Creating a Multicultural Environment that Values Diversity for Young Children

This brochure is written for early childhood educators, parents and practitioners interested in diversity awareness, to assist them in encouraging young children to “respect and accept” other cultures.
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Perspectives on Diversity

✦ Diversity means that no matter what ethnic background you are, everyone has his/her own unique personal meaningful cultural background (Roh, 1994).

✦ Diversity is experiencing the numerous ways that young children and adults deal with the unending demands of life (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

✦ Diversity involves cultivating a disposition of “respect, acceptance, and inclusion” (Saderman-Hall Rhomberg, 1995).

✦ Diversity is for everyone regardless of ethnicity, race, social class, and other differences (Nieto, 1992).

✦ Diversity promotes attitudes of respect and acceptance within an atmosphere of diversity (Feng, 1994).

✦ Diversity is learning about, preparing for, and celebrating cultural diversity (Gay, 1994).

Foundations of Children’s Understanding

By the age of 2 years, children are learning correct terms for gender (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

Between ages 2 and 4 years, young children develop ideas about society and what constitutes norms. Many ideas taught to children also parallel our norms of that society, if biases exist then children learn that also (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

By the age of 3 years, children are developing and exhibiting signs of being influenced by “societal biases” observed and learned that negatively influences them (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

Between 3 and 5 years, young children are concerned with finding out who they are and what is essential to their selfhood (Kendall, 1996).

By the age of 4 years, children are already thinking and individualizing their ideas based on their newfound knowledge from home and outside sources (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

“Positive and negative feelings about race seem to appear at about the same age as awareness of race” (Kendall, 1996, p. 37).

Foundations of a Multicultural Approach

Children in our world, now more than ever, are living in a diverse society.

Even if children live in an environment with one dominant race, it is still necessary to learn about a culture different from their own.

Our job as educators is to help children to be successful and empower them.

A tourist approach (teaching children about culture through celebrations and food only) should be avoided; achievements should be studied according to subject matter rather than by race.

Attitudes that reflect a diverse environment should be used throughout the year and not just on holidays such as Black History Month, Cinco de Mayo, Hanukkah or Ramadan.
Getting Started

Look at your own pre-judgments and biases
What differences in others make you feel uncomfortable? (their language, ability or color)
What attitude or bias do you have that affect others? (use of words, assumptions, stereotypes)
What words do you use when relating to young children? (positive, politically correct)

Does your work with young children reflect acceptance and respect for other cultures or affect how you teach?
Have you interviewed children to find out their thoughts? (know the background of children you are working with and find out what they would like to include in their program)
Are questions answered appropriately and honestly? (sincerely, or with a promise to get an answer if you don’t know)
Have parents been contacted concerning curriculum ideas? (requesting opinions)

What knowledge and research have you obtained about cultural activities?
What messages will children get from the materials they see in the classroom?
What am I doing to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to learn?
Are all children given the opportunity to learn to respect others who are different from them?

How Parents Can Help

- In a diverse society many biases exist. If we don’t resist them, then we support them with our silence.
- Give children rules for discussing our differences. They should be taught never to tease or reject someone who is different.
- Do not show bias in choosing friends, doctors, teachers, persons or where you shop. What a parent does is as important as what he says.
- Give children books, dolls and other toys that represent diverse cultures.
- Watch entertainment shows and videos with your child that depict persons from different cultures.
- Respond if you notice your child acting inappropriately around people who are different from them.
- Give your child an opportunity to experience other cultures by interacting with people who are different or from other ethnicities.
- Listen and be willing to answer questions your child may have about issues related to other cultures.
Suggestions to Create a Successful Multicultural Environment in an Early Child Care Setting

Classroom Environment

- Encourage a sense of wellbeing for all children by removing stereotypical materials, art and books.
- Create pictures and art that represent different families from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.
- Have multicultural material properly displayed for children’s use.
- Create learning activities and games that prompt positive discussion such as word games and language.

Art

- Have authentic materials for art activities that reflect rich colors and patterns for children to use.
- Have magazines available that contain people from diverse groups and locations.
- Have materials available for multicultural art activities such as skin-color crayons, markers and paint.
- Choose cultural artwork of prominent people in different cultures to teach and empower young children.

Block Play and Building

- Include a variety of interconnecting blocks that represent buildings from other countries.
- Have blocks and small animals that are from the U. S. and other countries.
- Have blocks or interlocking toys that reflect children and families of a variety of ethnic groups.

Books - How to use them with young children

- Use books that are sensitive to other cultures and include information about everyday life.
- Use books that represent the children who are in your class and other ethnic groups.
- Use books to arouse the children’s imagination and make them aware of human behavior and feelings of others.
- Use books about other cultures that tell an interesting story and give accurate information.
- Remove books that have biased language or stereotypical pictures from the classroom. Add books about the benefits of culture.

Cooking or Food Activities

- Encourage children to experiment with foods other than those with which they are familiar.
- Give children the opportunity to prepare and eat a variety of foods from other cultures such as spaghetti, stir-fried rice and burritos.
- Have children’s cookware, dishes and utensils available such as woks, chopsticks and kettles.
- Use a wide variety of colorful fruit and vegetables from other cultures to teach and enjoy such as kiwifruit, mangos and plantains.
- Bring spices to class from a variety of menus for children to smell and use for hands-on activities.
**Diversity Books for Young Children**


Davol, M., Trivas, I. (1993). *Black, White, Just Right*. A Whitman. A girl explains how her parents are different in color, and have different tastes in art and food, and pet preferences. She also describes how she is different too, but just right.

Haskins, J. (1992). *The Day Martin Luther King, Jr. was Shot*. Scholastic. This story presents the history of the civil rights movement through pictures, newspaper clippings and text from the colonial times to 1991, framed within the life of Martin Luther King.

Hooks, B. & Raschka, C. (2004). *Skin Again*. Hyperion Books for Children. This poetic book states that the skin I’m in is just a covering, it cannot tell my story. Skin is only a covering. What is important is who we are as a person.

Johnson, A., Soman, D. (1996). *The Aunt in our House*. Marshall Cavendish. When an aunt comes to live with this family, the entire family enjoys her company and helps her forget about the home she has lost.

Orlev, U. (1983). *The Island on Bird Street*. Houghton Mifflin. During World War II a Jewish boy is left on his own for months in a ruined house in the Warsaw Ghetto, where he must learn all the tricks of survival under constantly life-threatening conditions.


**Diversity Books for Teachers**

Compton-Lilly, C. (2004). *Confronting Racism, Poverty, and Power: Classroom Strategies to Change the World*. Heinemann. This books challenges assumptions about poor and minority families and their abilities to help teach literacy to their children, and discusses how these assumptions give rise to counterproductive teaching practices.

Derman-Sparks, L. (1989). *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. This much needed book explains why a diversity related curriculum is needed and how to incorporate it into an early childhood program.

Derman-Sparks, L. (1997). *Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism: A Developmental Approach*. Teachers College Press. This book is considered an excellent teaching source for teachers to learn about ethnic/racial diversity theories. Also used to challenge and expand teachers thought processes on using shame or guilt as teaching tools.
Freire, P. (1993). **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**. Continuum. This timeless, must-read book gives detailed information about the social injustice of another human being. The author argues that those who oppress others dehumanize themselves and also blinds themselves from seeing how their dominating behavior is self destructive.


Saderman-Hall, N. & Rhomberg, V. (1995). **The Affective Curriculum: Teaching the Anti-Bias Approach to Young Children**. Toronto: Nelson Canada. This book gives ideas for a multicultural curriculum and also endeavors to help teachers working with young children to think critically about the reasons for an activity before incorporating it into their program.

**Websites for Teachers**

Adventures of Cyberbee: Social Studies
[http://www.cyberbee.com/ss.html](http://www.cyberbee.com/ss.html)
This site has diversity related curriculum ideas, research tools, web projects and reviews several subjects of interest to teachers and students such as civil war, & history. Good site.

Central Michigan University's Diversity Resources Project
This site was developed to support and enhance subjects on multicultural related topics. It has resources and teaching related materials and is an excellent site.

Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education
[http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme](http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme)
This site is an open access e-journal published twice a year for scholars, practitioners and students of multicultural education. It is free to the public and a good site.

Lesson Plan and Teaching Strategies
[http://www.csun.edu/~hcedu013/plans.html](http://www.csun.edu/~hcedu013/plans.html)
This site is also devoted strictly to multicultural teaching strategies on as many as 75 subjects. A good site on diverse teaching strategies.

Project Jade—Multicultural Curriculum Resources
[jeffco.k12.co.us/isu/sped/jade/cultural.html](http://jeffco.k12.co.us/isu/sped/jade/cultural.html)
This Colorado Public Schools site is committed to meet the diverse needs of the students in preparation for a successful future. Excellent site.
References


