Culture: Make it an everyday part of your curriculum

As the world becomes more globally conscious, an important job of educators is to help children and youth acquire knowledge about cultural differences so that they will be able to work together and solve future problems together. Cultural competence is a critical set of skills that teachers, as well as out-of-school staff, need to help all children reach their full potentials.

National demographics are changing. What was once an overwhelmingly white, Anglo-Saxon nation is becoming increasingly multiracial and multi-cultural. Recent data from the US Census Bureau predicts that by 2020 more than 50% of US children will be non-white (Hispanic, African American, Asian/Pacific Islanders, or multiracial).

Dr. Patreese Ingram, Penn State University, explains how culturally competent youth development professionals play a key role in helping youth grow and develop.

“The research says that a positive self-esteem and emotional well-being provides a strong foundation for developing one’s cognitive abilities. So a healthy sense of self requires that the children know who they are—and like who they are—without feeling superior to other children. Youth development professionals really play a big role in helping youth develop that self-esteem and self identity.”

By making learning about culture a regular part of in-school and out-of-school programs, teachers and staff members can increase global awareness while they reduce intolerance. Culture-study can become part of the everyday life in the classroom or out-of-school program. It can be considered part of the curriculum, or it can become part of the basic guidelines of the program, as basic as behavior management and how children practice mutual respect and understanding.

The most important piece of starting a culture-study is having instructors who are culturally competent.

Davis (2012) describes four steps that educators need to take to become culturally competent:
1. Look inward and understand your own identity and culture.
2. Look outward and learn about others.
3. Blend new knowledge with what you already know.
4. Put knowledge and skills into action.

Dr. Ingram asserts that having an open-minded attitude is all-important to beginning a culture study.

“None of us will know all of the cultural nuances of every different group—every race, every ethnicity. So we’re going to make some mistakes when we’re interacting with people who have differences from us. But when youth and parents can see that we have a positive, open attitude and we’re willing to learn, and we’re willing to profit from those mistakes, then those mistakes don’t become such a big deal. So we gain knowledge and skills, but attitudes are very important, and they will help us continue to be open to learning.”
Follow these steps to embed culture-study in the everyday life of your school or out-of-school program.

1. Prepare the staff to study cultures.
   - Get everyone on your staff motivated by sharing the demographic statistics. Help staff become culturally competent by exploring their own cultural backgrounds and influences. Collect resources, including maps, reference books, and story books about different cultures.

2. Plan the environment to be inclusive.
   - Create a warm and welcoming environment with multicultural posters, artwork, and storybooks displayed prominently. Make all communications available in English and all relevant home languages. Invite families to share family photos and display them in the program. Make a point to greet all families as they arrive and speak to them when they pick up their children.

3. Write a letter to families, conduct surveys, and gain commitment.
   - Write a letter to the families (translated into relevant languages) explaining your intention to learn about each other and their cultures throughout the duration of the program. Ask each family to complete a cultural survey (translated into relevant languages) to help staff learn about their needs and desires.
   - Ask for the help and commitment of all families to share something of importance from their culture during the program.

4. Talk with children and youth about cultural differences.
   - Start the program out by talking with the youth in your program about your intention to study cultures as part of the program. Introduce and define the components of culture, such as race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, sexual orientation, geographic location, socio-economic level, and ability/disability.
   - Ask youth to do a research exploration of their own cultural backgrounds.

5. Plan activities and projects to get children talking and learning.
   - Hold group discussions about cultural differences. Guide the youth to do research projects about their culture or another culture that interests them. Take field trips to explore ethnic art exhibits, foods, and performances.

6. Practice communications strategies that include all cultures and abilities.
   - Learn how to spell, pronounce, and write the names of all the family members in your program. Do not use nicknames or attempt to simplify the names to suit your tongue. Have youth learn and practice some key phrases in the languages of all the cultures they research. When you ask a question, practice waiting for the child to answer. Some children are shy; others may need time to form their answers (particularly English language learners).

7. Hold a cultural celebration sharing foods and artifacts from different cultures.
   - Plan the date for your cultural celebration and send invitations far in advance. Make sure that you take into account family members’ work schedules. Have families sign up with the foods they will bring and the cultural artifacts they wish to display. Acknowledge the efforts of all and thank all families and youth for actively participating in the culture study.
   - Repeat this culture-study with each new group of youth and you can help create a more informed, more tolerant world for future generations!

extension.psu.edu/youth/betterkidcare
To strengthen cultural competency and understanding, check out other resources from Better Kid Care:

**On Demand modules**

http://bit.ly/ondemandbkc:

- PYD Foundations: Cultural Competency and Responsiveness
- Cultural Understanding: Building Solid Foundations
- Positive Youth Development: Building a Culture of Belonging

**Research-to-practice articles:**

- All children and families deserve respect
  http://bit.ly/2bfz1Uz
- Cultural understanding
  http://bit.ly/1TUZnNE

**Vodcast**

Cultural Understanding

References
