Cultural Competency as Skilled Dialogue

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There is a continuing need to competently serve children and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This article describes Skilled Dialogue, an approach to cultural competency developed by the first author in response to the challenges posed by cultural linguistic diversity. Skilled Dialogue focuses on cultural competency as the ability to craft respectful, reciprocal, and responsive interactions across diverse cultural parameters. The authors discuss key beliefs about cultural diversity and culture that provide the foundation of this approach, as well as the characteristics, component skills, and related strategies of Skilled Dialogue. Concrete suggestions are offered for engaging in the process of Skilled Dialogue as an approach to cultural competency.

There is a clear and growing need for early childhood special education practitioners to develop effective strategies for serving children and families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are different from their own. This article describes Skilled Dialogue, an approach developed by the first author in response to the challenges posed by cultural diversity in early childhood settings. Its specific form is based on action research over the past 10 years, during which its components were piloted with early childhood practitioners in various professional development and onsite contexts.

Three beliefs ground the Skilled Dialogue approach. The first belief is that diversity is a relational and context-embedded reality. The second belief is that understanding the dynamics of culture is a prerequisite to appropriately addressing the challenges posed by cultural diversity. Finally, a core belief is that the key to cultural competence lies more in our ability to craft respectful, reciprocal, and responsive interactions, both verbal and nonverbal, across diverse cultural parameters than in the breadth of our knowledge about other cultures. Each of these beliefs is discussed below, followed by a detailed description of Skilled Dialogue and specific strategies for using it in early childhood settings.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AS A RELATIONAL AND CONTEXT-EMBEDDED REALITY

A brief scenario involving Anna and Doris, two mothers who are each breastfeeding a child past the age of 12 months, illustrates our discussion of cultural diversity as a relational context-embedded reality. Anna is following practices common in her community and cultural templates she observed and learned as a child. All credible persons around her value “late” breastfeeding as normative and desirable. Furthermore, Anna sees other mothers around her following the same practice. Anna was breastfed until she was 2 years old.

Doris, the second mother in this scenario, is also breastfeeding her 18-month-old child. In Doris’ case, however, the behavior stems from a more conscious choice. She belongs to the La Leche League. Doris does not see many of her family or friends doing the same thing, although she does see other mothers who are in La Leche League breastfeeding their older children. However, she is aware of many “experts,” including her own relatives, who would disagree with her practice. Doris was not breastfed past 6 months of age.


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Early childhood practitioners working with these mothers face distinct challenges, especially if it is their belief that continuing breastfeeding will interfere with achieving age-appropriate self-feeding skills. For Anna, the decrease or cessation of breastfeeding carries an entirely different meaning than for Doris. Even though both mothers might see such cessation negatively, Anna has little or no framework for understanding it as other than “not normal.” To change her behavior would mean going against all she has believed and experienced since childhood, as well as risking almost certain censure from her family and community. Doris, on the other hand, does have a framework for understanding the early cessation of breastfeeding, although not necessarily one that she values highly. She might even have access to specific literature supporting an early shift to bottle feeding. Doris also knows other moms who do not breastfeed their older infants. If Doris changed her behavior, it would mean going against her best beliefs, but it would probably not challenge her fundamental worldview to the same degree as it would for Anna and would, in all likelihood, carry a much smaller risk of censure from family and community.

This vignette illustrates the point that primary differences between persons from different cultures lie not only in differences in behaviors but also in the meaning associated with those behaviors (i.e., in their context) and, consequently, in the risk associated with changing them (Landrine, 1995; see Note 1). Assuming there is a valid reason for encouraging a behavioral change in the first place, the challenge to early childhood special education (ECSE) practitioners lies in understanding both the “meaning” and the “risk” as accurately as they can within given contexts.

Cultural diversity is a term used to identify differences, such as those just described, that are attributed to cultural templates. Differences between persons may, of course, be perceived and explained through a variety of lenses, such as personality, trauma experiences, gender, and personal history. Culture is only one of several lenses through which one can look in seeking to explain behavior. The focus on culture in this article is an artifact of the authors’ purpose and the constraints of time and length. It is not intended to discount or devalue other sources of diversity.

ECSE literature tends to identify only some populations as culturally diverse (Barrera & Corso, 2000), regardless of their context. Skilled Dialogue, on the other hand, assumes that cultural diversity is a relational reality. That is, diversity is contextual and does not exist as a static quality within individuals, as does ethnicity, for example. It is relatively accurate to say that someone is Hispanic regardless of context. It is not equally accurate to say that same person is culturally diverse without knowing the social and cultural environment(s) in which he or she lives. All of us are diverse in relation to some people and some settings. At the same time, it is also true that all of us are not diverse in relation to some people and some settings.

A second assumption on which Skilled Dialogue is based is that cultural diversity is a positive quality that is never problematic in and of itself. It is the responses given to that diversity by individuals and institutions that carry negative or positive consequences. For example, having little or no proficiency in English in a setting where only English is spoken is not, in and of itself, a problem. Limited proficiency in English only becomes problematic when no accommodations are made for that reality (e.g., when no one offers to translate or to find someone else to translate; when no one takes time to teach English or learn the other language; when no one seeks alternative means of communication). It is only within a social environment where individuals are truly respected and valued, no matter how different or similar they are to others, that diversity can achieve its full potential as a strength and resource.

Understanding Culture

Responding appropriately to cultural diversity requires that we first place it in context as an artifact of culture itself. To accomplish that, we need to understand what culture is and how it functions. Culture is a pervasive and dynamic process that influences every aspect of how we perceive and interact with others. It includes the beliefs, language(s), and behaviors valued in a community (e.g., roles and rules for interacting with strangers). All cultures structure the transmission of these values and social mores from one generation to another (Polk, 1994). Children, for example, are socialized into the language, roles, and rules valued in their homes as a means of providing them with the tools for becoming successful participants in their family and community. Values, perceptions, and beliefs are transmitted from one generation to another, implicitly through modeling, as well as explicitly through verbal messages such as, “This is good”; “This is not good.” This process is called enculturation (Damen, 1987; Hollins, 1996).

A family’s template for promoting development and learning is rooted in what Moll and Greenberg (1990) referred to as cultural funds of knowledge, a concept analogous to cultural capital (e.g., Lubeck, 1994), which refers to the depth and breadth of funds of knowledge to which one has access. Moll and Greenberg (1990) defined funds of knowledge as an “operations manual of essential information and strategies households need to maintain their well-being” (p. 323). These “operations manuals” or “strategic bodies of essential information” are contained within and transmitted through a commu-
nity's culture. Some might even say that culture is comprised of a set of such funds of knowledge transmitted across generations.

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, say "hello," and shake hands when introduced. All settings call for different knowledge and skills to a greater or lesser degree. It is the degree of continuity or discontinuity between known and unknown that becomes a critical factor in relation to cultural diversity.

Once this aspect of culture is deeply understood, different behaviors and beliefs can be understood in their own context and not just in comparison to a selected culture. Consider, for example, the behavior of not asking direct questions. Examined outside its own context, it becomes a "diverse" behavior, an isolated behavior judged only in comparison to other cultural contexts. It may be viewed as somehow more or less effective than asking direct questions, a more valued behavior in Euro-American Normative Culture (ENC; see Note 2). Examined as a behavior grounded in its own cultural context, however, avoiding direct questions becomes only one of an interconnected cluster of behaviors developed by a community to most effectively meet particular goals. It can then be understood as a strategy that functions as well within its context as any alternative developed by other communities. From this perspective it becomes easier to understand how changing individual behaviors without attention to their context risks the coherence of related behaviors, as well as individuals' sense of self and power. Asking parents who speak only a little English to use only English with their child, for example, limits their ability to tell the stories or sing the lullabies they learned as children. This limitation can sabotage the desired goal of language development and adversely affect family relationships and socio-emotional development. Only when diverse skills and knowledge are accurately perceived as what they truly are—valued and deeply rooted expressions of self and community—can differences be respected without sacrificing connections.

## Cultural Competence as Skilled Dialogue

The term cultural competence or cultural competency is typically used in reference to the knowledge and skill necessary for facilitating communication and skill acquisition across cultures (e.g., Lynch & Hanson, 1992). It has, however, not always been positively received. Nevertheless, for want of a better term, it is chosen by the authors to refer to "the ability . . . to respond optimally to all children and families [in ways that acknowledge] . . . both the richness and the limitations of the sociocultural contexts in which children and families, as well as practitioners . . . may be operating" (Barrera & Kramer, 1997, p. 217).

Common approaches to cultural competency emphasize one key aspect of cross-cultural communication and learning: the need for information about (i.e., "knowing about") others (e.g., Lynch & Hanson, 1992). Although such information is both useful and necessary, it is not always sufficient. No matter how thorough or precise, it may not match individual families' more dynamic experiences as members of those cultures. In addition, ECSE practitioners can find it overwhelming and unrealistic to be familiar with cultural parameters for all the persons/children with whom they are asked to interact, especially when these children and families participate in multiple cultures. Even with this information, practitioners may remain unable to respond to the question, "What do we do now, in this specific and concrete situation with these particular persons/children?"

Skilled Dialogue, designed to augment and balance knowledge-based perspectives, offers a relational approach to cultural competency. Within this approach, the crafting of respectful, reciprocal, and responsive relationships is understood to be the true measure of cultural competency. A discussion of Skilled Dialogue's characteristic qualities and component skills further defines its nature as a tool for achieving cultural competence.

### Characteristic Qualities of Skilled Dialogue

Within the Skilled Dialogue approach, the absence or presence of three qualities—respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness—is key to determining whether interactions are skilled or unskilled (Barrera & Kramer, 1996). The following anecdote provides a practical context for the discussion of each of these qualities.

Betsy, an early interventionist, poses the following question:

How can I be culturally responsive when I go into the homes of families from cultures that make sharp distinctions between parents and "experts?" Take Karen, for example; she's a single mother from Puerto Rico whom I see weekly. When I ask her to tell me what she'd like for Maya, her child, or when I ask her to work with Maya, she tells me that I am the "expert" and that I should tell her what needs to be done. Sometimes she'll even go so far as to leave me alone with Maya. I know that Karen cares about Maya and is just express-
Respect. Respect is the hallmark quality of Skilled Dialogue. As used in this context, respect refers to an awareness and acknowledgment of boundaries between persons. Boundaries are markers that both connect and distinguish us from others. They identify the parameters of the spaces that we choose to occupy. Physical boundaries delineate the physical space around us; when entered without our permission, we feel disturbed or even violated. When acknowledged and entered with our permission, they support trust and connection. Emotional boundaries identify parameters of relatedness; they define when words and actions convey insult or praise. Cognitive boundaries determine what we believe to be true. When these are crossed, we may not understand what is said, or we may feel confused and angry. When validated, we tend to feel a greater sense of confidence and competence. Spiritual boundaries are about our connection with those aspects of the universe larger than we are (e.g., God, Spirit, Energy, Self). When these boundaries are crossed, we may feel lost or somehow less well defined. The boundaries that we hold reflect our basic assumptions about others, the world around us, and ourselves. These assumptions lie at the core of the meanings that we attach to our actions and our words.

Awareness and acknowledgment of boundaries different from our own can be problematic when it challenges our own assumptions. Once differences are identified, it may seem as if we will no longer be able to maintain connections. Yet, what truly divides or connects are the meanings we attach to distinctions, not the distinctions themselves.

More specifically to ECSE, how can we respect for diverse boundaries be communicated in situations such as that described in the anecdote about Betsy and Karen? Respectful communication requires remembering that neither Betsy nor Karen’s truths define the whole of reality; there are many more aspects to who they each are and to the roles they choose to play in relation to Maya. Respecting a mother who, like Karen, leaves the room and leaves the practitioner alone means both acknowledging that her current experience of reality casts practitioners in the “expert” role and that she has the same right to that experience of reality as Betsy does to her perceptions. This acceptance establishes the foundation for Skilled Dialogue. It does not, however, mean that either Betsy or Karen need to accept the status quo and seek no further change. It only means that there is now a willingness to (a) acknowledge differing perceptions and boundaries and (b) suspend the need to immediately change them to match.

Reciprocity. Reciprocity, a second quality necessary to Skilled Dialogue, builds on respect. Harry, Kalyanpur, and Day (1999) addressed this quality, giving numerous examples of its development. Reciprocity seeks to balance power between persons in dialogue. At its core is the recognition that each person in an interaction is equally powerful. Reciprocity in this sense distinguishes between the common understanding of power as expertise and authority and the less common understanding of power as capacity or capability. This understanding is reflected in the Spanish word poder, which is used both as a noun meaning “power” and a verb meaning “to be able,” as in “yo puedo” (“I can”).

Reciprocity does not require denying that one person has more expertise or knowledge than another in particular areas or that one person may have more institutionalized authority (e.g., a social worker with the authority to remove children from their home). What reciprocity does require is acknowledging and trusting that the experiences and perceptions of every person in an interaction are of equal value to that interaction. Reciprocal interactions allow equal opportunity to contribute and make choices. The recognition that one point of view need not dominate or exclude a diverse point of view, and the consequent support of free choice over forced “either-or” choice, are two important aspects of reciprocal interactions.

When differences are acknowledged as potential contributions, no sense of debt is incurred by any of the persons involved; no one is solely “giver” or “receiver” (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988). Entering into interactions only to give—whether knowledge, support, direction, or something else—with no acknowledgement of what others can contribute, inhibits not only what we might receive but also the full potential of what we seek to give. In reciprocal relationships everyone has something to offer that enriches not only the persons involved but also the outcome of their interactions. Every interaction becomes about both giving and receiving.

Returning to our anecdote of Betsy, the early childhood practitioner who wants Karen to be more involved, how might reciprocity between these two be established? Respect yields a simple nonjudgmental acknowledgment that diverse perspectives are present. This acknowledgment suspends the need to impose one experience of reality on another (i.e., to push Karen to become engaged in the ways that Betsy values or, conversely, to acquiesce and offer no options for change) and sets the stage for reciprocity. Reciprocity requires acknowledgment of Karen’s capacity to contribute in this particular situation and curiosity about how she is currently participating (e.g., trusting Betsy’s expertise; allowing time and space for Betsy’s agenda; listening). These can then lead to recognizing Karen’s capacity to participate in similar inter-
actions with her child at other times and in other settings. Eventually, to establish reciprocity, Betsy must reach the understanding that Karen is already equally, if not more, involved with this child in a variety of ways. This understanding then provides a context for finding ways to respond to the differences in perceptions between herself and Karen, as well as to what Karen and Maya need.

**Responsiveness.** If respect is about recognizing different boundaries, and reciprocity is about acknowledging that every person has something of value to contribute, then responsiveness is about where we go from there. Being responsive “requires . . . an openness to allowing [others] to uncover who they are rather than shaping them into who we want or need them to be” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 281).

Responsiveness is about turning all our assumptions into lightly held hypotheses (e.g., saying “I wonder if” and “Maybe” instead of “I know” and “I’m sure”). To be responsive is to allow ourselves to entertain a mystery: Who is this other person, really? We see this or that and we experience thus and so, but who are they really? If we seek only closure and forget mystery, we can all too easily confuse children to the “boxes” of their diagnoses, and families to the circles of our own categories and labels. We reduce them to a singular identity (e.g., the child with ADHD, or the resistant mother) and are no longer being responsive to them—only to our ideas about them. Remembering mystery requires that we attend to children and families “with focused attention, patience and curiosity” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 44).

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. Remen (2000) wrote, “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” (p. 289). This is, unfortunately, all too apt a description of what can happen as we present families with all our diagnostic findings and recommendations for intervention options. Once we assess a child, it is all too easy to “rush ahead” to our conclusions about what needs to be done. Responding and responsiveness are not necessarily the same. Responsiveness requires leaving room for the unexpected and the unpredictable. Maybe this child will be different from all others; maybe he or she will be able to do X. Maybe this family will be much more resourceful than we can foresee; maybe they will be able to support their child in ways we can only imagine.

Being responsive is particularly important in culturally diverse situations because these situations, in their very diversity, challenge us to recognize that a person is always more than, and perhaps even radically different from, our ideas about who they are. While we cannot al-

ways eliminate our preconceived ideas and judgments (i.e., the “boxes” in which we place people and experiences), we can, through mindful attention, refuse to reduce reality to their limited space.

Returning once more to our anecdote about Betsy and Karen, how might Betsy be responsive to this situation? The answer, of course, lies in the specifics of the situation, but we can list some possibilities. Betsy might be responsive to Karen by

- not “freezing” her idea of Karen as a passive parent, unwilling or unable to change.
- understanding that some cultures believe in the “social distribution of knowledge” and that necessary knowledge need not be personally possessed because it is “available and accessible through social networks” (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 323). Persons from these cultures may thus feel no need to duplicate someone else’s expertise or may even feel that doing so would be disrespectful as it would usurp their contributions.
- accepting that Karen may desperately need respite time and lessening demands until she and Betsy can identify means of finding that time in ways that do not keep her from working with Maya during Betsy’s sessions.
- respecting Karen’s perception of Betsy as an “expert” and exploring what this means with questions such as the following: Does Karen truly believe that she has nothing to offer or only that what she has to offer would not be accepted or would not be appropriate? What specific responsibilities is she assigning Betsy with this perception? What have Karen’s experiences with other “experts” been like? In what areas does she feel confident of her expertise? Is her withdrawal more an expression of her fear that she might do the “wrong” thing and harm her child? Is Betsy somehow unconsciously communicating her own need to be the “expert?”
- sharing with Karen all that she has to offer in this situation and structuring sessions so that Karen can also contribute her knowledge (e.g., having her teach Betsy how to cook the child’s favorite food as part of planned activities to elicit specific language).
- including materials and behaviors familiar to Karen in the session, rather than just using unfamiliar toys and routines.
These possibilities (and other similar ones) may not necessarily "solve the problem." They will, however, gradually redefine it and change the tenor of interactions between Betsy and Karen, increasing the possibility of arriving at more satisfactory and competent interactions between them.

**DEVELOPING SKILLED DIALOGUE**

The three qualities that characterize Skilled Dialogue are promoted and sustained through two component skills. Anchored understanding, the first skill, emphasizes compassionate knowing, a deeper experiential knowing that occurs as persons interact on a personal, face-to-face basis and learn each others’ stories as an anchor for “knowing about” (i.e., having information). The second skill, 3rd Space, focuses on the creative construction of interactional space that integrates complementary aspects of contradictions (see Figure 1).

**Anchored Understanding of Diversity**

*Anchored Understanding of Diversity* refers to a compassionate understanding of differences “anchored” both experientially and cognitively. The experiential anchor that situates information and makes it truly comprehensible is the knowing that stems from face-to-face and hands-on experiences. The corollary cognitive anchor is the belief that all behaviors have a positive intent (i.e., that others’ behaviors make as much sense as our own).

*Anchored Understanding of Diversity* is intentionally particular and reciprocal. It is designed to generate compassionate knowledge that “arises not from standing back in order to look at, but by active and intentional engagement in lived experience” (Groome, 1980, p. 141). It is one thing to talk generally about American Indians and another thing entirely to carry out that discussion over time with individual American Indians. Two contexts are created through such extended face-to-face interactions. First, previously held knowledge acquires a personal context—it becomes about someone whom we actually know. Second, interactions create conceptual contexts within which we can say, “Oh, so that’s what it means that Navajos have differing perceptions of time.” Within these contexts, previously held categories and assumptions can be challenged (e.g., “I thought that religion was only a one-day-a-week thing for Whites”).

Remen (2000) told a story that further illustrates the distinction between knowing that is experientially anchored and knowing that remains unanchored. A young physician has an elderly Navajo woman as her patient.

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**FIGURE 1.** Skilled dialogue qualities and component skills.
She had seen the elderly woman regularly for years, treating her for a variety of diseases. After the Navajo woman died at the age of 96, the physician received a call from a researcher writing a book about American Indian medicine traditions. He had been told about a great medicine woman. When he contacted her family he was told that this physician had cared for their mother and “would have the answers he needed” (p. 69). Remen recounted the physician’s reflections many years later: “I had been so busy with my numbers and my tests. What I would give for even one hour with her now, to ask her any of my unanswered questions . . . Or simply to ask for her blessing” (p. 69).

As practitioners, we are the recipients and generators of a large volume of information about the young children and families with whom we work. Similar to the physician in Remen’s (2000) story, we can name particular types of delay or syndromes a child exhibits; we can describe family dynamics and developmental concerns; we may even be able to describe the values associated with their culture. But, if asked to describe a particular child or family, would our answer match the family’s answer? Could we talk about the family’s hopes and dreams? Could we tell someone who a particular child is without reference to developmental status or disability conditions? Could we define what “success” or “family” meant to a particular child and family? Our ability to answer these questions would reflect the degree to which we possessed Anchored Understanding of Diversity in relation to this family.

Respecting someone does not necessarily require that we admire the behaviors they exhibit. It does require that we understand how their behavior makes sense from their cultural, as well as their personal perspective. Otherwise we may simply believe that they have nothing of relevance to contribute. We may not admire the behavior of a caregiver that sets no firm bedtime for his or her 4-year-old child. Anchoring our understanding of that behavior, however, would first require us to become curious as to the cognitive and emotional framework within which that behavior makes sense to that caregiver. What is her understanding of how the world works that underlies her intent? Why does she perceive this behavioral option as more appropriate than the option we might value (e.g., a set, consistent bedtime)?

Returning again to our anecdote about Betsy and Karen, how would Betsy know that she had achieved Anchored Understanding of Diversity? After spending time with Karen and following some of the suggestions given, Betsy would know that she had achieved Anchored Understanding of Diversity when she could in all honesty say and believe that under similar circumstances she, too, might behave as Karen did. As long as we can say, “I’d never do that” or “I can’t believe someone would do that” we have probably not achieved Anchored Understanding of Diversity. These statements, as well as other similar ones, remain less than compassionate. They implicitly carry a judgment of one person as better or more competent than the other and thus preclude respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness.

3rd Space

The skill of 3rd Space complements that of Anchored Understanding of Diversity. Anchoring our understanding of diverse perspectives leads us to find common ground. It can also lead us to discover just how different the grounds are upon which we stand. Betsy can, for example, anchor her understanding of Karen’s behavior and still remain convinced that Karen needs to give up her behavior in favor of a behavior that Betsy deems more desirable and productive. And Karen may, in fact, come to agree. If she doesn’t, however, we are left with two apparently contradictory perspectives: Betsy’s perspective that Karen needs to become more involved with Maya during intervention sessions and Karen’s perspective that Betsy is the expert and should be the one to work with Maya. Anchored Understanding of Diversity can take us to a “both–and” perspective, and sometimes that is enough. Sometimes, however, this perspective does not take us far enough. It still leaves us within an either–or frame. In Betsy’s case, it still leaves her wanting one set of behaviors and Karen wanting another. How can both working with Maya and not working with Maya be reconciled?

3rd Space is a skill and a mindset that focuses on creatively reframing contradictions into paradoxes. As a mindset, 3rd Space supports respectfully holding divergent and sometimes seemingly contradictory views in one’s mind at the same time, without forcing a choice between them. ENC commonly polarizes reality into either–or dichotomies (Hall, 1996; Stewart & Bennett, 1991). In contrast, the skill of 3rd Space invites practitioners to make a fundamental shift from a dualistic and exclusive perception of reality to an integrative, inclusive perspective that focuses on the complementary aspects of diverse values, behaviors, and beliefs, which can lead to a 3rd choice. For example, how can Karen’s present behavior (i.e., not staying to work with Maya) complement Betsy’s goal (i.e., increasing parent–child interactions) so that there are more than two choices to resolving their “contradiction?” The strategy of 3rd Space considers the richness of both perspectives and promotes respect and reciprocity by not excluding one perspective in order to privilege another.

3rd Space capitalizes on the potential of diversity to enrich and expand. The following characteristics of 3rd Space give some indication of just how it does this:

1. Reality in 3rd Space is nondichotomous; it is better described as a spectrum than a
continuum. In relation to Karen and Betsy, this aspect of 3rd Space introduces the possibility of conceptualizing each one’s perspective in nonpolarized ways.

2. There are always at least three choices in 3rd Space. This aspect of 3rd Space requires creatively generating alternatives beyond the obvious (e.g., Betsy requires Karen to be present or gives up on her expectations that she be present).

3. The whole is more than the sum of the parts. The idea that two or more perspectives, no matter how seemingly contradictory, can be somehow combined or integrated is a core theme to 3rd Space. In 3rd Space, differences are understood to be complementary rather than divisive. Boundaries can serve both as distinctions and as points of contact that, like the poles of a battery, generate constructive rather than destructive tension when connected.

The following analogy further illustrates 3rd Space prior to discussing its applications to Skilled Dialogue in early childhood settings. Imagine actual rooms in physical space. We can perceive this space in several ways. From a singular space perspective, there is, literally, only one room: the one I’m in. I believe that my room (i.e., view or perspective) is the only one that exists, and I can neither see nor imagine other views. They are nonexistent or totally discounted. If I am told about them, I do not accept them as “real.” Events and interactions can only take place in “my” room.

From a dualistic space perspective, I realize that mine is not the only room. I accept other views as real but place them outside of my space, thereby excluding them from my room. I am, so to speak, in one room, and persons different from me are in a different room(s). Events and interactions can only take place in one OR the other room (e.g., my way or your way, either this or that, right or wrong). In dualistic space, there is no common space. We cannot meet unless one of us moves: I must leave my room (i.e., comfortable space) OR you must leave yours OR we must both leave our rooms and go to another “neutral” room. If I hold a “both—and” perspective, we each remain in our separate rooms, side by side, unable to integrate our respective rooms (i.e., perspectives).

In contrast, a 3rd Space perspective invites us to consider the possibility that we could integrate our diverse perspectives. It asks the question, How can we both end up in the same space without moving? It challenges us to realize that it is the wall, and not our respective positions, that keeps us from occupying common space. Walls are different from boundaries. Boundaries are mark-

ers of space and identity. They may generate diversity “bumps,” but they do not obstruct our “view” and can be permeable when we wish them to be. Walls, on the other hand, are opaque and impenetrable. Depending on their size and thickness, walls exclude and result in diversity clashes or, sometimes, outright crashes. A wall is often a boundary that has fossilized over time, becoming hard and dense in response to repeated assaults on it. From a 3rd Space perspective, I realize that if we can lower or remove the wall between our rooms, we can both be in the same room without having to move.

**Using Skilled Dialogue**

Skilled Dialogue emerges out of the interweaving of the skills of Anchored Understanding and 3rd Space, although it may be useful initially to address each skill separately. Tables 1 and 2 provide concrete strategies and suggestions for engaging in the process of developing Anchored Understanding and creating 3rd Space (see Note 3). Additional strategies may be found in a variety of other sources (e.g., Bruder, Anderson, Schutz, & Caldera, 1991; Chen, Brekken, & Chan, 1997; Harry, 1997).

It is important to note that the strategies and suggestions presented in Tables 1 and 2 are not intended to be linear or discrete. While utilizing strategies for Anchored Understanding, you may also be utilizing strategies that support the creation of 3rd Space.

**Strategies Associated with Anchored Understanding**

Table 1 focuses on Anchored Understanding and lists strategies for promoting and sustaining respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness (i.e., engaging in Skilled Dialogue) in relation to this skill. Strategies for building respect are founded on a willingness to acknowledge that a variety of equally valid perspectives exist for achieving a particular goal. These strategies extend the opportunity to build respectful relationships with others by asking not only, “What do I believe?” but also, “What meaning am I attaching to another person’s behavior?” and “How are my own assumptions affecting my interactions with others?” Several strategies for further clarifying each other’s perspectives also exist. More detailed questions (e.g., “How would you describe what you want at this point?”) can be used to anticipate potential cultural bumps or to help identify areas of needed information once such bumps occur.

A second set of strategies is associated with reciprocity. These help concretize the intent of giving equal value to others’ perspectives. Questions such as, “How do you see my actions?” and “What do you hear me saying/ asking?” are helpful to this end. Another strategy associated with reciprocity is that of recognizing others’ contri-
TABLE 1. Strategies for Anchoring Understanding of Diversity

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<th>Qualities that characterize skilled dialogue</th>
<th>Related strategies</th>
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| **1. Respect: Acknowledging range and validity of diverse perspectives** | **Strategy 1.1: Get information about others' perspectives**  
*Sample questions:*  
Could you tell me more about X?  
Could you describe for me what X means to you?  
How would you describe what you want at this point?  
Could you give me a specific example? |
| **2. Reciprocity: Establishing interactions that allow equal voices for all perspectives (i.e., not privileging one perspective over another)** | **Strategy 1.2: Examine your own perspective**  
*Sample questions (to yourself):*  
What do I believe about persons who act in this fashion?  
What meaning(s) am I attaching to the behavior(s)?  
How are my assumptions affecting this interaction/communication? |
| **3. Responsiveness: Communicating understanding of others' perspective** | **Strategy 2.1: Clarify others' understanding of your perspective**  
*Sample questions:*  
How do you see my actions?  
What do you hear me saying/asking?  
What are your thoughts when you see me do/say X?  
What will responding to my request mean to you? |
|                                  | **Strategy 2.2: Recognize others' contributions**  
*Sample questions/statements:*  
What resources is X bringing to the interaction?  
What can I learn from X?  
What is positive about X's behavior? |
|                                  | **Strategy 3.1: Reflect understanding of others' perspectives**  
*Sample questions/statements:*  
Let me see if I understand what you mean; are you saying that . . . ?  
Can I use an analogy and see if I understand what you are saying?  
Is this kind of what you're talking about? |
|                                  | **Strategy 3.2: KEEP LISTENING AND ASKING QUESTIONS UNTIL YOU CAN CREDIBLY COMMUNICATE (verbally or nonverbally) “I know what you mean.”** |

Butations. Sample questions that can be asked to support reciprocity from this perspective are “What resources does this person bring to the interaction” (e.g., daily knowledge of child's behavior; connections with community) and “What can I learn from this person” (e.g., how to function in settings unfamiliar to me)?

The third quality, responsiveness, addresses our ability to communicate an understanding of others' perspectives with empathy. Strategies associated with this quality address our ability to reflect back to others our understanding of their perspective, along with our ability to keep that understanding fluid until their feedback confirms that we indeed know the meaning(s) that particular actions have for them. These strategies reflect the reality that responsiveness can only be established when we are perceived to truly understand others' perspectives.

**Strategies Associated with 3rd Space**

3rd Space, like Anchored Understanding, is best learned through practice. It may not be something we clearly understand until we experience it. Table 2 lists the three characteristic qualities of Skilled Dialogue as expressed in relation to 3rd Space and suggests strategies for sustaining and promoting each quality. Comments like “I see” and nonverbal cues that show interest in another person are the foundational components that build the respect necessary to create 3rd Space. By listening and observing without judgment, ECSE practitioners start the process of finding the current space of another individual. Through this process, similarities and differences (i.e., boundaries) are clearly established. Finding differences, however, can be a source of tension. Oftentimes when tension exists, ENC practitioners state that their first reaction is to minimize this tension. In creating 3rd Space, it is important to stay with the tension, even when significant contradictions are identified. Suspending judgment and delaying resolution are critical preconditions for the emergence of 3rd Space options.

Other strategies for creating 3rd Space revolve around building reciprocity to ensure that opportunities are developed for equalizing power across interactions.
### TABLE 2. Strategies for Creating 3rd Space Options

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<tr>
<th>Qualities that characterize skilled dialogue</th>
<th>Specific strategies</th>
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| 1. Respect: Stay with tension of differing perspectives | **Strategy 1.1:** Listen/observe without judgment  
*Sample statements:*  
"I see"  
"That's interesting"  
Nonverbal indicators of interest or curiosity  |
| 2. Reciprocity: Develop opportunities for equalizing power across interactions | **Strategy 1.2:** Identify specific contradictions or culture bumps  |
| 3. Responsiveness: Create a response that integrates and accesses strengths of diverse perspectives | **Strategy 2.1:** Shift focus of conversation to “equalize” participation  
*Sample questions/statements:  
Share “vulnerable” statement such as “I’m not sure of just where to go next”  
Use analogy/metaphor familiar to other, or unfamiliar to both  |
|                                           | **Strategy 2.2:** Reframe contradictions into complementary perspectives  
*Sample questions/statements  
What if we are both right?  
Suggest how others’ behaviors or perspectives might complement what you are advocating  |
|                                           | **Strategy 3.1:** Explore/create responses that incorporate multiple perspectives  
*Sample questions/statements:  
Use analogies (e.g., “half-full/half-empty” glass analogy presented in text)  
Come up with “third choices”; continue until you find one that seems best to all parties.  |

Practitioners can use comments or ask questions that reflect how two differing viewpoints may be simultaneously “right” or how they may complement each other (e.g., “Oh, I understand how that could be” or “You know, that is really helpful to what I think needs to happen”). A final strategy to create 3rd Space involves creating responses that access and integrate the strengths of diverse perspectives (e.g., tapping existing family skills, as well as suggesting new ones). Practitioners may be able to use analogies to elicit responses that are able to capture the complementary aspects of multiple perspectives (e.g., the glass is both half empty and half full). It is important that practitioners work to find multiple “third choices” until a choice is found that seems best to all parties.

### Conclusions

Serving children and families from cultural and linguistic backgrounds diverse from their own continues to present ECSE practitioners with significant challenges. This article describes Skilled Dialogue—an approach to developing respectful, reciprocal, and responsive interactions across diverse cultural parameters. Its two component skills, Anchored Understanding of Diversity and 3rd Space, are discussed and suggested strategies for each are presented. The examples provided are drawn from actual applications of these skills by the authors and by other practitioners in professional development settings. The use of Skilled Dialogue complements existing information and approaches to cultural competency and has been well received by practitioners in the arenas in which it has been disseminated. It thus appears to have strong potential for expanding practitioners’ skill repertoire in relation to cultural diversity. Further research into its use remains to be done to actualize this potential to its fullest. The Skilled Dialogue approach to cultural competency invites us to bring both compassion and creativity to our interactions with each other. These elements—compassion and creativity—are essential if we are to be truly competent in the face of the complex challenges posed by cultural diversity.

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### Notes

1. Additional examples that illustrate this point can be seen in the video *Diversity: Reconciling Differences* (Gonzalez-Mena, J., Herzog, M., & Herzog, S., 2000).
2. This term is used by Barrera, I., Corso, R. M., & Macpherson, D. (in press) to refer to the institutionalized cultural norms against which cultural linguistic diversity is defined. It is a term chosen over more common terms such as "White" or "European" in order to highlight the fact that it refers to institutionalized cultural norms rather than to the personalized cultural framework of particular individuals.

3. These strategies and suggestions were developed as part of field testing done with Dr. Rosalita Mitchell and Donna Thompson at the University of New Mexico. Their support and contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

REFERENCES


