



early developments Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

Spring 2004 | Volume 8 #1

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Director's Notes

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Taking Up the Challenge

Bringing Diversity to Early Childhood Workforce

Secrets to Success

Social Identity in Diverse Schools

Finding the Stars in a Multi-Colored Sky

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Diversity

news



Dick Clifford, FPG senior scientist and research associate professor in the UNC School of Education, received the Chancellor's Award from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which is given for meritorious or distinguished accomplishments. He was one of five university leaders recognized in the categories of devotion to duty, innovations, public service, safety/heroism, human relations or other achievements. The award recognized that "Clifford's accomplishments have dramatically changed services for young children in North Carolina."



Coming Next

Fragile X syndrome (FXS) is the focus of the next issue of *Early Developments*. Upcoming stories include

- Early Identification and Newborn Screening
- Speech, Language and FXS
- The Behavioral Challenge
- National Fragile X Awareness Day
- Fragile X Information Center
- Video Analysis Reveals Key Behaviors

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Director's Notes by Don Bailey



BY NOW IT SHOULD NOT BE NEWS TO ANYONE that America is becoming increasingly diverse in its population. Signs that we live in a multicultural, global society abound in the world today. In fact the word “minority” is taking on a new meaning in states such as California, where fewer than 50% of the children are Caucasian and there are more Hispanic than African-American children. These trends will likely characterize the US as a whole in the not-so-distant future, and early childhood programs need to be ready.

What is it about cultural diversity that challenges early childhood programs? One factor is that children enter early childhood and early intervention programs from families with a wide range of values and cultural experiences. Sometimes those values and experiences differ from those of the teachers and caregivers in those programs. Another factor is that unfortunately in America today, “minority” status is statistically more likely to be associated with poverty and poor educational outcomes. This means that special efforts are needed to support some children to maximize school success, but also that we need to be careful and not unfairly characterize an entire group of individuals. Poverty is probably the single factor that most significantly influences success in school and society, irrespective of one’s ethnic or cultural background. But racism, discrimination, and perceived minority status also work in subtle yet powerful ways.

This issue of *Early Developments* highlights some of the work at FPG designed to meet this need. One key concern is the extent to which individuals working in early childhood programs understand children and families from different cultures and behave in ways that are respectful of cultural differences. One FPG project is designed to assess

beliefs, practices and barriers perceived by early childhood professionals who work with Latino children. Building on this information, FPG is testing the efficacy of a three-day workshop designed to raise the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of child care providers in working with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Consistent with models used by other projects at FPG, the training includes a self-assessment tool that is used to help raise participants’ awareness of their own attitudes and behaviors, and to develop a training and technical assistance plan.

In addition to “front-line” service providers, a second need is for more diversity among our nation’s early childhood leaders. An FPG project called Walking the Walk strives to increase the number of culturally and linguistically diverse people entering the early childhood profession through campus-community partnerships across North Carolina. And researchers at FPG are taking advantage of a special program funded by the National Institutes of Health to promote research careers of individuals from diverse cultures.

Finally, we are engaged in direct work with children. In contrast to much research that has focused on school



failure in low-income and minority children, projects at FPG focus on factors that contribute to school success. One project is finding out about children's constructions and negotiations of social identities in culturally diverse schools. And another project uses science activities as the context in which to identify and nurture talent in young children from diverse cultures.

Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is one of the most well known of all American speeches. Much progress has been made since his time, but the dream has yet to be fully realized. Each April our country celebrates the Week of the Young Child in recognition that the early childhood years are where it all begins. In addition to assuring that children have the early experiences necessary for school success, so that no child is left behind, we also need to assure that all children finish the early childhood period with an appreciation for and understanding of individual differences. Attitudes about individual differences are formed during the early childhood years, in part by living and interacting with a wide or narrow range of people, and in part by the attitudes and experiences provided by adults. What should teachers and parents do

to facilitate understanding and acceptance of individual differences? How overt and planned should these strategies be? How can this be done without reinforcing generalizations about groups that do not reflect individual variation within groups? Can strategies be identified that assure a lifetime of appreciation and respect for human diversity? Much discussion about these topics has occurred in the early childhood literature. This has resulted in various "multicultural" curriculum models and guidelines. However, research on this topic at the early childhood level is scant and teachers have very little guidance as to the best strategies to use. Much work is needed to identify meaningful and appropriate practices that really make a difference in attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. The research being conducted at FPG outlined in this issue is making an important contribution to achieving this end. |ed|