
Multicultural education Is it really necessary?

by Barbara A. Langham

TRUE or FALSE: Multicultural education is necessary only if there are different cultures in a child care facility.

The statement is false. It doesn't matter whether a facility serves families that are all Anglo, all African American, all Hispanic, all Asian, or a mix, multicultural education is necessary. All children need to learn social skills to enable them to live and work successfully in a diverse country.

Diversity is increasing

The United States, according to the 2000 Census, has grown racially and ethnically diverse in recent years, and that diversity continues to increase (U.S. Census Bureau 2003).

In some states, groups once called "minorities" are becoming the majority. In Texas, for example,

Anglos will be outnumbered by all other groups in a year or two. One group in particular, Hispanics, will comprise the majority in about 30 years (Texas State Data Center 2001). Already non-Anglos make up 60 percent of the students in Texas public schools (Texas Education Agency 2002-2003).

Historically, Anglos have had greater access to education and work opportunities than other groups. As a result, Hispanics and African Americans were more likely to leave school early and work in low-skill, low-paying jobs. If trends continue, Texas can expect a higher proportion of low-skill workers, higher unemployment, and increased poverty as time goes on (Education Commission of the States 2003). Reversing these trends requires doing a better job of educating all children.

Education begins in early childhood. Across the United States, state child care regulators and education organizations are urging changes. They have recommended training to help teachers provide culturally relevant programs. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has encouraged the profession "to recruit many more early childhood professionals who themselves share children's cultures and home languages" (NAEYC 2001).

What is culture?

Culture refers to the shared values, attitudes, customs, beliefs, and behavior rules of a group of people. We see evidence of culture in the objects people use, such as clothing and toys, as well as in their music, food, language, and stories. We see culture in how people live, especially their family interactions, communication styles, and celebrations. What's harder to see are people's beliefs and attitudes about how to live each day and what gives meaning to their lives.

In the past educators have taught culture as something "out there," belonging to other groups, to be marked at times like Black History Month or Cinco de Mayo. As a result, many Anglo-Americans assume

Definitions

Culture — the shared values, attitudes, and behavior rules of a group of people.

Diversity — differences between people such as race and ethnicity as well as age, gender, ability and disability, sexual orientation, and spiritual beliefs.

Ethnicity — a person's geographic origin or national identity.

Multicultural education — schooling that reflects and serves individuals from many cultures.

Prejudice — an attitude, usually unfavorable, about an individual or group without correct or adequate information that can result in discriminatory behavior

Race — a classification based on physical characteristics such as skin color. Multicultural education advocates argue that race is an outdated theory based on superficial traits.

Racism — systematic discrimination based on race, or simply, prejudice plus power.

Stereotype — an oversimplified notion of a person or group that allows no individuality.



they themselves have no culture. Not true. Everyone has a culture. It has been compared to what water is to fish: you may not see it, but it guides your behavior.

We see evidence of Anglo-American culture in such things as the traditional turkey for Thanksgiving Day dinner and hot dogs on the Fourth of July. Some less visible characteristics include the following attitudes:

- clock conscious. Be on time.
- future-oriented. Work for the future, minimize the past.
- straightforward. Look each other in the eye. Say what you mean.
- distinctly individual. Control your own life.

Some Anglo-Americans, of course, remain close to their cultural roots. We see examples in German and Czech community festivals, St. Patrick's Day parades, and Scottish bagpipes at weddings, to name a few.

The point is that every child has a cultural heritage. Multicultural education recognizes and honors the cultural traditions of all groups. It says diversity gives our society strength and richness. It teaches children that differences are OK, and that people deserve the same opportunities no matter what their race, ethnic group, religion, age, or gender.

By contrast, monocultural education (one culture) puts children at risk for growing up with limited knowledge and social skills in a diverse society. Even worse, children may grow up thinking that one culture is the norm and somehow better than others.

Children learn prejudice early

Some might argue that preschool children are too young to notice differences. Actually research has made it clear that preschool children do notice differences and form attitudes about diversity.

Experienced teachers have heard preschoolers tell classmates things like "You talk funny" and "You can't play. You've got black skin."

"Young children pick up prejudice and stereotypes about themselves and other people simply as part of trying to make sense of their world," according to Stacey York, author of *Roots & Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Programs* (2003). York has summarized research findings in "Stages of racial awareness and prejudice" (see page 26).

Moving toward multicultural education

Providing multicultural education is a huge challenge. The concept may feel confusing and threaten-

ing at first. Teachers who have taught from one cultural perspective for a long time may find it hard to change. A program cannot become multicultural overnight.

But you don't need to know everything about all cultures to start. The important thing is to start somewhere. Some suggestions:

Identify your own culture

It's hard to recognize and appreciate other cultures if you don't know your own. Think carefully about the following questions. Write your answers in a journal. Return to them in a month or two and add new insights and experiences about what you have

learned. Share cultural appreciations and insights with other teachers at a staff meeting.

- Where did your family originate? Trace your family history as far back as possible. You may find that ancestors came from several different countries.
- When did your ancestors immigrate to the United States? Why did they come?
- Where did your ancestors first settle? How were they treated?
- What are some traditional foods, music, and celebrations of your cultural heritage?
- What are some beliefs and practices your family used in rearing children?

Stages of racial awareness and prejudice

Infants: develop self-awareness

- recognize familiar people and show fear of strangers
- recognize and actively explore faces to discern "what is me" and "what is not me"
- develop a sense of trust in the world
- experience and show fear and anger

Toddlers: identify self as an individual

- experience and show shame
- are sensitive and "catch" feelings from adults
- begin to mimic adult behavior
- ask "What's that?"

Twos: identify people with the words *me*, *mine*, and *you*

- need independence and a sense of control
- recognize physical characteristics
- classify people by gender
- learn names of colors
- can tell the difference between black and white
- may begin to use social labels

Threes and fours: increase their ability to notice differences among people

- can identify and match people according to their physical characteristics
- ask "why" questions
- have not yet developed gender or ethnic constancy—they don't know yet that attributes such as gender and skin color remain constant throughout a person's life.
- are susceptible to believing stereotypes
- make false associations and overgeneralize
- mask fear of differences with avoidance or silliness

Fives and sixes: understand cultural identity and enjoy exploring cultural heritage of classmates

- can identify stereotypes
- explore "real" and "pretend," "fair" and "unfair"
- tend toward rigid thinking and behavior
- show aggression through insults and name calling

Sevens to nines: develop gender and racial constancy

- understand group membership and form groups to distinguish self from others
- can consider multiple attributes
- become aware of racism against own group
- ask, "What are you?"
- want and need a wealth of accurate information
- develop personal strength

Nines to twelves: become interested in, and aware of, world events

- become interested in ancestry, history, geography
- understand "ashamed" and "proud"
- can put self in another's shoes
- become aware of cultural and political values
- understand racism
- can compare and contrast minority and majority perspectives
- can use skills to take social action.

Taken from Stacey York, *Roots and Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Programs*.

- What are some values, beliefs, and behaviors of your cultural heritage? What are some sayings that elders passed on to younger generations?
- How does your cultural heritage affect your caregiving and teaching style?

Build partnerships with parents

Get to know the parents of the children in your care. Avoid the tendency to stereotype them based on the way they look or talk. Get to know the parents as individuals. Avoid assuming that all Hispanics trace their roots to Mexico, for example. Ask Asian parents their specific identity—Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, or Korean, for example.

Engage parents in one-on-one conversations about their priorities for their children. What are their mealtime and sleep routines at home? What are the roles of family members? How do they spend time with their children at home—playing, doing chores, reading? How do they guide and discipline their children? Do they want their children to grow up speaking more than one language? What has been their experience with people from other cultural groups?

As parents talk, listen with your heart. Identify their strengths. Resist the urge to judge whether parents are right or wrong. You may find that you disagree about what’s best for a child. Discuss the issue with parents and work toward a solution that both of you can embrace.

Some child care providers and teachers make home visits a part of the enrollment process. These visits can provide a first-hand understanding of how a family lives. Keep in mind, however, that a family may fear that you are snooping, especially if they have had negative experiences with human service workers in the past. Make arrangements in advance and keep the visit short—no longer than 30 minutes.

Commit to a multicultural approach

Multicultural education is a vast and complex subject. Begin learning about it on your own and with colleagues. See the resources at the end of this article. As you learn, consider taking steps over time to provide a multicultural approach.

Administration. Ideally board members and advisers represent the cultures of the children in your care and in your community. The same is true

of teaching staff. Make sure all teachers and staff have opportunities for learning and advancement. If you have children whose home language is different from the dominant language in your program, bring in teachers or volunteers who speak that language.

Review your marketing and enrollment practices. Consider whether brochures and handbooks contain bias or stereotypes. Think of ways to reach out to families of diverse cultures.

Environment. Look around your classroom. Children need to feel they belong there. Photograph the children with their families, and display the photos on a bulletin board. Later add photos of people from different cultures in your community.

Make a teaching picture file

Pictures can serve an educational as well as an aesthetic purpose in your home or classroom. Make a file of teaching pictures. You can post the pictures on bulletin boards, display them in learning centers, and use them at storytime.

Here’s what you need:

- magazines, posters, catalogs, newspaper ads, greeting cards
- scissors
- construction paper or posterboard in bright colors
- glue
- photocopies of questions (see below)
- laminator or clear, adhesive-backed vinyl

1. Choose photos that represent diversity in a positive way and are large, preferably 8-inches by 10-inches.
2. Cut out the pictures and glue each to a piece of construction paper or posterboard.
3. On the back, glue a sheet of questions to use in discussion with children.
4. Laminate the photo or cover both sides with clear, adhesive-backed vinyl.

Questions

- What do you see in this picture?
- Tell me a story about what is happening.
- What do you think was happening before this picture was taken?
- What do you think will happen next?
- Tell me some ways this picture is like you. How is it different?
- What do you like about this picture?
- What would you change about it?

As you plan curriculum units, make sure that learning materials reflect the children and their home cultures. Gradually add items to learning centers that reflect the diversity of your community and your state.

Social interaction. Make a chart of all the children in your class. Throughout the day, note the times and the nature of your interactions. At day's end, count and reflect. Do you praise white children more often than Hispanic or black children? Do you assume that certain children can't perform and then you respond by feeling sorry for them? Take the time to know each child and discover that child's strengths.

Help children learn the names of their classmates. Teach children that you do not allow name calling, teasing, and bullying. One rule might be: Treat others as you want them to treat you. Encourage children to feel proud of who they are and to stand up for each other.

Use words of caring and respect: "thank you," "please," "Let's work together." Discuss stereotypes children see in books and on TV. Offer opportunities to discuss differences and how children feel about them.

Embracing diversity

Multicultural education is necessary because children live in a diverse society. Child care facilities

Guidelines for pictures

In a multicultural classroom, photos and illustrations:

- show real people. Remove cartoon images that inaccurately portray people and diversity.
- are vivid images. Avoid simple line art that makes all people look the same.
- portray daily life in the United States today. Leave historical and far-away images for school-age children to explore.
- represent major cultures in numbers appropriate to your community. Avoid tokenism (10 pictures of Anglos and one of Hispanics, for example).
- show people in positive and varied roles. Use photos of blacks as doctors and scientists, not just football players. Use photos of Hispanics as lawyers and business people, not just Folklorico dancers.
- emphasize cooperation, peace, freedom, and problem solving.

and schools need a multicultural approach because children notice differences early and can develop prejudice.

Begin by knowing and respecting the children and their families. Make sure your facility reflects those



families in its staff, curriculum, and environment. Teaching children about differences can help them develop tolerance and cooperation.

References

- Education Commission of the States. *Highlights from the 2003 National Forum on Education Policy, July 15, 2003*. www.ecs.org/html/meetingsEvents/NF2003/Highlights.asp?recID=47.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. *NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation, Initial Licensure Programs*. www.naeyc.org/profdev/prep_review/2001.pdf.
- Texas Education Agency. *PEIMS Report, 2002-2003*. (The breakdown of children in Texas public schools is Hispanic 43 percent, Caucasian 40 percent, African American 14 percent, Asian-Pacific Islander 2.9 percent, and Native American 0.3 percent.)
- Texas State Data Center. *New Population Projections for Texas Show a State Growing Extensively, Diversifying Rapidly and Aging Substantially in the Coming Decades*. www.txsdcenter.tamu.edu/tpepp/presskit/.
- U.S. Census Bureau. *Florida Leads in Growth of School-Age Population; Census Bureau Estimates Also Show Increasing State Diversity*. www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/001342.html.
- York, Stacey. 2003. *Roots and Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Programs*, Rev. ed. St. Paul, Minn.: Redleaf Press.

Resources

- Derman-Sparks, Louise. 1989. *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children. (150-page guidebook)
- Essential Connections: Ten Keys to Culturally Sensitive Child Care*. 1993. Sacramento, Calif.: California Department of Education. (36-min. video)
- Infant/Toddler Caregiving: A Guide to Culturally Sensitive Care*. 1995. Sacramento, Calif.: California Department of Education. (100-page guidebook)
- Pulido-Tobiassen, Dora and Janet Gonzalez-Mena. 1999. *A Place to Begin: Working with Parents on Issues of Diversity*. Oakland, Calif.: California Tomorrow. (130-page notebook)

York, Stacey. 2003. *Roots and Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Programs*, Rev. ed. St. Paul, Minn.: Redleaf Press.

Note: All the resources above are available on loan to Texas residents from the ECI Collection of the Brown-Heatly Library. See the web site at www.rehab.state.tx.us/library.html or phone (512) 424-4240.

Lakeshore Learning Materials

2695 E. Dominguez St.

Carson, CA 90810

1-800-421-5354

www.lakeshorelearning.com

This company offers multicultural supplies, including ethnic specific block people props and People Colors® Crayons.

Ideas for culturally relevant materials

Art center. Markers, crayons, paints, and paper reflect a variety of skin colors. Art papers and fabrics reflect different cultures, such as origami paper, rice paper, wool, and silk.

Block center. People props represent major ethnic groups. Materials such as metal, stones, and logs are available for building houses.

Music center. Instruments represent a variety of cultures such as maracas, gongs, rattles, and flutes. Cassette tapes contain songs in the children's home languages and music from their cultures.

Dramatic play center. Children can choose multiethnic dolls, cooking utensils such as tortilla presses and woks, eating utensils such as chopsticks, and clothes such as kimonos and ponchos.

Manipulative center. Items for sorting include such things as foreign coins and ethnic fabric scraps. Lotto and other games are printed with words in the children's home languages.

Science and discovery center. Items reflect different cultures, such as cactus and bonsai plants and cumin and oregano spices. Natural objects such as feathers and leaves show the diversity in nature.

Library. Books represent a variety of cultures and model friendships across racial and ethnic lines. Tapes contain stories in the children's home languages. Puppets represent major racial and ethnic groups.