PRINCIPLE 1:

Every individual is rooted in culture.

Highlights from the Original *Multicultural Principles* (1991)

- Culture has an influence on the beliefs and behaviors of everyone.

- Culture is passed from generation to generation.

- Culture is dynamic and changes according to the contemporary environment.

- Home language is a key component of children's identity formation.

- Successful programs respect and incorporate the cultures of children and families.

Research Review

> Culture influences every aspect of human development and is reflected in childrearing beliefs and practices. (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000, 3)

Culture is acquired through the repeated, daily interactions children have with the people around them while growing up. Children acquire cultural knowledge as they develop language, learn concepts, and experience the ways they are cared for by their parents and family members. Children also acquire cultural knowledge from their communities and Head Start experiences.

The acquisition of culture begins at birth and continues throughout the life span. On a daily basis, adults make many decisions and continually model behaviors, such as:

- interacting and communicating in order to establish relationships and bond with their infant (Small 1998);

- responding to specific behaviors from their child, including behaviors that are considered "inappropriate" in that culture (Rogoff & Mosier 2003); and

- planning, implementing, and evaluating the kinds of learning experiences that children have (Tudge & Putnam 1997).

The ways in which adults carry out these activities are rooted in and influenced by their culture(s). As children develop and learn, they are increasingly exposed to information, including facts about their world, as well as social rules and expectations about their behavior. They are encouraged to participate in or initiate some behaviors—and they are discouraged from others. For example, in some cultures, toddlers are encouraged to feed themselves using their fingers; whereas in others, they are fed by their parents. Families communicate their expectations both verbally and nonverbally.

As children develop, they demonstrate increasing levels of cultural knowledge. By the time children are old enough to attend preschool, they will already have cultural knowledge about the rules of their environments. Some of these rules include how to use objects, which behaviors are (or are not) acceptable, and how to relate to older or younger family members.

The influence of cultural activity upon children's development has been described from many different perspectives in the research literature. The following paragraphs provide a sampling of these perspectives.

Rogoff (1990, 2003), Small (1998), and Cohen (1978) have described cultural activity in human societies. Although their descriptions have differed in important ways, each account supports Principle 1—*every individual is rooted in culture*.

Rogoff (1990, 2003) described family interactions and daily routines as the source of children's cultural information. Children are born biologically equipped to be keen observers of their families. They become more involved in the activities of the family as they grow. Of course, a baby's family members have grown up within one or more cultures themselves and have developed their own cultural knowledge.

As a baby develops, he or she is increasingly able to participate in activities as well as influence other family members. As all family activities are situated within the culture (or cultures) of the family, these interactions provide children with an apprenticeship in thinking—a long-term process by which children's individual development is connected to culturally specific ways of thinking, learning, and living.

Small (1998) described children's development as resulting from the combination of biology and cultural influences. For example, language is biologically based—humans around the world are born with the capacity to acquire language. At the same time, our

cultural environments provide us with one or more specific languages and rules for communication.

All cultures appear to generate knowledge, rules, values, advice, and expectations for rearing children. Yet the specifics of how to raise children are often different across cultures. Finally, all cultures seem to have the ability to produce narratives—that is, a way of gathering and telling stories. Although the ways of telling stories vary by culture, the practice of having and telling stories appears to be universal.

Cohen (1978) presented a comprehensive analysis of culture. In this view, culture is more than a single aspect of human life—it can be considered on different levels.

At the *universal level*, all humans are essentially the same. For example, all cultures make use of language by combining information into stories. In addition, people everywhere have ways of expressing anger, sadness, or happiness; ways of raising children; and ways of making a living.

At the *group level*, human behaviors are patterned in ways that are shaped from child-hood. For example, within the cultural group(s) that raised us, many expectations about "how to act" are transmitted from generation to generation.

At the *family level*, individual families make different decisions about how to live their lives. For example, some people may choose to live as their parents did, whereas others may choose to do things quite differently.

Finally, culture can be viewed at the *individual level*. For example, each individual chooses the extent to which he or she wishes to participate in and pass on the traditions, beliefs, and values of his or her group and family.

Figure 1. Culture Viewed from Four Levels.
Based on text in Cohen, 1978.
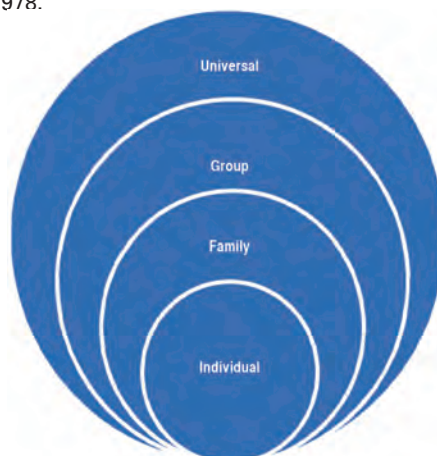
One way to think about culture at the individual level is to consider your siblings. Are you more alike or more different from one or more of them? These differences can exist even when you were raised in the same family and within the same community and cultural group. Therefore, although culture is an important influence on development, knowing someone's cultural group does not necessarily tell us much about the person *as an individual*. Figure 1 depicts the four different levels of culture.

Key Implications

On the basis of the literature reviewed above, culture is real and important, but understanding it is not necessarily simple or easy. Understanding culture, therefore, requires the ability to balance different considerations—different pieces of information—at the same time.

Chavajay and Rogoff (1999) made two important points. First, culture is not a single "thing," but, rather, can be understood on different levels. Second, culture *by itself* does not explain everything about the actions or behaviors of an individual or group of people. Thus, culture is one of many important elements in children's development, but not the only important element. Culture is a way (or ways) of living. In other words, culture is not the only way to explain human development. As the original *Multicultural Principles* noted, culture is "dynamic and evolves and adapts" (p. 11). Individuals are also dynamic—they change and adapt to the circumstances of their lives.

For Head Start programs, it is absolutely necessary to respect and incorporate families' cultures into the systems and services provided. Program management should actively promote the development of a positive cultural and individual identity for all children. In addition, as program staff are also members of cultural groups, programs must find ways to identify and include cultural information from program staff. At the same time, management must also consider the *Head Start Program Performance Standards*. The Voices from the Head Start Community section and Reflective Activity presented next provide initial suggestions for gathering and using cultural information from program staff and enrolled families.

VOICES FROM THE HEAD START COMMUNITY

A program in Minnesota created a Cross-Cultural Team, drawing from among diverse staff members who reflect the diversity of their service area. Members of the team explained the origins of this work as follows:

> In the late 1980s, different immigrant groups began moving into our service area. The first group to arrive was the Hmong, followed by families from Somalia and then many other areas. We had to make a

decision of how to serve these families. *We needed to do more than just translate our forms.* . . . Now, this effort is an integral part of our program related to how we serve the community.

Over the years, the work of the Cross-Cultural Team impacted the program's services and systems. The Team came up with and began to use a basic question to organize their ongoing work in understanding the cultures of the familes they serve: How do we meet the needs of all our families?

Using this question as an organizing tool, the team members gathered information regarding cultural values and customs from families and diverse staff members. They compiled their findings in different formats. The Team then used the information to plan specific program activities in order to best meet the needs of families and staff. Team members offered the following suggestions to other programs interested in this type of work: (1) take the time to reflect on information gathered; (2) work with community partners who have experience working with the different cultures of the Head Start service area; and (3) develop their own local process.

Over the years, the work of the Cross-Cultural Team has impacted the program's services and systems. Several examples are presented below.

1. *Creating a 24-hour parent communication hotline.* There is an 800 number available to the community in four languages: English, Spanish, Hmong, and Somali. The hotline provides information on daily activities, program information, and upcoming events, as well as registration information. Information is updated weekly.

2. *Organizing international events and festivals.* Different activites involving the families are planned during the program year. These events are organized to inform parents about classroom activities, and to help program staff and parents learn about one another's cultural heritage.

3. *Tape recording parents.* To provide children with authentic models of their home language(s), the program makes tape recordings of parents speaking or reading in their home language. The tapes are then played in the classroom for individual and group readings.

4. *Creating a cross-language phrase book.* This project began as a way to help staff learn to say "hello" to families in their own languages. Over time, the project expanded into a phrase book, which currently includes many commonly used words and phrases in the different languages of the families enrolled. The phrase book enables staff to say a few words to parents in their home language about registration or transportation and to speak with children about a variety of topics, including food and classroom learning experiences.

Team members also emphasized that they continue to develop ways of educating the parents about the program. In the words of one team member: "We have to help parents understand why we do things—why we read daily, why we use rhymes and free play, and have children using playdough." A team member offered this insight into their process:

Final Thought

> We can never learn *everything* about all cultures; but we can demonstrate an interest and willingness to learn from each other.
>
> —Cross-Cultural Team Member, MN

Reflective Questions/Activities

This section presents four suggestions for reflective thinking: (1) an activity in which program staff explore their own cultural backgrounds (e.g., during preservice or inservice); (2) an activity to help program staff develop an understanding of the cultures of parents and family members; (3) an activity for program staff to identify what culture means to them; and (4) an activity for program staff to consider using a graphic to think about culture in their work. These activities should be considered only as a starting point for discussion and further study; they do not represent a comprehensive approach to the issues.

Reflections for Program Staff: Culture in My Life

1. What do you remember about how you were raised? How might your personal background or upbringing influence your thinking about children's development?

2. What skills and behaviors do parents in your program value in their children? How might their personal backgrounds or other experiences influence their thinking?

3. When do your values and beliefs about children conflict with those of families enrolled in your program? How can you discuss and work with these differences in values and beliefs with families in order to benefit the children?

4. What experiences, values, and/or beliefs do families hold that may come into play when you are in the beginning of establishing relationships with them?

5. What beliefs do families have regarding the "cultures" of the service systems they are familiar with? For example, what do parents say about their experiences with education, health care, and other service areas?

Reflections for Program Staff: Culture in the Lives of Families

1. What cultural groups live within the service area of your program? What do you know about the lifestyle, immigration history, health beliefs, communication style, etc. of each cultural group? What do you know about the different ideas for raising children held within these cultural groups? How did you learn this information?

2. What skills and behaviors do parents in your program value in their children? How might their personal backgrounds or other experiences influence their thinking?

3. What systems or strategies does your program currently have in place to obtain additional information about the cultural groups in your service area? What else could be done to learn about the cultural groups in your service area?

4. In what ways do the systems and services of your program reflect information about the cultural groups in your service area? Have the demographics of your service area changed recently?

Reflective Thinking Activity

Examine the different definitions presented in the Definitions of Culture chart on page 9. Is there other information that you feel is important that has *not* been included in any of the definitions in this chart? What is your own definition of *culture*?

Culture is . . . ?

1. For me, culture is _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Reasons I chose this definition include _____

Culture: What IS It?

1. How might you use this graphic to recall and reflect upon your own cultural experiences as you were growing up?

2. How might you use this graphic to learn from (or to dialogue with) the families in your program?

3. How could you adapt or modify the graphic to better reflect your own view of culture?

Figure 2. **Connections to Culture**.