

Jill McFarren Avilés and Erika Amadee Flores

# Hearing All Voices

Culturally Responsive  
Coaching in Early Childhood



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In memory of my parents, who taught me the power  
of listening, and to my husband and children for their  
unwavering encouragement and support to follow my dreams.

—Jill

To my beloved parents, and to all the amazing early  
childhood professionals who are fueled with passion  
to make a positive impact in the lives of young children.  
May your voices always be heard.

—Erika



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## Foreword

Adriana is a little teary this morning. She had a difficult time saying goodbye to her mama at drop-off. She is new to this multicultural Head Start room of eighteen- to twenty-four-month-old toddlers that I have the joy of working with this year. Her tender feelings have been apparent to all of us this past week as she adjusts to the strange, new space, all of the unfamiliar people, and the sounds of the adults speaking languages different from those her family uses. A teacher gently guides Adriana to the breakfast table to join the group. Fellow student Ester seems to know what will help. She eagerly leaves her seat and goes to the shelf to find Adriana's family photo and brings it to her. Adriana gratefully accepts, and her teary face seems to relax a little bit.

After breakfast the two children play next to each other at the sand table, where Adriana reciprocates Ester's earlier helpfulness and holds out a cup for Ester to use. Ester smiles and begins to fill the cup; then she turns and hands it back to Adriana. Passing the cup back and forth becomes a game of "we help each other," which the children happily play over and over again.

The next day the children are playing in the gym, where there is an empty row of cubbies up against the wall. Maya, who has already had her second birthday, is skillfully climbing in and out of the cubbies when Ester comes over to join her. Maya sees that Ester is struggling to pull herself up and thoughtfully reaches out to offer Ester a hand. Ester readily accepts this small support. The children join together side by side in the cubbies, peeking around the dividers and celebrating with giggles when they see each other's smiling faces.

On another day, I notice Anthony keenly focused on playing with a shape sorter, struggling yet determined to fit wooden blocks into the matching spaces of the larger block. Ester sees his difficulty and comes over to help. She takes a block from his hand and demonstrates what to do. Anthony screeches, "No, no!" Ester keeps insisting he do it her way, despite his clear, strong desire to figure this task out for himself. Ester finally gets the message and leaves him to his work.

I collect many small stories like these of children's natural skills and dispositions for empathy, compassion, belonging, and fairness. These moments give me hope for humans, as it seems clear—and research suggests—that young children

are born with a strong desire to know, understand, and help others in ways that build equitable relationships.

I am starting the foreword of this book about culturally responsive coaching with these stories because I believe the children's ideas and actions in these moments can inspire adults to draw on our own compassionate nature in our work as culturally responsive coaches. The children's skills and dispositions in these stories also closely reflect the wisdom offered by the authors, Jill McFarren Avilés and Erika Amadee Flores, for the work of coaches in this beautiful book. The reflective questions that follow give you a taste of the ideas the authors offer in the book.

Can you identify the interactions in these observations of children that you might draw upon as a culturally responsive coach? Here are some possibilities:

- Ester understands that Adriana needs comfort in this strange, new place. How does your work as a coach acknowledge, celebrate, and center the culture of the people you work with?
- Adriana wants to show how she appreciated Ester's compassion by passing the cup of sand back and forth. How do you practice reciprocity in your work as a coach, joining together with the people you coach and sharing ideas, helping, and learning from each other?
- Maya closely observes and identifies Ester's struggle to climb and responds with the small support Ester needs to complete her goal. Their connection is strengthened as they share the joy of finding each other in the cubby spaces together. How can you closely observe and come to understand what will be useful for the people you coach to find their own way? How willing are you to accept help in your work as a coach? How do you feel when what you offer makes a difference? How do you share the joy of the connection you have made from the work you have done together?
- Anthony has clear ideas about what he is doing and how he wants to do it. Even though Ester's desire to help is admirable, she insistently tries to show him the way even when he is adamant that he wants to do it his own way. How do you ensure that your coaching supports people to do things that they feel strongly about in ways that support their growth rather than taking over for them?

- In all of these stories, even the spicy moments between Anthony and Ester, belonging, compassion, fairness, and equitable relationships are the essence of the children's focus. How do you put these important values at the center of your work as a coach?

The book is about cultivating equitable relationships, focusing on hearing and illuminating the voices of people whose voices are marginalized in the early childhood profession. The authors include a multitude of meaningful ways to help you and those you coach to identify, connect, and celebrate your own rich culture and values, while negotiating the reality of the white dominant culture of the profession. They put authentic, respectful relationships front and center in all of their approaches. The book offers rich descriptions and celebrations of different cultural values and experiences. The stories of the authors' own experiences of not fitting in and their love of being immersed in different cultural perspectives are powerful. They both describe their feelings of being invisible and not knowing how they fit in when they have been in a culture different from their own. They use their own life journeys, as well as their work as coaches in a variety of settings, to share ideas for getting to know your own culture and the culture of the people you mentor and to show how this affects the coaching process. Their life stories reflect why culturally responsive coaching is so necessary for negotiating the painful difficulties but also for engaging with joy and pride. As I read this manuscript, I often found I could picture myself in the coaching moments they describe.

In this era of standardization based in white supremacy and the push to prove that what we do with children has the "desired learning outcomes," more and more coaches are being hired and trained to help educators achieve these results. This book will be particularly useful for coaches who are working in these settings with tools that require you to gather data and meet an abundance of the standardized requirements, assessments, and quality rating scales that permeate our white-dominated profession. Often these tools are connected to funding, so it is serious business for teachers and providers to meet these demands. The authors approach this work with attention to building relationships and the culture and values of the people they are coaching. They desire to cultivate a process of inquiry that promotes rethinking how the definition of quality could look using a diverse and equitable lens. They offer a paradigm shift surrounding



who owns the knowledge, based on one's role, language, identity, and economic circumstances. They remind us to question who gets to define what quality early childhood education is. Who is asking the questions and determining the answers? Whose voices are missing? Who is being marginalized and harmed by our current definitions of quality, and how do we coach people to get there?

I was honored that Erika and Jill invited me to write the foreword to their important new book. I was also reluctant to write it. I am a white woman who has been in the early childhood field for a very long time, and my voice along with other white people's voices have dominated and created an early childhood profession that is centered in whiteness and promotes white supremacy. This fact has produced deep inequities, particularly for black and brown and non-English-speaking children and adults.

I have come to understand that it is time for me and other white people to step aside to make room for other voices and work to decenter whiteness and counter white supremacy in our profession. Agreeing to write this foreword, and again centering a white voice to begin this book, seemed contradictory. Yet I have come to understand that for women of color to openly name white supremacy can be unsafe. As a white woman, I don't have to be fearful of a response when I speak the importance of countering white supremacy and send an urgent call for equity. We want white people to read and use the ideas in this book. Unfortunately, people may still value white voices above others, so my intention as I write this foreword is to illuminate the voices that are often made invisible. I hope my endorsement will propel you to use this book, to join in the work to counter the inequities in our profession, and to uplift the marginalized voices of the people who make up the bulk of our workforce.

For me the visionary possibilities this book invites are this: when we seek, value, celebrate, and genuinely center the voices, experiences, and interpretations of quality from diverse communities, we might be able to counter the inequities and harm that our dominant white culture has enabled. I look forward to more stories from Erika and Jill as they continue their work to reimagine and make visible diverse and equitable approaches to quality early education that can benefit us all.

—Deb Curtis

# Acknowledgments

## Jill

Thank you to all the coaches and early childhood leaders who have shared their wisdom and commitment to set educators up for success, and to the early childhood educators who have trusted me to accompany their professional journey. You have affirmed the power of partnership and meaningful reflective practice in driving sustainable change. A special thank-you goes out to the Child Development Home (CDH) early childhood educators and Briya Public Charter School staff in Washington, DC, and the Early Head Start and Head Start educators and partners in Fairfax County, Virginia. Your relentless commitment to children's and families' learning and well-being, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a heart-given gift that will positively impact their lives for years to come.

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To my colleagues and friends with whom I've worked internationally, thanks for exemplifying the importance of humility and listening to the voices of children and community leaders. Our stories may be different, but they all are equally important to hear.

Melissa York, our editor at Redleaf Press, thank you for your thoughtful questions and thorough editing of our book. Your keen ability to read our minds and understand what we meant to say helped us get our thoughts across so that they could be heard and be meaningful to others. Renee Hammes, thank you for your creativity, patience, and passion to make sure the cover design conveyed the messages of the book. Deb Curtis, thank you for your thought-provoking wisdom and passion to really see children, along with your encouragement and moral support to submit our manuscript to Redleaf Press.

And last, to Erika for the many rich conversations that prompted us to write this book together and for your unwavering drive to make this a better world today and in the future.

## **Erika**

I want to thank my parents, Irma, Norma, Jena, Jesus, and Roberto, for their lifelong love and their dedication to providing the best life possible to all of their children. You are the foundations that supported me in writing this book. Thank you to all of my siblings for continuing to honor the cultural and linguistic heritage that our parents have cultivated in us.

I want to thank my husband, Mario, for his consistent support, love, and encouragement. Thank you for being with me during every step in the creation of this book!

Thank you to all of my clients who have allowed me to be part of their professional journey in the field of early childhood education. It is the cultural and linguistic diversity of each and every single organization, coach, teacher, director,

administrator, child, and family I have supported throughout my professional life that inspired the ideas in this book.

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Thank you, Jill, for cowriting this book with me. Creating this book together and offering it as a gift to the field of early childhood has been a wonderful journey.



# Introduction

We are so happy you are here! This book is about you. It is about your coaching clients and the rich cultural heritage that is an integral part of who we are in early childhood. It is about the diverse young children and their families whom your program serves. By diverse, we are referring to the wide range of racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds we encounter, as well as the environmental settings, the educational background of educators, the ages of the children, and the differing needs of each family.

This book was written for you and for your clients, for the unique values, beliefs, and practices that you as a coach and each client you work with bring to the field of early childhood education. You have your own unique culture, and your clients have their own unique culture. Let us deepen our understanding about our cultures and use the strength that each one brings to grow our field of early childhood education and be of better and more equitable and responsive service to children, families, and society.

Coaching is one of the strongest tools available to improve the quality of early childhood education. We define *quality* in early childhood education as the ability to understand and connect with the child's essence and to support children's innate drives as they develop within their social and cultural context. We propose that culturally responsive coaching follows a parallel process. We know that by working one-on-one with clients, we are able as coaches to provide individualized support that can help them grow and provide better service to young children and their families.

This book was born after a series of conversations with our clients and colleagues in early childhood about our field and current coaching practices. We hope that as you read through this book, it provokes reflection and builds awareness of your cultural beliefs and practices and that of your clients, at both a systems or organizational level and a personal one. Our profession is culturally and linguistically rich, and it mirrors the diversity found in the United States and across the globe. When we celebrate this diversity with our clients, we set the stage to nurture our connection and our innate drive to learn and evolve together.

We realize that many of the current coaching practices put pressure at various levels to comply with assessments and standards in the name of improving the quality of early childhood. Many of these assessments do not take into consideration the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the field. When we see each other as equals and value everyone's differences, we can move away from a cookie-cutter approach that is based on dominant values. These dominant practices may have the best intentions, but because they are not responsive to diversity, they end up stifling learning and development because of the heavy emphasis on checking the box to comply.

In our current societal paradigm, using data to quantify any intervention has taken a huge priority. We know that as a coach, you likely face pressure to support your clients (teachers, directors, educators, and so forth) to increase their effectiveness in assessed areas in a specific amount of time. Though this push may have incredibly positive and helpful goals, it may also be putting unnecessary stress on coaching and early childhood overall. This added strain may cause coaches and educators to lose sight of the high-level view of why and what they are doing. Coaching models become focused on showing quantifiable outcomes related to the program, sometimes striving for just a few more points on an assessment tool or simply checking off for compliance. And sometimes this results in the individual who is being coached, your client, getting lost in the process.

We ask: Can coaching to the tests truly bring long-term sustainable change? Do the tools used to assess quality take into account the diverse makeup of our field? Is the data used to show compliance, or does it serve as a tool for reflection and understanding? What would be possible if we took the time to connect to the culture of our clients to deepen our relationships and to be truly attuned to our clients' needs?

It takes a combination of art and science to find the right balance between achieving set goals while at the same time making sustainable change in your clients' professional development and their potential to positively impact the field of early childhood education. If you really want to help in the field of early childhood, change needs to be meaningful, sustainable, and client-driven, based on a client's own goals for growth as a professional. It must include change in yourself as a coach, in your client, and at the organizational level. Sustainable change means that the knowledge and competencies built through the coaching relationship continue to grow. Whatever the client has learned or gained during

the coaching relationship has become a new practice that will last a long time, not dependent on or restricted to what one person says.

The early childhood field is richly diverse in terms of culture, educational backgrounds, settings, and institutional goals. Thus, there is a sharpening focus on cultural responsiveness and equity in early childhood to ensure that diversity is an asset and equity is achieved. As a coach, you may be searching for tools and support to mirror culturally responsive and relationship-based practices. You may have the understanding that early childhood professionals need to make sustainable change while respecting diversity and fostering equity. Diversity and inclusivity are strengths, and they must be upheld if we are to address the inequalities that inhibit both young and adult learners from achieving their full potential. We embrace this philosophy as a fundamental principle in supporting educators in their ongoing professional learning process. It is through the culturally responsive coaching process that educators have the opportunity to feel heard as individuals and break down the barriers to learning they face, no matter their background, race, language, gender identity, anatomical sex, gender expression, or sexual orientation.

This book is a guide that offers tools to help you be much more responsive to your coaching clients' culture. Our goal is to help increase cultural responsiveness so that we can build equity and celebrate the uniqueness of individuals in our society. Our book is about making visible and celebrating our human connections and hearing and learning from all voices. Thus we understand ourselves and value each other as equals to ultimately support children in reaching their optimal potential!

We want to model how to be self-reflective about one's professional practice, developing a specific plan to reach meaningful, authentic goals. This practice focuses on discovering our strengths and the little steps that we take to get to that goal, implementing it, being patient and understanding of ourselves, and seeing the results. We support the client in learning how to go through a similar process with themselves even when they do not have a coach available.

We developed our culturally responsive coaching framework from our own experience, and it is supported by research as well. Our framework focuses on implementing practical strategies to increase equity in early education through day-to-day interactions, supporting educators to understand the importance of equity in their interactions with children and families.



After working in the field of early childhood education extensively, wearing multiple hats, we concluded that we must ensure educators' perspectives are holistic, culturally responsive, and strength-based, three necessary ingredients to enhance the lives of young children and their families and contribute to equity in early childhood settings. We are writing this guidebook to support you as an early childhood coach to get inspiration, knowledge, and tools to help you as you guide your clients from diverse backgrounds in early childhood settings. This book weaves together the latest in the science of change, brain development, and adult learning, and offers practical "how to" ideas to transfer this information into practice.

Our approach is to engage in a conversation with you and take an inclusive and equity-focused view of your role as a catalyst for change. The responsive strategies can be implemented in center-based and home-based early childhood settings. We present case studies from our experience and others' in working with a diversity of educators, highlighting the importance of taking a holistic, culturally responsive, strength-based approach and connecting work to real life. This guidebook is intended to be a pleasant reading experience for you, with space for your reflections and rich content to bring inspiration to your work as a coach in the field of early childhood education.

The conversations, reflective questions, and strategies presented in this book aim to bridge the voices of the educators who influence the lives of children and families with the sociocultural environment we live in, which is ever evolving. We hope that it invites you to reflect on your experiences and open yourself to possibly some difficult conversations about what it means to be culturally responsive. The ultimate goal is to make a difference in the lives of children and their families in an equitable way while listening to everyone's voices.

## **Our Story**

We, the authors, first met one day in a little restaurant in a small town together with other colleagues over dinner. With a delicious glass of wine, we chatted in Spanish, a language we naturally fall back on, about early childhood and the work we do in the field. We found a lot of interconnectedness between our work as well as our philosophy and values in the field. Over the years, we've discussed our reflections, coaching practices, and what was working for us and our clients. After presenting together at several conferences, we decided to create this book

in response to the current cultural climate and the needs in our field of early childhood education.

## **Erika's Story**

My passion for early childhood education began from my own early experiences as a young child. I was born in Chicago, Illinois, to parents who had recently immigrated to the United States from Mexico. Since my birth, I have lived in a multicultural context and have felt the influence of other countries. When I was a young girl, we spoke Spanish at home and very little English. It wasn't until I began preschool that I actually started learning the English language. I loved my preschool experience, which was in a Head Start program. I was a lucky child, as my teachers were warm, loving, and welcoming to my family and to me. However, at that time there were not as many resources as today to support families who speak a language other than English. I remember that from early on there was something quite different about myself and my family compared to others. I realized that my family's culture was not part of the dominant or mainstream culture.

As I grew up, there was very little representation of my family's heritage and history. I remember at some point even feeling embarrassed to speak Spanish or to say that my family was from Mexico. The dominant society was sending the message that diversity was not valued. This was quite unfortunate. Then, when I was eleven years old, my mom, my siblings, and I moved back to Mexico. It was a very difficult change because I had already put down strong roots in my social identity as an American and had to learn a mainstream culture for a second time.

What a different world I found when I moved to Zacatecas, Mexico! To my surprise, I loved it. The town was rich in art, cultural events, and colorful traditions. I was able to immerse myself in fine arts, an opportunity I had not been given as a young child growing up in a low-income family in the United States. In Mexico at that time there were many free programs to help children learn about the arts and other cultural interests. I was able to embrace my family's Mexican cultural heritage while still maintaining my social identity as an American. At around that time my interest in human development also blossomed. By age thirteen, I realized that I wanted to dedicate myself to helping improve others' lives. I was pretty sure I would pursue psychology, as I had visited a counselor for support as my family and I went through difficult life circumstances.

I truly admired the counselor's work and the positive impact she'd had on my family. I have clear memories of times when I was not properly supported as a bicultural child as I continued traveling across the border between the United States and Mexico during my formative years. Then and now I think of the countless other children going through the same experience, whose families have immigrated from every country in the world. I realized that I wanted to dedicate myself to a field in which I could help humans develop their potential and help prevent problems in society before they arose, and I discovered I could achieve that in early childhood education.

As the years passed, I was further immersed in different cultures. I became an exchange student in Budapest, Hungary, and then explored other nearby countries, over time becoming a seasoned world traveler. Consistently I've tried to take a nontouristic approach when I visit other countries to learn about other cultures. I really try to understand the different perspectives and the values that each culture brings. My love of cultures and my love for humanity fuels my passion in the field of early childhood education, and thus this book was born.

My professional journey took me to get a degree in psychology and later a master's degree in instructional leadership in early childhood education. Throughout the years, I've worn many hats in the field, supporting culturally and linguistically diverse programs as a teacher, researcher, trainer, coach, university instructor, consultant, presenter, and writer. During the time that I have worn all of these hats, I have always been seeking to find and implement the most innovative and impactful tools and approaches to help children and their families.

Then I decided to start my own company. I founded ChildrenFlow, an organization whose mission is to develop each child's unique being and deepen their interconnectedness with the world that surrounds them. ChildrenFlow fulfills its mission by providing impactful professional development products and services to early childhood initiatives to help build a better and happier world. I am committed to supporting initiatives in early childhood that respond to the rich variety of language and cultures in the United States. Not only does this colorful diversity reflect the children and families who enter our programs, but it is also a reflection of the teachers, assistants, directors, coaches, administrators, and all the way up to policy makers. My hope is that this book that Jill and I have written together will provoke further conversations and questions about advancing our field of early childhood education and building a more equitable world by being culturally and linguistically responsive.

## Jill's Story

I am bicultural and bilingual, and I have not always felt that I fit in any one culture. My life began in Bolivia, the third of five children of American and Austrian missionary parents who valued equity, relationships, and respecting people for who they are. Influenced by my family and birthplace and the neighborhoods where I grew up, my multicultural environment gave me unique insight into seeing the world through different lenses. My early experiences in Bolivia, surrounded by a diverse community, learning when and how to use two languages, laid the foundation for my work in finding the unique gifts that we each have to offer. Every three to four years, we moved to the United States so we could immerse ourselves for a year in the US educational system. It was also an opportunity for my parents to share their story and raise awareness with sponsors about their work with communities and schools in Bolivia. I often wondered why the sponsors were so fascinated with something that was so mundane to me. Now I understand that we were looking at life through different lenses. After twenty-six years of service, my parents, who were in their mid-fifties, decided it was time to leave Bolivia and settle in the States. I was old enough to see them struggle to find jobs that were fulfilling and in which their unique skills of community mobilization in a very different cultural context would be valued. They also had to adjust to commuting long distances by car. Their persistence and belief in themselves and others were the cornerstone of their resilience!

At times it was not easy shifting between the different cultures, feeling confused about who I was and how I fit into this complex system of diverse beliefs and traditions. Although I didn't know it at the time, the experiences of being Bolivian and American prepared me to understand how our individual perspective on the world shapes our reality. I learned that sometimes we need to put a hold on who we are so we can stop and truly listen to other people's voices. It taught me that the filters we build from very early on limit our ability to be open and respect the ideas of others.

Over the course of my professional career, first as a Head Start teacher and then in a variety of roles working for US and international organizations, I met inspiring leaders whose passion was to serve others and foster compassion and resilience in those they led. The resilience came from affirming their strengths, building ownership through reflective questioning, and not being afraid to show their vulnerability or learn from their mistakes. These gifts they shared inspired me to build on and celebrate the strengths of others while fostering

self-awareness and compassion. I also learned a great deal from children, especially in working closely with infants and toddlers. Their wonder at the world and with the simplest and most mundane experiences has taught me to feel awe at the beauty and wonder we often take for granted. Their innate drive to build relationships and to learn has become an essential part of what I strive to instill in others.

I started McFarren Avilés & Associates to partner with diverse organizations that are making an impact in the lives of children and their families. A major thrust of our work is fostering leadership and passion for lifelong learning in the Spanish-speaking early childhood community, especially with family child care educators. Engaging early childhood professionals in a language that is familiar and representative of their culture bridges a huge gap of knowledge and human connection. The energy, richness of the conversations, and overall well-being that we experience in the coaching and professional learning sessions is like no other. Synergy is created in a space where diverse voices are heard, respected, and lifted. I know that this positive energy is passed on to others through interactions with children and families. This book weaves these experiences together, along with Erika's, and aims to mirror the culturally responsive strategies that have been the backbone of our work. I hope the conversations permeating this book accompany you as a coach and offer the opportunity to reflect on your own journey as a servant leader striving to make lasting positive change.

## **How This Book Is Organized**

We begin this guidebook with an overview of our philosophy around diversity, culture, and integrated approaches, which sets the stage for the rest of the chapters. The next chapter focuses on you as a coach, as the person you have the most control over. We highlight the importance of getting to know yourself, including what drives you and what your biases are, and how these qualities influence learning and connecting with others. We include strategies to practice self-compassion and being a servant leader. These are the foundational competencies needed to be a culturally responsive coach. This self-reflection mirrors the process you can then use with your clients to build a trusting relationship. The third chapter focuses on the client and how their experiences, values, language, culture, and professional goals can influence the coaching relationship. Understanding your client's culture at a deep level is essential for culturally responsive coaching. Chapter 4 looks into

the culture of the diverse settings where your clients work. Understanding the setting will provide you with tools to be culturally responsive through your coaching. These first chapters set the stage to explore what coaching is about, the science and research behind strength-based coaching and how to do so in a culturally responsive way. Chapters 5 and onward emphasize the importance of a culturally responsive and equity-focused approach and share strategies and resources that you can use at different moments of the iterative coaching cycle, including the use of data from an equity and culturally responsive lens and how to support the resilience of your clients.

Throughout this guidebook, we use the word *client* instead of *coachee*. The primary reason for this is that it changes the perspective. The teacher or director or early childhood professional whom you are supporting as a coach is your client. And as with any client, we want to be very attuned to their specific needs and to be there to serve and support them as they reach their goals. This requires us to quiet our agenda and connect deeply with our client so we can support them in reaching their potential and their dreams in the field of early childhood education. We hope this book provides you with many insights, opportunities for reflection, and practical and actionable strategies to support equity and sustainable long-term change through culturally responsive coaching.



## Cultural Responsiveness for Sustainable Change

All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions—and society—so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom.

—Bell Hooks

### **Voices from the Field: Erika**

Walking through the city of Mumbai, I saw all the colorful shades of the rainbow. Bright pink, orange, blue, turquoise—all the colors that you can imagine! Women walked around with gorgeous shawls; sounds of birds, waves, traffic, and energetic pedestrians surrounded me as I walked by the famous arch of the Gateway of India. The monument stands, strongly constructed, reflecting the rays of the morning light as it testifies to the long history of these ancient lands. The aromas of spices and the sea brought a dreamlike state to the moment. It was my third day in India. Already I had visited several neighborhoods filled with tall apartment buildings, small shops, children playing freely on the sidewalks, and humongous statues of the Hindu god Ganesh that were heavily decorated with flowers and other offerings. The residents were celebrating the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi. I was told that the god Ganesh is the deva of intellect and wisdom, and he removes all obstacles. Children's and families' faces were full of smiles and light. I was delighted! Why is it that sometimes we have to visit a country that is so different from our own to be able to be more aware of our culture and others?

For years I had been attracted to India. This interest began when I started learning yoga as a teenager in Mexico, including its philosophical roots and the



healing approaches of Ayurveda. Throughout the years, I had soaked up the country's long and ancient history. So when a friend invited me to accompany him on a visit to friends in India to study its culture, art, and philosophy, I did not hesitate.

In Ahmadabad we stayed with local friends in a suburb outside the city center composed of tall apartment buildings, clustered one after the other. The streets were full of life. Our hosts went above and beyond to provide us with the most enjoyable experiences. They cooked immense amounts of food, showed us the highlights of their city, and even organized a party at their apartment. Overwhelmed by so many stimuli from the day and the party, I went to my bedroom to try to get some rest, only to encounter several female party guests who walked into my bedroom to chat, fix their hair, and use the bathroom at the end of the room even as I was lying in the bed trying to nap. I was surprised! It seemed as though it was normal in their family to enter another woman's bedroom at any time without even knocking on the door. I laughed and rejoiced at the surprises that had arisen during this trip as I deepened my understanding of a completely unfamiliar culture.

Getting to know my hosts at a deeper level and developing a trusting relationship helped open doors so I could go beyond a merely touristic understanding of India. For example, one early morning I awoke to find one of my hosts reading the Bhagavad Gita. She translated a short part of this sacred Hindu scripture to me as we sipped tea together. I felt my soul uplifted. She also shared her values, how she raises her children, what would comprise a quality education for them, and how happy her arranged marriage has turned out for both her and her husband. Her culture fascinates me, and it opened up my heart to connect deeply with someone who seemed so different from me.

About two weeks into our stay, we visited Agra, where the Taj Mahal is located. It was evening. Soon I was to return to the United States. I escaped to our hotel's quiet swimming pool. There, as I swam peacefully, I reflected on my coaching clients and my work in early childhood education. Coaching is at the heart of the professional work I do. I thought about all the teachers, directors, coaches, young children, and families associated with the organizations that I support. Many of my clients are a reflection of our current global world—an intermingling of a variety of countries, languages, religions, values, and customs.

I thought deeply on how culture affects our actions and the decisions we make and how it can motivate us for growth and change. Could we make an

impact in society by increasing our ability to respond to each and every person's history and culture? What positive impact could intentional cultural responsiveness have in coaching? Could coaching be more effective? How? I invite you to keep these questions in mind as we go through this chapter together.

### Reflective Questions

- What does culture mean to you?
- As a coach, why would it be relevant for you to understand your client's culture?
- What do you know about your client's culture?
- What role could cultural responsiveness play in coaching?
- How do you show cultural responsiveness to your clients?
- Have you ever had challenges with a client because of cultural differences?
- Has culture ever played a role in resistance to change—yours or your client's?

In this chapter, we will explore what culture is and how cultural responsiveness is essential for human development and for the field of early childhood education. We will discover what is meant by culture and cultural responsiveness, and see the role it plays in coaching. We will learn that everyone has culture, stemming from the beliefs, values, and practices that are unique to each person. We will also discuss how culturally responsive coaching can support equity and antidiscrimination in our society while showing respect for one another. One key focus of this chapter is an invitation to celebrate the diversity in early childhood and find ways through coaching to bring about sustainable change that positively impacts the lives of children and their families. This chapter lays the foundation for the rest of the book.

## Culture

You have probably heard the word *culture* a lot. It is one of those buzzwords used frequently in many spheres. But what does *culture* really mean? How does one acquire culture? What role does it play in a person's life? Let us take a closer look at how a human develops culturally.

When you look into a newborn child's eyes, you see a deep and beautiful being within—their unique essence. That young human already has temperament traits and interests, and they will pass through many developmental stages in life. A person's essence interacts with the external environment to fully develop their potential; this interaction is how culture is formed. The environment that influences the child's development is composed of their family, caregivers, neighborhood, community, religious organization, city, state, and nation, and these factors add up to each person's own particular culture.

Culture is composed of the beliefs, values, and perspectives that influence our behavior and the decisions we make. The word *culture* has its roots in the Latin term *colere*, which means to tend, to cultivate, or to help grow. Historically, each community or group of individuals has evolved and developed culturally according to their values and needs. These values and needs are influenced by factors such as historical-social context, environment, aspirations, dreams, and challenges. Cultures are constantly growing and changing based on the specific needs of each era, community, or individual.

Often we are unaware of our own culture. Culture is like the ocean, and we are the fish swimming in it, unaware that we are surrounded by water. We all live in our own ocean, our own culture. Our culture is a strong reflection of who we are. It is also imprinted by our ancestors, their struggles, their victories, and their dreams. Culture influences us every day. Paying attention to our own culture allows for more intentionality. We can be more aware of what helps us move in the direction of our goals or what holds us back from advancing. Chapter 2 focuses on being more aware of your own culture.

Each of your clients has a long cultural heritage that affects their work in the field of early childhood education. Your client's culture affects the actions, motivations, and perspectives that drive their work in the field. We cannot ignore culture as an element that affects our coaching services and outcomes, but it would be a difficult task to know each and every culture. Each person's culture is unique—even within the same family unit. Therefore, to understand the culture

of your client, you need to understand who they are as an individual. Chapter 3 takes a deeper look into how we can understand each client's culture.

Organizations and institutions also have their own culture, and this is certainly true in early childhood education. Initiatives to increase the quality of early care are influenced by specific values and perspectives. Our beliefs surrounding early childhood, our aspirations as a society, and our goals all influence the research, design, and implementation of programs. Many initiatives make efforts to root their decisions in science and research. However, even science cannot be fully free from culture's influence. The twentieth-century philosopher Thomas Kuhn deeply analyzed how science is influenced by the paradigms of its time. Our discoveries in science influence our culture, and our culture also influences science. They are interconnected.

Just think about the many approaches to early childhood education: constructivism, progressivism, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, and so on. Each arose from its historical and social context. Culture plays an active role in how we view and educate young children. In today's society in the United States, our philosophies surrounding the education of young children must evolve. Whose voices have been predominant in the current cultural values of early childhood programs? Whose voices are missing? Our society is ever becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse. Are these diverse voices being heard? Through coaching, how deeply are you listening to your client's culture?

We need to take culture into consideration if we are to fully support our clients. To do so, it is necessary to learn more deeply about our own culture, the program's culture, and the clients' culture to fully create a positive, lasting long-term change in the early years of young children.

## **Cultural Responsiveness**

In early childhood education, we promote being responsive to a child's needs and interests. It is called *responsiveness* because we observe what the child is doing or needs in the moment and, based on that observation, we respond with an action that is attuned to that child at that time. To respond to someone's culture involves understanding the culture of that person and using that understanding to respond to their needs and aspirations.

It is important to remember that this understanding of culture is *not* based on stereotypes of particular nations or populations, but rather it depends on

learning what has influenced a person's life and formed their habits, beliefs, aspirations, and values. Once we understand these cultural elements, we can then intentionally respond to truly support that person from a deep knowledge of who they are, the history they have lived, and where they want to go. Try to see the world from the client's perspective, listen, and put yourself in their shoes.

A specific competency related to cultural responsiveness is the ability to be interested in other cultures. It requires us to have curiosity. More specifically, to be culturally responsive to your clients requires being authentically interested in learning about their individual culture. Sometimes it may be uncomfortable to seek out information about different cultures because we don't want to offend others or seem silly. However, we invite you to be like a young child who is curious and asks questions without fear. In a similar way, you can also let your client know that you would like to learn about their culture and history to be able to better support them in your coaching relationship. You may also let them know that they can ask you questions about your own culture.

Even the most experienced world travelers who are constantly exposed to very unfamiliar cultures at times feel challenged to be open and learn about other ways of living. This is especially true when people from other cultures dress differently than you, speak a different language, or have a religion you know little about. It's okay if we sometimes feel uncomfortable because we don't want to insult someone or seem silly. It's okay to be vulnerable and not know everything. Developing a cultural responsiveness competency involves learning how to accept and embrace any vulnerability we feel in front of someone from a different culture.

Another essential element of culturally responsive competency is our ability to develop authentic relationships with people of diverse cultures. This means that we really get to know others and learn how to accept and respect their views, opinions, and perspectives. It doesn't mean that we must agree with everything we learn. We ourselves have our own particular culture, and we can share our values, dreams, and perspectives in a respectful way. However, our own culture should not be an impediment to developing a relationship in which we can collaborate harmoniously to reach common goals. Try to find ways to truly deepen client relationships based on mutual respect and acceptance of each other's culture. Dedicate time during your coaching sessions with your clients to learn deeply. Show interest and curiosity. Share your life and your own culture. Make connections between your own culture and life experiences.

Another element of cultural responsiveness is seeing the value that each culture offers and the social capital it adds to our world. By being open and curious and interested in your client's culture and sharing your own, you will be able to better support the client and therefore have a stronger impact in the lives of young children and their families.

## Coaching

As human beings, we are all evolving at many levels: at a personal level as well as at the level of the family, community, society, nation, and global international community. As we grow, helpers support us in our personal goals as well as in the overall goals of society. These helpers are parents, teachers, mentors, therapists, counselors, shamans, priests, pastors, and on and on. How can you as a coach take the role of an authentic helper or servant leader by connecting at a deep level with your client, responding intentionally to their culture?

If we are to play the role of a coach, to be truly effective in supporting the client's growth and development, our work must stem from a full understanding of the client's essence and culture. Imagine trying to cultivate grapes for a wine like a French Syrah but caring for the plant as if it were a Spanish albariño. That grapevine will not flourish as well as it could have, had we given ourselves the opportunity to understand it at a deep level. We would get only sour wine. To help the Syrah truly flourish into a wine that has reached its fullest potential involves understanding the soil, light, and irrigation requirements and the exact time of harvest, among many other factors. In the same way, to help an early childhood professional produce their best, to create transformational growth, we must understand that individual deeply.

Currently there are many models for coaching in early childhood education. The culturally responsive strategies that this guidebook offers can be applied in diverse coaching models. It might be that you are coaching within a model that will help teachers implement a certain curriculum or improve their interactions or their environments. Whatever the end goal that was provided to you as a coach is relevant and important. However, we encourage you to take the time to fully understand your client's culture, including their own goals in the field of early childhood. We also encourage you to have open conversations about your client's ideas regarding the different tools and methodologies you are required to use through your specific coaching model and program goals. For example, are there discrepancies between the coaching program and your client's cultural

perspectives regarding environments or certain adult-child interactions? What are their beliefs and experiences? Are the values of the program and your client aligned? Are there differences? If so, how can you support making your client's voice heard?

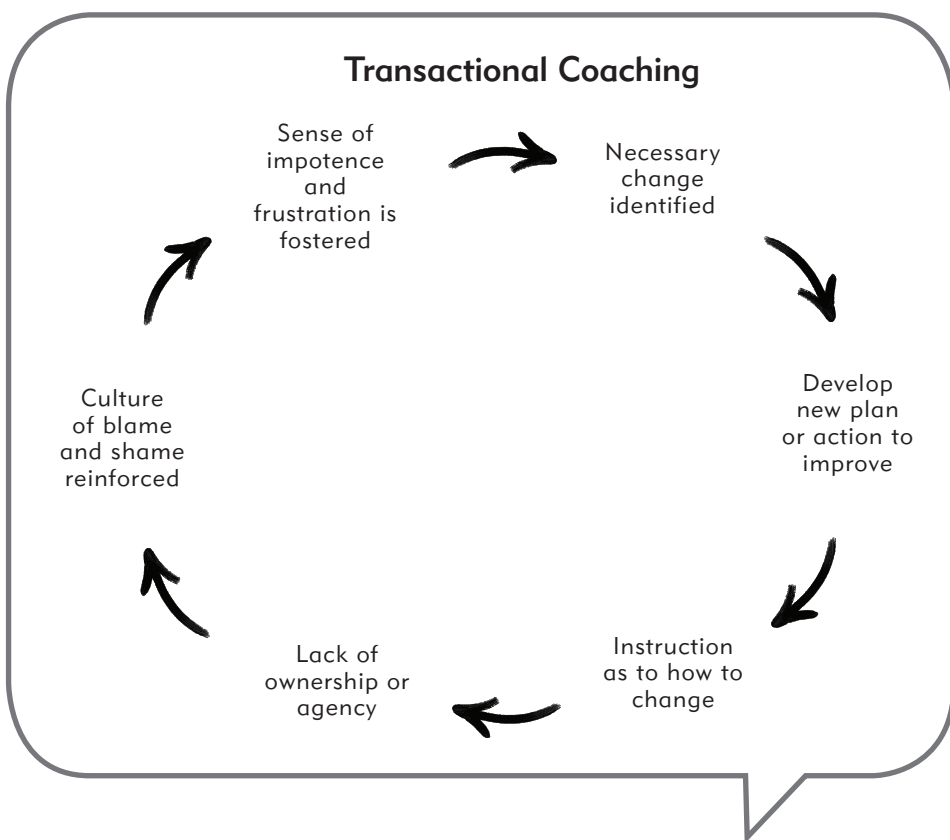
## **Cultural Responsiveness in Sustainable Change**

We direct our efforts as coaches, directors, or pedagogical leaders of early childhood professionals to ensure we are providing the highest quality educational experiences. By quality we refer to the process of nurturing the inner drive to learn and connect in young children and giving appropriate support to their families. Through research and science, our field has worked hard to uncover the essential ingredients of quality education, based on our current understanding of human development. We also know that when our society changes, so do our goals and aims and so do the ways we define and support quality. But from our current paradigm, we understand that interactions are key for young children and that the environment plays a huge role in development.

Often our role as coach involves supporting the client to learn about these research-based principles and to find ways to implement them in their practice. We must seek a balance between science and the goals of a particular program and the culture, beliefs, and perspectives of the client we are supporting. We must ask whether we are there to fully support the professional growth of our client or simply trying to shape that person so they comply and implement what the current research standards are saying. Will the client have buy-in if we are simply trying to mold them to fit standards? Without buy-in, we may find ourselves with a client who just nods their head yes to everything we say but their actions realign with their beliefs and perspectives once we leave. We may see them incorporate some ideas but only temporarily.

When coaching falls into patterns of this sort, it takes a transactional approach, like when you go to a grocery store to buy apples. You grab your apples, go to the cashier, pay, get your receipt, and go home. This type of interaction can be a waste of our time, the client's time, and the organization's resources. Transactional coaching sessions in early childhood education generally start with what the program perceives as a "necessary change" in the client's performance. Then a plan is developed to address this "necessary change." Instruction and guidance are provided for making this change, taking away the client's ownership and agency in their professional growth and disregarding their goals and drives.

This may create a culture of blame and shame, which in turn can develop a sense of impotence and frustration in the client. Let's say that the client shows "change" in that perceived "need." How long do you think this client would sustain such change in their actual practice?



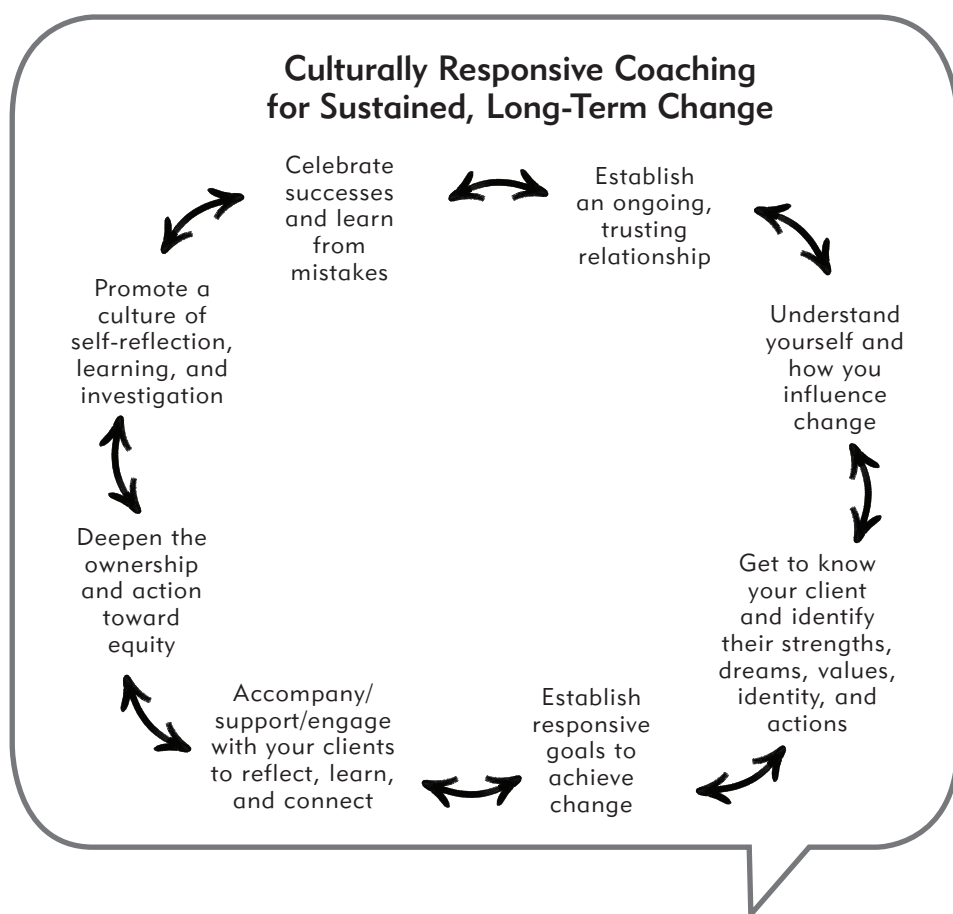
## Cultural Responsiveness as a Transformational Coaching Tool

We want to challenge the perspective of transactional coaching for compliance and replace it with coaching to achieve culturally responsive change that is sustainable in the long term and fosters learning and connection in early childhood professionals. We already know that resources in our field are limited, so we must invest our resources in experiences that will truly lead to long-term improvement.

Through the culturally responsive approach to coaching, we establish and maintain trusting and positive relationships based on a deep knowledge of ourselves, including our own culture. We make efforts to know the client's culture



deeply to build and sustain the relationship. Through coaching sessions, you support the client in identifying their own strengths, dreams, and values for their professional work. You help the client tap into their own professional vision and mission in supporting the learning and development of young children. Based on this, the client feels heard. The client's voice becomes the driving force in identifying areas where change is needed, and thus the client has ownership over the action items to achieve the goals. Through intentional coaching conversations, you build with your client a culture of self-reflection, learning, and investigation. You also empower the client's voice to be heard to build more equitable early childhood systems through grassroots efforts and help them be active agents in areas such as data and assessment. Throughout the process, you celebrate successes and also learn from mistakes.



Culturally responsive coaching can also be a strong agent of change to support equity and antidiscrimination in our society. Let us take a look into both of these elements.

## **Equity**

New cultural paradigms are always transforming society. Currently, we are pushing for a social transformation toward equity. The previous paradigm was focused on equality, in which every person was given the same. Equality has definitely helped advance our society; however, with the current events and knowledge of our society, we now believe promoting equity is critical. Equity involves understanding that each individual has specific needs that must be met to reach their goals. People do not need exactly the same thing (equality); rather, each individual needs more or less of certain types of support than others do (equity). To be equitable requires that we provide the support or tools each individual needs.

A common image used to show the difference between equality and equity imagines three children trying to reach an apple in a tree. The first is a very young child, the second is an older and taller child, and the third is the oldest and the tallest. In this example, the biggest child is tall enough to grab the apple, but the other two children are not able to do so. From an equality standpoint, each child would be given the same size box to stand on to try to reach an apple. With the same size box, the tallest child is still able to reach the apple and the mid-sized child is now able to get an apple too, but the shortest child is still not able to reach one. To be equitable, we instead provide different-sized boxes to each child so everyone can reach an apple. Some clients will need more time and more intense support from you, while others will need less frequent or shorter-lasting support. Some will need much more emotional support from you, while others will be ready to jump into very academic areas. Members of different cultural groups have different needs as well.

To be equitable coaches, we need to be very attuned to the actual needs of our clients, to meet them where they are in their development. When we understand their needs and base our coaching relationships on that, we are striving to demonstrate more equity. By doing so, we're hoping to move our society forward so that each individual has their needs met and can achieve their goals as early childhood educators. In chapter 4 we will explore specific strategies to use in your coaching to support equity by being culturally responsive to your clients.

## **Antidiscrimination work**

Unfortunately, throughout the history of humanity and still today, racism and other forms of discrimination exist. Discrimination involves treating others unjustly based on race, gender, religion, age, nationality, sexual orientation, income, educational level, or other aspects of an individual. To truly advance as a society, we need to take an antidiscrimination and anti-racist stance. This involves taking an active role in identifying discriminatory biases in ourselves as well as in others. It also involves taking actions that will help prevent discrimination in any form. To be anti-discriminatory is not a passive task but an active one in which we need to speak out whenever we see discrimination taking place and take needed actions. In the following chapters, we will be taking a deeper look into specific strategies to support antidiscrimination through culturally responsive coaching strategies.

## **Relationships and Rapport**

Coaching that springs from a strong relationship with a client can help initiate long-term change and growth. As human beings, we are social creatures. We live in groups. We have a need to be connected with other humans. This is an essential element of our development as a species. We have learned that when we work together, we can have our needs met and work toward goals that lead to our happiness and well-being.

As we have developed as a species, relationships have become an essential part of our learning and development. We have also developed a sense of which relationships are authentic and trustworthy. When we are in such a relationship, we feel comfortable to open up and to grow. However, if we are with another person who makes us uncomfortable, who does not understand us, or who brings their own agenda to impose on us, we may shut down. If we are to support early childhood professionals through coaching, it is essential to develop a strong and authentic relationship.

Rapport is one of the most fundamental aspects of building relationships. It involves truly seeing the world from the other person's perspective. It involves letting go of our own ideas, concepts, and perceptions to truly hear the voice of the other person and feel and see the world as they see it. When we do this, they feel understood and know they can trust you.

Understanding a client's culture helps us develop rapport at a deeper level. When we reflect on what a client has said, we're showing them that we are

hearing them. By acknowledging that we understand their perspective, we can deepen the relationship. This can also help the client feel more comfortable and understood. Let us further explore aspects of building rapport—recognizing strengths, being present, and celebrating diversity—in more detail.

### **Being strength-based**

Being strength-based involves focusing on the positive aspects of your client's work with young children. It highlights the cultural capital the client brings. We want to find very specific examples of the client's strengths, highlight them, communicate them, and use them as the base for further learning and development. When we start with the client's strengths, we can build on that foundation to help the client reach their professional goals.

Currently society tends to focus more on the negative. Frequently we point out what is wrong or look for what is missing. This approach may take clients to frustration, anxiousness, and higher stress levels. However, when we highlight strengths, we tap into the positive potential of our client and create an energy that fuels motivation for change and growth. Once a client starts reaching goals, we continue highlighting and celebrating these victories. By building on the positive, we can continue spiraling up in an everlasting cycle of learning and development to help the client reach their potential as an early childhood professional.

### **Being present**

So much of the time we are focused on our own thoughts. This internal chatter can take a lot of space, preventing us from truly being present in the moment and being aware of the other amazing human being who is in front of us, our client.

Take a moment right now to be aware of your surroundings. Look intentionally through your eyes. Every three seconds, try to look at a different object intently. Look at its shape, colors, and details. Become aware of your body. Is it tense somewhere? How is your posture? How is your breathing? Bring your awareness to the sounds that surround you in the moment. Can you hear birds chirping or crickets making sounds? Be present in your moment.

Next time you are with your client, try to be similarly aware of the environment that surrounds you. Be attuned to your client. Notice the details. Look into their eyes and hear their voice, their tone, their message. Quiet your chattering mind. By doing so, you will be able to connect more deeply and truly learn about

their culture and goals and how you can support them as a coach. Find ways to foster satisfaction each time you are with your client. What are their dreams? What are their fears? Connect. Be. Enjoy.

## **Celebrate diversity**

Nature is endlessly diverse. Just look out your window and see the variety of trees, flowers, insects, birds, grasses, and of course human beings. Every living being brings its own contribution to life on planet Earth. Through this diversity comes the balance that helps life prevail.

Likewise, every culture offers wonderful and colorful elements to our experience as a human species. When we differ in opinions, beliefs, and experiences and we learn to hear and learn from each of these differences, we are challenged to push ourselves to our next level of cultural understanding. Each generation comes into the world to offer new ideas and new perspectives.

Learning to be more comfortable, open, and responsive to diversity allows us to grow and improve. We invite you to celebrate the diversity of the early childhood professionals you support as well as the young children and families in the program. In that way, each one of us adds a tone to the music of life. The more we are able to value, listen, support, and harmonize every single one of these voices, the more able we are to produce a magnificent symphony.



Revisit the questions on page 3. How have your responses changed? How have they stayed the same?

## **Competencies**

- Understand culture at a deep level (versus touristic approaches).

## **Practices**

- Be interested and curious about cultures.
- Be proactive in learning about your own and your client's culture.
- Be respectful of different cultures.

- Acknowledge that all cultures bring social capital.
- Respond to your client's culture.
- Provide coaching that will support long-lasting, sustainable change.
- Deepen your relationships with your clients.
- Develop stronger rapport.
- Focus on your client's strengths.
- Be present to your client.
- Be equitable with your clients; everyone has different needs.
- Take an active role in identifying and acting against discrimination.
- Celebrate the rich cultural diversity of your clients.

## Hear Your Client's Voice

- How can you apply what you have learned in this chapter to be more attuned to your client's voice?
- What are some specific actions you can take the next time you are with your client to hear their voice more clearly?

## Hear Your Voice

- Reflect on your current coaching model. Is it transactional, or is it aimed at sustaining long-term change?
- How do the ideas in this chapter affect the way you perceive your current coaching practices?

## References and Resources

- Hooks, Bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



# A culturally responsive coaching guidebook

*Hearing All Voices* offers a holistic, culturally responsive, and strength-based perspective coaching framework that supports coaches and their clients in understanding the importance of equity in their interactions with educator peers, staff, children, and families.

McFarren Avilés and Flores focus on implementing practical strategies to increase equity in early education through meaningful and responsive interactions. They weave together the latest in the science of change, resources, practical “how-to” tools, and a reflective process to develop competencies that bring all voices into the work of increasing quality and advancing equity—essential ingredients for sustainable change.

“If you are interested in learning more about how to advance equity in ECE, then this book is for you. There is nothing like this—the authors have created a guide to navigate the compliance-driven systems and mentalities through authentic relationship building.”

—Cassandra O’Neill, CEO,  
Leadership Alchemy and co-author of  
*Five Elements of Collective Leadership for  
Early Childhood Professionals*

“This timely book offers coaches a mindful and respectful transformational journey to understand and embrace culturally responsive coaching. Every coach will benefit from the strategies. I was grateful for the conversational tone, the stretching of my perspectives, and the powerful impact on my own coaching!”

—Constant Hine, president/principal  
consultant, Horizons in Learning and author  
of *Transformational Coaching for Early  
Childhood Educators*

“How I wish I had read this wonderful guide before I served as an early childhood education coach! In an accessible format and centered on culturally responsive coaching, *Hearing All Voices* guides coaches to bring that deep respect for one’s culture to our work with teachers.”

—Amy Stephens Cubbage, MS, JD,  
president, The North Carolina  
Partnership for Children



**Jill McFarren Avilés** is the founder and director of McFarren Avilés & Associates, LLC, whose mission is to inspire others to see how amazing they are, the impact that they have on others, and foster the love of learning and ongoing professional journey.



**Erika Amadee Flores** is the founder of ChildrenFlow, an organization that provides professional development for early childhood education with the mission to help develop each child’s unique being while deepening their connection with the world around them.