American families are becoming increasingly diverse. What does that mean for teaching? Think about responsively engaging different family types, having experiences with people from different races, cultures, religions, and socioeconomic and language groups. How prepared do you now feel to work with culturally diverse families? Consider these questions:

• How do the changing demographics of American families influence your work with them?
• What exactly is culture?
• What are some similarities and differences between culturally diverse families?
• How can you work effectively in supporting linguistically diverse families?
• What should you consider when collaborating with families in terms of their religious beliefs or socioeconomic level?
• What is culturally responsive family engagement and how can you practice it?
• How can a classroom cultural audit help you welcome all families into your classroom?

Culturally responsive curricula include collaborative partnerships with families that are built on reciprocal trust and focus on the child and family’s strengths.
—Linda Espinosa (2005)
Part of the excitement of working in the field of education is to get a glimpse of the future of communities and the nation right in our classrooms. The children of families served today will soon be high school graduates and, one day, the adult citizens in the community. Children in the classroom reflect the next generation and demonstrate the increasing diversity of America. One illustration of this diversity is seen in the many languages spoken by children in today’s American classrooms. Table 5.1 lists the top 25 languages spoken in schools currently, and Table 5.2 demonstrates that although some states do have a higher population of English language learners (ELL), diversity is found in all areas of the country.

As you encounter the changing demographics of the nation at the local level in your classroom, you will be working with children and families whose language and culture will be different from yours, as well as that of other children. Those differences pose a particular set of challenges as you seek to be respectful of all children and families. The long list of differences can range from child-rearing practices, eating and dietary habits, gender roles, attitudes about school and learning, and communication styles to complex relationships with teachers and administrators.

### Table 5.1 Language Backgrounds of Limited English Proficient (LEP) Students in the United States and Outlying Areas, 2000 to 2001 (Sorted by Estimated Rank, Top 25 Languages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>LEP Students</th>
<th>Percentage of LEP Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>3,598,451</td>
<td>79.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>88,906</td>
<td>1.953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>70,768</td>
<td>1.555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chinese, Cantonese</td>
<td>46,466</td>
<td>1.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Korean (Yue)</td>
<td>43,969</td>
<td>0.966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Haitian Creole</td>
<td>42,236</td>
<td>0.928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>41,279</td>
<td>0.907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>37,157</td>
<td>0.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tagalog (Filipino)</td>
<td>34,133</td>
<td>0.750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Navajo (Dine)</td>
<td>27,029</td>
<td>0.594</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Note:* These numbers mask regional variations. For example, in nine states, Spanish was not the dominant language among LEPs. In Montana, Blackfoot was the top language other than spoken English, and in Maine, the top language diversity was French. In several states, Vietnamese was not the second most common language diversity. For example, Chinese ranked second in New York and Kentucky, and Serbo-Croatian was second in Missouri.
Table 5.2  English Language Learners
Population by State

States with largest population of students with limited English proficiency (LEP) in public schools (2007 to 2008)
1. California (1,526,036)
2. Texas (701,799)
3. Florida (234,934)
4. New York (213,000)
5. Illinois (175,454)
6. Arizona (125,636)

1. South Carolina (714.2%)
2. Kentucky (417.4%)
3. Indiana (407.8%)
4. North Carolina (371.7%)
5. Tennessee (369.9%)

Source: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (2010).

Note: Twenty states have seen more than a 100% growth in the numbers of students with limited English proficiency since 1994.

In the Classroom: The Silent Child

Clara Simpson didn’t know what to do. She had tried everything she could think of to help Elena be successful in her third-grade classroom, but as far as Clara could tell, she had made no progress with Elena. Elena and her family had moved to Poplar Grove from Mexico in early September, and they spoke no English. Since Elena’s first day in her classroom, she had not spoken one word in class. Clara had not been worried about that in the beginning, but here it was, late November of the school year, and Elena continued to be silent in the classroom. Clara knew that Elena was learning. She noticed how observant Elena was in watching the other children, and she knew that Elena comprehended some information. Just yesterday, the class had been working in groups on experimenting with simple machines. Elena had successfully done the task, needing little help from her group members. “How can she understand that a bottle opener is a lever, yet can’t answer questions about a story?” Clara wondered in frustration.

Clara had tried to build a relationship with Elena’s parents, but it was difficult since they spoke no English and had to rely on family members to serve as translators. At the parent-teacher conference a few weeks ago,

(Continued)
they had nodded at everything Clara told them about Elena’s progress and seemed agreeable to helping her at home, yet Clara couldn’t tell if they were helping her. As a part of the school’s new family involvement plan, Clara had invited the parents in to talk about their careers, and she had hoped Elena’s parents would come in and share their Mexican culture with the class. Clara knew they couldn’t speak English well, but thought that might motivate Elena to speak in class, if she could translate for her parents. However, they had sent word through Elena’s fifth-grade cousin that they were not available. Clara knew that they worked long hours at the family’s Mexican restaurant to support themselves and guessed that they didn’t have time to come to school. Elena was probably going to grow up and work in the family’s restaurant business anyway, so maybe she shouldn’t worry about her academic progress.

Rosario rocked three-year-old Gabriela and thought about how their lives had changed so dramatically in the last year. A year ago, the hurricane had destroyed much of their coastal fishing village of La Pesca in northeastern Mexico. Miguel’s fishing boat had been demolished, and their home damaged beyond repair. It was the final straw in their decision to leave Mexico for a better life for their family in the United States. Miguel’s brother, Hector, and his family had moved to the United States 10 years ago and owned a successful Mexican restaurant in town. He had been after them for a long time to come and join him in the business. “Our life in La Pesca wasn’t so bad,” she thought, as Miguel worked hard with his fishing business, and Rosario had been a teacher at the local school until Elena was born. Miguel and Rosario both believed that it was important for her to stay home with their children, and she had given up her teaching job to care for Elena, followed a few years later by Javier, and then Gabriela. Even without her income, they had managed to get by, until the hurricane. Now, in their new life, Miguel enjoyed the restaurant business, and she liked living close to her sisters-in-law. The Latino community in Poplar Grove was growing, and their local Catholic church offered a service in Spanish where her family could worship. Her English was slowly improving, and she hoped that one day she would speak it well enough to volunteer at the children’s school. The school system was good, and she respected the teachers’ opinions. Elena’s teacher, Mrs. Simpson, had been concerned at their conference that Elena was not keeping up with the class, but Rosario knew from the things that Elena chattered about at home in Spanish that she was learning many new things. Elena didn’t seem to be picking up English as quickly as Javier was in his kindergarten class, and some of Rosario’s friends from church had told her that she shouldn’t allow the children to speak Spanish at home, but it was important to Rosario that the children not lose their Mexican heritage. She wished she could help Elena more with her homework and that Elena didn’t have to work two to three hours a night on it, but until Rosario’s English was better, she’d have to continue to rely on her nieces and nephews for help.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is often described as the beliefs or practices of a certain group of people, but there are difficulties associated with the word “culture” in its complexity. Frequently, people are labeled as “Latino,” “African American,” “Asian,” or “Native American,” and described in characteristics attributed to their culture. Yet within each of these groups, there is much diversity. As Gonzalez-Mena (2008) stated,

Culture is extremely complex, and people of the same culture are quite different, depending on their individuality, their family, their gender, age, race, ethnicity, abilities, religion, economic level, social status, where they live and where they came from, sexual orientation, educational level, and even appearance, size, and shape! (p. 5)
Instead of viewing culture as a description of a group of people, perhaps a more useful approach for educators is to think of culture as the lens through which people view the world based on their backgrounds and experiences. Cultural beliefs and practices, as transmitted through a student’s family and community experiences, help shape their personal and family histories. This is called belongingness, and it is important for educators to understand all the cultural influences on a family when trying to establish a relationship with them (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

In addition to race, ethnicity, language, age, socioeconomic status (SES), sexual orientation, disabilities, or country of origin, culture can also include religious or spiritual practices and geographical locations. For example, even though the white, Anglo-European descendant population may be similar in skin tone and language, there is a great diversity between rural and urban; male and female; upper-, middle-, and lower-socioeconomic classes; and younger and older Caucasians. Culture or diversity does not just refer to minorities but applies to the entire population.

If culture includes all these different factors, then all of us are multicultural. As Warrier et al. (2002) stated,

I might have grown up in a working class, but today I am a professional, so I may no longer identify as a working-class person. If I am multiracial, how do I identify myself? We must move from having unitary ways of understanding people to looking at the complex ways all these issues come together for different people. (p. 662)

Key Concepts in the Idea of Culture

Phillips (as cited in Couchenour & Chrisman, 2000, pp. 25–26) described six key concepts of culture:

1. **Culture is learned.** Culture is not biological, meaning that a child of a certain ethnic or racial background may not necessarily understand the practices of that ethnic or racial group if not raised in it. For example, a child adopted from China and raised in a rural, middle-class white American home may not have any understanding of Chinese culture, unless specifically taught about it.

2. **Culture is characteristic of groups and not an individual trait.** Individual personality characteristics, such as shyness or competitiveness, are not culturally determined; however, students may also have learned cultural behaviors. Children whose personality traits are in conflict with their family’s cultural behaviors may feel as if they do not belong in their culture.

3. **Culture is a set of rules for behavior, but not necessarily the behavior itself.** Children are taught what is considered to be correct behavior and what is not, based on cultural beliefs. For example, if a family’s worldview is one of assertiveness and speaking up for individual rights, then children will be encouraged to be equal participants in conversations and question authority, while another cultural group’s belief may be to respect authority, with children taught to remain silent when adults are speaking.

4. **Cultures borrow and share rules.** Cultures change and influence one another, especially as people from different cultures interact, marry, and raise children. For
example, if two people of different faiths marry, the couple may choose to raise their children with the religious beliefs of both of their faiths, including observing holidays from both religions. Cultures may change over time unless the group protects its boundaries by discouraging members from interacting with others outside the culture. For example, the Amish culture seeks to isolate itself from the American culture and protects its cultural practices and beliefs, dating back to the late 17th century. Marriages outside the faith are not allowed (Robinson, 2006).

5. **Members of a cultural group may be proficient in cultural behavior but are unable to describe the rule.** For example, a rural southern tradition is to serve black-eyed peas and hog jowl on New Year’s Eve because of the belief that if a person eats like a “poor man” on the first day of the year, the New Year will bring prosperity. Children may grow up participating in this tradition and continue it into adulthood without ever understanding why this is a traditional holiday meal.

6. **Individuals are embedded to different degrees within a culture.** Acculturation describes the degree to which people from a certain cultural group display the beliefs and practices of that group. Families adopt cultural practices to varying degrees based on factors such as education level, socioeconomic status, the amount of time spent in the culture or removed from it, including the age of immigration from the native country, the amount of contact with people from other cultures, and urban or rural origin (Randall-David, 1989). Therefore, it is important for teachers not to expect a family to act a certain way because of their race, ethnicity, or language. It is important to understand individual differences, as well as cultural beliefs.

**ACTIVITY 5.1**

Think about each of these six concepts of culture. Can you give an example from your family experiences of each of these concepts? For example, how embedded are you in your culture? Can you give examples of cultural rules that you were taught as a child? Share your examples with classmates, noting how each of you has learned your cultural beliefs and practices over time, as opposed to being born with a cultural identity.

**SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AMONG CULTURALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES**

There are fundamental similarities among culturally diverse families that teachers can count on. Parents from all races, social classes, and ethnicities want the very best for their children. One Latino mother summed it up: “I believe every parent wants their child to be something” (Griego Jones, 2003, p. 89). To help achieve this, a significant amount of learning goes on in the home. Families may discuss the events of the school day with their children, help with homework and projects, as well as teach about the world indirectly through everyday activities in the neighborhood and community (De Gaetano, 2007). This goes counter to the notion of the cultural deficit model held by some educators. The deficit model is a negative view about families that presumes that some families are lacking in resources or talents to support their children in their education.

Although there are similarities among culturally diverse families, there are also differences, especially relating to the amount and type of school involvement the families
Edwards (2004) described differentiated parenting as the recognition that families differ from one another in their ideas, viewpoints, and ability to work with educators. Some families may willingly choose an active role and partnership with the school, while other families may remain fearful and intimidated by the prospect of school involvement based on language differences, racial politics, social stigma, educational or economic level, and age. One mother related her discomfort when attending a meeting scheduled by the teacher:

The pre-judgment before you even get there . . . your stomach starts churning, and I mean, I think that’s how most parents feel. It’s like, oh, I gotta go in and talk to the teacher at the teacher conference and they are going to look at me like I don’t know anything. (Griego Jones, 2003, p. 91)

It is important for you to have a variety of family engagement strategies that will allow families to choose to be involved in ways that are best suited to their lifestyle and beliefs about education.

**TEACHERS’ BELIEFS ABOUT DIVERSE FAMILIES**

While collaborating with individual parents, caregivers, and extended families, you need to reconsider your habitudes, or unexamined attitudes or preconceptions of cultural traits, because these preconceived notions may be inaccurate for the actual families you’ll be working with (Flores, Tefft-Cousins, & Diaz, 1991). Teachers may mistakenly use the term “culture” as an explanation for student and family behaviors that appear contradictory to their expectations. Ladson-Billings (2006) described an incident where teachers had labeled certain cultures as being a problem when it came to family engagement:

Teachers from a suburban school invite me to talk to them about a problem they are experiencing. They cannot get African American and Hmong parents to come to school. I arrive at the meeting and begin with the question: “Suppose you arrive at school tomorrow morning and every African American and Hmong parent in this school is here. What would you have them do?” The teachers sit in stunned silence. I have not given them some handy tips or a pat explanation about the culture of the students and their parents. (p. 108)
Establishing respectful relationships with families of diverse cultures first involves understanding one’s personal beliefs about culture and the complex nature of family engagement.

Teachers should be wary of the following habits that may influence their attitudes while engaging with families:

- **Dominant cultural perspective.** The majority of American teachers come from the dominant culture: 86% of elementary and secondary teachers are white, European Americans (Gay, 2002), and they may have fixed notions of the right way to parent, leading to resistance to other worldviews. For example, teachers regularly recommend that families read books with their children and view negatively any families where books weren’t read in the home. However, as one Latino mother shared, having books in the home and reading to children was not a routine in many Latino homes, but instead, they tended to tell stories. For example, many mothers would hold babies and toddlers and tell them stories, which was also a bonding time. This mother was surprised when her children entered school that families were encouraged to purchase books for the home and that reading to or listening to children read was so much stressed by the teachers (J. Goddard, personal communication, March 30, 2007).

- **Engrained notions of conventional family engagement.** It is also important to note that the dominant white, middle-class American perspective generally prevails when considering family engagement practices, and teachers often (unconsciously and consciously) feel more at ease with family engagement practices that reflect that worldview (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This conventional approach to family engagement may feel strange to families who hold different viewpoints about their role in their child’s education. For example, some families may not understand how fundraising through a bake sale or school car wash may directly contribute to the academic success of their child. They would rather help their children with homework and leave school activities to the teacher, who was trained for that (Clayton, 2003).

- **Deficit role of family in school engagement.** American teachers view favorably families who act as interventionists in their child’s education, with active involvement in school activities. However, some cultures view the family’s role in their child’s education to be noninterventionist in nature, believing that they should not intervene in the education process or question the teacher’s practices (Protheroe, 2006). “Demand parents” who hold urban and suburban schools accountable are now constituting a parent interventionist model whose voices are increasingly heard (Crews, 2007).

- **Parental disinterest.** These varied perspectives can cause teachers who value traditional family engagement activities to feel frustrated, as in the case of one teacher who lamented the lack of volunteers in her classroom, stating, “I give up my time after school for their child. They should give up a little of theirs to come to school and meet with me.” This teacher never realized that her cultural perspective limited families to ways they could be involved, causing her to fail to appreciate the ways they were actually supporting their child’s learning.

As this illustrates, it is important for teachers to not only understand their personal beliefs but also strive to understand other families’ viewpoints and practices.
LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN FAMILIES

With the variety of languages spoken by American students and their families, it is important to develop skills to work successfully with those who may not speak English. This starts with an understanding of the process of second language acquisition and how families influence that process. The process of learning a second language is similar to the process of learning the first language. However, becoming fluent in a language can be highly influenced by environmental factors, including the ability to practice the language with other competent speakers and the support in the school setting. Schools may offer a variety of instructional programs for English language learners (ELLs):

1. **English immersion.** Often called ESL (English as a Second Language). This approach does not develop or have the child practice their first language. The goal is to have students learn everything in English.

2. **Bilingual education.** Sometimes called dual-language programs. Instruction in this program is divided into English and the child’s first language. The goal is to maintain and support the child’s first language while transitioning into English.

3. **Primary or native language programs.** Instruction is only in the child’s native language, with little or no exposure to English (Espinosa, 2005).

Research indicates that helping children maintain and build their skills in their first language while building strong language skills in English should be a long-term goal for educators. When children lose the ability to speak their native language, they may suffer cultural alienation, family difficulties, and possible school failure (Espinosa, 2005; Garcia, 2003; Wong Fillmore, 2000). There is strong value in children maintaining their home language, as the home can function as a language refuge, a place where cultural bonds and linguistic ties to the extended family are nurtured. The home can also reinforce a positive attitude toward learning English, although the decision about whether to speak English at home should be a collaborative family decision and not forced because of school expectations (Clayton, 2003).

**Suggestions for Working With Linguistically Diverse Families**

When working with families who do not speak English as their first language, encourage them to speak with their child in the home language and support families in the following ways:

- Loan native language books, stories, and materials to families to use during interactive reading activities.
- Include families and extended relatives in the classroom as language models to read to the class in their first language or tell stories, provide translation, and teach the class new words. The United States Census Bureau (2000) noted 47 million people (over the age of five) spoke a language other than English in their homes.
- Keep families informed about their child’s language development in the acquisition of English. Compared with learning only one language, bilingualism may result in a slower growth in vocabulary. Also, one language may become dominant for the
speaker, which is normal (Espinosa, 2005). This can be confusing and upsetting for families who notice the child depending on her native language less.

- Allow students to maintain their native culture and language. Research shows that students who maintain their cultural identity and native language have more academic success (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory [NWREL], 1998).
- Recruit volunteers to serve as guides for the families’ first year in a new school setting. Ideally, these mentors should speak both English and the families’ native language. If that is not feasible, then offer the services of translators when possible.
- Work with your district to offer district-wide meetings for families with limited English proficiency, complete with translators to ensure information is disseminated and questions are answered (Clayton, 2003).

Although you may try to reach out to families who do not speak English and encourage them to be involved in the school setting, it is important to realize that often, families with limited English proficiency may be reluctant to become involved for several reasons. Their lack of fluency in English, plus their lack of knowledge of the cultural expectations of schools, may prevent involvement. In addition, many cultures regard attending a child’s school as the delivery of bad news and possible loss of face. They are afraid they will be given suggestions by the teacher they cannot implement because of language misunderstandings. Finally, many families do not have the luxury to leave work and physically get to school during inconvenient hours for them, from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. If public transportation does not run near the school, they may lack the means to get there.

More information about working with linguistically diverse families, relating to communicating effectively with them, will be shared in Chapter 10.

WORKING WITH NEWLY IMMIGRATED FAMILIES

Estimates provided from the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR, 2007) show that, as of 2005, 13% of the U.S. population comprises foreign-born people. Although a debate has raged for several years about the positive or negative influence that immigration has had on our society, the impact of immigration has been profoundly felt in schools (Friedlander, 1991). Immigrant children are regularly found in today’s classrooms, and there are a variety of reasons as to why these students’ families chose to migrate to the United States. Some came for religious freedom or to unite with family members, others to escape various war-torn countries or oppressive governments and dictators, while others may have chosen to live in the United States to seek the economic possibilities the country has to offer.

Some families who reach the United States come with advanced preparation, job security, language and educational skills, family, and community support, making for an easier adjustment in adapting to their new life. Other families, who leave their country under a variety of difficult circumstances such as war, political chaos, or economic stagnation, may face greater adaptation problems because of uncertainty, separation, lack of support, low education and language skills, and general isolation. The experience of many immigrant families includes a combination of both these positive and negative experiences in their adjustment and adaptation (Igoa, 1995; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).
Suggestions for Working With Newly Immigrated Families

Immigrant families and their children are now part of communities in every state of the nation. As a teaching professional, your task is to focus on the well-being, adjustment, and accommodation of the family and child in the school community. By building a relationship that strengthens the adaptation journey for the family, you foster individual success in school and community life. Here are some suggestions to consider:

- Focus on helping the child become successful in school. School success is embraced and encouraged by families, most specially immigrant families.
- Provide families with resources for their lifelong learning goals by sharing resources for English classes, job training, GED classes, and job opportunities.
- As a key person in the adaptation process for an immigrant family, you may be the “ambassador” of American culture. Provide explanations and reasons for our way of life, from special celebrations and holidays to the foods served in the school cafeteria.
- Depending on the stage of adaptation, you may be using translators and interpreters with recently arrived immigrant families; as the teacher, you must always be the person responsible for a child’s school progress—translators are to be the background voice during meetings and conferences. Ideally, professional translators should be used, but realistically, finding these translators is not always feasible. Teachers may need to get creative and find local resources within the community, such as military personnel who have lived abroad, or electronic translation sources, such as free or commercial Internet sites and computer programs. Remember, there may be some parents who are not literate, and you should not rely only on print communication.
- Be aware of intercultural communication, which includes more than just language, but also the relationships between people who are different in values, role expectations, and rules in social relationships (NWREL, 1998).
- Encourage family engagement. Many families come from cultures where teachers are not questioned and family engagement in schooling would be considered rude and disrespectful (NWREL, 1998). Thus, involvement in the educational process may be a new concept for many immigrant families. Therefore, continuously reach out to your students’ families with suggestions of ways they may be involved with their child’s education.
- Seek to understand the causes of immigration and particular concerns of your students’ families. As stated earlier, immigrants come to the United States for various reasons, and no two immigrants’ experiences are the same. Understanding why students’ families immigrated will assist in developing a positive relationship with immigrant families.

As with past generations of immigrants to America, education will provide the foundation for a new life in the United States for new immigrant families. Work with these families and their children today will have a lasting, positive impact on those families as well as the community.
Responsive teachers are often confused about diverse family religious practices: what to include in the classroom curriculum in the area of world religions and how to respect family requests concerning their religious beliefs. For example, is it all right for children to talk about their family’s religious practices in class discussions, or is that a violation of the separation of church and state? Can teachers share books that show families participating in religious ceremonies and rituals without being accused of teaching about religion? The First Amendment makes it clear: “Public schools may not inculcate nor inhibit religion. They must be places where religion and religious conviction are treated with fairness and respect.” This point is important enough to repeat, “Public schools uphold the First Amendment when they protect the religious liberty rights of students of all faiths or none” (Family education, 2007, p. 1). Therefore, culturally supportive family involvement practices include respecting all families’ religious beliefs and allowing children to share those freely in the classroom.

The issue of religious beliefs often surfaces around holidays. In the United States, the school calendar is built around the holidays celebrated in the Christian religion. For example, public schools are not in session on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath day, and schools rarely plan activities to be held on a Sunday or other special religious days, such as Christmas and Easter. Teachers tend to plan their curriculum around the dominant culture themes, and the classroom read-aloud often features holiday stories from an Anglo-Saxon perspective. This ethnocentric, monocultural emphasis can lead to cultural discontinuity for students from different religious backgrounds, where they feel disconnected from the overall classroom cultural environment because of a lack of connectedness with what is being taught.

Schools demonstrate equity when they ensure that the curriculum includes study about all world religions. Diverse religious holidays offer rich opportunities to teach about religion in elementary schools. Teaching about religious holidays is permissible, as opposed to celebrating religious holidays, which is not. Studying different religious holidays or festivals may not only add to students’ academic knowledge about the world but also be a way to explore family and community diversity (Family Education, 2007). Table 5.3 lists a variety of ethnic and religious holidays, many of which may not be familiar to you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity/Religion</th>
<th>Holiday/Celebration</th>
<th>Month</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Emancipation day</td>
<td>January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black history month</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rosa Park’s anniversary</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malcolm X’s birthday</td>
<td>May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Juneteenth</td>
<td>June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kwanzaa</td>
<td>December to January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>Lohri</td>
<td>January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vesak—Buddha’s Birth</td>
<td>April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diwali</td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bodhi—Buddha’s Enlightenment</td>
<td>December</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese, Korean, Taiwan</td>
<td>Chinese Lunar New Year</td>
<td>January/February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lantern Festival</td>
<td>February/March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dragon Boat Festival</td>
<td>May/June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mid-Autumn Festival</td>
<td>September/October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Double Ninth Day (Elder’s Day)</td>
<td>October/November</td>
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## Hindu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lohri</td>
<td>January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holi</td>
<td>February/March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahashivaratri (Shiva Ratri)</td>
<td>February/March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rama Navami</td>
<td>April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krishna Jayanti</td>
<td>July/August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganesha-Chaturthi (Ganesha Utsava)</td>
<td>August/September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diwali</td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Islamic, Muslim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al Hijra—Muslim New Year</td>
<td>January/February/March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mawlid al-Nabi (Muhammad's birthday)</td>
<td>March/April/May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramadan</td>
<td>August/September/October/November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eid al-Fitr (conclusion of Ramadan)</td>
<td>September/October/November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eid al-Adha (conclusion of Hajj)</td>
<td>November/December</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>November/December/January/February</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Japanese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O-Sho-Gatsu, Japanese New Year</td>
<td>January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Foundation Day</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinamatsuri, The Doll Festival</td>
<td>March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O-Bon Festival/Feast of Lanterns</td>
<td>August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumnal Equinox</td>
<td>September/October</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Jewish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tu B’Svat or Tu B’Shevat</td>
<td>January/February/March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purim</td>
<td>February/March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pesach/Passover</td>
<td>March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yom Hashoah/Holocaust Memorial Day</td>
<td>April/May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shavuot</td>
<td>May/June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tisha B’av</td>
<td>July/August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosh Hashanah, Jewish New Year’s Day</td>
<td>September/October/November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement</td>
<td>September/October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukkot</td>
<td>September/October/November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah</td>
<td>September/October/November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanukkah</td>
<td>December</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Mexico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constitution Day</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flag Day</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinco de Mayo</td>
<td>May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Independence Day</td>
<td>September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dia de los Muertos/Day of the Dead</td>
<td>November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Posadas</td>
<td>December</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Puerto Rican

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three Kings Day</td>
<td>January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emancipation Day</td>
<td>March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth of Puerto Rico</td>
<td>July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery of Puerto Rico Day</td>
<td>November</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Kentucky University Medical Center (2008).

**Notes:**

a. For specific dates for a calendar year, see, www3.kumc.edu/diversity/ethnic_relig/ethnic.html.

b. The Islamic calendar is based on lunar observation, and dates apply to North America.
One issue that sometimes turns into a battleground between teachers and families relating to religion is a family’s request for their child to be excused from classroom discussions or activities for religious reasons. School officials must accommodate these requests, and if students miss school days because of religious reasons, they must be allowed to make up the work. This may be difficult for you, as a teacher, to accept, but it is important to remember that religion shapes culture, and cultural practices often reflect religious beliefs. For example, as one Muslim mother stated, “Our religion is our culture, and our culture is our religion. I cannot separate the two.” For this parent, observing her faith’s religious practices was more important than her child attending school that day. This illustrates the importance of teachers suspending their judgment concerning families’ religious beliefs, as they will spill over into the classroom setting.

Consider the following short vignettes involving classroom situations. How would you respond to the students involved and their families?

### Family Religious Beliefs

- **You overhear a conversation between two students in your fifth-grade class concerning snakes and poison.** One of the students describes his church, The Church of God With Signs Following, where they wave live rattlesnakes during services and drink poison (strychnine) too. If they die, their faith is probably weak. The student said that he has witnessed men fall on the floor and be carried out.

- **A parent calls for a conference with you, the teacher, and the principal.** She adamantly and emotionally states that she does not want her child to hear anything about the topic of religion either in the classroom or in the school environment. When information on religion comes up, she asks that her child be allowed to leave the room. She indicates that she is willing to sue the district and the teacher personally if she hears of religion being discussed.

- **A new student moves into your classroom.** On her first morning, her mother brings her to class and informs you that their family members are Jehovah’s Witnesses and that her daughter does not celebrate holidays and/or salute the flag. That morning, during the Pledge of Allegiance, the student remains seated. Later, the other students ask why she did not participate in saying the Pledge.

### Sexual Mores

- **A Muslim father requests that his fifth-grade daughter never be seated next to a boy** (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). However, you often have students’ desks in groups of four facing one another to promote cooperative learning. In addition, there are fewer girls than boys in your classroom this school year, so the option of placing the girl only next to other girls appears limited. You are also unsure how you will control her seating when she is in other classes, such as art or music.

### Religious Practices or Traditions

- **It is taboo to describe the religious ceremonies of the Zuni to outsiders—secrecy is fundamental to the Zuni religion.** Teaching Zuni ceremonial prayers to youths is the role of the head kachina priest (Morrell, 2007). A Zuni student in your class has missed several classes for reasons that are unclear to you. When you contact the parents, they indicate that their child has been undergoing training to be involved in a ceremony.

- **You create a math classification activity for your kindergarten class where children are given small bags of colored candies and asked to sort them according to color, size, and shape.** After the children sort their candies by different attributes, they are allowed to eat them. One child begins crying and says that she can’t have any sweets because of her religion. Her mother sends you a note the next day that expresses her unhappiness about the incident. She writes that their Catholic family is abstaining from all sweets during the Lent season and that she does not want any more candy served in class until the end of Lent.
All these scenarios present difficult dilemmas that teachers find themselves facing, relating to religious diversity. What can teachers do to be better prepared for family religious diversity in their classrooms?

### Suggestions for Working With Religiously Diverse Families

- Research the major religions or belief systems practiced within your school community. Take notes on any restrictions within the religion that may influence your classroom instruction and your students. Investigate festivals or celebrations that could add richness to your curriculum.
- Be aware of school district policies relating to how religious information is shared, and also make sure families are aware of the district policies and legal rights concerning religion. Have a chat with your principal about his approach to working with families who bring up faith-based concerns. You may be reluctant to approach the issue of religion with families; however, to be respectful of all families, you must be aware of any religious limitations for particular students.
- Remember, students also have the right to express their religious views during a class discussion or as a part of a written assignment or activity. Young students’ opinions are often based on their families’ values and may be controversial, but warrant a discussion. Be prepared that certain units of study, such as evolution or religious holidays, may lead to questions and discussions relating to faith or religious beliefs.
- Recruit another teacher as a mentor to help you with community religious issues. If you are concerned that a conversation with a family member about religious concerns may become confrontational or accusatory, ask your administrator, mentor teacher, or family involvement coordinator to be a part of the meeting.

Your faith background (or lack thereof) helps define who you are as a member of your culture, yet as a public school teacher, it is important that you suspend judgment concerning families’ religious beliefs and be respectful of those beliefs different from yours.

### Culturally Responsive Family Engagement

Recent researchers have described the importance of a culturally responsive curriculum that meets the needs of all learners, including those who are diverse in race, ethnicity, language, ability, gender, language, religion, and SES (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In Chapter 1, you were introduced to the similar concept of **culturally responsive family engagement**, where teachers go beyond the traditional activities associated with schools and families and seek to have a strong awareness of cultural differences, while also affirming the views of all families (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 27). This culturally responsive family engagement requires multiple communication opportunities with families, such as the beginning of school year survey in Table 5.4 or by conducting home visits (which will be further discussed in Chapters 10 and 12).

Culturally responsive family engagement must go beyond your classroom practices, though, and also include your school’s policies and practices. The state of Alaska has developed Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools to provide “a way for schools and communities to examine the extent to which they are attending to the educational and cultural well-being of the students in their care” (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998, p. 2). The Standards are listed in Table 5.5.
TABLE 5.4 Beginning of the Year Survey for Families

1. What does your child like to do at home? What do you like to do together?
2. Does your child like to read or be read to? What does your child like to read?
3. What kind of activities does your child do at home that requires work with numbers or math?
4. How do you help your child learn different things that are important to your family, such as your family’s values and beliefs?
5. How does your child contribute to your daily family routines? What special jobs within the family does your child do?
6. What hobbies or sports does your child enjoy? Do other family members participate in these hobbies or sports? If so, who?
7. What goals do you have for your child this year?
8. What else would you like me to know about your child or your family?

TABLE 5.5 Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools (1998)

Cultural Standards for Educators
Culturally responsive educators work closely with parents to achieve a high level of complementary educational expectations between home and school. Educators who meet this cultural standard

1. Promote extensive community and parental interaction and involvement in their children’s education
2. Involve elders, parents, and local leaders in all aspects of instructional planning and implementation
3. Seek to continually learn about and build on the cultural knowledge that students bring with them from their homes and community
4. Seek to learn the local heritage language and promote its use in their teaching
5. Exercise professional responsibilities in the context of local cultural traditions and expectations
6. Maintain a close working relationship with and make appropriate use of the cultural and professional expertise of their coworkers from the local community


Note that the recommendation that culturally responsive educators actively participate in the community and connect with community members in meaningful ways. This can be a powerful tool to strengthen partnerships with families (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). If the community that students come from is having a celebration, by all means attend. It is painfully clear when parents realize that some teachers avoid involvement in their cultural events, whether at school or in their community setting. For example, Latino parents noticed with surprise and sadness that both new and veteran teachers sometimes appeared afraid to venture into their communities and wanted to leave quickly (Griego Jones, 2003).
Developing a Classroom Cultural Audit

Another important aspect of culturally responsive family engagement involves the classroom environment. It’s easy to send a subtle message of acceptance or rejection each time a student or family member walks into the classroom. During the first year of teaching, seek to create a classroom community that values the cultural contributions of all families and is a risk-free environment where students respect different cultures. Watch attitude, tone of voice, and behavior while interacting with students and families; this will serve as a model for students and is the essence of culturally sensitive caring, where teachers are placed in an ethical, emotional, and academic partnership with ethnically diverse students who are anchored in honor, integrity, resource sharing, and deep belief in the possibility of growth (Gay, 2002). When children feel accepted (or rejected) at school, they will communicate this to their families.

In addition to behavior in the classroom, the environment should also clearly represent the children’s lives through home, school, and community connections (McIntyre, Rosebery, & Gonzalez, 2001). Gay (2002) described the hidden or symbolic curriculum that is communicated through classroom materials and displays. By portraying a wide variety of age, gender, ability, race, ethnic, religious, and social class diversity through the classroom environment, the message is given that all people are valued. Rotating classroom displays, portfolio collections, photo albums or scrapbooks, bulletin board exhibits, student projects, tape recordings, or videos that represent family diversity can draw attention to the accomplishments of all families and help them feel that they are partners with the teacher in educating their children. It also gives the children a sense of belonging and continuity between school and home.

One way to ensure this is to conduct a family-friendly classroom cultural audit. By looking at classroom displays and exhibitions of family cultural artifacts, classroom projects, and the ways in which you have authentic contact with families, you can determine your level of cultural responsiveness. Table 5.6 presents a checklist of ideas for ways in which you can further develop culturally responsive family engagement through your classroom environment.

### Table 5.6 Family-Friendly Classroom Cultural Audit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does your classroom rate? Check if your classroom has the following elements:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classroom Displays</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruit families as collaborators in designing a family-friendly classroom:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Display a world map on the wall indicating where everyone is from, linking children’s pictures with yarn. Encourage families to add their pictures next to their child’s in the collection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Record children's songs based on community themes (McIntyre et al., 2001). Have a tape recorder available to families to listen to their children’s songs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Record children’s dance demonstrations, whether they are ethnic, regional, or community based. Have a television available for families to view when they stop by.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
TABLE 5.6 (Continued)

- Label items throughout the classroom in multiple languages and use these to build vocabulary. Consider rotating terms rather than leaving them all year. When possible, integrate into the curriculum.
- Set up a family-based classroom museum with families contributing artifacts on a rotating basis.
- A family member might be willing to take on the role of curator (on a rotating basis).
- Create a bulletin board exhibit of photos of ceremonial dress or clothing worn in the native country.
- A volunteer might be willing to be in charge of changing the exhibit periodically.
- As a project for the year end, put together a portfolio (using a pictorial overview) of the cultural artifacts families have contributed.

Projects Tied to Family/Community Interests

Enlist families as partners with their children in project development:

- Embed home language into projects through the year (McIntyre et al., 2001). Make sure to alert families about contributing to projects in which they may have particular expertise.
- Integrate cultural knowledge by storytelling in the classroom (Delgado Gaitan, 2004). Record the event for other families to view later.
- Compare current projects in your classroom with those completed by families (e.g., raising chicks) (McIntyre et al., 2001). Encourage families to tell their children about their school projects similar to the ones in which they are currently engaged.
- Ask students about special food dishes, breads, or candies from their communities of origin (Cortina, 2006). Provide ingredients for families to make recipes if they are willing.

Cultural and Community Demonstrations

Cultural and community-learning opportunities engage students:

- Have families act as guides in local area mapping activities during a classroom geography lesson.
- Integrate funds of knowledge held by family members relating to a specific classroom lesson.

Opportunities for Authentic Contact With Families

Deepen your understanding of family dynamics:

- Exchange journals between families and teacher (Finnegan, 1997).
- Look for opportunities for interactions with family members during pick-up or drop-off times.
- Try to allow for discussions about hobbies, sports interests, and academics.
- Display multicultural books and use them for interactive reading and make them available for children and families to read at home through a classroom lending library.

SUMMARY

Respecting and honoring the different families represented in your classroom through your teaching practices and classroom environment is not an easy task. In fact, it will be a lot of work! However, as a professional in the field of education, you will be supporting
the basic principle of family engagement as a part of healthy child development and learning for children from diverse families. Your work will also benefit your entire class, as all your students learn to accept and appreciate each other’s similarities and differences.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

Reread the In the Classroom case study presented at the beginning of the chapter, and reflect on these questions:

1. What attitudes or preconceived notions does Clara Simpson have about Elena and her family? How does that affect her teaching effectiveness with Elena?

2. What family engagement strategies has the teacher tried? Have they been effective? Why or why not?

3. Using a model of culturally responsive family support, what other family engagement strategies should the teacher try to help Elena be successful in class?

**WEBSITES**


This site includes information on family income research and policies affecting families, including food insecurity, poverty statistics for states and cities, and minimum wage increases.

The Education Alliance, maintained by Brown University, [www.alliance.brown.edu](http://www.alliance.brown.edu).

This website offers suggestions to foster family relationships, family involvement, and cultural awareness.

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, maintained by George Washington University Graduate School, [www.ncela.gwu.edu](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu).

Promotes educator’s cultural competence to better serve culturally diverse students.


This partnership between a faith-based community group, a local teachers union, and a school district began in 1998 as an effort to address the cycle of blame that existed between parents and teachers at several Sacramento schools.
The Urban Institute, www.urban.org.

Urban Institute experts study public policies affecting families and parents. Look under their section on families and parenting.

**STUDENT STUDY SITE**

Log on to the student study site at www.sagepub.com/grant2e for additional study tools, including the following:

- eFlashcards
- Web quizzes
- Web resources
- Learning objectives