



# Cultural Competence

## **CULTURAL COMPETENCE – SEEING LIFE BEYOND OUR OWN EXISTENCE**

Cultural competence is identified in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) as one of the pedagogical practices that informs curriculum decision-making and enhances children’s learning. This fact sheet will explore the distinctions between culture, valuing cultural diversity and cultural competence, in order to support educator’s thinking and practices. Reflective questions are included to promote reflection and discussion.

### **Defining cultural competence**

Cultural competence is often confused with knowledge of culture or a valuing of cultural diversity. Whilst these three concepts share some similarities in focus, operationally they are disparate in their aims.

Developing an understanding of culture and the way in which it operates is fundamental to understanding what it means to be culturally competent. There are many ways to understand culture. Some people may view culture in broad terms, recognising language, behaviours, attitudes and values as an integral part of culture. Others may have a narrower and more concrete understanding of culture, focusing on the more tangible aspects of culture such as food, dress, music and the arts. Sociologists and anthropologists share some similar views on culture in that they see knowledge of ones’ own culture as necessary for participating in and understanding society. Seen in this way, culture can be defined as follows:

*“the way (people) perceive the world, the way they communicate with one another and, the things they do and their values. Culture is the system of shared knowledge which people use to govern their own actions and interpret the actions of others”* (Partington & McCudden, 1993, p.12)

There are four key elements to understanding the construction of culture. These include:

1. Culture is acquired - we learn about culture from others in our community, including our parents
2. Culture is shared - culture does not exist in a vacuum, it is shared amongst a group of people
3. Culture defines core values - because we have been taught our culture and share it with our cultural group, we tend to form the same core values
4. Cultures resist change but are not static - culture does and can change, but change is usually slow and gradual.

Kidd argues that “culture is seen as the cement that bonds individuals together. It is made up of shared and collective symbols and it shapes our lives. It gives us the rules by which to live our lives. It hovers over us, structuring the world around us”. (2002, p. 10)

## Cultural diversity in the context of cultural competency

An appreciation of cultural diversity is fundamental to cultural competence. Cultural diversity is a relational reality, that is, it is contextual and does not exist as a static quality. All of us are different at some point in time to the people around us. It is important to remember that at some point in time we are also similar to the people around us. In being culturally competent individuals must take a philosophical position that cultural diversity is not problematic. Issues and tensions arise in relation to cultural diversity in circumstances where little or no accommodation is made for the reality of cultural diversity.

Moll and Greenberg (1990, as cited in Barrera & Corso, 2002, p. 104) suggest that culture is maintained through the transferral of knowledge from one generation to the next. This process is referred to as “funds of knowledge”. An example to demonstrate how “funds of knowledge” might operate is as follows:

*Knowing how to greet adults who are not family members, for example, requires a specific cultural fund of knowledge. The content of this fund differs across cultures. In some cultures, children will be taught to remain silent as a sign of respect. In other cultures, children will be expected to step up and say “hello” and shake hands when introduced as a sign of respect. (Barrera & Corso, 2002)*

It is unrealistic to assume that cultural competence is achieved through the proficiency of funds of knowledge. No one person can know all there is to know about a particular culture.

The term cultural competence is typically used in reference to the knowledge and skill necessary for facilitating communication and skills acquisition across cultures (Lynch & Hanson, 1992, as cited in Barrera & Corso, 2002). For others it refers to “the ability ... to respond optimally to all children and families (in ways that acknowledge) ... both the richness and the limitation of the socio-cultural context in which children and families, as well as practitioners ... may be operating” (Barrera & Kramer, as cited in Barrera & Corso, 2002, p. 105).





## Using the metaphor of mystery

What comes to mind when you hear the word mystery? For some mystery may provoke the following thoughts:

- Finding out more;
- Looking for clues;
- Going in search of something that is missing.

Applying the metaphor of mystery is a useful strategy to assist in increasing our ability to be culturally competent. Freedman and Combs (1996, as cited in Barrera & Corso, 2002) suggest that mystery requires that we attend to children and families with focused attention, patience and curiosity. In this sense, being responsive is about being willing to not know for sure, to not know exactly what to do or what to say. All too often when we approach other cultures with a sense of knowing, we can impede our learning. “Knowing where we are going encourages us to stop seeing and hearing and allows us to fall asleep...[such knowing allows] a part of [us] to rush ahead to [our destination] the moment [we] see it” (Remen, 2000, as cited in Barrera & Corso, 2002, p. 107). Perhaps one of the most effective strategies to increase our cultural competence is to search for clues, remain curious and retain a desire to find out more about others, whilst always remaining open to diversity and learning.

### Questions for reflection:

- How have you come to understand cultural competence? What does it look like on a daily basis?
- How do you ensure you remain aware of your own worldview and attitudes towards diversity and difference?
- How do you ensure that particular cultural knowledge and practices are not given more value or importance than others?
- How do you remain curious in your relationships with children and families within and across cultures?



**References and further reading:**

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009). *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*.

[http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy\\_Agenda/Quality/Pages/EarlyYearsLearningFramework.aspx](http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Pages/EarlyYearsLearningFramework.aspx)

Barrera, I. & Corso, R. (2002). Cultural Competency as Skilled Dialogue. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, p. 103-113.



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This fact sheet has been developed by Semann & Slattery on behalf of Children's Services Central. Children's Services Central is the Professional Support Coordinator in New South Wales and is an initiative funded by the Australian Government under the Inclusion and Professional Support Program. Children's Services Central is managed by a consortium of key organisations that resource and support the sectors of children's services in New South Wales.