Early childhood educators work with children and families from a range of diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2005). As society becomes increasingly multi-racial, multilingual, and multicultural, so too grows the need for educators’ abilities to support children’s development by instilling in them the tools they need to live together respectfully and stand up to prejudice.

Teachers of young children play a pivotal role in laying this foundation (Gay, 2002; Hein & Miller, 2004), so they must be prepared to develop environments that are inclusive and respectful to all. Early educators have already adopted multiculturalism and anti-bias curriculum frameworks to address issues of culture and diversity.

- **Multiculturalism** focuses on the creation of equal educational opportunities and positive attitudes toward differences (Banks & Banks, 2004).
- An **anti-bias curriculum**, articulated by Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2006), adds an emphasis on the individual’s actions in response to discrimination and prejudice.

The models to put both of these frameworks into practice generally follow a top-down structure in which teachers educate children about various cultures.

**Interculturalism** adds a new layer for addressing diversity through its attention to the bi-directionality that is needed in an authentic sharing of cultural contexts. “Interculturalism is the sharing and learning across cultures that promotes understanding, equality, harmony, and justice in a diverse society” (Loyola Marymount University, 1990, unpaged).

With interculturalism, individuals learn from each other and engage in an ongoing exploration of the historical and cultural contexts that influence individual development. Instead of a top-down transmission of knowledge, an intercultural environment is one in which there are authentic and meaningful exchanges of information about each person’s individual experiences that transform all involved. Imagine an early childhood classroom where the teachers, children, and families learn together in an environment that facilitates a deep level of sharing about their cultural contexts.

The intercultural approach realizes that no one individual fully represents an ethnicity or a race. Each person represents his or her own experience as a member of a group and within his or her cultural context. The phrase **cultural context** within the early childhood education setting is inclusive of all aspects of a child’s cultural identity that are unique and influential, such as ethnicity and race, primary language, family composition, socioeconomic status, and special needs. Each individual can simultaneously contribute in multiple ways to the richness of the cultural context.

Making assumptions of similarities about children and families simply because they share a racial background can lead to erroneous conclusions. There is often more variation within a cultural group than between cultural...
Interculturalism: Addressing Diversity in Early Childhood

An intercultural approach
• encourages children to share their cultural context and
• transforms children's understanding of the group's variations.

With an intercultural approach to teaching, there is no expert providing knowledge to a novice recipient. Rather, all of the individuals—children, families, and teachers alike—have the opportunity to learn from each other.

The experience of sharing cultural contexts with each other in a constructive and positive manner differs from a multicultural curriculum, where a teacher introduces children to a variety of cultural experiences that may or may not reflect their daily lives. Through intercultural activities and dialogue, the children and teacher develop a full and rich understanding of how each individual is unique and special and contributes to the diverse fabric of society.

Personal commonalities and differences are explored. Generalizations about particular groups are less likely to develop because the information shared is specific to an individual.

Preschoolers are developing an understanding of differences both within and outside of their families and communities. The group setting brings diversity issues to the forefront at a formative time in children's development, providing early childhood educators with the unique opportunity to build a foundation of respect and inclusion of difference. Therefore, the goals of this article are to

1. demonstrate why there is a critical need for intercultural experiences in the early years,

2. propose important components of teacher preparation programs to provide intercultural tools, and

3. suggest practical ways teachers can apply the intercultural approach in their classrooms.

Why Early Intercultural Experiences?

Young children construct their identity through their early experiences.
• One of the earliest stages of cognitive development begins with the infant's ability to distinguish him/herself from others (Alcock, Carment, & Sadava, 2005).
• By the time children reach toddlerhood, they can correctly discern racial differences and use gender labels (Ramsey, 2004), yet they still struggle with understanding exactly what these constructs mean (Sprung, 2007).
• Preschool children actively construct their own self identities by examining their similarities and differences from others (Cross, 1991). Preschoolers ask questions about their own and others’ racial, linguistic, and gender attributes (Ramsey, 2004). Preschoolers are cognizant of family structure and socio-economic differences and the values society attaches to them (Tatum, 2003).

Although some may think prejudice is minimal or does not really exist in the early childhood years (Holmes, 1995), research has demonstrated quite the contrary. Children develop an increasingly accurate awareness and acceptance of
their identity. As a consequence of young children’s growing positive feelings about their in-group, there is a simultaneous increase in negative feelings toward out-groups (Aboud, 1980).

- For instance, white children from as young as 3 demonstrated a pro-white/anti-black bias (Katz & Kofkin, 1997) that solidified by age 6 (Doyle & Aboud, 1995).
- More recent research further affirms these findings and points to the importance of the environments within which children are raised (MacNaughton & Davis, 2001).
- Young children are aware of social attitudes that exist within their early lives, and their environments influence their perception of differences (Targowska, 2001).

Moreover, research has indicated that the meanings that ethnic and cultural minority group members ascribe to their ethnicity can play a critical component in determining their mental and behavioral health (Caldwell, Zimmerman, Bernat, Sellers, & Notaro, 2002). This further highlights the critical need for a positive and respectful intercultural environment within early childhood classrooms because awareness, self-identification, knowledge of dominant groups, and biases are beginning to be established.

Teachers of young children typically find themselves navigating multiple cultures, individual development needs, and various special needs, while simultaneously working to develop curriculum and provide inclusive environments that nurture development and engage all young children (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

Even in classrooms where children appear to be homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status, they may have a variety of special needs and are likely being raised in a variety of different family structures. The varieties of family compositions, for example, bring unique experiences into children’s lives and, thus, their cultural context.

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**Demonstrate sensitivity, inclusiveness, and respect.**

Early childhood professionals have the responsibility to demonstrate sensitivity, inclusiveness, and respect toward all family compositions, regardless of how they differ from their own experiences of family life (Turner-Vorbeck, 2005). Moreover, from an intercultural perspective, teachers are expected to be open to learning about themselves through self-reflection and the experiences they share with the children and families they serve. Therefore, self-awareness and reflection skills are important components of teacher education and inservice programs.

**Professional Development Supports Interculturalism**

Early childhood teachers use a complex set of skills to meet the needs of children and families. Teachers are expected to

- increase their sensitivity to different cultures, family compositions, religious practices, and languages
- become more aware of their own implicit and explicit biases that influence their teaching practices
- avoid generalizing the traditions, beliefs, and values of an individual to a group or, conversely, from a group to an individual.

However, teacher preparation programs rarely provide adequate opportunities to learn and practice these skills (Aguado, Ballesteros, & Malik, 2003).

- Teachers report that they are not prepared to work with diverse populations and have not been adequately trained (Au & Blake, 2003; Ukpokodu, 2004).
- As many as 80% of teachers did not feel prepared for the various challenges that diversity presented within their classrooms (Parsad, Lewis, & Farris, 2001).
- Although preservice teachers are uncomfortable discussing diversity issues (Van Hook, 2002), further discussion of these topics is necessary (Garmon, 2005; Sobel & Taylor, 2005; Turner-Vorbeck, 2005).

This article proposes that the early childhood field reach consensus about the content and quality of required preservice coursework addressing diversity. Systemic changes are needed for preservice teacher education to meet the needs of today’s children and families (Villalobos & Lucas, 2002). Content in these programs are recommended to minimally include:

1. self-awareness of each teacher’s cultural context and biases,
2. opportunities to interact with diverse populations, and
3. reflection throughout both of those experiences.

**Self-Awareness**

Years of research shed light on the effects of teacher preparation in the United States with regard to cultural issues.

- Nearly 40% of preservice teachers did not understand the impact of institutionalized racism on the development of minority children. They lacked awareness of their own biases and stereotypes and the impact they may have on their teaching practices. These students also underestimated the effect that preservice training could have on their understanding of diversity (Grant & Secada, 1990).
- Teachers were reticent to examine their own experiences of socialization in regards to racial, cultural, and class privilege differences (Sleeter, 2001).
- Teacher efficacy was tied to the extent to which a teacher was aware of his/her biases and views regarding the diversity represented by children in a classroom (Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008).

To address these challenges, preservice teacher preparation courses are urged to include activities such as role-plays, guest speakers, and candid discussions to challenge students to move beyond their level of comfort and develop a deeper understanding of cultural context (Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008).

**Interaction With Diverse Populations**

Preservice teachers learn best through experience. Discussions in college courses can start the process of reflection, but experience with diversity is what triggers change in biases (Hixson, 1991). A diverse student body and faculty can be a starting point. However, the intimacy that is shared among teachers, children, and their families is qualitatively different than what may be found among college students and faculty. Teachers of young children are expected to learn how to respect family traditions such as children’s sleeping arrangements at home, food preferences, and other childrearing strategies that may vary depending on cultural context.

Direct experience with diverse populations of children and their families is necessary in order to develop these skills in cultural competence. Service-learning opportunities with diverse populations enable future teachers to discover their own biases and are essential for teacher preparation (Pang & Park, 2003; Renner, Price, Keene, & Little, 2004).

**Reflection**

The critical dialogue about intercultural understandings begins in the academic classroom. It is more fully realized in service learning, which provides opportunities for improved cross-cultural communication and practice with a variety of issues that develop when young children are learning about differences. The key factor for both of these teacher preparation components is reflection.

- The ability to think critically about oneself and others is
Reflection is an important skill that serves many goals for educators. Its application to self-awareness and practical experiences with diverse populations is critical to implementation of an intercultural approach. After teachers have engaged in reflection regarding their own cultural context and their experiences with diverse populations, they can move toward creating cultural consistency between home and school.

Attributes of an Intercultural Classroom

Early childhood learning environments are far more than the physical setting.

• Each classroom reflects a program’s values and beliefs about children, families, and the community (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

• The learning environment is a powerful conduit of values (Spencer & Horowitz, 1973). It includes the way time is structured and the roles expected for everyone.

• When children are placed in any context, they learn to act in a manner that is considered to be suitable to that context (Kounin & Sherman, 1979).

• Self-reflection contributes to thinking about alternative perspectives and informs decision-making (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2005).

• Intercultural sensitivity can be increased through teacher preparation courses when reflection is built into the pedagogy (Mahoney & Schamber, 2004; Sobel & Taylor, 2005).

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Learning Materials

In high-quality, multicultural classrooms racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse materials (dolls, people figures, books, pretend food, music) representing the larger society are available. Pictures of strangers with varying abilities and races are commonly displayed. The intercultural approach suggests that multicultural and anti-bias materials used to implement curriculum should instead reflect that group’s children and teachers.

Intercultural classrooms…

• create space and time to sensitively discuss children’s different backgrounds, cultures, family structures, and abilities. Time is set aside regularly in which children and teachers share significant items from home with the group.

• are adorned with pictures of the group’s children and families using materials, playing in the classroom, and sharing aspects of their cultural context.

• have customized, individualized picture books or photo albums of the children’s families that show important people and pets.

• include the cultural tools used in home-based daily routines, such as eating.

Learning materials reflect the group’s children and teachers.

Engage in culturally familiar activities.

Engaging in culturally familiar activities with children is essential when teaching in an intercultural approach. Even daily routines can be filled with implicit or explicit cultural messages. These are some recommended intercultural teaching strategies.

• Use children’s home languages to read books (families can record themselves reading books if a teacher is not fluent in the home language).
• Implement an emergent curriculum, based on children's family traditions.

• During meals, naps, and toileting, demonstrate intercultural understanding and competence. For example, some children may have been taught to dispose of used toilet tissue in the trash to avoid plumbing problems. Seek to understand the intention behind a child's actions before determining if the behavior must change.

• Be careful not to impose teachers' culturally learned behaviors on the children. Not all children are consoled with hugs at home. Others do not make eye contact.

• Introduce different cultures through stories and games. These activities especially help counter ethnocentrism and negative messages and promote images that convey the complexity of cultural, family, and individual differences (Oberhuemer, 1994).

When home and school cultures differ, it is important to resolve these cultural conflicts in a mutually respectable way. This can only be done with open dialogue among families and teachers. Learn about each other's cultures and expectations. Respect each individual’s unique culture and identity.

*     *     *

Research on diversity in education at all levels spans decades. Addressing the issues with early childhood educators and young children is critically important to create a more equitable education system and a more just society. Transformation begins in higher education, where the next generation of teachers is being prepared. With support from program directors, teachers can then effectively reflect on, model, and positively influence how future generations of children and families appreciate diversity in their lives.

References


Interculturalism: Addressing Diversity in Early Childhood


Dr. Linda Espinosa, Professor of Early Childhood at the University of Missouri, has extensive experience working with low-income Latino children. Her book is organized into seven chapters addressing changing demographics in the United States; research findings about topics such as child development, language development, children in poverty, and English Language Learners (ELL); and curriculum strategies for diverse populations.

In the first chapter, Espinosa emphasizes the impact of good early childhood programs in educating children of poverty and ELL. Later chapters explain research findings in how children in poverty and ELL develop, including techniques to minimize the negative impact that these environmental factors can have on children. Particularly interesting is the chapter in language development, because it offers a very easy way to understand bilingualism development and steps in that process.

The most important part of the book is the section on curriculum adaptation and program design. Espinosa offers practical strategies to create programs that meet children’s needs, including social and emotional development. She also explains how to work with families from diverse backgrounds to create a climate that is respectful and culturally responsive.

One of the strengths of this book is that the author offers practical ways to integrate research findings in classrooms and programs. Her emphasis on understanding and valuing families and children is commendable. Although possible barriers and issues are identified, the book finishes on a positive note with many strategies and tips for classroom implementation.

A more in-depth discussion of teaching mathematics to this diverse population would be a valuable addition. This is an important topic due to the focus on math content in the Common Core curriculum.

Espinosa’s book would especially benefit pre-service teachers. New and experienced teachers can benefit because the material is current and pedagogically sound. Administrators are urged to add this book to the school library for teachers who are new to working with children of poverty and ELL children, or are looking for practical information about working with children and families from diverse groups.