

Collaborative Adventures

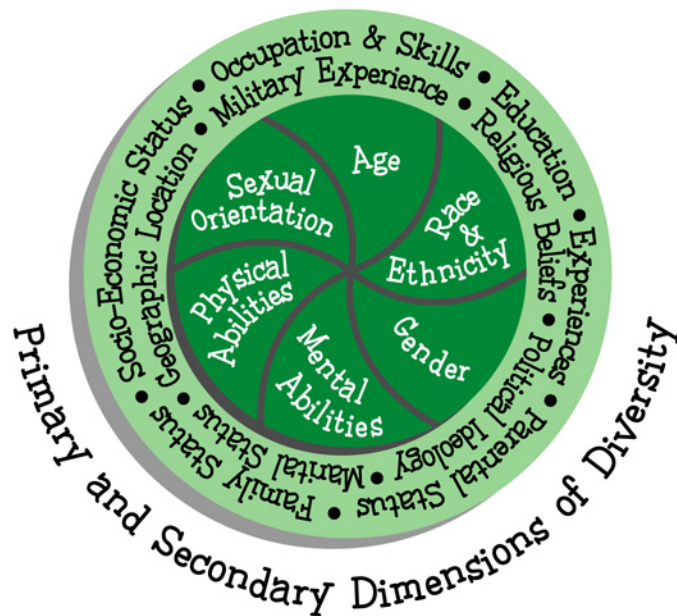
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The Cultural Competence Journey: Appreciating Differences

By: Janet McIntyre

When Dr. David Satcher, 16th Surgeon General of the United States from 1998-2002*, gave his keynote address at the Georgetown University Training Institutes in Nashville, Tennessee in July, he chose to open with a story that not only made the audience laugh, but caused me to think about the topic for this article: the richness of the cultural diversity surrounding us today. Dr. Satcher told of 2 farmers meeting at a national convention ... one farmer owned a 5,000 acre farm in Texas and the other's farm was about 65 acres in South Carolina. The Texan asked the South Carolinian how many acres he farmed, and he replied, "Oh, I reckon my farm is about 60 or 70 acres. How big is yours?" To this question she replied, "Let me put it this way. I can get in my truck at dawn and drive until sunset and still not reach the end of my farm." The South Carolina farmer then replied sympathetically, "Too bad, I used to have a truck like that!" This exchange helps illustrate several of the many elements of cultural diversity. The farmers' way of speaking was vastly different and allowed room for misinterpretation. The farmers came from states where the context for farming was very different. The crops planted and animals bred or fed are different, along with the quality of the soil as well as the weather. Even though both were farmers and there were things they seemed to have in common because of their shared occupation, their differences were many as well. We are all shaped by unique experiences and human qualities that define our culture. At the TA Center we like to call this your "Cultural DNA". Diversity Consultant Dr. Jacquelyn Green has created a Diversity Wheel that helps us identify just some of the primary and secondary traits that help define what we mean by diversity.



Building on Dr. Green's work, Choices TA Center Coaches Rachel Lewis and Chris Cook will be presenting a concurrent session at the statewide system of care conference on October 3, 2008, entitled "Flavor Appreciation: A Cultural Taste Test". In their presentation, Chris and Rachel stress that one of the first steps in the journey (and it definitely **is** a journey) toward deeper cultural awareness and understanding of others is identifying the elements of your own culture. What makes us different? And what do we have in common with others? What stereotypes (yes, we all have them) are part of our belief systems and how do we react when reality and our experiences don't jibe with those well ingrained beliefs?

These stereotypes may be as simple as “people that eat ____ for breakfast start their day properly” or “people who drive ____ cars are rich”, or they may be fraught with mean-spirited prejudice about people of certain nationalities, races or cultural groups.

While cultural competence is broadly defined as the practice of considering culture in order to serve people of diverse backgrounds, it is also one of the three most important values that define systems of care for children and families: family driven and youth guided, culturally competent and community based care. “An underlying value of systems of care is that services must be appropriate to the cultural contexts of the lives of the children and families they serve in order to truly benefit children and youth with serious mental health issues and their families.” (Harper, et al., 2006). So how can we move forward on this life-long journey toward cultural competence? How do we learn to appreciate and honor the diversity represented by the youth and families who are served through systems of care and wraparound....or for that matter, any human services?

Margaret B. Arbuckle wrote (Focal Point, 2002) that when the citizens of Guilford County, North Carolina, learned from the 2000 census of the rapidly increasing diversity of their community it only confirmed what they already knew. More than 80 different languages were native to the children in the public schools – and in grocery stores and reception areas alike, many nationalities were newly represented. The new and growing cultural diversity represented a challenge to a community that had a rich heritage of addressing social justice issues, from actively supporting the Underground Railroad to civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s. However the facts remained that a disproportionate number of African American youth were placed in foster care, suspended from schools and left without needed healthcare. When North Carolina was awarded a federal SAMHSA grant, a newly formed task force hosted a huge community meeting attended by the press as well as leadership of more than eight large government social service agencies, family members dressed in native costume, and university faculty. Attendees were welcomed with food and beverages from countries in eastern and western Europe, Africa and Asia. This meeting laid the groundwork for an amazing transformation for agencies, families and evaluators in Greensboro. People at all levels were urged to examine their own cultural heritage and agencies began to hold pitch-in lunches for employees to share their own cultural heritage. After work, they visited ethnic grocery stores and restaurants and went to movies and musical events representative of different cultures.

Throughout, families helped service providers learn that response to a family in a culturally sensitive manner is more than a respectful response for a particular ethnic group’s cultural practices. Being culturally competent is being respectful of each individual, her values and beliefs, and her traditions and practices, and then support these in all interactions with the family (Fall 2002 Focal Point, p23)

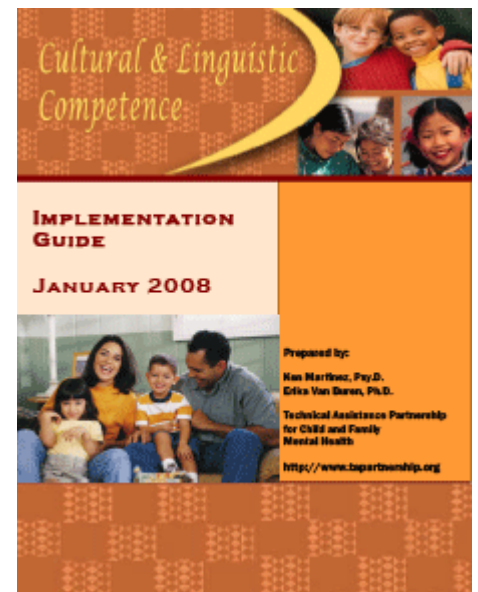
As time progressed, Dr. Arbuckle noted that staff members were increasingly comfortable talking about cultural differences among themselves and consumers began to witness increased cultural awareness. See the Focal Point article for more information about the resources used by the North Carolina grant site to jumpstart their cultural competence journey.

To cap off this article’s brief summary of the very large world of understanding and valuing differences in our systems of care, we’d like to share one other new resource. It is called *The Cultural and Linguistic Competence Implementation Guide* by the Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health (Martinez & Van Buren, 2008). This detailed, yet readable guidebook covers six domains with multiple focus areas in each:

- Governance and organizational infrastructure
- Services and supports
- Planning and continuous quality improvement
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Workforce

While it might not be practical for some communities to follow every suggestion in this guide, there is much information that is applicable for all. It is available for download at <http://www.tapartnership.org/cc/>.

It seems appropriate here to share this wonderful story about embracing diversity from a book featured in the June 2008 issue of Collaborative Adventures: *Everything is Normal Until Proven Otherwise* by Karl Dennis and Ira Lourie. (pp.107-108).



Karl relates his experience working with a group of two fellow African-Americans and one American Indian to write a monograph that defined cultural competence. After the group seemed to work hard for one entire day, the African Americans realized that their American Indian friend had hardly said a word all day and asked him if anything was wrong. He replied, "In my Indian culture, people tend to wait at least five seconds after someone stops talking before the next person starts. This is very important, because this is how you demonstrate you have heard what they said and that you've really thought about it. But when I work with Black people, as soon as one person stops talking another one starts, and if I hold to my own cultural values, I never get a chance to say anything." The group agreed to honor their friend's cultural value by waiting the proper time so he could participate.

Not long after, Karl was relating this story to a woman he had known for many years and she started to laugh, saying "Karl, you need to understand that with Indians, it's five seconds; with Blacks, it's as soon as someone else finishes; but we Jews, we tend to interrupt." When Karl encountered another colleague who had written widely on cultural competence a few months later and related the story, he too began to laugh, saying "Well, Karl you need to understand with Indians its five seconds, with Blacks it's right away, and Jews may interrupt, but we Cubans, we all talk at the same time."

Finally, after one of Karl's presentations a woman approached and told him there was another group he needed to know about. "It may be very true about Indians' five seconds, Blacks right away, Jews interrupting, and Cubans at the same time. But I'm English, and in England people would not have said anything until after you had left, and then they would have proceeded to talk about you."

The point of this story is twofold: first, we must be very careful to insure that our own cultural biases and experiences don't unfairly slant how we perceive others from backgrounds different from ours, and second, after we honestly explore the customs and cultural values of others, we should treasure their diversity!

Enjoy your journey,
Janet McIntyre

*Dr. Satcher is now the Director of the National Center for Primary Care at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta.

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