

Developing a Cultural Disposition in Teachers

by Margie Carter

Multicultural education is now a household word in our profession, and it is common to see teachers planning environments and curriculums to reflect different cultural artifacts and celebrations. Still, I find myself discontent and responding with more sighs than cheers — “If only it were that simple.”

There are groans from other quarters as well. Last week I heard a director of a fine, accredited center lament, “Just when we think we’ve met the multicultural criteria, along comes another set of considerations.” She ran down a list of terms still confusing to her: *pro-diversity*, *anti-bias*, *inclusive* and *culturally relevant education*. Indeed, these words reflect our continued efforts to get beyond the tokenizing and trivial pursuit of culture.

I have three quotes, all from unknown sources, over my desk:

To achieve a multicultural society, we must first preserve opportunities for cultures to thrive.

While multiculturalism is a value to positively embrace, it is not an adequate response to the living legacy of racism.

Bigotry fills voids left by fear, ignorance, and misinformation.

The complexities of culture, interwoven with our inherited biases and “isms,” present us with some profoundly challenging work. I’ve watched some people throw their hands up in despair, while others dissolve into tears. There are no simple formulations

or step-by-step recipes here. “Steady — on,” I remind myself, “Stay open, listen and watch carefully, self-reflect, and continue to take risks.”

This *Beginnings Workshop* offers a selection of cultural perspectives to consider. Sensitive, culturally competent teachers need knowledge about the cultures represented in their classrooms, especially behaviors viewed as appropriate and expectations regarding child rearing, education, and the role of a teacher. Teachers with multiple cultures in their classrooms often feel overwhelmed by the task of acquiring this knowledge. And, as with teachers who have more homogeneous classes, they are prone to stereotyping or misrepresenting cultures about which they have only superficial understandings. Does this mean we need to broaden our training to cover every culture represented in the United States?

My answer is “no.” I’ve concluded that the most important focus for my multicultural, anti-bias, or culturally relevant training is to foster what Lillian Katz calls **dispositions**. Rather than providing curriculum ideas for teaching about particular cultures, my goal is to get teachers to look deeper at their own assumptions and to recognize the biases we have all learned. I want teachers to develop a framework which alerts them to cultural considerations while providing for the individual needs and learning styles of children in their class. Here are some training strategies toward that end.

- **Strategy — Examine Group Identities**

Using a sheet of newsprint for each, choose three categories of people to examine. My choice usually

includes a common reference group such as “football players”; a group most workshop participants would identify with, like “child care workers”; and a cultural group about which they may have some harmful bias, such as a particular ethnic group, “gays or lesbians,” or “people with a disability.” Ask the group to brainstorm a list of both positive and negative associations held for each group. Discuss each list, beginning with the common identity group of the participants, i.e., child care staff, asking, “In what way is this list true or untrue about you?”

This activity usually exposes the ease with which we all stereotype and the complex web of individual and cultural identities that must be considered. Beginning with misconceptions of one’s own identity group builds bridges of understanding to double check our assumptions about others. Conclude with the question, “What would be the best way for someone to learn about you and your identity group?” This discussion can develop a framework to guide teachers in their efforts to learn about children, families, and co-workers in their program and to counter biases they encounter.

• Strategy — Develop Persona Stories

The *Anti-Bias Curriculum* book (pp. 16, 146) describes Kay Taus’s development of persona doll stories to explore diversity with children. This idea can be adapted for use with teachers, asking them to work in small clusters to create a family story about particular children. I’ve used several different approaches with this activity, sometimes asking them to create a story reflecting a particular identity group, while at other times leaving the assignment open ended to discover if the clusters develop stories reflecting any diversity.

In either case, the discussion following the storytelling usually provides ample opportunity to explore assumptions and stereotypes, invisibility as a form of bias, and diversity within a specific identity group. Racial and gender diversity issues can be further prompted by giving each cluster a simple face mask to represent their persona story, easily made by bending wire hangers into face shapes and covering them with nylon stockings of different skin colors, with felt scraps and yarn for features.

• Strategy — Interview Others

Providing a set of questions, ask each staff member to interview someone outside your program, representing a cultural group with which they have little direct experience. (Staff may need some help in locating people to interview, so directors are advised to develop a resource list before doing this activity.) Prior to the interview, have teachers make a list of personal assumptions, positive and negative associations held about that group. Interview questions might include the following:

How do you define yourself culturally? Growing up as a child, were you aware of any cultural differences between your family and others with whom you had contact or saw on TV? What attitudes about “difference” did your family convey to you? What expectations did your family/culture have of you as a child and as a student; expectations of teachers, schools, community, the government? What do you consider to be oppressive in your own culture? What would you like to change about society’s attitude about your culture?

If several interviews are done with people with the same cultural identity, these can be looked at by the staff together. Teachers can share what they learned about themselves as well as others from doing this activity.

• Strategy — Video Party

Bring teachers together for an informal evening of discussing a video together. Discussion questions and videos I’ve used include:

How would you summarize the message of this story? From what cultural, social, or economic perspective was it told? Were groups of people portrayed in terms of any positive or negative images? How did this film reinforce or challenge any of your previously held stereotypes? If you were a member of a group portrayed in this film, how would you feel in viewing this? How is this similar or different from your own perspective?

Videos: *Long Walk Home, Driving Miss Daisy, Straight Out of Brooklyn, Do the Right Thing, Pow Wow Highway, The Wash, Come See the Paradise, Milagro Bean Field War, Stand and Deliver, Desert Hearts, Torch Song Trilogy, My Left Foot, Children of a Lesser God, Streetwise, Norma Rae*

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• Strategy — Checklists and Assessment Forms

There are a number of valuable resources with ready-made forms or guidelines with questions to explore the considerations of culture in your program. I frequently refer to **Alerta, A Multicultural, Bilingual Approach to Teaching Young Children** for adapting training activities around their worksheets on such topics as “Discovering the Cultures in Your Classroom” (pp. 53-72), “Identifying and Using Community Resources” (pp. 83-91), and “Survey of the Classroom Environment” (pp. 263-268). A sample adaptation follows this article.

To help teachers examine aspects of culture that go beyond what they obviously see, I use video clips, role plays, or anecdotal stories in conjunction with questions for reflection such as those on patterns of interaction and communication (pp. 34-38) in **Early Childhood Education For a Multicultural Society: A Handbook for Educators**.

Carol Brunson Phillips reminds us that culture is a process. The work of learning about other cultures and unlearning our biases is that of a lifetime. We have an increasing number of useful resources available to us and, given a disposition that is self-reflective, willing to take risks and tolerate the lack of easy answers, the journey is rewarding.

References

Chud, G., and R. Fahlman. **Early Childhood Education For a Multicultural Society: A Handbook for Educators**. Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press, 1990.

Derman-Sparks, L. **Anti-Bias Curriculum, Tools for Empowering Young Children**. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1989.

Williams, L., and Y. De Gaetano. **Alerta, A Multicultural, Bilingual Approach to Teaching Young Children**. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1985.

Highly Recommended:

Kessler, S., and B. Swadener. **Reconceptualizing the Early Childhood Curriculum. Beginning the Dialogue**. New York: Teachers College Press, 1992.

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Assessing Environments for Anti-Bias and Culturally Relevant Materials

All early childhood programs should contain images and materials reflecting the families in the classroom and then expanding beyond to the major groups in the surrounding community and in the nation. Every effort should be made to provide images and materials that counter stereotyping based on sex roles, race, or culture.

Using the following as a checklist to assess your classroom, note specific examples and quantities.

1. What groups are represented by the pictures and photographs currently displayed in the classroom (e.g., race, culture, languages, gender roles, family structures, lifestyles, age, physical abilities)? Is any one dominant or tokenized?
2. How authentic are these images? Do they represent real individuals or more stereotyped ones? Are they contemporary or historical?
3. What colors are predominantly used in classroom displays? Available in art area?
4. What cultures are included in classroom music (songs, instruments, recordings) and displayed artwork (prints, sculpture, textiles, artifacts)?
5. What cultural traditions, lifestyles, and family structures are represented in the dress-up and block areas (clothing, food, dolls, props, pictures posted of family life, work roles, shelters, forms of transportation, etc.)?
6. What groups and languages are represented in the books and writing area? (For detailed checklist on analyzing children's books, see York, **Roots and Wings**, pp. 57-58, or Derman-Sparks, **Anti-Bias Curriculum**, pp. 143-145.)

After reviewing your findings above, what recommendations would you make? Materials to eliminate or add?

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