

Valuing Diversity for Young Children

A POSITION STATEMENT OF THE
Southern Early Childhood Association

P.O. Box 55930 - Little Rock, AR 72215-5930

1-800-305-7322

gbean@southernearlychildhood.org

Three Diversity Principles for the Early Childhood Educator

• Curriculum Preparation and Deliverance

What is presented, as well as how it is presented, shape the curriculum and therefore, the learning of children. Curricular decisions should demonstrate an acceptance of and appreciation for children of diverse backgrounds.

• Home-School Relations and Interactions

Successful home-school relations and interactions are essential for positive learning experiences for children and their families. These interactions often determine the level of support that teachers and other professionals receive from parents. Positive home-school relations are deeply rooted in teachers' and parents' willingness to step outside of their own comfort zones and to try to accept and respect the differences of others.

• Teacher Preparation and Professional Development Programs

Preparation programs for early childhood professionals should include specific training and instruction in diversity and diversity awareness. Early childhood teachers have a tremendous impact on how children will achieve in future learning environments. Such training should acknowledge that no one culture, race or ethnic group represents the norm (Ricks, 2001).

Valuing diversity simply means that we are comfortable with who we are as individuals and are able to accept and appreciate the differences of ourselves and of others. Through valuing diversity, we learn to expect, respect and accept differences from others.

Diversity encompasses all of the differences that we possess as humans. It includes differences in race, language, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, nationality, abilities, exceptionalities, and geographical placement. Diversity consists of all the qualities that make us dissimilar and of that which brings to our existence experiences, abilities, talents, character traits, and preferences that enhance our being. It is these aspects of who we are that play a major role in how we respond to our world and in how we educate ourselves and others.

Educators of young children and childcare providers should value diversity. Our collective differences bring strength to the teaching and learning process and each of us is enriched through the cultural, language and ethnic diversity of others. Expecting differences means that we acknowledge the fact that we are all made differently and each of us has talents, skills, and abilities to contribute to society. Those traits may be dissimilar to those around us, but they are truly of value in our learning processes. They become our “funds of knowledge” (Moll, et al, 1992) or our foundation for learning. Moll et al defines these funds as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being.” They are the structures upon which all future learning is built.

Accepting differences implies that we willingly receive and embrace the differences of others. By accepting the differences of others, we openly acknowledge and affirm the validity of those differences. We understand that all people have a heritage (Holman, 1998) and that heritage is rooted in beliefs, customs and behaviors that shape who we are. Through acceptance, we learn to listen to every voice with the same level of interest until each voice is heard and every story is told. Our demonstration of how we respect differences in others is shown in how we respond to the difference they display. The varying perspectives that individuals bring to our learning environments are assets in effective decisionmaking, teaching and learning.

If diversity is expected, respected and accepted, we as early childhood professionals can begin to meet the education goals of our democratic society.

Some Books to Consider To Promote Diversity

Socio-Economic Status: *Fly Away Home*, Bunting, (1991)

Exceptionalities: *Be Good to Eddie Lee*, Fleming (1997)

Language Differences: *Painted Words: Spoken Memories*, Alike (1997)

Gender Differences: *Amazing Grace*, Hoffman (1991)

Ethnicity Differences: *Abuela*, Dorros (1991)

Racial Differences: *Uncle Jed's Barbershop*, Mitchell (1993)

Diversity Strategies for the Early Childhood Educator

Curriculum Preparation and Deliverance

- Include classroom materials from many cultures that reflect the diversity within specific cultures as well as among cultures.
- Choose books that reflect diversity and many cultures to read to your children. Children should be able to see faces similar to theirs in the books that are shared with them. Books should be examined for authenticity and true portrayals of diverse individuals and groups.

- Include diverse individuals in wall and room decorations. When children see themselves reflected in classroom materials, they understand that who they are is valued, accepted and deemed important. This simple, yet deliberate act can make the difference in how well children are motivated to learn.
- Use language with children that demonstrates an acceptance of all cultures. Word choices indicate acceptance of and often determine behavior in children. Choose words carefully and avoid those that would convey a negative connotation when none is intended. Life is given to words when we speak them, and children usually try to live up to our characterizations of them. Expect the best from all children and communicate that expectation to them in positive and motivating ways.
- Consider field trips that are taken and who the guest speakers are. If all field trips are reflective of one culture, students never have an opportunity to see themselves or individuals in their communities as something of value. Guest speakers should represent as many diverse individuals as possible. When all speakers come from one group, the message sent to children is that individuals from their particular group have little to share with them.
- Look at cultural celebrations and when they are celebrated. Contributions of many cultures should be shared throughout the year and not only at specified times during the year. Each culture has its own beliefs, customs, rituals, religions, and business and academic achievements that make it both unique and great. Celebrate them.

Home-School Relations and Interactions

Parents care about their children and their education. Because of this concern, parents and teachers have a common interest in the teaching and learning that children experience. Delpit (1998) stated that parents make the difference in how they choose to provide their children with the language of power needed to succeed in school settings. It is the type and quality of this capital that makes the difference in what a child is able to achieve (McClain, 1997).

- Establish positive relationships with diverse parents by communicating in ways that make them feel comfortable and accepted. Use language that is plain, simple, and easily understood. Open and clear communication is key in parent interactions.
- Enlist the aid of someone who speaks the language if there is a language barrier. Learn as much as possible about the family language and culture and include appropriate aspects of that information in classroom instruction.
- Invite parents to your classroom to share various aspects of their lives with your children. Allowing them to share information and experiences will send a clear message to all that you value their differences and view them as an asset for your learning community. Their sharing will broaden and deepen mutual understandings with you, the family, and the child.

- Respond to parents' needs and concerns in an equitable manner, making sure that all voices are heard and not merely those with which you agree or those with which you are most familiar or comfortable. Choose to show parents that they are an important member of the team that is responsible for educating their child.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development Programs

- Help professionals identify the uniqueness of their own culture. In the role of teacher, understanding one's own culture begins the process of uncovering what Paley (2000) calls the "hidden curriculum" of classrooms. This hidden curriculum is the one that goes unspoken and one that often assumes that the common body of knowledge for all students under his/her tutelage is the body of knowledge with which he/she is most familiar. This assumption is harmful and only serves to alienate students who are not privy to that body of knowledge because of cultural, ethnic, or linguistic differences.
- Challenge professionals to learn as much as they can about the children they teach. For many, this may mean moving outside of their comfort zones and exploring different ways of living. This knowledge helps to locate a point of identification with the student and will facilitate teaching and learning. Knowledge about children's home lives and the ways in which they are being enculturated in this society can help a teacher be more effective in classroom instruction. This knowledge may also serve as a source of enrichment and enlightenment for all children.
- Encourage professionals to acknowledge the differences of all children. It is never good enough to ignore the differences of children. Many good meaning professionals claim that they do not see color in their classrooms. Delpit (1995) stated that to say that you do not see a child's color means that you do not see the child. In reflecting on her past practices, Paley (2000) stated that it was her tendency to ignore anything that was different about a child and, therefore, not acknowledge those differences. Just as each adult has individual qualities that make him/her unique, so do children, and it is part of our job to acknowledge those differences.
- Plan to include on a regular basis topics that challenge professionals to think beyond their own ways of living. Choose and encourage reading materials that will better prepare teachers and childcare workers to interact with a variety of individuals. These materials can serve as a common experience for them to draw upon in discussions at faculty and staff meetings. Through these discussions, professionals should feel free and open to discuss their own previously held biases and examine ways in which they can become more knowledgeable and accepting of diverse individuals.
- Choose to include professional faculty and staff of diverse backgrounds when hiring for various positions. It is not enough to talk about valuing diversity and then continue to hire only from within a certain group. Truly understanding diversity means that biases rooted in stereotypes have no place within the work environment. It also means that talents and abilities are recognized in all. Once hired, these individuals should have equal consideration for promotions within the organization.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators must believe that all children regardless of differences in race, language, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, nationality, abilities, exceptionalities and geographical placement can and will learn when given proper instruction. They must also believe that true ability and talent have no color, race, ethnicity, or gender. Particular talents are not limited to any one group of individuals. This is an ideal that will become evident if you choose to expect, respect, and accept the differences our children bring to the learning environment.

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Position Paper Developer

Dr. Veda McClain
Arkansas State University

Position Paper Reviewers

Dr. Laverne Warner
Sam Houston State University, Texas

Terry Green
Audubon Area Head Start, Kentucky

Nancy Fraser Williams
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Sandra Hutson
Iberia Parish Schools, Louisiana

Carole Whitener
Tidewater Community College, Virginia