - Final Post-Institute: 4.2

- **Cultural Competency Strategies**
  - Pre-Institute: 2.0
  - 4 Month Observation: 3.4
  - 6 Month Observation: 3.6
  - Final Post-Institute: 4.1
Experienced educator Luz Collazo learned valuable strategies to create a balance between English and Spanish in her classroom throughout the 2009-2010 Summer Institute and Mentoring program. As the lead teacher, Luz was faced with significant challenges in creating a culturally responsive classroom as she was reassigned to a new classroom at the Mi Casita Center and paired with a new assistant teacher, Felicita Delgado. Despite this transition, Luz and Felicita were successful in ensuring that their diverse ELL students were supported in their language and literacy development.

The Mi Casita teaching team concentrated its efforts on providing culturally competent and developmentally appropriate materials throughout the classroom, and always ensured that whole-group instruction contained an equal balance of Spanish and English. Mentor Dee Bailey noted, “the teachers posed questions in English and Spanish on a consistent basis, and the children responded in either English or Spanish based on their comfort level.” Similarly by the last supportive visit, the mentor, noted that the classroom activities consistently “promote a rich vocabulary in Spanish and English.” However, this teaching team did face an additional challenge with the enrollment of a Turkish language student who faced difficulties in acquiring English within a classroom that contained primarily English-and Spanish-speaking students.

Figure 2. Mi Casita Team 2 - Camden, New Jersey

Instructional Strategies Domain
While the classroom contained many supports for Spanish-language students learning English, there were limited Turkish materials to help make the classroom a warm and inviting space for this new student. The mentor helped the teaching team to add “Turkish” survival phrases to their existing Spanish survival charts and provided Turkish books and materials for them to integrate into the classroom. The teaching team also asked the Turkish student’s parents to provide the classroom with a book of photos and postcards describing Turkey and their culture. The Turkish materials were prominently displayed in the classroom, next to Spanish materials, to ensure that all of the classroom’s young learners felt their culture was accepted and welcomed.

The mentor evaluations support the successful progress of the Mi Casita teaching team in providing exceptional developmentally and linguistically appropriate instruction. The mean score representing culturally competent instructional practices increased by 2.9 points on the 5-point scale, while the mean score for the incorporation of ELL strategies rose by 2.6 points. These positive developments demonstrate the ability of the Mi Casita teaching team to overcome any challenges in their classroom to ensure their diverse students are provided with a foundation for academic success. [Refer to Figure 2 for complete results.]

2009-2010 Center Spotlight: Princeton Nursery School Team 2 Princeton, New Jersey

The Princeton Nursery School teaching team was unique, with each educator in the teaching team bringing different linguistic backgrounds and cultures into their classroom instruction. Lead teacher Amy Breece was fluent in English and some Spanish. Assistant teacher Claudia Guzman was proficient in English and Spanish, and assistant teacher Nicole Lopez was proficient in English, French, Creole and some Spanish. These varied linguistic competencies, combined with the skills acquired through the Summer Institute, ensured that this classroom could be transformed into a culturally competent, even trilingual environment.

During the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program, this teaching team concentrated on increasing the use of Spanish through small phrases and words that supported the preservation of that home language. These efforts were especially important because 18 of the 23 classroom students identified Spanish as their home language. With the help of their mentor, the teaching team added more bilingual transitions to their classroom routines and integrated Spanish phrases during circle time and literacy activities. “The program taught me how to use language through singing and creating transitions to help the children learn in a fun way,” stated Claudia Guzman.

By the second supportive visit, their mentor, Liliana Gomez, noted that the lead teacher “makes a great effort to say words in Spanish” and that the teaching team was making substantial progress by simultaneously reading a story in both English and Spanish during whole-group activities. “The Summer Institute and Mentoring Program helped me a lot. I now read more books in Spanish to the children and it’s helping improve my Spanish,” added Nicole Lopez.
After attending the Summer Institute, the teaching team also realized the importance of creating a welcoming and safe classroom environment for their diverse students. The teaching team added English and Spanish labels to classroom objects, started to display family pictures, and posted multicultural flags to create a culturally accepting environment. “The Summer Institute and Mentoring Program helped me recognize the importance of incorporating different cultures and languages into the activities, transitions, and stories. The prop box strategies helped us make the stories come alive and translating them into their language helped the children become more involved in the stories,” stated Amy Breece.

To further aid their ELL students in acquiring language and literacy skills, the teaching team began to lead their class in singing multicultural songs, playing African-American music, and using props during story time to enhance comprehension. Mentor Liliana Gomez noted by her final visit, the classroom had become “a reflection of many changes” and she applauded the “effort and willingness of the teachers to be guided through this process.” The evaluations overwhelmingly affirm successful progress of the Princeton Nursery School teaching team in creating a culturally and linguistically competent classroom. The mean score representing culturally competent classroom design increased by 3.4 points on the 5-point scale, while the mean score for the incorporation of ELL strategies increased by 2.4 points. These positive developments highlight the outstanding transformation of the Princeton Nursery School’s classroom into a welcoming and accepting environment for diverse young learners. [Refer to Figure 3 for complete results.]
Results for 2010-2011

The 2010-2011 data also demonstrate clear and measurable improvement across the three core competencies: developmentally appropriate practices, ELL strategies, and culturally competent strategies. An analysis of the observation data indicates that the Summer Institute and Mentoring program had a positive effect on increasing the efficacy of English Language Learner instruction and culturally competent instruction across the curriculum.

The 2010-2011 cohort made substantial gains in redesigning their classroom environments to be culturally competent and welcoming to all learners and their families. When comparing the assessment results of the pre-Institute observation with the final post-Institute observation, we found that the classroom design improved in all three core competency areas. The data analysis indicates strong improvements in the display of diverse pictures, use and availability of culturally competent props and materials, as well as the labeling of materials in multiple languages. [Refer to Figure 4 for complete results.

The mean score for culturally competent classroom design demonstrated the largest increase, with an improvement of 2.1 points on the 5-point scale between the pre-Institute observation score and the final post-Institute observation score. Similarly, improvements were demonstrated with an increase of the mean score for English Language Learner classroom design practices by 1.5 points on the 5-point scale.

Figure 4. 2010-2011 Overall Program Results

Classroom Design Domain

Cultural and Linguistic Connections
One of the overarching goals of the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program is to empower teachers to apply their cultural and linguistic knowledge to their instructional practices as they support the development of diverse young children. When comparing the instructional strategy assessment results of the pre-Institute observation with the results of post-Institute assessments, the data demonstrate improvements in all three core competency areas for instructional strategies. [Refer to Figure 5 for complete results.]

The mean score for culturally competent instructional strategies increased by 2.2 points and ELL instructional strategies increased by 2 points on the 5-point scale. The data clearly affirm improvements in the areas of extending conversations in English and home languages, using literacy activities such as read-aloud stories and poems, as well as incorporating props and gestures into instruction.

**Figure 5. 2010-2011 Overall Program Results**

![Graph showing instructional strategies domain results](image)
Mabelyn Estrada and Gloria Dominguez are an experienced teaching team, but they faced some difficult challenges during the 2010-2011 school year. They were accustomed to instructing diverse children in their classroom. However, this year held new challenges for them as a Bangladesh-speaking student entered their classroom. Through the Summer Institute and Mentoring program, this teaching team learned key instructional strategies to support the language development of all of their students.

The El Mundo de Colores teaching team was enthusiastic when entering the Summer Institute, and their motivation continued as they brought about progressive change in their classroom throughout the 9-month mentoring process. Mabelyn commented that the Summer Institute was “very helpful in improving [her] practices” and the continued mentoring provided the teaching team with additional support to ensure culturally and linguistically competent instructional changes were integrated effectively into classroom routines.

To address the immediate challenge of supporting their young students with limited English proficiency, one of whom was speaking a home language unfamiliar to both teachers, their mentor, Dee Bailey, suggested a “survival” phrase chart to help the Bangladesh-speaking student understand basic classroom directions and identify objects. The teaching team immediately created a survival phrase chart to aid the student’s transition and incorporated several additional best practices to support the language development of all the ELL students in their classroom. For example, even as they worked with the student from Bangladesh, the teaching team ensured that they continually incorporated English and Spanish through their word-wall and literacy activities, as well as when stating classroom transitions and instructions. Their mentor observed, “the teaching team is very responsive to the needs and interest of the children, especially when engaging the students one-on-one during small group activities.”

Lead teacher, Mabelyn Estrada was greatly inspired by attending the Summer Institute stating, “The Summer Institute motivated me to find additional multicultural items for my classroom.” Her efforts were noted by her mentor, who commented that the classroom contained “colorful and purposeful pictures that relate to the children and their families” and a “print-rich environment that supports language and culture of the children and families.”

Most notably, Mabelyn found that the Summer Institute had a personal impact on her own cultural esteem and outlook. As an English Language Learner herself, Mabelyn was often ashamed of her heritage and language as a young student. By learning from the experiences of other participating teachers through the Summer Institute experience, Mabelyn found affirmation in her Puerto Rican heritage and background. Now inspired to help her students feel proud of their ethnicity and uniqueness, Mabelyn feels transformed by her experience. This teaching team remains passionate in their efforts to ensure that their students feel accepted and supported in their learning.
The evaluation results reported by their mentor affirm that the El Mundo de Colores teaching team made great strides in improving their instructional strategies. Most notably, the mean score representing culturally competent instructional practices increased by an astounding 3.3 points on the five-point scale. Moreover, the mean score for the incorporation of ELL strategies rose by 2.6 points, and the mean score for developmentally appropriate strategies increased by 2.2 points. [Refer to Figure 6 for complete results.]

![Image of the El Mundo de Colores Team: Mabelyn Estrada and Gloria Dominguez]

**Figure 6. El Mundo de Colores - Paterson, New Jersey**

**Instructional Strategies Domain**

- Developmentally Appropriate Practices
- ELL Strategies
- Cultural Competency Strategies
- Pre-Institute
- 4 Month Observation
- 6 Month Observation
- Final Post-Institute
Throughout the Summer Institute and Mentoring program, the Stepping Stones teaching team demonstrated significant interest in, and dedication to, improving their classroom to best meet the needs of ELL students. Lead teacher Lindsay Csogi, and her assistant Ana Marcela Retana already recognized the importance of making diverse students feel welcome by speaking both Spanish and English and labeling classroom items in both languages. However, through the guidance of their mentor, this teaching team increased their expertise in creating a culturally and linguistically responsive classroom.

While many of the literacy activities had previously balanced Spanish and English vocabulary, their mentor suggested that additional props and multicultural items could even better support the language comprehension of their ELL students. Taking all of the mentor’s advice, the Stepping Stones teaching team worked diligently to refine their classroom instructional strategies.

Throughout the supportive visits, the teaching team ensured that all of their ELL students felt proud of their diverse cultures. Lindsay and Marcela collected and displayed pictures of flags and homes from each child’s home country and, during one visit, led the class in using musical instruments provided by the Summer Institute and Mentoring program to interpret an African song. Mentor Liliana Gomez commended the teaching team for always expressing “love, patience, and kindness” with their students that reaf-
firmed the students’ feelings of acceptance and comfort within the classroom environment.

During story time, the teaching team worked to incorporate props that supported their ELL students’ acquisition and comprehension of English. During one literacy activity, instead of using a book, Lindsay orally retold a story based on the theme of transportation, using both English and Spanish. During the story time, she also passed around transportation props such as toy cars, trains, and boats to ensure the story remained relevant for students with limited English proficiency.

During a subsequent lesson, Marcela supported the development of Spanish-speaking students by simultaneously translating the story into Spanish while lead teacher Lindsay read the story in English. Their mentor commended the teaching team for maintaining a “fine balance of English and Spanish” during all classroom activities and for their continual attentiveness to the children’s needs. “This program has taught me to put my Spanish background into the classroom. Our literacy moments and transitions grew tremendously as a result of the training and mentoring we received. I would recommend this program to others who want to become more culturally competent in their classroom,” Marcela stated. Lindsay added, “The program was amazing in so many ways. I never learned so much and received so much one-on-one support from a program. I will never forget when mentor Liliana modeled, The Little Red Hen, including visual, tactile, and auditory learning in one thematic session. The program exceeded my expectations and I am thankful for the experience.”

The evaluation results reported by their mentor affirm that the Stepping Stones teaching team made great strides in improving their teamwork in the classroom and improving their teaching rhythm and temperament to best address the needs of diverse learners. Most notably, the mean score representing culturally competent practices increased by 2.6 points on the five-point scale. In addition, the mean score for the incorporation of ELL strategies rose by 1.9 points, and the mean score for developmentally appropriate strategies increased by 1.5 points. [Refer to Figure 7 for complete results.]

During the 2010 and 2011 cohort years, the Summer Institute and Mentoring program reached a significant milestone: all teaching teams in two centers have now graduated from the program. All teaching teams at both Better Beginnings Child Development Center in Hightstown, New Jersey, and Princeton Nursery School in Princeton, New Jersey, are now armed with the specialized knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices and English Language Learner best practices. Both center directors are proud of their educators’ accomplishments and the transformation of their entire centers’ instructional practices. Princeton Nursery

Spotlight on Culturally Competent Centers

During the 2010 and 2011 cohort years, the Summer Institute and Mentoring program reached a significant milestone: all teaching teams in two centers have now graduated from the program. All teaching teams at both Better Beginnings Child Development Center in Hightstown, New Jersey, and Princeton Nursery School in Princeton, New Jersey, are now armed with the specialized knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices and English Language Learner best practices. Both center directors are proud of their educators’ accomplishments and the transformation of their entire centers’ instructional practices. Princeton Nursery
School’s director, Wendy Cotton, was most impressed with the Summer Institute and Mentoring program’s ability to provide experienced and highly skilled teachers as mentors to the educators in her center. She even arranged to close her center, and send all her teachers to the Summer Institute during the 2009-2010 session.

Wendy found that all her teachers “learned to change their practices and classroom environment to support all children, as well as children learning English as a second language.” Wendy credits the success of the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program in transforming her center into a unique program. She believes the program’s intensive model allows for the development of genuine relationships between the teachers and mentors that can support the teachers in their attempts to make instructional changes in their classroom. As a result of the year-long training and mentoring program, Wendy believes that all of her educators now recognize the importance of creating a culturally sensitive classroom as the foundation for language and literacy development.

Better Beginnings Child Development Center’s director, Luz Horta, has sent a team to the Summer Institute every year since the conception of the program in 2007. Like Wendy Cotton, she credits many of the im-
provements that she has seen in her center to the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program.

The Summer Institute and Mentoring program recognizes that the training of early childhood center directors is essential to ensure that teaching teams are supported in their efforts to create culturally competent classrooms. Research conducted at the end of each year’s program demonstrates that the support of directors or administrators is critical to the implementation of change (Flemington & Love, 2003; and Howard, 2010). To aid center directors in understanding the importance of the program’s year-long curriculum, two Director’s Institutes are held each year in North and South Jersey, respectively. During the Directors’ Institutes, the center directors engage in the same curriculum and activities as their teaching teams completed during Summer Institute. Through these interactive activities, the directors come to realize how they can support their staff to understand how culture and language can affect all aspects of a child’s emotional and academic development.

Current and past center directors shared their experiences in witnessing drastic improvements within their classrooms and noticing comprehensive changes in their centers’ ability to ensure that diverse learners always feel welcome and supported in their learning. Many participating directors enjoyed the Directors’ Institutes so much that they enrolled multiple teams from their center for the next year’s Summer Institute and Mentoring Program. Thus, the Directors’ Institute also serves as a recruitment tool for the program as well as an opportunity to demonstrate the breadth and depth of the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program. As a result of the Directors’ Institutes, program applications are at an all-time high, and all available participant openings have been filled for the 2011-12 cohort year.

A Promising Model for Professional Development

The literature on preparation for teaching diverse populations shows few changes over the last 25 years in how teachers are being prepared to address the individual needs of ethnic minority students and ELL students (Hollins & Guzman 2005). Many administrators have hoped that single courses, conferences, and workshops will respond to the need for better teacher preparation. However, these professional development opportunities often do not allow for digging deeper into the frame of culture and language or for working with the teachers’ own biases. Organizations that govern the preparation of early childhood teachers, such as NAEYC and the Division of Early Childhood Council for Exceptional Children, strongly affirm the notion that early childhood teachers must be prepared to support children and their families from culturally diverse backgrounds (Miller & Fuller, 2006). The Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL) organization agree that teachers must understand the basic issues of second
language acquisition, bilingualism, the difference between social and academic language proficiency, and the roles that language and culture play in learning (McGraner & Saenz, 2009).

Culturally competent teachers learn from observations and interactions with the culturally diverse children in their classrooms and their families. They reflect on these experiences to create developmentally appropriate practices (Miller & Fuller, 2006). Through reflective analysis of their own beliefs and systematic inquiry into diverse cultures, teachers are able to reconsider their assumptions, understand the values and practices of families and cultures different from their own, and increase their skills in working with diverse students (Cochran-Smith, 1995). In 2011, the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program model was peer reviewed through a paper submitted to the American Educational Research Association (AERA). One reviewer stated, “The program uses a unique style of a summer institute followed by teleconferences and mentoring. This style has the potential to change the way we offer professional development to practicing teachers.” Another reviewer declared, “The program provides valuable insight as to what works in professional development addressing the needs of diverse student populations.” Learning to be culturally and linguistically responsive with young children is important for teachers, but it is critical for the positive development of young ELL students.

Loss of home language has potentially negative long-term consequences for the ELL child’s academic, social, and emotional development, as well as for their family dynamics (Espinosa, 2008). A culturally responsive classroom sends a powerful message to children and families that their home language and culture are not only accepted, but viewed as an asset in learning. Employing specific teaching strategies has the potential to close the cultural and linguistic gaps between teachers, administrators, children, and families.

Theoretically and empirically, there is evidence that ELL children benefit when schools systematically build connections to their home language, literacy, and social patterns of behavior. By knowing how the family is socializing the child, what aspirations the parents have for the child, common styles of interaction, and family values and customs, the program staff can design instructional activities that capitalize on and extend the strengths and abilities of ELL children (Espinosa, 2011).

Higher education institutions and professional development opportunities seldom consider the impact of elements of culture and language on classroom practices, teacher effectiveness, parent involvement, and outcomes for children (Daniel & Friedman, 2005). The best thing we can do for teachers is to be present with them and model the patterns for successful learning and teaching. Research has consistently demonstrated that on-going feedback and support play an important role in creating meaningful change (Hains, 2003). In addition, educational expert Linda Darling-Hammond believes that mentoring is essential to meeting the unique needs and challenges associated with diverse learners. Darling-Hammond states, “teachers who spend more time collectively studying teaching practices are more effective overall at developing high-order thinking skills, and meeting the needs of diverse learning” (Darling-Hammond, 1998).
Conclusion

Becoming a culturally responsive and competent early childhood professional is a continuous process that requires self-reflection, on-going professional development, and mentoring. It also requires a social imagination that involves the creativity needed to build learning communities where parents are equal partners, and teachers are students of culture and language every day (Berdecía & Kosec, 2011).

The New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Summer Institute and Mentoring Program provides an intensive professional development experience that transforms teachers’ practices through extensive coaching and mentoring. The Summer Institute and Mentoring Program’s intensive coaching and mentoring design has been successful with both 2009 cohort and 2010 cohort in transforming teachers thinking and practices. By the conclusion of the program, the mentors observed overwhelmingly positive improvements in the teaching teams’ classroom design and instructional strategies, indicating that the teaching teams had effectively embraced and implemented practices to support the development of English Language Learners.

The teaching teams’ improvements are supported by extensive research indicating that when interventions are delivered in more intensive and extensive ways, the professional development becomes associated with high quality practices, and, in turn, improved outcomes for educators and children (Zaslow, Tout, Halle, Vick, & Lavelle, 2009; Raikes, 2006; Halle, Zaslow, Tout, Starr, Wessel & McSwiggan, 2010).

The Summer Institute and Mentoring Program provides a comprehensive model for professional development that consists of a three-day training, coupled with supportive mentoring and coaching and quarterly teleconferences. The evaluations of the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program over the past four cohort years clearly demonstrate that this intensive training and mentoring professional development model can have significant positive effects on classroom practices and instruction.

However, if we are going to see sustained and widespread changes in teacher practices, beyond the success of the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program, educators must work to embed culture and language into every single activity of a the curriculum as a permanent feature, instead of into one isolated moment on a calendar. Educators must realize the importance of infusing culturally and linguistically competent strategies into all aspects of their instruction, routines, and classroom environment. Teachers who are bilingual or multilingual and possess the knowledge of diverse cultures and who are under-utilized and at times discouraged from speaking their native language, must be strategically placed in classrooms and schools where they can make a difference. They also need to continue to receive professional development opportunities in the areas of culture and language.

The paradigm shift supported by the Summer Institute and Mentoring Program requires that the principles for the inclusion of cultural and linguistic strategies be adopted, and therefore practiced, across curricula and programs. These strategies must be part of the early learning standards in each state, from preschool to third grade and beyond. Actively incorporating these cultural and linguistic strategies can lead to improved outcomes for teachers and diverse learners. With enhanced knowledge and training, early childhood classrooms can be effectively transformed to close cultural gaps between teachers and diverse children and continue to advance the cultural connections that matter for both families and school success.
References


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2009-2010 Participating Centers
- Better Beginnings Child Development Center, Hightstown, New Jersey
- Princeton Nursery School (Team 1), Princeton, New Jersey
- Princeton Nursery School (Team 2), Princeton, New Jersey
- Mercer Street Friends, Trenton, New Jersey
- Mi Casita I, Camden, New Jersey
- Mi Casita II, (Team 1) Camden, New Jersey
- Mi Casita II, (Team 2) Camden, New Jersey
- Neighborhood Child Care Center, Montclair, New Jersey

2010-2011 Participating Centers
- Better Beginnings Child Development Center, Hightstown, New Jersey
- El Mundo de Colores, Paterson, New Jersey
- Mi Casita I, Camden, New Jersey
- Neighborhood Child Care Center, Montclair, New Jersey
- Stepping Stones Learning Institute, Trenton, New Jersey
- Trenton Head Start, (Team 1), Trenton, New Jersey
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Ana is also an adjunct faculty member at Mercer County Community College, where she teaches Intro to Early Childhood Education, Infant and Toddler Development, Curriculum and Methods, and the educational field experience. Ana earned a BA in Sociology with a minor in Women Studies and an M.Ed with a specialization in Early Childhood, both from The College of New Jersey. She also holds a New Jersey Standard Teaching Certificate in Preschool through 3rd grade. In addition, Ana has a post-graduate certificate in Infant Mental Health from the YCS Infant and Preschool Mental Health Institute and Seton Hall University. In January 2012, Ana will be pursuing a Ph.D. in education with a concentration Early Childhood and English Language Learners.

Caitlin Kosec, M.P.P., is an independent policy analyst and program evaluator with the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children at the John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy of Thomas Edison State College. While serving the College as a consultant, Caitlin co-authored and completed data analysis for the 2008 and 2009 Summer Institute and Mentoring Program evaluations: Threads of Culture: The New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Summer Institute and Mentoring Program and Cultural Conversations: Linking Culture and Language in Early Childhood Classrooms. Caitlin is also a Development Coordinator with Advancement Project, a public policy change organization rooted in the civil rights movement in the state of California. Advancement Project engineers large-scale systems change to remedy inequality, expand opportunity, and open paths to upward mobility.

Prior to joining Advancement Project, Caitlin served as the Scholarship Director at the Carson Scholars Fund, where she managed a national scholarship program to award the efforts of over 5,000 academically talented students. She has also edited numerous publications for the Institute of Policy Studies at Johns Hopkins University and previously worked for the CEO's Office of the Baltimore City Public School System. Caitlin holds a Master of Public Policy degree from Johns Hopkins University with a concentration in Education Policy and Nonprofit Management, as well as a Bachelor of Arts degree in History with a minor in Elementary Education from the University of Mary Washington. Caitlin is originally from Hillsborough, New Jersey.
Mentor Biographies

Dee L. Bailey-Gittens is a trainer, educator, and speaker with over 16 years of experience working with children and families in educational and non-profit settings. As a child advocate, she organizes special events and conferences and develops and delivers management and support staff training. Dee earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in American History with a minor in Russian Language from Lincoln University; Preschool Teacher Certificate from Mira Costa College; and a Training Certificate from Mercer County College. She has also completed graduate work in Early Childhood Education at the College of New Jersey. She holds a P-3 Certification from the NJ Department of Education. Dee was a former kindergarten teacher, preschool teacher, Abbott Preschool Director, and Trainer/Consultant with Burlington County Community College’s CDA program. Dee recently completed a Certified Parent Educator Program at Rutgers University and a Train the Trainers Institute in Infant Toddler Mental Health for the Infant Toddler Credential. Among her civic activities she is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; The National Sorority of Phi Delta Kappa, Inc., (teacher sorority); and the Nora F. Taylor Chapter #57 Order of the Eastern Stars Prince Hall Affiliated. She is a 2003 graduate of the Camden Empowerment Zone’s Neighborhood Leadership Institute, and is the 2006 recipient of the Jerrothia Riggs Education Award. Dee has been mentor with the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learner Summer Institute and Mentoring Program for four consecutive years.

Pamala A. Brooks, Ed. D. is the owner of PALS Educational Consulting. Pam is a mentor, coach, trainer, educator, and keynote speaker. Currently, she is serving as the first vice president for the local Kenyon AEYC. On the state level, Pam serves an Affiliate Council Representative and is a member of the State CDA Advisory Board. Pam is also a national affiliate council regional representative for NAEYC. Pam earned a bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education from Kean University and a master’s degree in Early Childhood Education from Nova Southeastern University. Pam is currently working on her dissertation at Nova in Child, Youth, and Family Studies. Both these experiences opened her eyes to her passion for teaching. Besides providing of professional development at many levels, Pam teaches CDA and P-3 courses for Bloomfield College; facilitates Directors’ Academies and New Jersey Administrators’ Credential Institutes; and co-facilitates Professional Impact Leadership Institutes.

Liliana Gomez has been in the field of early childhood education for 22 years. She earned a bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education in her home country of Colombia and completed graduate coursework for P-3 certification at the College of New Jersey. She holds a New Jersey Standard Teaching Certificate in Preschool through 3rd grade from the New Jersey Department of Education. Liliana is also employed by the Children is Home Society of New Jersey as a Bilingual Group Facilitator and program assistant. She conducts a parent-child literacy program that helps parents learn about the importance of reading to young children, and she coordinates all aspects of curriculum implementation for Spanish- and English-speaking groups. The program has a read-aloud component followed by an interactive activity to strengthen the bond between parent and child. Liliana has been a mentor with the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learner Summer Institute and Mentoring Program for four consecutive years.

Kamili Leath, M.S. is the Chief Operating Officer at Leath and Associates, LLC, a human development and training organization. As a consultant and speaker, she brings a wealth of knowledge, skills and ability with her “down-to-earth” approach to teaching and learning. She has worked in the non-profit sector at universities and colleges, providing support and assistance to graduate and undergraduate students. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Arcadia University and a Master of Science in Christian Counseling from Philadelphia Biblical University. Kamili conducts workshops and provides technical assistance for child care centers and churches as well as businesses. Kamili has a passion to see young children grow and succeed. She wants to see every preschooler developing and thriving in an excellent environment. She believes that every young child can succeed with appropriate support in an appropriate setting. This is Kamili’s second year as a mentor for the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learner Summer Institute and Mentoring Program.
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