Building Early Childhood Systems in a Multi-ethnic Society:

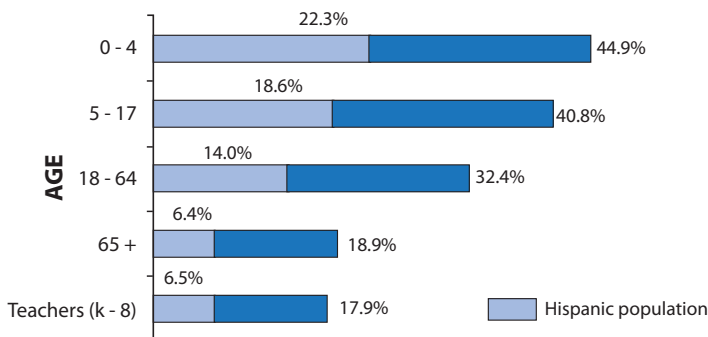## AN OVERVIEW OF BUILD'S BRIEFS ON DIVERSITY AND EQUITY

The United States is becoming more diverse, and children are leading the way. That alone is reason for focusing attention on issues of race/ethnicity, language, and culture in developing early childhood systems.

As the charts below show, in 2005, 45% of all young children (0-4) in the United States were of color (not White, non-Hispanic). This compares with approximately 32% of the working age population and 19% of the retirement age population. Moreover, projections to the year 2025 estimate that almost all the growth in the child population in this country will be among children of color. Of the projected increase in the child population of approximately ten million, only 300,000 will be White, non-Hispanic, while six million will be Latino.

Diversity in America: Young Children Leading the Way
Percent of Population of Color and/or Hispanic by Age

AGE

- 0 - 4: 22.3% / 44.9%
- 5 - 17: 18.6% / 40.8%
- 18 - 64: 14.0% / 32.4%
- 65 +: 6.4% / 18.9%
- Teachers (k - 8): 6.5% / 17.9%

Hispanic population

Source: United States Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey (age)
Current Populations Services, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006 (teachers)

The Growing Diversity of Child Population
Projected Population Growth 2005 - 2025

0 - 17 Year Olds

White non-Hispanic: 300,000
African American: 2,000,000
Hispanic: 6,000,000
All Other: 1,650,000
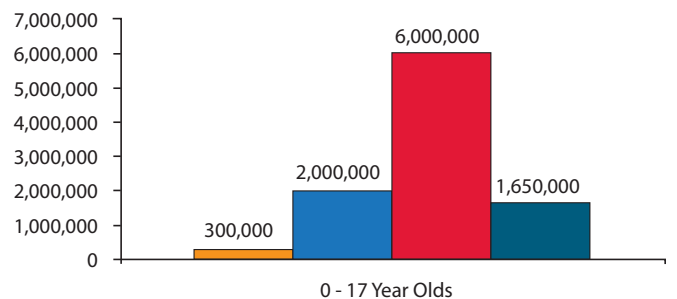
At the same time, however, there is ample evidence that developing an early childhood system that strives to meet the needs of all children requires explicit attention to a number of current gaps that exist – by income, race/ethnicity, language, and culture – both in child outcomes and opportunities and system capacity and response.

Simply expressed, the BUILD Initiative has defined these gaps for children by culture and language as follows:

- A **readiness gap** at the time of kindergarten entry (similar to and with some common etiology to income, achievement, health, safety, justice system, and wealth gaps);
- A **participation gap** in formal services (particularly health services and preschool and other formal care arrangements);
- A **cultural awareness and recognition gap** (particularly for providers serving children with different cultural and language backgrounds than their own);
- A **workforce diversity gap** (particularly among credentialed providers and within professional institutions training and accrediting the workforce); and
- A **stakeholder planning and decision-making gap** (particularly in developing public policies and recognizing the expertise of those from other backgrounds and experiences).

Each of these is discussed briefly below:

Readiness gap. Gaps – by income, race, language, and ethnicity – that young children face at the time they enter kindergarten have been well-documented. Closing these gaps is fundamental to the United States' success as a nation. At the same time, these racial/ethnic and language gaps need to be viewed in the context of similar gaps in income and wealth, safety, health, and justice system involvement – which must be addressed as part and parcel to closing readiness and achievement gaps. The etiology of these gaps can include institutional racism, dominant culture insensitivity to different cultural practices in supporting children, and disinvestments in particular places and groups. Much fuller examination and recognition is needed of the underlying elements that can give rise not only to kindergarten entry readiness gaps, but to other gaps such as health disparities.

Participation gap. When enrollment and participation data are disaggregated by income, race/ethnicity, and language, there often are substantial gaps in participation and barriers to access to basic services, particularly in what are generally considered normative and developmental services. In particular, health coverage and access to a medical home is much lower for Latino children, as is participation in preschool and other formal child care environments. Recreational and developmental activities through the local library or other community services and programming for young children and their families often are disproportionately available and accessible to wealthier families. This is often due to location, fee structures, language, focus, marketing and discretion in scheduling family time. Closing participation gaps requires culture- and language-sensitive outreach, geographic and financial accessibility, and congruence with the values and cultural practices of families from different backgrounds and settings.

Cultural awareness and recognition gap. As children grow and develop, they develop cognitively and physically and they develop their own sense of self in the context of their home culture and that of the larger community. Young children develop gender, racial, and cultural identities and learn how to relate to people who are both similar to and different from them. While many elements of healthy child development are universal to children, different cultures place different emphases in development on individuality, separation and competition, family roles, methods of communication, and even notions of time. For example, Latinos tend to be heavily oriented to family and value of the notion of the community's responsibility in raising a child.

Particularly as society is establishing programs and expectations for young children, an area previously left largely to the family, it is important to be explicit in recognizing and responding to differences across cultures. This can support parental and family participation in the program and work to alleviate tension between the culture of the classroom and the home culture of the child. In addition, children hear and can be influenced and harmed by prejudicial remarks or statements and by subtle, non-verbal actions or inactions by others. Persons working with young children need to know how to create climates that help prevent prejudicial activities and respond effectively when they occur. Also, while research is clear on the benefits of learning two or more languages at an early age and acquiring strong mastery of a first language in the early years, early childhood practices often do not build upon this research base. The chart below illustrates some differences in a multi-cultural as opposed to a mono-cultural approach to early learning.

Culturally Aligned Services and Expectations: A Multi-Cultural as Opposed to Dominant Culture Lens	
Mono-Cultural (Dominant Culture) World	**Multi-Cultural World**
Rich language and literacy environment	Rich language and literacy environment supporting dual-multiple language learning
Age-appropriate social and emotional development	Age-appropriate race, language and culture identity development that values child's culture and models respect for other cultures
Intentional learning environment/curriculum	Intentional learning environment in context and building on cultural backgrounds
Parent involvement	Family/village involvement
Skilled teachers	Teachers skilled in and reflecting the race, language and cultural backgrounds of children

This cultural awareness and recognition gap can exist within early learning standards and benchmarks, which states are developing to undergird early childhood systems development. They can exist in quality rating and improvement systems and strategies, pre-service early childhood development systems, and in-service training and development opportunities. Closing this awareness and recognition gap requires explicit attention to issues of race, language, and culture within and across the many programs serving young children and their families.
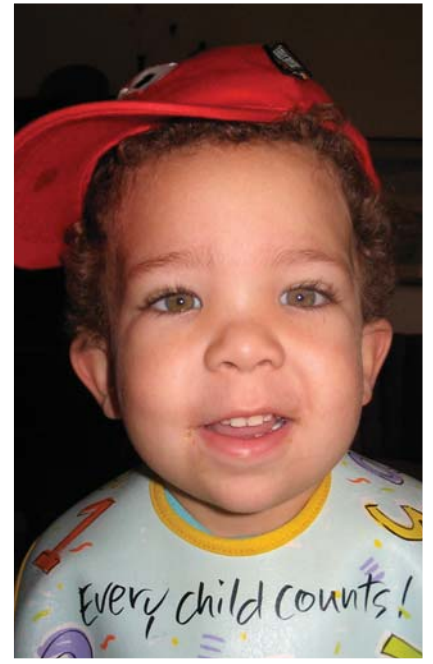
Workforce diversity gap. As the first chart shows, the young child population is very diverse, much more so than the working age population. At the same time, the elementary education teaching force is less diverse than even the adult workforce as a whole. As preschool programs are developed within states and credentials of workers become requisites for certain positions, specific attention must be paid to developing a skilled, diverse early childhood workforce. A system must be developed that creates pathways to ensure that persons of color and persons with language backgrounds of the young child population can fill those roles. This includes both pre-service and in-service education opportunities and traditional and non-traditional sources of supports for educators to acquire skills, credentials, and salaries and careers commensurate with the skills they have. Done well, the development of the next generation of early childhood educators can offer employment and career development opportunities that help ensure the needed diversity within early childhood, provide family sustaining compensation within that workforce, and offer all children role models and adult teachers from diverse backgrounds.

Stakeholder planning and decision-making gap.
Closing all these gaps requires explicit planning, which can be very enriching to all stakeholders, as they learn about and appreciate both their own and others' cultural backgrounds and strengths. Doing so also requires constructing planning and decision-making tables that include individuals who have different cultural, language, and ethnic backgrounds to contribute their expertise to this learning. This may even mean adapting decision-making approaches to recognize that different cultures approach decision-making differently – in terms of consensual versus majority rule, time allotments for discussion and planning, and ways of establishing trust and a sense of shared experience across groups. Particularly when dealing with sensitive issues of race and ethnicity, decision-making tables should not always place individuals from different backgrounds in minority roles. Both process and product are important in developing early childhood systems that respond to the diversity of the young child population.

Clearly, closing these five gaps will require intentionality, building upon evidence of child learning and development as viewed through a multi-cultural lens and with reference to multiple language acquisition. It will require data and information systems that provide relevant information on race, language, and culture. It will require experimentation, development of exemplary programs and strategies, and gathering of lessons learned for building a broader knowledge base of effective practice. It will involve planning and decision-making structures that themselves are attuned to these issues, recognizing them as integral to the development of an early learning system that works for all children.

At the same time, it will offer opportunities for shared growth and learning and for an enriched overall early childhood system. Young children are growing up in an increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural world, where all children will benefit from being skilled and attuned to working within and across languages and cultures.

The BUILD Initiative's Briefs on Diversity and Equity are designed to help fill a final gap – a knowledge and communications gap in developing early childhood systems for a multi-ethnic society. As much as possible, the series will describe pioneering efforts within states to address these different gaps, as well as assessing the current state of the field and the body of available research and evidence that should undergird state strategies.

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