Inclusive, Democratic Family–Professional Partnerships: (Re)Conceptualizing Culture and Language in Teacher Preparation

Margaret R. Beneke, MAT¹ and Gregory A. Cheatham, PhD¹

Abstract
Family–professional partnerships are vital to the provision of appropriate and effective special education services for young children. Despite the recognized need, teacher educators in early childhood and early childhood special education have faced challenges in preparing their students to partner with families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In this article, we assert that for pre-service early childhood/early childhood special education teachers to prepare for cross-cultural family–professional partnerships, teacher educators can take a democratic, inclusive perspective and address conceptualizations of culture and language. To this end, we first explain meanings of inclusive education and democratic partnerships. We then focus on conceptualizations of culture and language in developing cross-cultural partnerships. Finally, we provide recommendations to prepare pre-service teachers to form more democratic and inclusive cross-cultural partnerships with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Keywords
family–professional partnerships, teacher preparation, cultural diversity, linguistic diversity, inclusive education, democracy

In early childhood (EC), early intervention (EI), and early childhood special education (ECSE), developing partnerships between professionals and families is at the heart of quality education for young children. Family–professional partnerships can be defined as interdependent relationships between practitioners and families that are built on trust, honesty, and shared responsibility (Brotherson et al., 2010). By recognizing and affirming each other’s expertise, competencies, and capacity for decision making, families and professionals can create sustainable, reciprocal partnerships (Barrera, Corso, & Macpherson, 2003; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). Not only can family–professional partnerships support young children’s early learning and future academic success (Bruner, Agnamba, Calderon, & Simons, 2013; Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009), they can also strengthen parental self-efficacy and teacher responsiveness (Dunst, Hamby, & Brookfield, 2007; Fults & Harry, 2012). Furthermore, EC/EI/ECSE programs are mandated to facilitate parent participation with families of children with disabilities (Individuals With Disabilities Act, 2004). Accordingly, pre-service teachers need support and practice to embody the posture and facility for partnering with families.

Yet developing partnerships can be challenging for practitioners, particularly with families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2012; Cheatham & Santos, 2011; Harry, 2008; Lupi & Tong, 2001). A long history of families’ exclusion from education programs and previous experiences with professional insensitivity toward diversity can trigger mistrust for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Harry, 2008). Differences in conversational norms and expectations may cause communication difficulties (Howard & Lipinoga, 2010). The sociocultural values and social behavior of families and practitioners can be incongruous (Chen & Rubin, 2011), leading to misunderstandings (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, & Garcia, 2009). Furthermore, families may have unequal access to institutional power and curricular knowledge (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2012; Cheatham & Santos, 2011; Hollins, 2011). For example, families from low socioeconomic backgrounds may passively participate during parent–teacher conferences due to parents’ lack of knowledge about mainstream views of child

¹University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA

Corresponding Author:
Margaret R. Beneke, Department of Special Education, School of Education, University of Kansas, 1122 West Campus Rd., Lawrence, KS 66045, USA.
Email: maggiebeneke@ku.edu

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development, parents’ low confidence in their parenting skills, and teachers’ unwillingness to give up control (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). These differences in access to institutional knowledge and power can contribute to challenging interactions and miscommunication, and may influence practitioners to develop implicit, deficit views of families (Halgunseth et al., 2009; Hanson & Lynch, 2010; Harry, 2008).

Despite the recognized need, teacher educators in EC/EI/ECSE have faced challenges in preparing students to partner with families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Banerjee & Luckner, 2014; Fults & Harry, 2012; Hansuvadha, 2009). Building on the definition of “family–professional partnerships,” above, we use the term “cross-cultural partnerships” to describe future practitioners’ positive relationships with families from diverse backgrounds. Given the opportunity and achievement disparities for young children from culturally, racially, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds in the United States, an emphasis on cross-cultural family–professional partnerships in teacher preparation can better support an increasingly diverse population of young children and families in the United States (Bodur, 2012; Brotherson et al., 2010). When teachers and families do not establish strong cross-cultural partnerships, young children from diverse backgrounds may have fewer opportunities for success in EC/EI/ECSE programs (Janus & Duku, 2007). By attending to conceptions of culture and language in partnering with families, teacher educators have the potential to positively influence the success of young children from diverse, historically underserved backgrounds. Unquestionably, preparing pre-service teachers to navigate and meaningfully engage with family members from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is essential.

In this article, we assert that to meet the needs of young children and families from diverse backgrounds, teacher educators can take an inclusive, democratic perspective in preparing pre-service teachers to form cross-cultural family–professional partnerships. From an inclusive and democratic perspective, attention to the ways in which pre-service teachers understand culture and language is warranted. To this end, we discuss (a) meanings of inclusive education and democratic partnerships, (b) culture and language in developing cross-cultural partnerships, and (c) recommendations to prepare pre-service teachers to form more democratic and inclusive partnerships with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

### Inclusive and Democratic Family–Professional Partnerships

Two approaches for preparing pre-service teachers to cross-culturally partner with families will be discussed here. First, Artiles and Kozleski (2007) offered an expanded definition of “inclusion,” a term that typically and exclusively refers to inclusion of children with disabilities. Instead, they suggest that inclusive education means cultivating an equitable learning community in which all children and families are regarded as valuable members. Conceptualized as a legitimizing space for multiple and diverse ways of being, Artiles and Kozleski assert that inclusive education consists of developing and advancing practices to be inclusive and equitable for those individuals from historically marginalized groups (i.e., groups who have experienced historical discrimination based on ethnicity, race, language, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, etc.). Inclusive education, then, is a dynamic and flexible process that involves constant attention, reflection, and action toward understanding how historically marginalized populations of children and families can more equitably participate in educational processes and communities (Artiles, Kozleski, & Waitoller, 2011). An inclusive education approach can be embraced to support positive and meaningful partnerships with families.

Second, John Dewey’s 20th-century ideals of family–professional partnership remain relevant to the 21st-century challenges of social inequity and educational discrimination (Dzur, 2004; Fischer, 2004; Skrtic, 2013; Sullivan, 2005). In true democratic family–professional partnerships, Dewey explained that professionals and citizens share responsibility through mutually beneficial alliances (Dzur, 2004; Sullivan, 2005). Deference to professional expertise can be debilitating for citizens (i.e., families), particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds (Dzur, 2004; Fischer, 2004). When teachers and families are positioned in expert–client relationships, families’ perspectives or wisdom may be overlooked. Instead, educators can deconstruct and reconstruct expectations for family–professional partnerships to be more democratic and equitable, transforming the role of educator from expert to facilitator (Dzur, 2004; Fischer, 2004; Skrtic, 2013; Sullivan, 2005). A democratic approach to cross-cultural family–professional partnerships (e.g., engaging families in problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration) can empower families from historically marginalized backgrounds. Educators can help families to identify strengths, goals, and problems, setting the democratic agenda in the interest of the common good. Educators can then apply specialized knowledge to address these shared goals (Fischer, 2004). In these reciprocal relationships of positive interdependence, expertise is both shared and advanced (Skrtic, 2013).

In the context of EC/EI/ECSE teacher education, we tie Artiles et al.’s (2011) view of inclusive education with contemporary Deweyan approaches to democratic partnership (Dzur, 2004; Skrtic, 2013) to examine conceptualizations of culture and language in preparing pre-service teachers to facilitate cross-cultural family–professional partnerships.
Pre-service teachers’ inconsistent and sometimes paradoxical understandings of culture and language may negatively affect cross-cultural partnerships with families. To encourage inclusive, democratic family–professional partnerships, teacher educators can provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to explore and critically reflect on conceptualizations of culture and language. Furthermore, teacher educators can support pre-service teachers to examine who is recognized and accounted for in definitions of culture and language, with particular attention to democratic participation of families from historically marginalized groups.

**Conceptualizations of Culture and Language: Contradictions and Clarifications**

As families in EC/EL/ECSE programs become increasingly diverse and the population of practitioners remains relatively homogeneous, practitioners and families may be positioned on opposite sides of a widening sociocultural divide. A value for inclusion and democracy in EC/EL/ECSE means calling attention to the implicit and explicit processes that create inequity for families from culturally diverse backgrounds. Although teacher educators may emphasize aspects of culture and language in their courses and practicum experiences, pre-service teachers’ surface and/or static understandings of culture and language can lead to strained cross-cultural relationships. When pre-service teachers overlook the dynamic, varied, and value-laden nature of culture and language, they may limit families’ capacities to develop successful cross-cultural partnerships.

**Challenges and Changes in Conceptualizing Culture**

In this section, we look critically at conventional conceptualizations of culture, offering new ways to conceptualize culture that may yield more inclusive, democratic family–professional partnerships (see Table 1). Subsequently, we will draw on these new conceptualizations of culture to offer recommendations for teacher educators.

**Old way: Conceptualizing culture as fixed and static.** First, the conceptualization of culture as static can create challenges for pre-service teachers to cross-culturally partner. To support pre-service teachers in recognizing cultural differences, some teacher preparation programs define culture in terms of specific, categorical attributes that may be shared by groups of people (Lubienski, 2003). For example, cross-cultural studies both in and outside the United States have demonstrated that some racial or ethnic groups value authoritarian versus authoritative parenting styles (Dwairy et al., 2006; Lim & Lim, 2004; Querido, Warner, & Eyberg, 2002; Varela et al., 2004). Although teacher educators may elucidate these particular cultural behaviors to demonstrate cultural variation and to challenge pre-service teachers’ cultural expectations (Oyler, 2011), these efforts may unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes and/or misunderstandings of culture.

Based on a static understanding of culture, teacher candidates may anticipate homogeneity in behavior and thinking for all children and families from a particular racial or ethnic group (Hollins, 2011). They may expect children or families to act or identify in a particular way, based only on perceptions of ethnicity or race (Sleeter, 2012). When culture is defined by specific, observable behaviors attributable to individuals’ ethnic background, pre-service teachers may oversimplify culture’s significance and assume individuals from particular groups can be characterized by a fixed set of traits (Lubienski, 2003). Ultimately, allowing teacher candidates to assume children and families from specific social groups (i.e., racial or ethnic groups) possess a static set of characteristics can distort the role of culture in the lives of children and families (Rueda & Stillman, 2012).

**New way: Conceptualizing culture as dynamic.** Conversely, an inclusive, democratic conceptualization recognizes the dynamic nature of culture. Individuals engage in multiple overlapping cultural communities, which shift and change over time (Gutiérrez, Ali, & Henríquez, 2010; Rogoff, 2003). Sociocultural scholars recognize that culture is more than a set of static attributes; culture is a dynamic process that transforms through human activity (Rueda & Stillman, 2012). Although cross-cultural research can demonstrate cultural differences among groups of people at a single point in time, these definitions of culture are likely to evolve and may have little relation to individual family members with whom early educators partner. As individuals participate in cultural activities, their attitudes and beliefs are altered through their participation. Cultural communities simultaneously change because of individuals’ participation (Rogoff, 2003).

### Table 1. Conceptualizations of Culture.

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<tr>
<th>Old way</th>
<th>New way</th>
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<tr>
<td>Culture can be defined by static, fixed traits</td>
<td>Cultural behaviors and ideas evolve through dynamic activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Universal cultural norms exist</td>
<td>There are many diverse, legitimate ways of thinking, behaving, and being</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainstream cultural processes represent unbiased ideologies and produce equitable relationships</td>
<td>Mainstream cultural processes represent privileged ideologies and produce inequitable relationships</td>
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With considerable increases in immigration and intercultural families in the United States, cultural hybridization is more likely to occur. For example, studies of immigrant families in the United States found families were integrating traditional and mainstream cultures to create new parenting practices (Choi, Kim, Pekelnicky, & Kim, 2013; Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). In addition, researchers have found that parents with differing cultural backgrounds may merge cultural practices in light of mutual goals for their children (Crippen, & Brew, 2013). Parents from various cultural backgrounds may negotiate culturally defined gender roles (e.g., father works from home while mother pursues graduate studies), abandon traditional disciplinary practices in light of a new cultural context (e.g., replacing corporal punishment with more authoritative parenting style), or maintain customary parenting practices (e.g., co-sleeping with young children). By engaging in ongoing dialogue about each family’s particular parenting practices, attending to the values and beliefs that undergird these practices, and recognizing that each family may adjust parenting practices over time and across contexts, pre-service teachers can be inclusive, democratic partners. Conceptualizing culture as a dynamic activity can support pre-service teachers to get to know individual families and resist cultural stereotypes.

Old way: Conceptualizing cultural norms as universal. A second aspect of conceptualizing culture that can create challenges in developing cross-cultural partnerships is the assumption that universal cultural norms do and should exist. Children learn to communicate and behave by participating in the social contexts congruent with their home and community environments (Pumariega & Joshi, 2010). Thus, the tools a child has available for social interaction are likely based on their experiences outside school. Researchers have demonstrated the positive and legitimate use of social behaviors that are not positively recognized in the United States (e.g., aggression, compliance, self-control, withdrawal; Chen, 2011; Han & Thomas, 2010). These social behaviors may be valued, practiced, and even purposefully taught by families, but are unlikely to be valued in EC/EI/ECSE programs.

In EC/EI/ECSE, practitioner expectations for social behavior and social competence in the United States are often based on mainstream European American middle class culture (e.g., self-expression, active exploration, leadership; Chen, 2011; Han & Thomas, 2010; Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002). Incongruence between expectations at home and school can create cultural conflict (Milner, 2010). Pre-service teachers may lack experience working in diverse populations and may implicitly expect children and families to meet mainstream expectations based on their own cultural frames of reference (Hollins, 2011; Nieto, 2005; Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2002). When a child’s legitimate attempts to socially engage do not align with mainstream expectations, the child may be negatively evaluated by the educator, leading to inappropriate referral to special education (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Salend, Barrick-Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002). Moreover, by judging the social practices of children against a single, universal conceptualization of cultural norms, pre-service teachers can uphold mainstream expectations and child development expertise, discounting cultural values of families from historically marginalized backgrounds.

New way: Conceptualizing cultural norms as diverse and legitimate. To prepare teachers for inclusive, democratic partnerships with diverse families, pre-service teachers can benefit from understanding the nuanced, varied nature of culture. Cultural meanings are mediated and transformed by individual histories, ideologies, and contexts (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). When culture is defined as locally constructed and unevenly expressed, pre-service teachers are less likely to draw inaccurate inferences about families based on faulty universal definitions of cultural behavior (Lubienski, 2003; Oyler, 2011; Rueda & Stillman, 2012). Acknowledging the active and multifaceted role of all individuals in cultural activity can provide space for pre-service teachers to recognize the cultural nature of their own expectations and validate those of diverse families (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Taking an inclusive, democratic perspective of culture means that teacher educators emphasize the multiple, legitimate ways in which practitioners and families think and behave. For example, pre-service teachers may assume that independent living is a goal that all families have for their children. Yet leaving the home may not be a culturally normative goal for families that value interdependence with extended family (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999). Understanding the variability of cultural meanings may encourage pre-service teachers to inquire into the cultural resources and processes that individual families from diverse backgrounds draw on within and across EC/EI/ECSE settings. When pre-service teachers can acknowledge the plurality of culturally valuable social expressions, they can be more inclusive and democratic partners with families.

Old way: Conceptualizing culture as an unbiased phenomenon. A conceptualization of culture as an unbiased, equitable social phenomenon can strain family–professional partnerships. In addition to not realizing their own participation in culture, pre-service teachers may not be aware that mainstream educational practices can perpetuate oppression and social inequities, upholding the view that mainstream cultural processes represent unbiased ideologies and produce neutral relationships. If pre-service teachers have been socialized into a culture of privilege, their perspective may be further reinforced by mainstream ideologies and prevailing practices with children and families in schools.
(Hollins, 2011). When pre-service teachers interpret cultural differences as impartial or neutral distinctions, they may fail to recognize the oppressive nature of cultural process and can create inequitable hierarchy of power and expertise between families and teachers.

Pre-service teachers’ mainstream cultural beliefs about child-rearing practices and parent involvement can add to deficit views of children and families from historically underserved groups and uphold the status quo. For instance, educators may associate features such as single parenthood or large family size with deficit perspectives of family functioning without regard for the family’s parenting skills and value for early education (Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005). Without regard for the diverse ways families may intend to contribute, pre-service teachers may limit or exclude families from diverse backgrounds (Harry, 2008). Without attention to the value-laden nature of cultural expectations, educators may use a privileged lens, thereby perceiving children as having behavior challenges and blaming behavioral differences on family dysfunction (Fults & Harry, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006). When pre-service teachers view these mainstream ideologies as neutral and unbiased, they may disempower families from historically marginalized backgrounds.

**New way: Conceptualizing culture processes as producing inequities.** To be inclusive and democratic, pre-service teachers need to recognize that cultural processes are never neutral, but enmeshed in hierarchical relationships of power and privilege. Accordingly, teacher educators can support pre-service teachers in critically questioning dominant cultural values and practices that may relegate families from historically marginalized backgrounds to a subordinate position (Hollins, 2011). This includes studying the culturally constructed, sociohistorically ordered nature of expectations for parent and child participation in EC and ECSE settings. Reconceptualizing culture in terms of power relationships can help pre-service teachers to reflect on the potentially inequitable nature of their own and institutional practices, shifting blame away from families (Bodur, 2012).

When educators can understand and appreciate each family’s unique strengths, power relations are more equitably leveled, and teachers can better participate in a democratic collaboration (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Pre-service teachers can recognize that deficit perspectives of families from historically marginalized groups exist, and that these families may be guarded in their interactions based on a history of exclusion in schools (Harry et al., 2005). By doing so, pre-service teachers can begin to analyze the ways in which their own cultural participation plays a role in cross-cultural relationships of power and expertise. Understanding the ways in which culture is defined and enacted can help pre-service teachers to be inclusive of cultural differences and to take a democratic approach to partnering with families from historically marginalized groups.

**Limitations and Resolutions in Conceptualizing Language**

The ways in which language is conceptualized in teacher education can also create challenges for inclusive, democratic family–professional partnerships (see Table 2). In this section, we examine and explicate conceptualizations of language that support inclusive, democratic family–professional partnerships.

**Old way: Conceptualizing language use as universal.** First, pre-service teachers’ expectation that conversational norms are universal can impede development of cross-cultural, family–professional partnerships. Importantly, the majority of pre-service teachers are monolingual English speakers (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008), and standard English is often favored in educational settings (Ayers, 2014). Based on universal conceptualization of conversation, pre-service teachers in EC/EL/ECSE may implicitly expect families to mirror their own uses of language in conversation. Yet families who speak non-standard dialects of English, or for whom English is a second language, may draw on diverse participation structures and linguistic codes during dialogue. For example, some families may value indirect communication by making subtle suggestions, avoiding confrontation, and hinting at disagreement (Cheatham & Santos, 2011). Other families may feel comfortable sharing control of conversation with multiple speakers, allowing interruptions (Philips, 2009).

When teachers use direct communication and expect families to use these, or when teachers rely on conversational agendas (e.g., formal conference reports), teachers may face challenges in effectively communicating with these families. Although miscommunication may result from practitioners misreading various communication details and interactional patterns (Delpit, 2006), pre-service teachers who lack experience with cross-cultural communication may not be aware of families’ advocacy attempts, or may respond by dismissing aspects of families’ diverse linguistic repertoires (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2012). Furthermore, pre-service teachers may inadvertently make

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<td><strong>Old way</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Universal conversational norms exist</td>
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<td>Language acts as a decontextualized, power-free mode of communication</td>
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negative assumptions about families (e.g., family as rude, uninterested) based on the ways they talk, which may result in fewer services for children and their families. When pre-service teachers assume that language use in conversation has universal characteristics that align with their own language use and expectations, misunderstandings and inequitable relationships with families are likely to occur.

**New way: Conceptualizing language use as diverse and legitimate.** To engage in inclusive, democratic conversation, pre-service teachers need to be familiar with the multiple, legitimate language uses. Rules of speaking are learned in social and cultural contexts (Lupi & Tong, 2001). Language practices are developed, transformed, and mediated by participation in language communities (Gutiérrez et al., 2010). Based on varied experiences with language, families and practitioners may draw on differing conversational norms to enact roles, dispositions, and cultures (Cheatham, & Santos, 2011). Importantly, no one dialect, linguistic code, or participation structure is inherently superior (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006; Philips, 2009; Wodak, 2012). Conversational norms for being polite, taking turns, and changing conversational topics vary and can be equally valuable and effective (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007). Yet the use of English as a second language and non-standard English has historically been de-valued by teachers and schools (Beneke & Cheatham, 2015; Gutiérrez et al., 2010; Philips, 2009).

Pre-service teachers can benefit from an awareness of these pre-existing attitudes toward language. Furthermore, attention to the pragmatic, semantic, and contextualized nature of language use can support pre-service teachers to acknowledge the many valid uses of non-standard language and strengths of bilingual speakers. When teacher educators resist a universal conception of language, pre-service teachers may reflect on how their own linguistic styles, practices, and assumptions influence family–professional partnerships. Recognition of the diverse, legitimate uses of language can support pre-service teachers to more inclusively and democratically communicate with families from diverse backgrounds.

**Old way: Conceptualizing language as decontextualized and power-free.** Second, conceptualizing language as a neutral, power-free mode of communication can impede teachers’ development of cross-cultural family–professional partnerships. In preparing EC/EI/ECSE teachers to cross-culturally partner, definitions of language are often reduced to the decontextualized, technical functions of communication. Teacher educators may encourage pre-service teachers to develop and universally apply specific, formulaic communication skills such as active listening, paraphrasing, or questioning. Although these techniques are a useful start, they neglect attention to the ways power relationships are socially and historically constructed between speakers, and are not likely to be effective with every family. For example, because of the hierarchy between institutions and families, some families from lower socioeconomic status may be convinced that their views of child development are not legitimate, and may be less willing to share insights with teachers (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). Indeed, these challenging interactions may reinforce pre-service teachers’ pre-existing stereotypes about families from historically marginalized backgrounds (Fults & Harry, 2012), triggering them to lower expectations, reduce efforts to partner with families, and revert to a posture of professional dominance (Harry et al., 2005).

In addition, if educators only rely on a set of prescribed communication skills, they may unintentionally preclude opportunities to acknowledge families’ communicative efforts, obstructing opportunities for families to offer strategies, share stories, or impart wisdom about their own children. For instance, during parent–teacher conferences, EC teachers may give families parenting advice without regard to whether the advice was warranted or wanted (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). Drawing on the institutional conversational structure of the conference agenda, teachers’ interpretation and evaluation of the child’s competencies construct their institutional identity as professional expert, simultaneously constructing the family as acquiescent consumer of evaluation and advice. When families who speak non-standard English dialects or for whom English is a second language have unequal access to the meanings and significance of common procedures in EC/EI/ECSE programs, asymmetrical power relationships may be exacerbated (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2012). When families do not respond to mechanistic communication methods, teachers maintain conversational and decision-making power, constructing families as passive recipients of knowledge (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2012). Pre-service teachers may unintentionally create conversational barriers for families from historically marginalized backgrounds, simultaneously instantiating these families as “incompetent” or “incapable” of collaboration. Thus, operating on neutral, power-free definitions of language use can limit the capacities of families from diverse backgrounds to engage in inclusive, democratic dialogue with teachers.

**New way: Conceptualizing language and power relationships in context.** Alternatively, educators can expand conceptualizations of language to recognize both the oppressive and emancipatory ways that language can construct relationships of power. Scholars of discourse view language as more than a set of neutral linguistic symbols used to communicate; through talk, speakers socially enact and construct identities, meanings, and the social world (Gee, 2008; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). As pre-service teachers conceptualize language, they can benefit from exploration of
how individual speakers socially construct power relationships and are socially constructed by power relationships. Because practitioners, as representatives of educational institutions, may have greater access to relevant conversational tools in EC/EI/ECSE settings, asymmetrical power relationships can be constructed between families and educators (Delpit, 2006; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010; Turnbull et al., 2015). Teacher educators can support pre-service teachers to move beyond technical communication strategies, to acknowledge the strengths and resources of each family in conversation.

When families from historically marginalized backgrounds have equitable opportunities to contribute to conversation, they are socially constructed as competent and valuable partners. For example, during parent–teacher conferences, when teachers build on families’ knowledge of children and EC, recognize families’ strengths and priorities, and respond to families’ suggestions, families can also construct an identity as expert (e.g., expert regarding their child, their family, their community). From an inclusive, democratic perspective, when pre-service teachers are aware of the power dynamics constructed through talk, and respond to the details of families’ communication in context, they can transpose the role of “expert” by sharing expertise with families. Understanding the dynamic, diverse, and value-laden nature of language is critical for pre-service teachers to cross-culturally partner with families.

**Recommendations for Inclusive, Democratic Partnerships**

We have outlined both old and new conceptions of culture and language that merit teacher educators’ focus from an inclusive, democratic perspective (see Tables 1 and 2). By intentionally embracing more thorough conceptions of culture and language, teacher educators have the potential to influence pre-service teachers’ ability to collaborate with families from diverse backgrounds, resulting in meaningful cross-cultural family–professional partnerships (Rueda & Stillman, 2012). In this section, we identify promising practices for EC/EI/ECSE teacher educators to address cultural and linguistic aspects of cross-cultural family–professional partnerships. Ultimately, we contend that a focus on inclusive, democratic family partnerships can better support young children and families from diverse backgrounds.

**Advancing New Conceptions of Culture**

For pre-service teachers to recognize that culture is enacted and dynamic, they need to encounter and challenge static conceptions of culture. Pre-service teachers seem to benefit from multiple, iterative, opportunities to study ideas about cultural diversity with peers and faculty (Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2008). Teacher educators can prompt and scaffold ongoing class discussions by making visible the voices and perspectives of family members from diverse backgrounds in a number of formats (e.g., video examples, case studies, vignettes). Pre-service teachers can contemplate what it means to have culture in light of families whose behaviors challenge static definitions of culture. For example, teacher educators may use vignettes about families who integrate traditional and mainstream cultures to create new parenting practices (Choi et al., 2013; Halgunseth et al., 2006) or video clips of those parents with differing cultural backgrounds who merge cultural practices in light of mutual goals for their children (Crippen, & Brew, 2013) to guide discussion with pre-service teachers. Teacher educators can then introduce and revisit a collaborative problem-solving process approach to working with families (Fults & Harry, 2012), urging pre-service teachers to see the dynamic nature of culture by engaging the individual interests and needs of families.

Auspiciously, programmatic efforts that provide experiences for observational learning in the field prior to practicum experiences have helped pre-service teachers to build more meaningful awareness of cultural diversity (Jurow, Tracy, Hotchkiss, & Kirshner, 2012). Pre-service teachers may build a more profound understanding of the dynamic nature of culture through participant observation in culturally diverse settings with families (García, Arias, Murri, & Serna, 2010). Through extended field experiences such as partnering with families in service learning (e.g., volunteering in community centers such as recreational centers, libraries, or community-sponsored events; García et al., 2010) or gathering stories from families in home visits (Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2005), pre-service teachers can develop a deeper appreciation for the dynamic nature of culture. Teacher educators can guide pre-service teachers to focus observations on aspects of cultural behavior, comparing their observations in home and community contexts with those cultural behaviors that have been categorically crystallized. When dissonance arises between pre-service teachers’ experiences with families and static conceptions of cultural behavior, teacher educators can encourage critical questioning and dialogue, emphasizing the dynamic nature of culture in individuals’ lived experiences. Through observations and interactions between pre-service teachers and families in home and in community settings, teacher educators can support students to more purposefully connect and apply course content about dynamic cultural processes.

To build awareness of families’ diverse, legitimate ways of being, thinking, and behaving, teacher educators can raise pre-service teachers’ awareness of their own cultural participation. When teacher educators encourage pre-service teachers with opportunities to develop cultural dispositions, they may transcend universal assumptions about culture (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Villegas, 2007).
Pre-service teachers need opportunities to reflect on their own personal values, to connect these values to history and culture, and to compare them with others (Harry, 2008). Self-reflection can be usefully applied in teacher education courses through the use of narratives, such as in the ABC model (i.e., autobiography, biography, and cross-cultural comparison; He & Cooper, 2009; Schmidt, 1999). Using the ABC model, pre-service teachers can write detailed autobiographies recounting aspects of their own family cultures and personal values, read the biography of a parent or caregiver with a different cultural background and differing values, and compare cultural and value differences between the two narratives. Teacher educators can then facilitate dialogue with their students about these differences, probing students to recognize the cultural foundations of their expectations for families.

Cultural continua represent the range of potential social behaviors and connected values that all individuals, including family members and pre-service teachers, might enact through cultural participation. Exposure and analysis of cultural continua for social values and behavior may be beneficial in helping pre-service teachers recognize the varied and valid ways culture is expressed (Cheatham & Santos, 2011; Lynch & Hanson, 2011). Pre-service teachers may benefit from recognition of the range of possibilities along these continua such as strict or loose orientations toward time; individualist or interdependent orientations toward cultural values; and nuclear or networked orientations toward family structure (Lynch & Hanson, 2011). Pre-service teachers can map their own behaviors onto these continua, analyzing the ways in which their behaviors differ between contexts such as home and school. Reflecting on these differences can highlight for pre-service teachers the diverse, legitimate ways culture is expressed (Cheatham & Santos, 2011). Pre-service teachers can then guide their EC/EI/ECSE students to attend to these differences, probing students to recognize the cultural foundations of their expectations for families.

Teacher educators can take a number of actions toward strengthening pre-service teachers’ understanding of the diverse, legitimate uses of language. When pre-service teachers reflect on their own language use, they may be more aware of pre-existing attitudes toward language. To help pre-service teachers form linguistic self-awareness, teacher educators can allow time for reflection on personal interaction styles by debriefing conversational efforts and behaviors following course discussions (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Lupi & Tong, 2001). Providing pre-service teachers with experiences to step outside their linguistic comfort zone can also be beneficial in understanding the diverse and legitimate ways language is used. Role-playing conversations with families from linguistically diverse backgrounds may help pre-service teachers recognize dominant communication patterns (Harry, 2008; Keengwe, 2010). Semester-long assignments (e.g., home visits, interviews) in which pre-service teachers interact and partner with families from linguistically diverse backgrounds can be especially rich in raising linguistic awareness (García et al., 2010; Keengwe, 2010). Given family consent, pre-service teachers can video or audio record and analyze a conversation. Teacher educators can then guide their EC/EI/ECSE students to attend to families’ subtle facial expressions, use interviewing techniques to clarify understanding, and provide wait time in conversation during their interactions with families; pre-service teachers can identify linguistic processes, which contribute to pragmatic inferences about family attitudes and characteristics (Cheatham & Santos, 2011). Pre-service teachers can gain insights into the linguistic resources that
families bring to partnerships when they can see their own linguistic resources and their uses in context. Interacting with families from linguistically diverse backgrounds can support pre-service teachers to build awareness and practice strategies needed for inclusive, democratic dialogue with diverse families.

In addition, when teacher educators cultivate experiences for pre-service teachers to examine their own linguistic behaviors and assumptions, they open spaces for pre-service teachers to critically look at the oppressive ways in which language can function. For instance, teacher candidates can analyze the discourses and dominant linguistic values that play out in educational arenas (Ayers, 2014). Acknowledging the dominant use of standard English and English as a first language in EC/EI/ECSE programs in contrast to language use at home and community can help teachers self-reflect on linguistic advantage and disadvantage that may influence their communication with linguistically diverse families (Delpit, 2006). Case studies or vignettes that highlight the ways in which individual families have been marginalized based on differences in language use may help pre-service teachers to brainstorm ways to inclusively reach out to individual families.

Furthermore, looking at expert discourses and power structures in conversation can encourage pre-service teachers to take an inclusive, democratic stance toward cross-cultural partnership. Teacher educators can emphasize that pre-service teachers should assume the role of learner, as opposed to expert, when conversing with family from diverse backgrounds (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). Critically comparing conversation transcripts of educators and English-speaking families with the conversations of educators and families for whom English is a second language may help pre-service teachers identify missed opportunities for inclusive, democratic partnerships (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2012; Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). Finally, pre-service teachers may also benefit from studying models and examples of successful dialogue with families from diverse backgrounds (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Concretely demonstrating the principles of inclusive, democratic partnerships can help pre-service teachers understand the practical possibilities of equitable interactions with families. Close inspection of language use in context can familiarize pre-service teachers with more inclusive, democratic ways of using language.

**Conclusion**

Pre-service teachers face complex challenges in cross-culturally partnering with families. Taking an inclusive, democratic approach can support more successful partnerships between pre-service teachers and families from diverse backgrounds. As pre-service teachers prepare for EC/EI/ECSE settings, teacher education programs can promote the skills teacher candidates need to facilitate cross-cultural family partnerships. To this end, teacher educators can embrace more thorough conceptualizations of culture and language. By doing so, teacher educators have the potential to influence pre-service teachers’ ability to collaborate with families from diverse backgrounds, resulting in meaningful cross-cultural family–professional partnerships.

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