The Power of Pausing: Practicing Cultural Humility in the Workplace

BY NUDRAT (NURI) HASSAN

In early childhood programs, we often encounter staff and families from many different backgrounds. These differences enrich our programs and give us opportunities to learn from one another. When we approach others with curiosity and openness, we create a space for respect, understanding, and collaboration. However, sometimes assumptions about one's background can unintentionally create discomfort. These moments may not come from a place of harm, but they still affect the person on the receiving end. What may seem like a casual remark or a friendly observation can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or place someone into a category that does not fully represent who they are. This is where the power of pausing can come in.

One way to address this is to intentionally pause before moving forward with assumptions and instead practice cultural humility, a concept often emphasized in fields like public health and education. This pause is not simply about stopping but rather an active moment of reflection. It involves recognizing one's initial assumptions, questioning where they come from, and creating space to seek understanding. Cultural humility is the lifelong commitment to self-reflection, openness, and recognizing that we do not know everything about another person's experiences or identity. It encourages us to approach learning about others with curiosity rather than assumptions.

I have personally experienced moments where people make assumptions about who I am based on my appearance. Because I am a brown woman from Southeast Asia, many people immediately assume that I am Indian. *Surprise!* I am not. I am from Bangladesh. While I understand where that assumption may come from, it often leads to comments or questions that place me in a category that does not accurately represent my identity. In reality, it can feel awkward for me to have to correct someone's assumptions. Bangladesh is a neighboring country to India with its own history, culture, and language. While there are similarities across South Asian/Desi cultures, each country and each individual have a unique story.

One of the things that makes me proud to be Bangladeshi is its deep connection to language and cultural identity. The Bangla Language Movement of 1952 is a powerful example of this history, when students protested for the right to speak their mother tongue, and some even sacrificed their lives. Because of this powerful moment in history, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) later established February 21 to honor those students and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity around the world. In the context of cultural humility, this history underscores the importance of pausing and avoiding assumptions about others' experiences. This perspective encourages me to approach interactions with curiosity, listen actively, and remain open to learning from others rather than relying on preconceived notions.

When assumptions are made before understanding someone's background, it can make a person feel unseen. On the other hand, taking the time to share and ask questions can help families and staff feel seen as individuals.

When we work closely and develop relationships with coworkers and families, we naturally want to learn about them. But instead of starting a conversation based on assumptions, more thoughtful, respectful, and open-ended questions invite conversation and allow individuals to define their own identities rather than having them defined by others. Approaching conversations this way not only prevents misunderstandings but also creates opportunities to learn from one another. It fosters a program culture where people feel seen, respected, and valued for who they are.

We all make assumptions from time to time, but what is important is our willingness and intention to reflect, learn, and grow from those moments. By pausing to reflect before acting on assumptions, we can move forward with curiosity and humility. Asking open-ended questions, practicing active listening, and seeking to understand others' perspectives foster humility and curiosity, strengthening relationships. Using these strategies allows us to foster stronger, more trusting relationships with staff, children, and families, each of whom brings a unique background, story, and viewpoint.

Below are a handful of questions that may help you or your staff reflect on ways to practice cultural humility:

REFLECTION

- When have I made an assumption about a colleague, child, or their family in my center or family child care program that might have unintentionally made them feel unseen or misunderstood?
- How do I usually respond when a parent, family member, or peer corrects one of my assumptions or misunderstandings about their child or family?
- What helps me remain open and curious about others' perspectives rather than jumping to conclusions?
- How does our current program foster curiosity and openness about diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences?
- Are there times when I might have unintentionally relied on stereotypes or generalizations when thinking about children or families? How can I challenge those assumptions?
- How do I model cultural humility and curiosity in everyday interactions with my team?
- How does our program ensure that children and their families feel seen, valued, and respected for their unique backgrounds and identities?
- What practices do we have, or could we add, to invite families to share their culture, traditions, and stories in ways that make them feel comfortable?

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Nudrat (Nuri) Hassan, MPH, *serves as the Data and Evaluation Coordinator at the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at the National Louis University. In this role, she develops and automates both individual and aggregated profile reports for Leadership Academies across the country, utilizing statistical analysis and programming techniques. She also designs surveys to support program evaluation efforts for the Research and Evaluation Team. Nuri holds a Bachelor's degree in Applied Health Science with a certification in Health Informatics from Minnesota State University and a Master of Public Health in Epidemiology with a certification in Maternal and Child Health from the University of South Carolina, Columbia. Prior to her current position, Nuri was a Health Promotion Graduate Assistant at the Center for Health and Well-being, where she conducted evaluation reports, provided wellness coaching, and served as an STI consultant to help students access community resources for preventative health measures.*