This case study was developed by Joanne Gosney, a kindergarten teacher–director involved in the trial of the Queensland kindergarten learning guideline. This case study is broken into segments to highlight ways to engage with parents and children from diverse cultures.

Developing cultural competence

Developing cultural competence involves building your own understanding and appreciation of diversity. As Mem Fox writes:

> Whoever you are, wherever you are, our blood is the same.
> Whoever you are, wherever you are.


To develop cultural competence, you first need to understand that everyone is shaped by their own cultural background. Our biases and views shape how we see the world. It takes time to learn to see things from new cultural perspectives. If you approach teaching children from diverse cultural backgrounds with a sense of curiosity and adventure, you, your group and your community will benefit enormously.

There are thousands of cultural groups throughout the world and you cannot be an expert on each one. But you can do your research, ask questions and be prepared to explore new ways to communicate. It is important to show interest in parents’ and children’s cultural backgrounds and to be patient with others and yourself. Here are some ways that I respond to the diversity in my centre.
Part 1: First meeting

Eun-song and H-wang came to enrol their child in kindergarten. They were newly arrived immigrants, who did not speak English, but had been advised to send their child to kindergarten to help him learn English. They arrived with their child, holding a piece of paper with the kindergarten’s address.

Waving hello is universal, so I waved a greeting and beckoned the family to come in and sit down. I brought over a world globe and pointed to myself, then to Australia on the globe. I said, ‘Me, Australia,’ and asked, ‘Where are you from?’ as I pointed to the family. The family pointed to Korea on the globe. Drawing on my experience of working in an area with a large Korean community, I was able to greet the family in their language, which produced smiles and nods.

The kindergarten already had some information and enrolment forms translated into Korean that I could give the parents. I also made an appointment for them to come back the next day. This was done by pointing to the diary and the clock. I then telephoned another parent from the kindergarten to help translate and check that Eun-song and H-wang had understood. This parent also came to the meeting the following day to translate, and Eun-song and H-wang’s child was successfully enrolled.

Explore the scenario

• Do your research and ask questions

It is important to do some research about the range of cultural groups represented in the local area and the protocols relevant to working with people from these groups. You can use formal and informal ways to find the information you need, such as searching the internet, contacting the local Member of Parliament’s office or talking to local people at the corner shop. Use this information to help prepare for the families from diverse backgrounds who may access the centre. For example, prepare some information and enrolment forms translated into a number of languages that can be given to parents. You can ask local community members, parents who speak a language other than English or a translation service to help you to prepare these resources.

• Learn new ways to communicate

Knowing how to say ‘hello’ in different languages goes a long way when breaking the ice. Be prepared to use gestures and visual cues to help communicate.

Explore resources in the community that can help you to communicate with parents and children who speak languages other than English. A telephone translation service is an excellent tool, and there are often parents and friends who are enthusiastic to help.
Part 2: Supporting the child

Gun-Hae started kindergarten midyear. His English was limited. He could say ‘hello’, ‘no’ and ‘yes’. He spoke to me and other children in Korean, and assumed he was understood. Either I or the assistant stayed with him much of the time, guiding him through the day’s routine. The children were keen to help him and show him what to do and how things worked. He had never seen easel painting or playdough, and the children loved being with him as he experienced these for the first time.

Gestures and vocal tone were key tools used to communicate with Gun-Hae. It was important to change our communication style to match those he was more familiar with in his family and cultural context. Gun-Hae was used to being given clear, direct instructions. Requests such as ‘Children, can you sit down now, please?’ were not easily understood. Gun-Hae was more comfortable with a short direction such as, ‘Sit down’, accompanied by a clear gesture. In Western cultures, this directness may seem inappropriate, but it is acceptable within Korean and Chinese cultures.

In addition, I used a set of picture cards (labelled with both Korean and English words) to communicate simple phrases and instructions such as ‘good morning’, ‘morning tea’, ‘wash hands’, ‘toilet’, ‘dancing’ and ‘playing’ to help promote two-way communication. Gun-Hae was also paired up with other children who spoke Korean and English, and these children would spontaneously translate for him and teach him English vocabulary.

Explore the scenario

• Learn new ways to communicate

It is important to find out about the interactional styles that the child is familiar with. Adjusting your communication style to incorporate aspects of the child’s culture of origin can help the child to feel that they belong and to feel successful. For example, in Korean and Chinese cultures, short, direct instructions are more familiar than longer requests used in Western cultures. Using visual, nonverbal prompts combined with some language familiar to the child, while introducing English language, helps the child to feel confident while expanding their language skills.

• Engaging other children and families

Children, parents and community members are valuable resources, and can be invited to assist new families and children with diverse backgrounds. They can help by translating, being welcoming and available, guiding a child or parent so they understand what is happening on a day-to-day basis in the centre. A parent/carer or local community member may also be able to explain to the teacher cultural or interactional practices that are familiar to the child and their family. Engaging children, family and community members in helping a new child and/or family helps to show all families that their contributions are welcomed and valued.
Part 3: Celebrating diversity

Throughout the year, I also explored and celebrated diversity with children in a variety of ways. This played an important role in helping all the children to view differences positively. Difference became a concept embedded in the children’s daily activities across all learning areas. We discussed the concept of difference in the activities children chose, including the size, shape, colour or texture of tools, play equipment and aspects of their environment. We explored difference using books, talking about their families, and music and foods that we liked, in emerging situations during the day and throughout the year. In this way, the children learnt that difference is something to be enjoyed and embraced.

Explore the scenario

- Celebrate diversity throughout the program

  It is important to explore diversity in relevant and meaningful ways throughout the day and across the year. Diversity is not always immediately obvious. Even families and children from similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds will have different life experiences. For example, they may enjoy different weekend activities, celebrate events in different ways, have different connections with various relatives or have different family members living in their home.

  Celebrating a range of similarities and differences, and appreciating diversity within everyday moments as well as part of planned learning experiences, helps to build children’s cultural competence and a strong sense of identity and connectedness.

Focus questions

Consider these questions to help you to reflect on ways to explore diversity with children and build respect for differences:

- What do you know about the cultural groups represented in your centre/local area?
- How can you communicate with someone who has limited English?
- Can you say ‘hello’ in the languages represented in your local community?
- What resources (community members, children, materials, information) are available to help you to communicate and learn about diverse cultural groups in your centre?