

Development of “The Respect for Differences Scale”<sup>1</sup> (RDS):  
A New Parent Report Measure

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## OVERVIEW

The United States is more ethnically diverse than ever before. This trend is especially apparent in today's early childhood classrooms. For example, 56 percent of children under age 6 are white, 22 percent are Latino, 14 percent are African American, and 4 percent are Asian, with the remaining students representing biracial and American Indian backgrounds (Stebbins and Knitzer, 2007). Children of today will play, learn, and work in an increasingly diverse society. The seeds of cultural beliefs and understanding of differences are sown in the preschool years. An appreciation for diversity is critical for success across the lifespan and must begin in early childhood classrooms. However, we found no measures that examine the extent to which programs honor the home cultures of the students that they serve. This paper describes a new tool that early childhood researchers and practitioners can use to assess how early childhood programs are helping children acquire the skills they need to become members of a multicultural society and the methodology used to develop that tool.

As part of a larger study of the Los Angeles County Universal Preschool Program (LAUP) that MPR is conducting for the First 5 LA Commission, we developed a measure designed to assess children's respect for and appreciation of their own family's culture and of differences among people. LAUP holds honoring of home culture as one of its guiding principles. Our original intent was to develop survey questions that captured, from the perspective of parents, how the programs were addressing this principle. A key challenge, however, was how to address the range of home cultures represented by families from a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The questions we developed also needed to have the same meaning for different groups. Therefore, we used focus groups to define the key constructs for such a measure and cognitive interviews to develop an instrument that would be meaningful to linguistically and ethnically diverse parents.

This paper demonstrates a mixed-method approach to inform the development of a new measure. Data were collected in three stages. In the first stage, families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds were invited to a series of focus groups so researchers could learn about what aspects of home culture parents wanted and expected the early childhood programs to foster. Two months later, in the second stage, cognitive interviews were conducted with a different group of families to assess their interpretation of survey questions developed from the focus group findings. In the third and final stage, interviewers administered the measure as part of a longer survey to a diverse group of parents. In this paper we present the key findings from the focus groups and cognitive interviews and our preliminary analysis of the first wave of the UPCOS study in fall 2007.

This study adopts a theoretical framework that assumes that individual development must be understood in and cannot be separated from its social, cultural, and historical contexts (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, we find that families from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and different levels of acculturation in the United States hold varying views about what cultural respect means and how it should be instituted in early childhood classrooms.

## METHOD

MPR's study of LAUP is being conducted in two phases. In the pilot phase, conducted between March and August 2007, we piloted a protocol that addressed the diversity of the population served by LAUP. The second phase of the study includes a fall 2007 and spring 2008 data collection that includes assessments with preschool children, interviews with parents and teachers, teacher reports of the social-emotional development of the children, and classroom observations. As a part of the pilot we conducted two stages of exploration to develop a measure that would capture the ways in which parents wanted their children's preschool programs to support their home culture. Our overall approach to this effort was emic in that we explored the topic from the perspective of the families being studied.

### *Stage 1*

In stage 1 of the development of the scale, we conducted six focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to allow parents from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to highlight and discuss how preschools fostered or conflicted with the family's values. A total of 57 parents representing five groups—Filipino (n=13); Korean (n=8); Chinese (n=10); African American (n=9); and two groups of Latino parents, one Spanish-speaking monolingual (n=10) and the other Latino bilingual or English-speaking monolingual (n=7)—were invited to take part in one-hour focus groups. Experienced moderators who were native speakers of English or Spanish led the groups. Interpreters were provided for members of the Filipino, Korean, and Chinese focus groups to help clarify some concepts and to enable the parents to express themselves in their native language if they wished. The Latino Spanish-speaking monolingual focus group was conducted in Spanish and the other Latino focus group was conducted in English. Except for the Latino Spanish-speaking monolingual group, all focus group participants spoke some English. The focus group convenience sample were not parents of children in LAUP, but all were parents of four-year-old children who attended preschool. The majority (63.2 percent) of parents participating in the focus group discussions had at least some college education. Nearly a quarter (24.6 percent) of the parents were born in the United States. Most parents spoke English (50.9 percent) and/or Spanish (22.8 percent) as the main language at home.

The moderators asked parents about traditions and customs that were important to share with their children, challenges to passing these on when the children were in preschool, and how preschool programs could support home culture. Specifically, parents answered questions such as:

- What traditions and customs do you think are important for you and your family to share with your child?
- How can the preschool program support you in sharing your culture with your child?
- What challenges are there to passing on the important parts of your culture to your child?
- What traditions or customs do you have at home that you think will be more difficult to continue now that your child is spending more time with other children?

Focus group discussions were audio- and videotaped. The authors independently reviewed the tapes and field notes and developed specific and inductive codes with which to analyze the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

### *Stage 2*

In stage 2 of the development of the scale, researchers integrated the themes emerging from the focus group findings into a draft scale designed to explore the ways in which parents perceived preschool programs as fostering home culture and values that they considered important. Cognitive interviews are an effective method for exploring the ways in which respondents interpret questions (Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski, 2000). We used cognitive interviews to assess parental interpretation of the items and the rationale for their responses of this scale.

Fifty-three parents of children enrolled in LAUP programs completed the draft measure and discussed the questions with us. These parents were from the same diverse racial and ethnic groups as the focus group parents. Most parents spoke English (66.0 percent) or Spanish (24.5 percent) as the main language at home, and all the cognitive interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish. The majority of the respondents (60.4 percent) had at least some college education, and many were born in the United States (43.4 percent). Cognitive interviewing proceeded over a period of two weeks. Researchers recorded each session and took notes on each item, indicating whether it was difficult for the respondent to answer or made them feel uneasy. Researchers also noted the importance or relevance for the parents of the different aspects addressed in the questions. The form and content of the instrument changed over the course of the cognitive interviewing period as the research team coded responses and revised the survey to reflect respondents' reactions to different items.

### *Stage 3*

The third stage of the development of the measure was conducted as part of the phase two data collection. A total of 1,586 parents were administered the final RDS as part of the fall 2007 UPCOS data collection. The final scale consisted of 12 items that measured the frequency with which parents observed different behaviors with the following response categories: *always*, *very often*, *sometimes*, *rarely* and *never*, with most questions phrased as "How often is [CHILD] willing to ...?" or "How often does he do?". A score of 4 on the scale is high and a score of 0 is low.<sup>3</sup> The majority of parents who completed the scale in this phase were of Latino ancestry (74 percent), with the remaining groups including African Americans (7.7 percent), white (7.0 percent), Asian/Pacific Islander (7.2 percent), and other or mixed heritage (4.1 percent). All groups other than Latinos are non-Hispanic. The scale had adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha=.77$ ). Copies of the English and Spanish versions of the pretest and posttest measures are available from the authors.

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<sup>3</sup> The analysis collapsed *rarely* (1) and *never* (0), making the scale range from a high of 4 to a low of 1

## RESULTS

### *Stage 1*

Three main themes emerged across all focus groups that highlighted the cultural practices parents found important to share with their children and their feelings about how preschool programs could support home culture.

*Support respect for adults.* Parents from each of the racial and ethnic groups believed to some extent that an important part of their heritage was that children learn to be respectful of adults and talk with adults respectfully. This was especially predominant for the Filipino and Latino parents, who spoke at length about the importance of respecting elders and talking respectfully to adults in the home and in the community (such as teachers and doctors).

*Provide knowledge of and curiosity about cultural traditions.* Parents believed that knowledge of and curiosity about their own and other cultures were important. For example, parents wanted children to have opportunities at the preschool to eat foods that were familiar to them and to have opportunities to become interested in foods from new cultures. Parents, particularly African American parents, believed it was important that children not only celebrate holidays at school but also develop an understanding for why they are celebrated.

*Provide appreciation for and use of home language.* Parents reported that programs should promote English as well as their home language. Parents, particularly Spanish-speaking parents, believed that one of the major drawbacks of their children's preschool program was that children were less likely to interact at home in the language of their culture.

### *Stage 2*

After numerous meetings, the research team integrated the themes emerging from the focus groups into a draft measure which was tested by means of cognitive interviewing. Parents completed the questionnaire in either English or Spanish and the researcher then asked them about how they interpreted certain items and the factors that contributed to their responses. Cognitive interviewing identified three main problems with the draft measure. The interviews also suggested approaches for improving the draft measure, and the measure went through three major iterations over the course of the piloting.

*Child as level of measurement.* The original draft measure consisted of 15 items that asked parents to determine how often their child's early childhood programs promoted children's respect for adults, cultural knowledge, and appreciation for home languages and how important this was to them. That is, the first draft of these questions focused on how often programs had certain activities or emphasized certain behaviors. Early cognitive interviews suggested that many parents were unfamiliar with whether or how frequently programs were engaging in specific activities to support the family's home culture. Parents would rate the program positively (that is, parents rated practices as occurring often) but then were unable to provide an example of when it occurred. In addition, the variability in parents' frequency of reports of these items was limited (skewed distribution). In a second iteration of the measure during stage 2, parents were asked to report on how important it was for programs to engage in these activities.

Once again, there was limited variability in parent responses, with most parents citing all activities as very important for programs to do.

After probing parents in the initial days of cognitive interviewing, the research team created a third iteration of the scale which on observable child behaviors that would result from positive practices in diverse cultural settings. After considerable probing, it became clear that the measure could elicit greater variability by asking questions at the level of child outcomes. For example, in response to the question “Compared to when [CHILD] started preschool, how interested is [CHILD] in words from other languages now?” 66 percent of parents felt their child was a lot more willing, 17 percent said a little more willing, 9 percent said less, and 8 percent said there had been no change. This result enriched focus group findings by shedding light on the positive nature of diverse language environments, whereas in the focus groups, English classrooms were seen as inhibiting home language development.

*Development of pretests and posttests.* Cognitive interviewing revealed that the third iteration of the scale functioned well. However, without a baseline this scale as piloted was confusing to interpret. In our spring pilot version of the instrument we asked parents to assess change over the preschool year, and offered “no change” as one of the responses. In exploring with parents what “no change” meant we realized we could not understand this without knowing more about the child’s behavior at the start of preschool. To enable the research team to look at change over the course of the preschool year and to understand what *no change* means (is it *no change* because the child was always willing to play with children from different cultural backgrounds, or because she or he did not do so at the start of preschool and still does not?), the team developed a final pretest version of these questions that uses a frequency response scale. In spring 2008 we are conducting a posttest. Half of the parents are being asked to report on the change over the course of the preschool year while the others are given the pretest version again.

*Clarification of unclear terms.* Cognitive interviews also highlighted the need for avoiding the use of idioms and terms that were not easily translatable. For example, parents were asked how frequently children now “talked back” to adults. “Talking back,” however, was difficult to translate into Spanish, and many of the Asian parents found the question confusing. One mother perceived “talking back” as a positive (that is, as sticking up for oneself), a reminder that idioms are culturally bound. Therefore, the question was changed to use the phrase “talk disrespectfully.”

### *Stage 3*

In fall 2007, a final version of the measure, the RDS, was administered to the 1,586 parents as a subset of the UPCOS parent interview. Overall, parents reported high scores on the instrument ( $M=3.2$ ,  $SD=.5$ ). Scores ranged from 1.6 to 4.0. Preliminary analyses revealed that reverse-coded item H showed some misfit. Opportunities for parents to observe their children avoiding children from different cultural backgrounds may vary or parents may interpret avoidance differently. For example, reserved behavior may be interpreted by some parents as avoidance and by other parents as shyness. Table 1 includes the pretest version of the RDS and provides the percentage of responses for the fall 2007 administration of the pretest RDS.

TABLE 1  
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES FOR THE FALL 2007 ADMINISTRATION OF  
THE RESPECT FOR DIFFERENCES SCALE

How often is/does your child ..... (percentage responses)	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely or Never	N/A
a. willing to try foods from different cultures?	27.2	14.9	36.8	21.1	
b. respectful to adults in your family?	59.9	24.4	14.1	1.6	
c. willing to play with children from different backgrounds?	75.3	14.1	9.0	1.6	
d. talk disrespectfully to adults in your home? ( <i>reverse coded</i> ).	3.9	2.0	11.6	82.5	
e. willing to play with children who have special needs or physical or mental disabilities?	40.9	5.3	4.5	1.6	47.7
f. interested in different cultures?	39.2	18.1	31.4	11.3	
g. interested about why different people celebrate different holidays?	38.8	15.9	27.0	18.3	
h. avoid playing with children from different cultural backgrounds? ( <i>reverse coded</i> )	4.6	2.1	8.0	85.3	
i. willing to speak your home language?	38.7	11.2	12.5	6.6	31.0
j. willing to take part in events that are important to your family's cultural traditions?	70.0	13.7	12.4	3.9	
k. interested in words from other languages?	53.9	16.8	20.5	8.8	
l. respectful of people from different cultures or backgrounds?	73.7	16.6	8.0	1.7	

On average, the parents of African American children ( $M=3.37$ ,  $SD=.44$ ) and parents of multiracial children ( $M=3.42$ ,  $SD=.46$ ) rated their children more positively than parents of children who are white ( $M=3.18$ ,  $SD=.49$ ), Latino ( $M=3.21$ ,  $SD=.51$ ), or Asian/Pacific Islander ( $M=3.10$ ,  $SD=.56$ ) [ $F(4, 1,442) = 6.34$ ,  $p<.05$ ].

## LIMITATIONS

A few limitations to this study are important to note. First, highly educated parents were overrepresented in the focus groups and cognitive interviews. It is possible that the areas highlighted by these parents may overlook important areas of concern for parents with more limited educational opportunities. In addition, the presence of a translator for the groups that did not speak English or Spanish may have influenced the openness with which parents shared information. The type of self-disclosure involved in focus groups is not culturally acceptable for some groups and may have limited response.

The sample in our study is limited to four-year-old children who will be age eligible for kindergarten next year. Thus it does not accurately capture developmental changes in children's understanding and respect for diversity.

This was an empirical study examining parents' responses to what parents identified as important components of respect for diversity rather than what researchers have described. Put differently, we did not probe areas that previous research has examined in children's development of understanding of difference but instead examined areas that parents identified as important. For example, developmental research on children's understanding of social differences has shown that young children from 3 to 6 years of age generally rely on external, peripheral, and physical features when describing differences such as gender, race and ethnicity, intelligence, and social class (Quintana, 1998). Children's early attitudes and perceptions often tend to reflect wider societal views and are influenced by socialization from families and early childhood programs. Thus, researchers often suggest that practitioners and parents should encourage young children to express their thoughts about race, ethnicity, and gender freely through creative media such as drawing and play. Educators often are guided to talk openly with children about differences and similarities they note in their environments. Because children experience much growth in their ability to understand differences in race, ethnicity, and gender throughout childhood, it often is considered important to open lines of communication for children to process their cognitions early in their developmental trajectory in order to stimulate development to more-advanced and pluralistic conceptions of variations among groups.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

This study highlights the importance of using both cognitive interviewing and focus groups for survey development. This integrated approach can provide feedback on constructs needed to develop surveys as well as issues with survey items. In the present study, focus groups revealed common themes across families regarding the importance of children showing respect for adults, developing knowledge and curiosity for cultures, and appreciating language differences. These themes were manifest in different ways for different groups. Cognitive interviewing helped to further illuminate how questions benefited from a child-level focus and clarification of terms for parent respondents.

In addition, we found that there were differences by race and ethnicity in parents' responses to the RDS. Specifically, our analysis revealed that parents of African American (non-Hispanic) children and parents of multiracial (non-Hispanic) children rated their children more positively than parents of children who are white (non-Hispanic), Latino, or Asian/Pacific Islander. Although it is unclear why these differences exist, it is plausible that multiracial parents were more likely to observe their children in different cultural contexts with their families and in turn rate their children more favorably. Moreover, it is possible that because parents of Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander children observe their children speaking English, rather than the families' home languages, they were more likely to rate their children less positively. However, it also is possible that this is a function of differences in rater style. Adults from different cultural groups have been noted to use rating scales more or less leniently than other groups (Fox and Jones 1998). Further analyses will be needed to fully understand these variations.

Future research will examine more specifically the psychometric properties of the scale, how scores on this scale change over the course of the preschool year, the more-nuanced differences in scale scores by race and ethnicity, and the relationship between parents' scores on the scale and children's social and emotional development.



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