CULTURAL COMPETENCE: NEW FRONTIERS

The Child and Adolescent Service System cultural competence model emerged in the mid-1980's as many systems and agencies redoubled their efforts to enhance services to culturally diverse populations. This increased interest in improving services to culturally diverse groups is attributable to a variety of factors including: (a) changing demographics; (b) greater acknowledgment that culture is a factor in the helping process; and (c) recognition that many professionals are not trained to provide service to diverse populations. Accordingly, various child and youth service delivery systems have mobilized to provide specific activities to promote cultural competence.

Professionals in the child welfare field now recognize: the need for more foster and adoptive homes of color, that children of color often end up in more restrictive settings, and that children are allowed to drift in foster care and not be permanently placed (Edelman, 1987). The juvenile justice field is dealing with such issues as minority overrepresentation in that system, more violent offenses being perpetrated by youth (often involving firearms), and the increased prevalence of female offenders (Mann-Richey, 1993). Maternal and child health professionals are working to: lower infant mortality rates, reduce the abuse of alcohol and other drugs by expectant mothers and families, better understand culturally diverse help-seeking practices, eliminate recalcitrant childhood diseases (e.g., polio, tuberculosis), and acknowledge diverse perspectives of health and illness (Randall-David, 1989).

In children's mental health, the issues include: the development of culturally appropriate diagnostic and treatment approaches, identification of effective outreach efforts to culturally diverse communities and utilization of culturally diverse natural helpers, eradication of overrepresentation in more restrictive settings (including juvenile justice settings), and the evaluation of culturally competent services and programs. Clearly, everyone has their work cut out for them.

One exciting development in the area of cultural diversity is the growing number of journal articles and books that address the topic. Agencies and organizations are beginning to develop their own libraries, as well as bibliographic and other instructional materials that promote greater competence.

For example, the Office for Substance Abuse Prevention has launched the first in a series of cultural competence publications "to promote the development and dissemination of a scientific knowledge base that assists prevention program evaluators and practitioners in working with multicultural communities" (Orlandi, Weston & Epstein, 1992, p. iii).

In the field of child welfare, the Child Welfare League of America developed and published the Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Instrument (Child Welfare League of America, 1993) to help agencies assess their own progress. Once 100 assessments are completed by member agencies, an analysis of aggregate data will be published (Child Welfare League of America, 1994).

With respect to training, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau has convened training activities that are very responsive to the cultural realities and needs of mothers and young children of color. The Juvenile justice and Delinquency Prevention Office has initiated demonstration projects and other activities to inform both professionals and non-professionals alike in how one begins to reclaim children leaning toward youth gangs or otherwise delinquent activity.

In many communities across the country little-known resources exist in the form of Pow Wows, Cinco de Mayo celebrations, Martin Luther King holiday observances, and Asian New Year festivals. Moreover, places of worship are also key locations at which good information and expertise about a given cultural group can be sought.

The caveat, however, is evident in the acknowledgment that cultural competence is not new. It still needs to be infused into the fabric of many of America's key institutions. For example, there are few mandatory courses on diversity at colleges and universities at either the undergraduate or graduate levels. Many systems are still struggling to recruit, hire and retain workers of color. And, research has only scratched the surface with respect to groups of color in
terms of within group diversity. Much of our thinking about diversity is based on media portrayals of pathology in families and not empirically validated strengths and coping techniques.

There is a great deal of work to be done as this society enters the twenty-first century. Beyond the many systemwide or disciplinary-specific activities, many local opportunities exist to promote cultural competence. Some agencies have initiated efforts that can involve natural helpers and leaders, as well as diverse professionals, consumers and family members to further this agenda. Agency or bureau-based task groups and cultural competence committees are emerging offering those interested a role to play.

Lastly, we all have to remain vigilant in assessing our personal biases in the organizations and institutions in which we work. While conditions for groups of color and other cultural groups are arguably at a critical juncture, we all have a role to play in assuring that the issues do not get lost or trivialized. Now is a good time to develop the commitment and dedication needed to eliminate barriers to culturally competent service delivery to children, youth and their families that assures that their culture, race and class are taken into account. Becoming more aware of service delivery issues affecting diverse populations is a way of staying both professionally ethical and personally employable as America grows ever more diverse.

References and Additional Sources of Information:


Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Office, Department of Justice, 633 Indiana Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20531; (202) 307-5911; (202) 514-6382 (fax).


Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services, 5600 Fishers Lane, Room 1805, Rockville, Maryland 20857; (301) 4432170; (301) 443-1797 (fax).
