

# Transforming Transdisciplinary Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education through Intercultural Education

Jerry Aldridge<sup>1\*</sup>

Jennifer L. Kilgo<sup>2</sup>

A.K. Bruton<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

*Early intervention and early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) for young children with known or suspected disabilities have explicit definitions and goals as explained in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the DEC Recommended Practices in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (2014). However, cultural approaches to early childhood intervention and education have been loosely defined. When discussing culture, professionals often use different terms for the same concept or the same term for different constructs. The purpose of this article is to define intercultural education as it relates to working with families of young children in EI/ECSE. Issues concerning intercultural education with young children and their families also are considered. Suggestions are proposed for how intercultural education can transform and enhance current practices, within a transdisciplinary framework. Finally, suggestions are made for further exploration and research on how intercultural education can be applied to transdisciplinary EI/ECSE.*

**Keywords:** Intercultural education, transdisciplinary teaming, early intervention, early childhood special education.

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD. Professor Emeritus., University of Alabama, Alabama, USA  
e-mail: jta@uab.edu

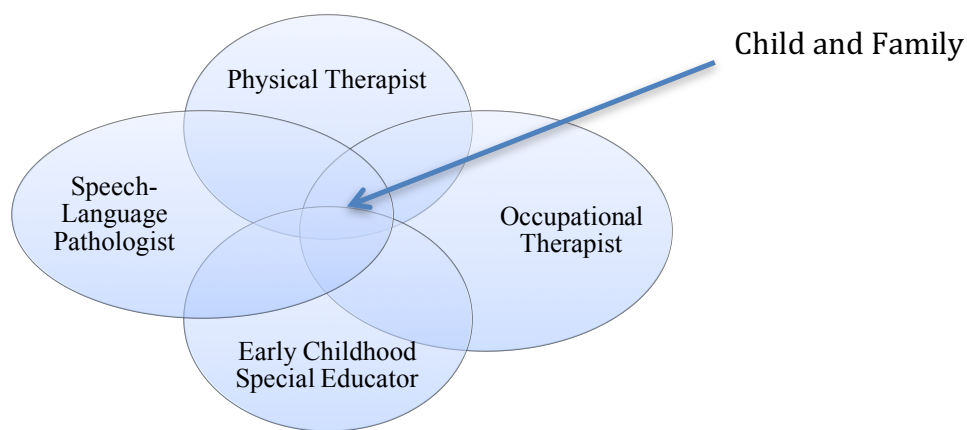
<sup>2</sup> PhD. Prof., University of Alabama, Alabama, USA  
e-mail: jkilgo@uab.edu

<sup>3</sup> Communication Specialist., University of Alabama, Alabama, USA  
e-mail: brutonak@gmail.com

## Introduction

Early intervention and early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) services have been explicitly defined in the United States by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Turnbull, Huerta, & Stowe, 2004) and evidence-based practices and services within a teaming and collaborative framework have been in the *DEC Recommended Practices in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education* (2014) of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). Transdisciplinary teams are described as professionals representing multiple disciplines (e.g., early childhood special education, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology) and families who work together to ensure that services achieve child and family outcomes and goals. Although one team member may have the primary contact with the family and take the lead in coordinating services, all team members have direct contact with children and families as needed and contribute to team functioning. The team members exchange expertise, knowledge, and information to jointly plan and implement interventions that are individualized for each child and family within the context of the natural environment (DEC, 2014; Kilgo, 2006; McWilliam, 2010).

A transdisciplinary approach represents recommended practice because it (a) impedes the fragmentation of services along disciplinary lines; (b) prevents the duplication of services; (c) views the child's development as holistic and integrated; (d) promotes therapy and intervention within natural routines and environments; and (e) emphasizes the importance of the family as equal, contributing members of the team (Kilgo, 2006; McWilliam, 2010). Figure 1 provides a representation of a transdisciplinary team that is focused on the child and family in the context of the natural environment, which may include the home, childcare, school, and other community environments.



**Figure 1.** *Transdisciplinary teams, which are comprised of professionals representing multiple disciplines and the family, provide services that are centered on the needs of each child and family within the context of their natural environments.*

Unfortunately, definitions and recommendations concerning cultural exchange and interactions, including intercultural education, have been limited and often confusing in the professional literature. There is a need for standard terminology, descriptions, and explanations of cultural issues for education in general and early intervention and early childhood special education in particular. When culture is discussed within and among different disciplines, including education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, human ecology, etc., researchers and practitioners tend to use the same terms with different meanings as well as different terms for the same concepts (Portera, 2011). The purpose of this article is to define intercultural education for EI/ECSE, discuss issues related to intercultural education, and propose suggestions for using transdisciplinary teaming and intercultural education with families of young children with special needs.

### What is Intercultural Education?

Historically, a plethora of terms has been used to describe how disparate groups interact with one another. In an age of globalism, cosmopolitanism, and transnational interactions, standard definitions of diversity and culture are necessary. “Considering the present situation in the industrialized countries of the world, there is an urgent and immediate need for a *semantic and conceptual* discussion of education, with a view to removing linguistic misunderstandings and finding common, shared terminologies” (Portera, 2011, p. 27). In an attempt to clarify misconceptions and miscommunication, Portera defined many of the terms associated with diversity and culture, including suppression, assimilation, segregation, fusion, universalism, multiculturalism, interculturalism, and transculturalism.

Intercultural education is defined as “deep engagement with diverse cultures and worldviews to enrich children and the society, rather than the celebration of differences and the co-existence of various cultural groups” (Miller & Petriwskyj, 2013, p. 253). Intercultural education “takes into consideration both opportunities and limitations, but it transcends them and builds up a new synthesis, with improved chances of dialogue, exchange and interaction” (Portera, 2011, p. 20). Intercultural education differs from multicultural education with the insistence of intercultural educators on the element of deep engagement with others based on equal power relations (Gorski, 2008; Miller & Petriwskyj, 2013). There are at least five other noteworthy differences between intercultural education and multicultural education, which are highlighted in the sections that follow.

#### *European versus North American Terminology*

Intercultural education began in Europe in the context of education and sociology (Portera, 2011). Specifically, the French sociologist, Louis Porcher, and his student, Martine Abdallah-Pretceille, were the first to define intercultural education (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1990; Portera, 2011). Since the 1990s, intercultural education developed rapidly throughout Europe and Australia (Miller & Petriwskyj, 2013; Clifford, 2011;

Gundara, 2011; Lasonen, 2011). However, in the United States, multiculturalism has been the preferred term for professional practices regarding diverse populations and interactions in EI/ECSE (Aldridge, Kilgo, & Christensen, 2014). Some of the beliefs and practices of European intercultural education have permeated multicultural education in the United States and Canada; however, the term “intercultural education” has been slow to enter the North American lexicon (Grant & Brueck, 2011). Still, the definitions and expressed goals of intercultural education and multicultural education are different (Portera, 2011). Many of these differences in the themes of multicultural education and intercultural education are expounded in the sections that follow, in relation to EI/ECSE.

#### *Engagement versus Tolerance*

As noted in the definition, a major theme of intercultural education is deep engagement among different cultures. This is different from the multicultural view of tolerance, co-existence, and acceptance, which does not emphasize sustained interactions among diverse groups. With EI/ECSE in the United States, deep engagement with diverse families is a requirement. Interculturalism replaces multiculturalism when we work with families who have young children with special needs. This happens because EI/ECSE is family-centered, with an emphasis on children’s natural environments, such as the home and other community environments. Because the family is an equal member of a transdisciplinary team, deep engagement is needed. The practices of acceptance, tolerance, and co-existence, which are multicultural constructs, are insufficient (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2014; Kilgo, 2006).

#### *Interactive Integration versus Monistic Interaction*

Simply engaging with families is not enough; how families are engaged is of utmost importance. Intercultural education for young children with special needs demands interactive integration, while some forms of multicultural education tolerate monistic integration. Interactive integration occurs “when people of different ethnic groups and cultures try to live together and interact with each other...with a constant exchange of ideas, rules, values, and meanings.... Only the concept of *Intercultural Education* can be placed alongside the notion of interaction and interactive integration” (Portera, 2011, p. 17). Monistic or one-way integration proponents expect families to integrate into EI/ECSE services where unequal power has been constructed between professionals and family members. In one-way integration, parents or caregivers are expected to acquiesce and allow the professionals to prescribe and implement services. This practice is discriminatory in that it supports inequitable relations and marginalizes the role of family involvement in the process. When interactive integration occurs, the result is collaboration between families and professionals, while monistic integration requires adjustment of families into traditional structures of EI/ECSE.

#### *Dynamic versus Static*

Engagement and interactive integration in EI/ECSE both require acceptance of others and adaptation to change (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). Intercultural educators acknowledge the dynamic nature of individuals, families, and cultures. This results in professional understanding of multiplicity or hybridity in individual identities, family

structures, and cultural backgrounds. Patterns of engagement and interactive integration between families and professionals are sustained, but inevitably morph over time (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). The transdisciplinary team is transformed and their professional and personal identities also are altered through intercultural learning and communication. On the other hand, traditional multicultural educators view children, families, and cultures as fixed and invariant entities. This unintentionally promotes communication barriers and encourages stereotypes. This is particularly troubling when professionals see themselves as authorities and assume families are recipients of the professional team’s expertise and wisdom (Gorski, 2008).

*Synergism versus Pluralism*

Transdisciplinary teams that are engaging, interactive, and dynamic develop synergism. When all team members are motivated, genuinely respectful of one another, and participate in sustained dialogue among valued and equal members, synergy occurs. The results are creative solutions and possibilities greater than what each team member could have individually produced (Kilgo, 2006). This is different from multiculturalism where pluralism exists. Teams who are pluralistic co-exist and perform their respective duties according to their disciplines, but miss the opportunities that intercultural education and communication provide (Miller & Petriwskyj, 2013).

As described above, there are distinct differences in multicultural education and intercultural education. A summary of the differences in the themes of multicultural education and intercultural education are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
*Themes of Multicultural Education versus Intercultural Education*

Multicultural Education	Intercultural Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tolerance, co-existence, and acceptance of diverse cultures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deep engagement among cultures with sustained interactions between families and professionals.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monistic, one-way interaction with inequitable relationships and unequal power among families and professionals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive integration with equal power and collaboration among families and professionals.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Static interactions occur as children, families, and cultures are responded to as fixed and invariant resulting in stereotypes and ineffective communication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dynamic interactions occur as professionals respond to the evolving nature of family identities, structures, and cultural backgrounds.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pluralism occurs as families and professionals co-exist on teams and perform roles and responsibilities separately.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teams of professionals and families that are engaging, interactive, and dynamic create synergism; thus, they are creative and effective.</li> </ul>
---	--

Issues Related to Intercultural Education

Intercultural education is not without challenges. Much of the controversy about intercultural education has come from within its ranks. For example, Paul Gorski (2008), a prominent intercultural educator, has been highly critical of the field. He suggests, “most intercultural education practice supports, rather than challenges, dominant hegemony, prevailing social hierarchies, and inequitable distributions of power and privilege” (p. 515). Several issues plague intercultural education. Five of the most salient include: misinterpretation of definitions, application of deficit theory, existence of inequitable relationships, focus on microstructures over macrostructures, and inattention to sociopolitical contexts.

*Misinterpretation of Definitions*

A major theme of this article is the problem of definitions among basic terms related to cultural diversity. This is especially true regarding the definition of intercultural education. According to Portera (2011), “Even though in European countries several documents on education... incorporate principles of Intercultural Education in their school policies, numerous studies and research show a lack of clear semantic definitions and common epistemological formulations” (p. 17). Intercultural education has also been misinterpreted in numerous educational contexts (Gorski, 2008; Gundara, 2011; Portera, 2011). For example, many professionals who support intercultural education believe that it is *always* the best way to approach differences. They view intercultural education as the top tier of a hierarchical model. Sometimes a multicultural approach is more appropriate for the context of EI/ECSE, especially when discrimination and inequality are perpetuated by existing power structures or encouraged by specific team members (Portera, 2011). Intercultural education is not the top tier of a hierarchical model.

Another pervasive misconception about a definition of intercultural education is that intercultural education can be implemented as a separate entity; such as it can be worked on unconnectedly or taught as a distinct subject. As the literature on intercultural education illustrates, intercultural education is not additive or cumulative. Through transdisciplinary teaming, intercultural education has to become an integral part of what the team does, if it is to be effective. In fact, intercultural education must become a part of everything the transdisciplinary team undertakes and accomplishes. This has to occur because intercultural “means *consideration of all kinds of diversity*, from social status, to cultural, to gender issues” (Portera, 2011, p. 25).

*Application of Deficit Theory*

Another challenge for intercultural educators has been the application of deficit theory. Intercultural education is ineffective if a deficit framework is used. “Deficit theory, a remnant of colonial and imperial history, holds that inequality is the result, not of systemic inequities in access to power, but intellectual and ethical deficiencies in particular groups of people” (Gorski, 2008, p. 518). Applied to EI/ECSE, this means that families and children who participate in transdisciplinary services are at fault with regard to the challenges and issues that led them to need support in the first place. Gorski (2008) is very clear about the need for professionals to reject deficit theory. He says, “Any approach to intercultural education that explains inequality by demonizing disenfranchised communities must be abandoned. I must be wary of any supposed intercultural paradigm that, like the ‘culture of poverty’ myth, attributes values or worldviews to anyone based on one dimension of identity” (p. 522). Early interventionists and educators are implicated if they approach young children and their families, using a deficit paradigm. Fortunately, recommended practice supports a strengths approach when working with young children with special needs and their families (DEC, 2014). Some special educators, as well as early educators, would argue that EI/ECSE must start with a deficit approach because a challenge must be identified before a transdisciplinary team is formed. For whatever reason children receive EI/ECSE services, a focus on strengths must be used if intercultural education is employed. Gorski and Landsman emphasize that whatever issues and challenges have been identified, the families are not to be blamed. If any blame is to occur, it must be placed on the state and federal structures that provide services and not on individuals with special needs and their families (Gorski & Landsman, 2014).

#### *Existence of Inequitable Relationships*

Another complication for intercultural educators is the pitfall of inequitable relationships. Of all of the issues related to intercultural education, this is one of the most salient for early educators, special educators, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, school nurses, and other professional personnel who serve on transdisciplinary EI/ECSE teams. The importance of team members having equitable relationships in transdisciplinary teaming cannot be overemphasized. This is because all team members, including families and paraprofessionals, should have equal power and voice on the team to function effectively. If this seems easy to accomplish, then professional team members are not recognizing that they often wield power and reinforce inequitable relations as prominent team members. According to Gorski (2008), “far too often these experiences are facilitated—controlled—in ways that assume that all participants sit at an even table, one at which all parties have equitable access to cultural capital” (p. 521).

Dialogue is required of teams; however, if power relations are unequal, the question is, “dialogue for what purpose?” (Jones, 1999). A problem occurs in unequal team relationships when professionals try to empathize with families. Jones (1999) asks, “What if ‘togetherness’ and dialogue-across-difference fail to hold a compellingly positive meaning for subordinate...groups? What if the ‘other’ fails to find interesting the idea of their empathetic understanding of the powerful, which is theoretically

demanded by dialogic encounters?” (p. 299). Teams must consciously work for, explicitly state, and then implement the goal that all team members have equal power, value, and voice, including family members, paraprofessionals, and other team members.

#### *Focus on Microstructures over Macrostructures*

Another pitfall in intercultural education is for professionals to solely focus on individuals rather than on systemic issues (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005). This can be difficult when the role of transdisciplinary teams is to target the needs of individual children and their families. For intercultural educators, it would be shortsighted and narrow if the team did not also center on the systems that provide services. For example, it has long been recognized that children who live in areas of poverty do not receive the same quantity or quality of services as children in more affluent areas (Collins, 1988; Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; DeTurk, 2006). A transdisciplinary team that incorporates an intercultural approach considers the inequitable distribution of services regarding the children and families with whom we work. Therefore, the team must plan how to achieve equality in service delivery for each family with whom we work. Otherwise, the team is perpetuating the status quo and participating in the delivery of unjust services (Gorski, 2008). An intercultural education team would work to improve the macrostructures of EI/ECSE as well as provide specific services for individuals and families.

#### *Inattention to Sociopolitical Contexts*

Transdisciplinary teams incorporating interculturalism must also consider the sociopolitical contexts in which they provide services. Those in control of early intervention and education often promote bureaucracy that actually inhibits rather than supports the work of teams. For many years, the requirements of Individual Education Programs (IEPs) in the United States and similar procedures in other countries have been criticized for requiring an undue amount of paperwork and time for teachers and other professionals (Cooper, 1996). As transdisciplinary teams participating in intercultural dialogue consider macrostructural along with microstructural influences, they also must attend to sociopolitical contexts that shape and dictate practices in early intervention/education. Intercultural dialogue must occur, not only among families and other professionals, but also within local school systems and state and federal governments in order to promote changes and improvements in policies and procedures that inform our practice (Portera, 2011).

### Suggestions for Using Intercultural Education in EI/ECSE

Having presented the definition of intercultural education and differentiated it from multicultural education, as well as described issues related to intercultural education, we now consider how transdisciplinary teams can use intercultural education in EI/ECSE through intercultural dialogue. Gudyunst and Kim (2003) and Garcia (2012) have exhaustively reviewed the research on intercultural dialogue and found three necessary



components for effective intercultural communication. These include: (a) motivation, (b) knowledge, and (c) skills. Each of these components is described here in relation to transdisciplinary EI/ECSE.

### *Motivation*

Deep engagement with families is the cornerstone of any transdisciplinary team working with young children (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2014; Kilgo, 2006; Lynch & Hanson, 2011). Every team member must be motivated to dialogue effectively with other members, but especially with the family members on the team. Motivation involves four salient desires. These include the desire to (a) communicate effectively, (b) provide optimal services through transdisciplinary teaming, (c) change and be changed, and (d) continually improve and refine one's disposition and attitude in the process.

### Knowledge

Herbert Spencer (1884) is credited for asking, "What knowledge is most worth knowing?" Every conscientious transdisciplinary team member asks the same question about the children in their care. Additionally, every member of the team has knowledge to share with others; however, intercultural educators emphasize that all members must share equal power within relationships. Beyond each professional's knowledge of her/his discipline and how to provide individualized services to children with disabilities, intercultural educators stress that professionals must consider "what knowledge is most worth knowing?" The answer includes individual, familial, and cultural diversity; transdisciplinary team processes, and the principles of intercultural education.

Knowledge of individual diversity is required for each child with whom we work. If the team is providing services for a child with a visual impairment, the team must be knowledgeable about the nature of the impairment and evidence based practices that have proven to be effective with children with similar visual disabilities. Knowledge of individual diversity goes hand in hand with motivation. For individual differences with which we are unfamiliar, we must have the desire to find out all we can to help children and families affected by developmental delays or disabilities. Resources that are helpful in this process include books, journal articles, web sites, and other web-based materials (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2014; Lynch & Hanson, 2011).

Family diversity also is a challenge for team members (Kilgo, & Aldridge, 2013). Dynamic changes in family structures and functions have rapidly increased over the past 50 years (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2014; Kilgo, 2006). The multiple and hybrid characteristics of families with whom we work in educational settings has become one of our greatest challenges in EI/ECSE (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). *The Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research Series* was published to help professionals learn as much as possible about this task (Abrams, Matthey, Murrer, Bernardo, & Shehan, 2000; Blair, 2012;

Claster & Blair, 2013; Daly, 2001; Fox & Benson, 2000; Pillemer & Luscher, 2003; Robila, 2004).

Because it is impossible to know everything about cultural diversity, early interventionists/educators are encouraged to read and learn as much as possible about diversity (Kilgo & Aldridge, 2013). An excellent resource with which to begin is a book such as Lynch and Hanson's (2011) *Developing Cross-Cultural Competence: A Guide for Working with Children and their Families*.

#### Skills

Intercultural communication also requires each transdisciplinary team member to exhibit certain skills. The skills that are most important include: (a) *reciprocity*, (b) *navigation*, (c) *negotiation (conflict resolution)*, and (d) *compromise*.

*Reciprocity* involves mutual respect through active listening and questioning among team members. Ideally, each team member has an equal voice and shares professional knowledge and practical suggestions. Each participant has expertise to share and also exhibits knowledge strengths and gaps. True reciprocity allows each member to positively effect change in the group and also be changed through the process of reciprocal sharing of knowledge and ideas (Garcia, 2012).

*Navigation* is another salient skill. There is an abundance of resources and information to maneuver in EI/ECSE. Interpreting assessments, developing goals, finding resources, and implementing interventions in natural, inclusive settings require active engagement of every team member. Each person must have the skill of finding, interpreting, and using resources as well as sharing these and collaborating about them with the group (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2014).

Inevitably, teams will experience conflict concerning the goals and procedures for implementing them. *Negotiation* and *conflict resolution* are required in order to develop Individual Family Service Plans (IFSPs) and Individual Education Programs (IEPs). Eventually, negotiation and conflict resolution must give way to the skill of *compromise*. After team members contribute their part and advocate for what they believe is best for children and families, compromise and consensus must occur in order to successfully implement optimal services for children and families (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

#### Transdisciplinary Problem Solving through Intercultural Dialogue

Many of the suggestions for using intercultural education in EI/ECSE have been reported in the literature (Garcia, 2012; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). The concern that arises is what happens in the real world when teams have to implement intercultural dialogue. To illustrate the challenges of implementing intercultural communication with transdisciplinary teams, consider the following scenario and the thoughts held by four members of the transdisciplinary team.

*Alejandro*

*Alejandro is a 33-month-old male with a diagnosis of cerebral palsy. His immediate family consists of his mother, Gabriella, and his grandmother, Corina. Alejandro's family comes from Honduras. The mother and grandmother speak Spanish fluently, and Gabriella can effectively communicate in English. The family has no transportation. Miss Judy's Preschool across the street from Alejandro's home. Alejandro is in transition from early intervention to early childhood special education services. The mother and grandmother insist that Alejandro attend Miss Judy's Preschool, but there are several challenges. Miss Judy has operated her private preschool for 30 years. She has a high school diploma and the minimal educational qualifications to run a preschool. She has very limited knowledge of cerebral palsy. Miss Judy uses a seasonal curriculum, where children spend a considerable amount of time celebrating a holiday each month and all of her children's birthdays as they occur. Alejandro's family is a member of the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witness religion. Their beliefs strictly forbid the celebration of holidays.*

#### *Thoughts of Individual Team Members*

Alejandro is transitioning from early intervention to early childhood special education services. The team has already met. After the first meeting, four of the team members had strong opinions about Alejandro's education. Here is what each team member is thinking.

#### *Miss Judy (Age 55)*

##### *Director of Miss Judy's Preschool for Children 2 ½ - 5*

*In the thirty years I have had my preschool, I don't think I've ever been so frustrated. The little boy, Alejandro, who lives across the street, will be coming to my preschool soon. That is not the problem. He's a cute boy and I often see him playing with his mother and grandmother. The problem is, I've been asked to be on something called a transdisciplinary team and I don't know what that is or what it means. There are all sorts of people on this team and to tell the truth, they intimidate me, although I would never let them know it. I don't particularly like Mr. West. He says he's an occupational therapist or something like that. He wants to come into my preschool and help Alejandro feed himself during snack time and do some assistive device to help Alejandro with drawing and coloring. What does that mean? I don't understand any of this. And I surely do not understand why Alejandro needs to be prepared for a job. He's only three years old. Gracious! The thing that bothers me the most is the team is concerned about how I teach. Imagine that! I've been doing this for 30 years and they want me to consider changing how we celebrate holidays. I don't understand that either. I want to help Alejandro, but these people want me to change what I do. I don't know what to do.*

#### *Mr. West (Age 28)*

##### *Occupational Therapist*

*I am excited about helping Alejandro in his new preschool class, but I don't think it is going to be easy working with Miss Judy. I wouldn't let anybody know, but she intimidates me. I can tell she doesn't like me. During the team meeting I tried to let her*

*know I would come in and help her with Alejandro. I explained what I do and how I could help, but she didn't say a word—just looked at me like I was crazy. If that wasn't stressful enough, Ms. Cates, the early childhood special educator, questioned Miss Judy about what is called a seasonal curriculum. Alejandro cannot celebrate holidays because his religion is Jehovah's Witness. Miss Judy started to get defensive. Ms. Cates tried to smooth things over, but that didn't seem to work, so we moved quickly to another topic. I think what I'll do at the next team meeting is let Miss Judy know, again, that I will be happy to come and work with Alejandro in her preschool, once a week. Surely, she will be happy to know she will have help with Alejandro.*

*Gabriella (Age 21)*

*Alejandro's Mother*

*I don't know what is going on. Alejandro had so many nice people that came to our house and worked with him. Now they can't do that anymore and to tell the truth, I don't understand why. The team explained that Alejandro must do something called....what was that word? Oh, "transition." They said he had to transition to other services. I had no idea what that meant, but I didn't say anything. I finally figured out they wanted a plan for Alejandro's "transition" and I decided Alejandro should go to Miss Judy's Preschool. I have no transportation and the location is perfect. Besides, Miss Judy waves at us every time she sees us and seems like a good person. She is happy to work with Alejandro, but I can tell she is just about as confused as I am about what is happening. I do not want Alejandro to participate in any celebrations. Miss Judy has a lot of those, but if I'm working, Alejandro can just come home to his grandmother when a holiday party happens. The team didn't seem to like that and wanted to solve the problem with Miss Judy. I was embarrassed for myself, as well as Miss Judy. I don't want to cause any trouble and it seems this new team wants Miss Judy to change. I'm really worried. I didn't mean to get Miss Judy in trouble. After all, she is going to be Alejandro's teacher and I certainly don't want her mad at him.*

*Ms. Cates (Age 40)*

*Early Childhood Special Education Teacher (Team Leader)*

*What a mess! At the first team meeting of Alejandro, everything did not go as I had planned. In fact, it went downhill fast. I can tell everyone wants to help Alejandro and plan for a good preschool experience, but to tell the truth, the team was simply not communicating and I didn't exactly know what to do about it. Mr. West seemed eager to explain to Miss Judy what he could do to help. I could tell Miss Judy was thinking, "Who are you?" Since this was not going very well, I decided to change the subject, which made things even worse. I learned recently in my Cultural Issues class in graduate school that Jehovah's Witnesses cannot celebrate holidays. I knew Miss Judy had a seasonal curriculum and so I asked her to tell about how she celebrates holidays. After she told us, I tried to discuss Alejandro's religious situation. I thought it would be better if I approached it, instead of Gabriella. I didn't want Alejandro's mother to feel awkward in this first meeting. We could all tell that Miss Judy was defensive and bothered. This, in turn, upset Gabriella, who then defended Miss Judy and said Alejandro could go home to his grandmother when a holiday or birthday celebration*

*happened. I don't know what to do to smooth things over before the next team meeting, when we really get down to business to determine the goals for Alejandro.*

#### *Using Intercultural Education to Address Team Difficulties*

The question that emerges is if intercultural education be used to help this team and, if so, how can this occur. To answer this, it is important to first review the nature of intercultural education. Then we consider the qualities that each team member needs to participate in intercultural dialogue. Finally, we explain the transdisciplinary team processes that are necessary for a successful team.

#### *Nature of Intercultural Education with Teams*

The two most important requirements of intercultural education are *equal power relations* and *deep engagement* in dialogue. Considering Alejandro's team, the following challenges must be addressed:

1. What is necessary for *equal power relations*?
  - Who has the most power on this team? Why?
  - Who has the least power? Why?
  - How can this be resolved?
2. What needs to happen that is not happening for Alejandro's team to communicate at the level of *deep engagement*?
  - What important information should have been shared at the beginning of the first team meeting? Who should share this information? Why?
  - What does *each* team member need to know that she or he doesn't know?
  - How can this best be communicated? Why?

These questions cannot be answered in a universal way. At the beginning of the establishment of *each* new team, these questions must be addressed, in order to incorporate intercultural education and dialogue in EI/ECSE.

#### *Qualities that Each Team Member Needs*

Recall that according to Garcia (2012) and Gudykunst and Kim (2003), intercultural communication requires three components from each participant: (a) *motivation*, (b) *knowledge*, and (c) *skills*. It seems clear that all members of Alejandro's team are *motivated* to provide him with the best possible services. Are there any other motivations that would be helpful for specific team members? For example, should Mr. West and Miss Judy be motivated to respect, understand, and work with one another? If so, how can this be accomplished? Should Alejandro's mother, Gabriella, be motivated to express herself more assertively, or is that not in the realm of motivation?

With regard to *knowledge*, it is also clear that each team member lacks some knowledge that would be necessary for optimal communication, team building, and supporting the

optimal development of Alejandro. Here is just one example concerning each participant.

- What does Miss Judy need to know about transdisciplinary teams in general, and occupational therapy, in particular? How should she get this information?
- What does Mr. West need to know about Miss Judy and how to interact with her on equal terms?
- What does Gabriella, Alejandro's mother, need to know about Alejandro's transition from early intervention to early childhood special education? How is she supposed to get this knowledge?
- What does Ms. Cates need to know about how to approach the religious diversity of families, when it conflicts with classroom practices? How can she get this information?

The next area to consider is what *skills* does Alejandro's team need to acquire. We know that the skills required of transdisciplinary teams include (a) *reciprocity*, (b) *navigation*, (c) *negotiation (conflict resolution)*, and (d) *compromise*. Which of Alejandro's team needs support in developing *reciprocity*? Can Miss Judy and Mr. West interact in a reciprocal relationship? How would they develop this skill? Who can help them? Who on this team has the skills to *navigate* the services that Alejandro needs? How can the team engage in *negotiation* and *conflict resolution*? What is the role of Ms. Cates, the team leader, in this process? Finally, who on Alejandro's team needs to *compromise*? Skills are often more difficult to develop than knowledge. Is there anyone who can help individual team members develop the skills they need?

#### *Transdisciplinary Team Processes Needed by Alejandro's Team*

Using a transdisciplinary team approach requires a high level of skills among team members (Kilgo, 2006; McWilliam, 2010). The team leader of Alejandro's case, Ms. Cates, must facilitate the development of the communication and collaborative abilities needed by individual team members that will be applied collectively. Ms. Cates should assist the team to negotiate and problem solve, as well as facilitate the process of role release in which the team members engage in the process of teaching, sharing, and exchanging roles and responsibilities. As such, individual team members must be willing to learn from and share with others team members including the family. For example, team members may suggest adaptations and supports for Alejandro to participate in activities and routines, recommend intervention strategies, and teach Miss Judy how to support development and learning in all domains. Each team member must continue to be recognized as the authority of his or her own discipline, the family must be recognized as having the most information about their child, and Miss Judy must be acknowledged as having the most information about her childcare program. Ms. Katz should provide assistance and support for role release, problem solving, communication, and collaboration among all team members.

#### *Concluding Thoughts on Transdisciplinary Teaming and Intercultural Education*

The vast majority of professional publications on both transdisciplinary teaming and intercultural education are explicit in explaining *what* to do in these respective areas. However, there is a paucity of information about *how* to go about each one. There are no resources that discuss how to incorporate intercultural education into transdisciplinary teaming. We believe this is the first attempt to describe this daunting task.

There are two additional points to consider. The first point has to do with “adjustment.” Until the end of modernity, which was around 1970, children and families were expected to passively adjust to whatever the school system offered for young children with special needs. At that time there were no federal services for early intervention. Shortly after postmodernity began, accommodations for diversity with regard to individuals, families, and cultures developed to such an extent that the opposite issue occurred. Teachers and professionals were expected to adjust to diversity and the implicit message became do whatever it takes to honor diversity, whether you agree with it or not. Both modern and postmodern conceptions of accommodating diversity were extreme.

We are at the advent of a period in early intervention and early childhood special education where the pendulum is swinging toward the middle. This brings about the second point. That is, all team members are allowed to disagree on issues of diversity. We now have reached the advent of ethnorelativism in which we acknowledge all individuals have a particular framework and moral compass from which to operate that may be different from our own. Ethnorelativism...

assumes that cultures can only be understood relative to one another and that behavior can only be understood within a cultural context. The state of ethnorelativism does not imply an ethical agreement with all difference nor a disavowal of stating (and acting on) a preference for one worldview over another. This position does imply, however, that ethical choices will be made on grounds other than the protection of one’s own worldview or in the name of absolute principles. (Bennett, 1993, p. 50)

Finally, active synergism, rather than passive adjustment, between families and professionals can occur in transdisciplinary teaming through an intercultural education approach. If all members of the team have equal power and deep engagement in dialogue occurs, all individuals can respectfully disagree and progress toward optimal services for children still can occur through synergism and compromise.

## References

- Abdallah-Preteceille, M. (1990). *Vers une pedagogie interculturelle*. Paris, FR: INRP Sorbonne.
- Abrams, M., Matthey, J., Murrer, B., Bernardo, F., & Shehan, C. (2000) (Eds.). *Through the eyes of the child: Re-visioning children as active agents of family life*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Aldridge, J., Kilgo, J., & Christensen, L. (in press). Turning culture upside down: The role of Transcultural education. *Social Studies Research and Practice*.
- Bennett, M. (1993). Toward ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In R. Pagie (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 21-71). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Blair, S. (2012) (Ed.). *Economic stress and the family*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Claster, S., & Blair, S. (2013). *Visions of the 21st century family: Transforming structures and identities*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Clifford, V. (2011). Moving from multicultural to intercultural education in Australian Higher Education. In C. Grant & A. Portera (Eds.), *Intercultural and multicultural education: Enhancing global interconnectedness* (pp. 315-323). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collins, J. (1988). Language and class in minority education. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 19(4), 299-326.
- Cooper, P. (1996). Are Individual Education Plans a waste of paper? *British Journal of Special Education*, 23(3), 115-119.
- Daly, K. (2001) (Ed.). *Minding the time in family experience: Emerging perspectives and issues*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Dessel, A., Rogge, M., & Garlington, S. (2006). Using intergroup dialogue to promote social justice and change. *Social Work*, 51(4), 303-315.
- DeTurk, S. (2006). The power of dialogue: Consequences of intergroup dialogue and their implications for agency and alliance building. *Communication Quarterly*, 54(1), 33-51.
- Division of Early Childhood. (2014). *DEC recommended practices in early intervention/early childhood special education*. Retrieved from <http://www.dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices>
- Fox, G., & Benson, M. (2000) (Eds.). *Families, crime and criminal justice: Charting the linkages*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Garcia, S. (2012). The preservice classroom as an intercultural space for experiencing a process of cultural reciprocity. In M. Kalyanpur & B. Harry (Eds.), *Cultural reciprocity in special education: Building family-professional relationships* (pp. 155-174). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Gargiulo, R., & Kilgo, J. (2014). *An introduction to young children with special needs: Birth through age eight* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning.
- Gorski, P. (2006). Complicity with conservatism: The de-politicizing of multicultural and intercultural education. *Intercultural Education*, 17(2), 163-177.
- Gorski, P. (2008). Good intentions are not enough: A decolonizing intercultural



- education. *Intercultural Education*, 19(6), 515-525.
- Gorski, P. & Landsman, J. (2014) (Eds.) *The poverty and education reader: A call for equity in many voices*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Grant, C., & Brueck, S. (2011). A global invitation: Toward the expansion of dialogue, reflection and creative engagement for intercultural and multicultural education. In C. Grant & A. Portera (Eds.), *Intercultural and multicultural education: Enhancing global interconnectedness* (pp. 3-11). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gudykunst, W., & Kim, Y. (2003). *Communicating with strangers: An approach to Intercultural communication* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Gundara, J. (2011). Citizenship and intercultural education in an international and comparative context. In C. Grant & A. Portera (Eds.), *Intercultural and multicultural education: Enhancing global interconnectedness* (pp. 294-314). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jones, A. (1999). The limits of cross-cultural dialogue: Pedagogy, desire, and absolution in the classroom. *Educational Theory*, 49(3), 299-316.
- Kilgo, J. (2006) (Ed.). *Transdisciplinary teaming in early intervention/early childhood special education*. Olney, MD: Association for Childhood Education International.
- Kilgo, J., & Aldridge, J. (2013). *A team-based approach to sustain collaboration with Families Representing diverse cultural backgrounds*. Paper presented at the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) 29th Annual International Conference on Young Children with Special Needs and Their Families, San Francisco, CA, October 17, 2013.
- Lasonen, J. (2011). Multiculturalism in the Nordic countries. In C. Grant & A. Portera (Eds.), *Intercultural and multicultural education: Enhancing global interconnectedness* (pp. 261-278).
- Lynch, E., & Hanson, M. (2011). *Developing cross-cultural competence: A guide for working with children and their families* (4th ed.). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Marginson, S., & Sawir, E. (2011). *Ideas for intercultural education*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McWilliam, R. (2010). (Ed.) *Working with families of young children with special needs*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Miller, M., & Petriwskyj, A. (2013). New directions in intercultural early education in Australia. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 45(2), 251-266.
- Olson, C., & Kroeger, K. (2001). Global competency and intercultural sensitivity. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 5(2), 116-37.
- Pillemer, K., & Luscher, K. (2003) (Eds.). *Intergenerational ambivalences: New perspectives on parent-child relations in later life*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Portera, A. (2011). Intercultural and multicultural education: Epistemological and semantic aspects. In C. Grant & A. Portera (Eds.), *Intercultural and multicultural education: Enhancing global interconnectedness* (pp. 12-30). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Robila, M. (2004) (Ed.). *Families in Eastern Europe*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Shields, C., Bishop, R., & Mazawi, A. (2005). *Pathologizing practices: The impact of*

- deficit thinking on education.* New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Spencer, H. (1884). *What knowledge is of most worth?* New York, NY: John B. Alden.
- Turnbull, H., Huerta, N., & Stowe, M. (2004). *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as amended in 2004.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.