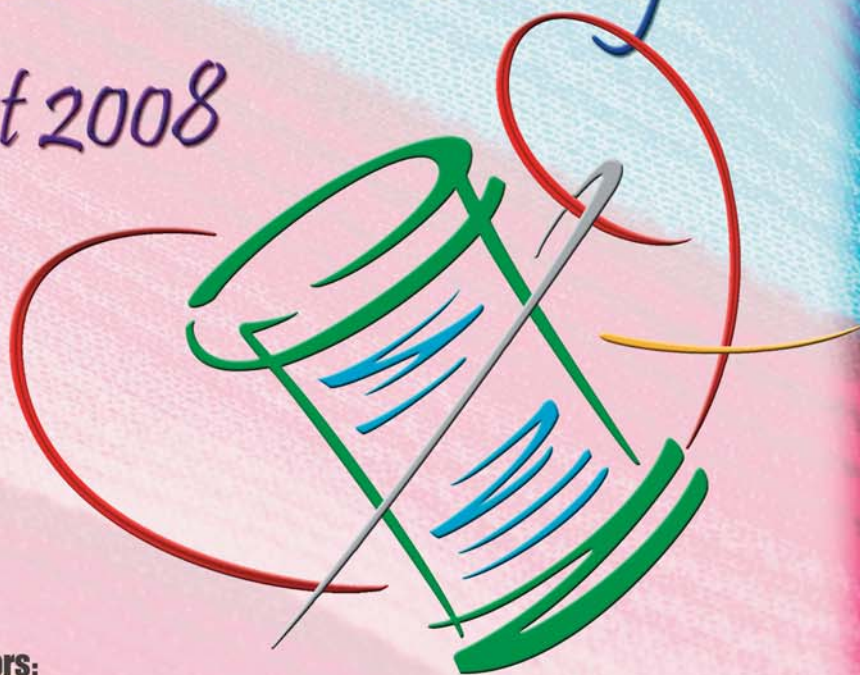


Threads of Cultures:

**The New Jersey Cultural Competency
and English Language Learners
Summer Institute/Mentoring Program**

Executive Summary
August 2008



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**Funded by the generous support of
The Schumann Fund for New Jersey**

Acknowledgements

Case Study Report/Program Evaluation Funder

- The Schumann Fund for New Jersey

Pilot Project Partners

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- Family Strength Associate, Inc.
- John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy of Thomas Edison State College

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Participating Centers

- Better Beginnings Child Development Center, Hightstown, New Jersey
- Burlington Head Start, Delanco, New Jersey (2 classrooms participated)
- El Centro Communal Boricano, Camden, New Jersey
- Marlin Luther King Jr. Child Development Center, Camden, New Jersey
- Princeton YWCA, Princeton, New Jersey
- Respond, Inc, Camden, New Jersey
- The Growing Tree, Jersey City, New Jersey
- Trenton Head Start, Trenton, New Jersey
- Straight and Narrow, La Vida Child Care Center, Patterson, New Jersey

Program Framework...

Threads of Cultures: The Pilot Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Summer Institute/Mentoring Program in New Jersey

Culture and language are threads that must be woven together throughout early childhood programs because it has personal meaning and connection to the diverse speakers that comprise all cultures. Language and culture can not be examined separately due to their shared components.

Language is the principal means where we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. In both cases, language expresses cultural reality. Members of a community or social groups do not only express experiences; they also create experiences through language. Language is a

system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through the use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. The prohibition if its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture. Thus, we can say that language symbolizes cultural identity (Kramsch, 1998).

America is becoming increasingly racially diverse. According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Instructional Education Programs, one in five students who enter school in the U.S. speak a



home language other than English. English Language Learners (ELL) represent more than million students in K-12 public schools, over 2 million students in preschool to grade 3, and over 300,000 students in Head Start programs nationwide (NCELA, 2006).

In New Jersey's classrooms, the number of English Language Learners and ethnically diverse children is also rapidly increasing. However, our teachers do not possess the skill-sets necessary to address the intersection between culture and language. Higher education institutions and professional development opportunities seldom address how cultural and language issues can impact classroom practices, teacher effectiveness, parent involvement, and outcomes for children (Daniel, & Friedman, 2005).

Research on brain development has provided evidence that language, social, and cognitive development are essential aspects of the learning process. Each child's home language and culture provide a foundation to learn about the world around them and shapes his or her classroom experiences. Culturally responsive classrooms understand that culture and language are tied to children's emotional and cognitive development and can provide the cornerstone to ensure a positive early development.

To address the need to build a culturally responsive early childhood workforce, the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children at the John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy of Thomas Edison State College developed the concept for the New Jersey



2007 First Charter Class

Summer Institute/Mentoring Program that would infuse early childhood practitioners with effective strategies to become culturally and linguistically competent.

The framework of the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Summer Institute/Mentoring Program proved to be a success at transforming the classroom design and teacher practices of early childhood teachers. During the Summer Institute/Mentoring Program, participants took a closer look at how the classroom environment can affect learning and what the teachers could do to create a positive and welcoming classroom that affirms culture and home language. This reflective professional development experience allows teachers to develop a deeper understanding of children, the teacher-learning process, and their role in the educational lives of their students. Since teachers were viewed as equal partners in this action research, they embraced the opportunity to arrive at cooperative solutions and were committed to the implementation of strategies to create culturally competent classrooms that welcome diverse students with multiple languages.

What We Did...

The New Jersey Summer Institute/Mentoring Program Model

The three-day New Jersey Summer Institute provided 20 early childhood teachers from 10 classrooms with the opportunity to gain knowledge about English Language Learners and culturally competent practices. The Institute targeted non-Abbott centers that received funding from the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Family Development. The Institute teachers represented each of the three regions in New Jersey—North, Central, and South. After the Summer Institute the teachers were mentored for six-months and participated in a learning community via teleconferences.

Teachers were encouraged to examine their own cultural fabric and biases, as well as the world of English Language Learners from different cultural perspectives. After exploring their own cultural background, as well as that of their students, the teachers began to recognize the different strategies they could use to enhance their classroom instruction. Participants had the opportunity to explore many strategies to become culturally and linguistically competent caregivers. After the training, teachers started to incorporate these strategies to transform their classroom into exceptional learning environments for all their students. Using action research, teachers continually made improvements to their classrooms and instructional strategies.

The Summer Institute/Mentoring Program relied on a variety of methods to encourage changes in teaching practices in order to create more culturally competent and welcoming classrooms for English Language Learners. The central means of teacher improvement relied on action research. Action research can



Teachers participating in the "AWAKA" cultural simulation

be defined as an approach to professional development and improved student learning in which teachers systematically reflect on their work and make changes in their practice. Effective action research integrates theory and practice by immediately applying results into the classroom (Borgia & Schuler, 1996). Betty Garder described the philosophy behind action research as, "To learn is to change; to change is to create; and to create is to learn" (Gardner, 1996).

Action research is an active process for teachers. Through participation in the Summer Institute/Mentoring Program, teachers were asked to examine their teaching experiences concerning cultural competency and English Language Learners, reflect the meaning and efficacy of their teaching, and then take action to change what they perceived to be in need of change. Action research is an on-going process, rather than a program, and results from one teacher's experience can be applied to other classrooms (Borgia & Schuler, 1996).

"I was always aware of cultural differences, but now I am taking it seriously. Culture now has a purpose in my Classroom."
Summer Institute Participant

Design Features of the New Jersey Summer Institute/Mentoring Program:

- 1) Pre-Assessment: Each classroom was visited to interview the teaching team consisting of both the group and assistant teacher. Classroom observations and assessments were completed.
- 2) Training Modules: The Institute's training program included one day on culture, one day and a half on English Language Learners, and a half day on creating an action plan for returning to the classroom. Participants earned 21 hours of professional development in cultural competency and strategies for English Language Learners.
- 3) Tool Box: Each classroom received a tool box of bilingual and culturally competent materials, books, posters, etc., that assisted the teaching team in transforming their classroom.
- 4) Mentoring and Coaching: Each teaching team received a periodic monthly check-in call to discuss changes made to the classroom design and to teaching practices. During these check-ins, teachers also had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss areas they wanted to further improve. Two follow-up visits were also scheduled in October and mid January through February 2008. After each visit, teachers received an observation report which outlined areas improved and suggested areas of focus for the next visit. At the conclusion of the observation and the assessment, the teachers received on-site coaching in the classroom. The teachers also received mentoring services by being able to call the mentor at any time for advice concerning instructional practices.
- 5) Learning Community: Teachers participated in two teleconferences that maintained a learning community through lesson studies and the discussion of best practices. Teachers who participated in the learning community earned an additional 4 hours of professional development.
- 6) Post-Assessment: Each classroom was visited a third time in late January 2008 to early February 2008 to evaluate the full impact of the program with classroom observations and assessments. Dual post-tests allowed for the evaluation of lasting teaching practices.

What We Learned...

Summer Institute/Mentoring Program Effective in Changing Teacher Thinking and Practice



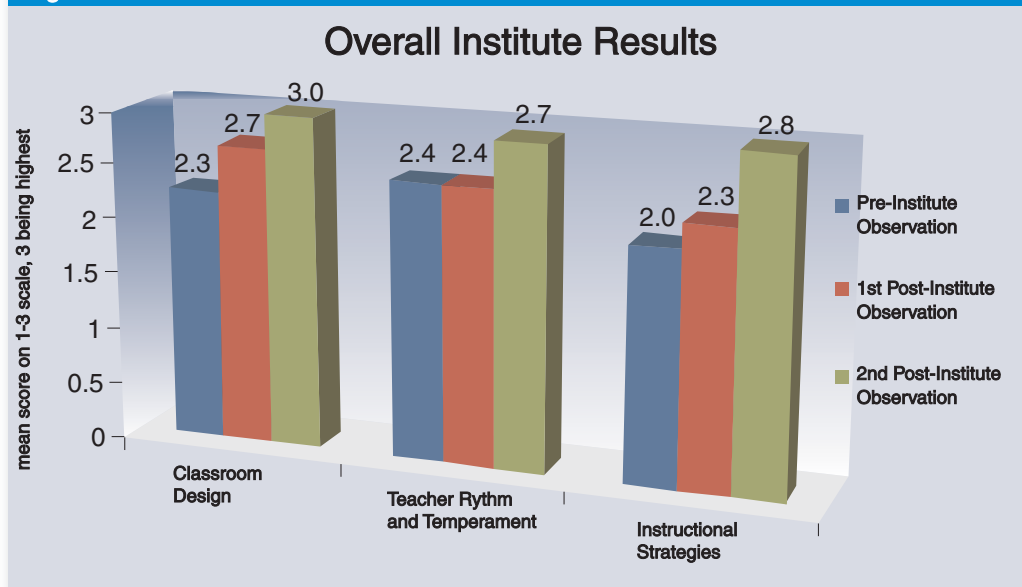
The teachers were surveyed after they completed the three-day Summer Institute, received one-on-one mentoring and coaching, and participated in the two teleconferences. The mentor's classroom observations confirmed that the teachers possessed a strong commitment to transforming their classroom. The mentor observed highly visible changes in the classroom design and the selection of materials. The one-on-one mentoring sessions demonstrated that teachers were testing ideas

cated that she was, "enlightened to understand how to incorporate and use Spanish appropriately in the classroom." Another teacher expressed, "I learned more in three days than in any other trainings I ever participated in combined."

Other teachers indicated a shift away from previous bias and the movement towards a culturally responsive classroom. One participant stated, "It was an eye-opening experi-

ence. I have a totally new vision on how to approach children in the classroom. It really helped me because I have a new way, a new tool that helped me understand where my children were from and how I can help." Another teacher expressed, "I was always aware of cultural differences, but now I am taking

Figure 1



because they asked for more feedback about particular concepts discussed in the Summer Institute/Mentoring Program as well as ideas from the two assigned textbook readings. Results from the interviews indicated that 100% of the teachers believed they possessed more knowledge about English Language Learners and cultural competency after the Summer Institute. For example, a teacher indi-

it seriously. Culture now has a purpose in my classroom."

One hundred percent of participants indicated that classroom observations and subsequent mentor feedback helped them to improve their classroom design or instructional practices. The intentional mentoring provided in the Summer Institute/Mentoring Program's struc-

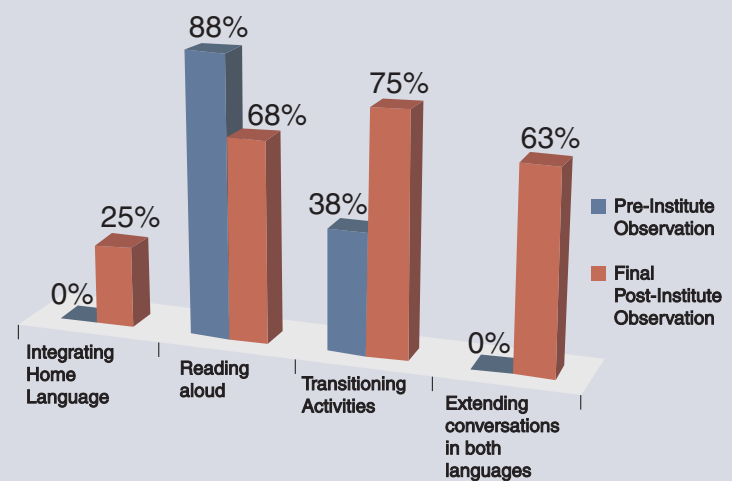
ture allowed teachers to have the support to break out of their old instructional patterns and try something new. One hundred percent of participants also indicated that having a mentor was helpful in transforming their classroom and implementing new instructional techniques. Teacher feedback indicated that the mentoring and coaching received from the Summer Institute/Mentoring Program was a positive driving force in implementing new techniques.

Teachers have started to incorporate the English Language Learners strategies recommended by the New Jersey Department of Education Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines for Non-Abbott Centers (2003) and the book, “One Child, Two Languages: A Guide for Preschool Educators of Children Learning English as a Second Language.” In the second post-Summer Institute classroom observations, more ELL strategies were observed being implemented, and the teachers were feeling more confident about using these strategies. In a majority of the participating classrooms, more teachers were improving their implementation of the ELL strategies by starting with what the children know, building vocabulary in the home language, and talking while doing. For example, the average number

of centers demonstrating the ELL technique of talking while doing increased in 63 percent of participating classrooms. However, despite these improvements, there are still several areas in which teachers need to improve their instruction. For example, on average, only 25 percent of the classrooms are integrating children’s home languages into both directions and the content of lessons.

Figure 3

ELL Strategies: Needs Improvement

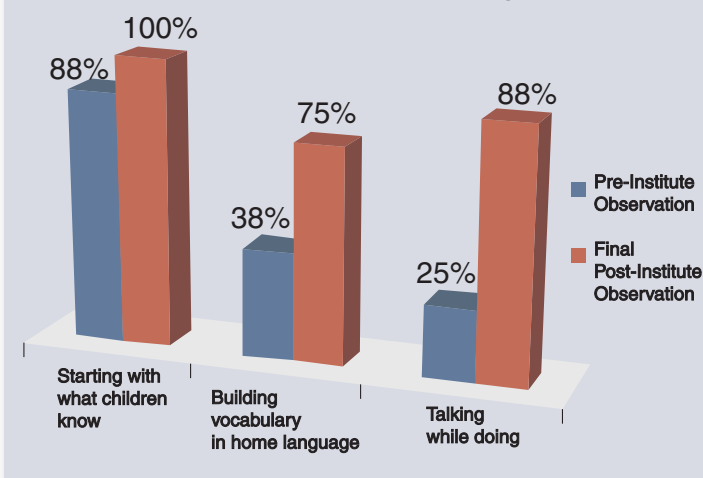


Conclusion

The New Jersey Summer Institute/Mentoring Program pilot took on an ambitious six-month timeframe to attempt to measure the transformation in teacher practice in terms of cultural and linguistic responsiveness that support English Language Learners. Our findings do not state that these teachers have arrived at becoming expert culturally responsive caregivers. The research literature has linked high teacher cultural competency with improved children’s academic and developmental outcomes. The reader should note however that this case study was conducted on a small scale and does not assess actual child development outcomes. The promising results of this evaluation strongly warrant further research on the

Figure 2

Improved ELL Strategies



connection between provider competency development and child outcomes. With the acquisition of adequate funding, future research will employ an experimental design (control group) and focus on child outcomes in addition to assessments of teacher competency.

The development of a truly culturally and linguistically competent educator is a continuous process that requires constant self-reflection, reinforcement, and ongoing professional development. However, the results from our pilot suggest that participant changes in thinking and practices can occur in a six-month period. In short, professional development coupled with mentoring can positively impact teachers' capacity to be culturally and linguistically responsive caregivers.

The learning communities provided time for teachers to reflect on their experiences, as well as encourage future changes. Research has demonstrated that the participation in learning communities leads to change in educational practice. Learning communities allow teachers to share knowledge that is situated in the day-to-day experiences of teachers which is best understood through critical reflection with others who share similar experiences. During

the learning community, teachers were able to spend time collectively, and acted as a sounding board for each others ideas. Through this active engagement, professional knowledge can increase and student learning can be enhanced (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2006).

Teachers and schools must also be supported in their efforts to create culturally competent classrooms by possessing materials and supplies to complement innovative teaching. Funds must be provided for the acquisition of materials that welcome all students and languages in order to provide optimal learning experiences. Administrators must also support their teachers' efforts to create culturally competent classrooms. Classroom teachers who are fluent in other languages and have cultural competency training should be placed in classrooms with diverse students who could best benefit from their support. Culturally responsive classrooms and caregivers have the power to nurture children's self-esteem, and provide them with confidence to explore the world around them in order to be successful in school and beyond. These classrooms have the power to create a greater link between home and school as well as an opportunity to foster meaningful parent involvement.

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Who Are We...

The John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy is a center of innovation and applied policy within the John S. Watson School of Public Service of Thomas Edison State College. The school is designed to offer undergraduate and graduate degree programs and advanced professional certificate programs that cover domestic and international issues, including public policy studies, nonprofit management, financial management, public policy analysis, regional planning, early childhood education, environmental policy/environmental justice and health policy and management.

The Watson Institute is dedicated to deepening the analysis around critical public policy challenges and broadening the range of policy ideas, perspectives, and options. The Institute assists decision makers in enacting public policy in the interest of New Jersey's residents by expanding the range of policy and political possibilities and positing new policy paradigms. The Institute was created to respond to the practical needs of decision makers across New Jersey, and to honor the outstanding record of public service of the late N.J. Assemblyman John S. Watson, the nation's first African American chairman of an appropriations committee. The College initially established The Institute as the Trenton Office of Policy Studies in 1991 and dedicated it as The John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy in 1997.

The Watson Institute is considered a "think and do tank" versus a traditional "think tank." By turning "lessons learned" into more informed policy perspectives and mandates, the Institute develops long-term strategic partnerships that will effectuate the greatest level of change. Furthermore, it utilizes a holistic approach to policy development that is integrated across six thematic policy-based centers: The

Center for Leadership Development, the Center for Urban Environment (CUE), the Center for Health Policy Development, the Technical Assistance and Support Service (TASSC), the Education Policy and Practice Initiative, and the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children.



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

The Center's Core Values are:

- ✎ Higher education options and professional development that aid educators in becoming "highly qualified" practitioners;
- ✎ Culturally and linguistically sensitive practitioners are essential for the education of young children and true parent involvement;
- ✎ Adequate investment in early learning through a comprehensive system assure that every child in New Jersey reaches its potential; and
- ✎ Environmental protection for child health and well-being to impact learning and outcomes for children.

To obtain additional copies of the executive summary and full case study, call (609) 777-4351 ext. 4290, Fax (609) 777-3207, toll free (888) 442-8372 ext. 4290, or visit our Website www.tesc.edu.



Special Thanks

The Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children would like to thank our funding partners, writers, editors, technical reviewers, and the working group for their support and contributions to this case study report as well as their ideas for the 2008 Summer Institute implementation plan. In addition, we would like to thank the teachers who allowed us to capture their classroom success stories: Ada Cecelia Aguirre, Claudetta Jack, Charlene Borelli, Kimberly Prince, Elizabeth Concepcion, Melonie Coley, Graciela Leal, and Christine Tate. We would also like to thank Monica Mejia for providing us with a director's view of the impact of the Summer Institute.

Data Collection Disclosure

The data gathered and shared in this case study report comes from the anecdotal notes and classroom observations taken by the sole mentor to the project, Ana I. Berdecía. The observation instrument was then compiled and analyzed by an independent program evaluator, Caitlin Kosec. The literature review and framework for the case study report was co-authored by both the mentor and the evaluator.

