

## **Multicultural Education in Early Childhood: Issues and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

The writer is proposing that multicultural education be made an important component in early childhood education. The current trend in demography in most countries is one of increasing heterogeneity which gives rise to racial tensions and cultural conflicts. People need to come to terms with the fact that we need to co-exist in harmony, and this can only happen if there is genuine respect and acceptance of differences. Attitudinal and value systems can change only with knowledge and understanding. Education therefore plays a key role in bringing about these changes, and the best time to start this process of education is right from early childhood. This article explores the issues and challenges of doing just that. As crucial as it is that we embark on this path, we must be aware of the obstacles and difficulties that lie in front of us in order to circumvent hurdles and strategise our efforts in the most optimum manner.

### **Background**

The theme of this paper was chosen because of the current scenario in the writer's home country, i.e. Malaysia, where after 51 years of independence and the implementation of numerous programmes targeting national unity and inter-ethnic integration, a pattern of increasing polarization seems to be on the up-trend (Najeemah 2005; Hazri et al. 2004; Nik et al. 2003). In the latest attempts to reverse this trend, the government has made compulsory a course on ethnic relations for all undergraduates enrolled in universities; as well as organized a national service programme for selected high school leavers. This programme is not a conscription exercise but meant more to encourage increased interaction between adolescents from different ethnic groups. The impact of such efforts is still questionable, but any developmental psychologist or educationist will point out that such programmes targeting late adolescents and young adults might just be a case of "too little, too late" as it would be very difficult to undo pre-existing prejudices, attitudes and bias internalised in these individuals which will affect their behavior and interaction with people of different ethnicity and culture. Well documented literature on child development has shown that such critical attitudes will be better nurtured in the early years (and this is elaborated further in a subsequent section of the paper).

The writer then set out to see what other countries were doing in the field of early childhood in terms of multicultural education, with the aim of gathering information

on the what, why and how of implementing multicultural education in early childhood. This effort took her to Australia and Japan,<sup>1</sup> where through field visits, observations and conversations with both early childhood experts and practitioners, valuable insights were obtained regarding multicultural education in the early years.

It is within this context then, that the writer sets out to present the issues and challenges of implementing multicultural education in early childhood. These challenges are discussed in relation to four main provisions advocated for implementing multicultural education. However it must be noted that this paper is not meant to be prescriptive as situations differ in different settings, and therefore nowhere in this paper is an attempt made to emphasize particularistic solutions to individual problems. Instead some guidelines and approaches are discussed to be viewed more as possible considerations for those interested in these initiatives but only after assessing their appropriateness to local contexts.

### ***Why multicultural education?***

Multicultural education refers to the learning of appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills related to the respect and appreciation of different cultures and other differences which include race, ethnicity, religion etc. Gollnick and Chinn (1990) recommend five goals for multicultural education. These goals also emphasize issues beyond the boundaries of ethnic or racial issues. They include: i) the promotion of strength and value of cultural diversity, ii) an emphasis on human rights and respect for those who are different from oneself, iii) the acceptance of alternative life choices for people, iv) the promotion of social justice and equality for all people, and v) an emphasis on equal distribution of power and income among groups. For most intents and purposes the focus of this article is on the first two.

Most large societies often have subcultures or groups of people with distinct sets of behavior and beliefs that differentiate them from a larger culture of which they are a part. The subculture may be different because of the age of its members, their race, ethnicity, or class. The qualities that determine a subculture as distinct may be aesthetic, religious, occupational, political, sexual or a combination of these factors.

At first glance, it may seem that only in countries whose population is made up many different cultural communities that the issue of multicultural education seems pertinent. Hence in predominantly mono-cultural or bicultural societies, there is no need to study

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<sup>1</sup> In Australia, the writer visited and had discussions with experts in Macquarie University, University of Queensland and Queensland University of Technology; as well as early childhood care providers in on-campus as well as off-campus centers in Sydney and Brisbane. In Japan, structured conversations were held with experts in the Faculty of Education, Hiroshima University; and Toyo Eiwa Women's University. Visits and discussions were also held with early childcare providers at Hiroshima University kindergarten, Kaede Yochien (center affiliated with Toyo Eiwa University); and Machida Shizen Hoikuen. The writer was also fortunate to have been invited to the Seminar on Multicultural Education In Kindergarten and Elementary School in Okubu Yochien and Okubo Shogakko, Tokyo where she witnessed first-hand some of the pedagogy and approaches used in these classes.

other cultures. This myth is pervasive in such societies. However with the phenomenon of transmigration, the world becoming a borderless village, increasing interdependence among countries, and more tragic and spectacular events like 9/11 and the ominous threat of a “clash of civilizations” the issue of multiculturalism and its place in education is becoming more important. A deliberate and conscious effort has to be undertaken to promote respect and not just mere tolerance for differences, including cultural ones which make up the most contentious of differences amongst mankind. This imperative was officially declared even as early as the Swann Report (DES, 1985) which emphasized the need to teach all young people how to respect ethnic and cultural differences and to accept them as part of the cultural richness of life in our modern world, and not as a threat.

### ***Why early childhood?***

Brain research has shown that the “prime time” for emotional and social development in children is birth to 12 years of age. Differing aspects of emotional and social development, which incorporate higher capacities, such as awareness of others, empathy and trust, are important at different times. Emotional intelligence is critical to life success. The part of the brain that regulates emotion, the amygdala, is shaped early on by experience and forms the brain’s emotional wiring. Early nurturing is important to learning empathy, happiness, hopefulness and resiliency. Social development, which involves both self-awareness and a child’s ability to interact with others, also occurs in stages. For example, sharing toys is something that a 2-year-old’s brain is not fully developed to do well, so this social ability is more common and positive with toddlers who are 3 or older. The caregiver’s efforts to nurture and guide a child will assist in laying healthy foundations for social and emotional development.

There are suggestions that multicultural education should be reserved for older children who are less egocentric or ethnocentric. Lynch and Hanson (1998) tell us that “cultural understanding in one’s first culture occurs early and is typically established by age 5” (p.24). They go on to say, “children learn new cultural patterns more easily than adults” (p.25). Young children are capable of learning that we are all alike and all different in certain ways. In fact, research has also demonstrated that children are not totally free of bias and prejudice. Studies (Glover 1996; Palmer 1990; Ramsey & Myers 1990) have shown that children as young as three notice differences such as skin, eye and hair colour. As part of their socialisation, children develop their self-identity by comparing their own selves with others. They learn that they belong to certain groups and not to others due to certain visible similarities and differences. Through observing how others around them react and respond to these differences, they see what is valued and what is not. They start to develop positive or negative feelings about the differences observed. These feelings form the basis of evaluative judgments whether these differences are “good” or “bad”. These judgments then become their bias and prejudice if framed in negative terms. For example, children exhibit preferences for same-race when selecting dolls, refusing to hold different-race children’s hands (Glover 1991). The influence of family, significant others,

early childhood services, and the mass media play a vital role in developing children's attitudes and behaviors towards differences. Children learn to treat others differently on the basis of race, gender, age, ability, religion and cultural heritage either directly or vicariously through the gradual process of socialisation and enculturation.

Additionally, it is important that we catch them young, when the likelihood of them having been socialized or enculturated with negative stereotypes and biases is less. Children also are capable of being "teachers" or influencing adults when they transfer what they learn in early childhood care centers. Children have been known to reprimand their smoker-parents that "smoking is bad and it can kill you." Similarly if and when they hear negative comments about culturally different people, they can then either correct their parents' perceptions or ask why they say these things, and therefore perhaps even get them to re-examine their prejudices.

## **Issues and Challenges**

In this section a discussion of the issues and challenges will be linked to the provisions advocated for implementing multicultural education in early childhood education settings. These provisions include the following:

- access to and enrollment in early childhood education services
- curriculum orientation – pedagogy and resources
- language development
- early childhood education staff – recruitment and professional development

### **Access to and enrollment in early childhood education services**

It seems only logical that the first precondition for multicultural education is the provision for equal access to early childhood services. All children irrespective of ethnicity, class, gender, ability, religion etc should be admissible to the facility of their choice. The desirable outcome is that services will reflect the cultural make-up of the country. Communication about this policy needs to be undertaken with potential families so that those who have objections to their children being educated alongside others who are "different" can exercise their choice of not enrolling their children. Notwithstanding such a policy, the reality might be that the ability of different cultural groups within society to access children's services is not equal. Therefore it is essential that:

- Services recognize that every child, family and staff member has a right to access early childhood services which support their cultural identity and their community.
- Services are to be planned, implemented and evaluated through ongoing discussion with service users and the wider community to reflect the diversity of that community.

- Within each service, information is provided in a variety of ways, for example oral, visual and written.
- Information about the service for families is accessible. This is facilitated by multilingual translations and/or interpreter services relevant to the families.
- Families who are disadvantaged by the particular circumstance of recent arrival in the country or community are provided with special consideration regarding access and support. (Early Childhood Australia National Council 2007)

Until and unless the government or some other agency undertakes to provide free service for all who need it, it is very difficult to realize this provision. Early childhood education is costly as it may range from half day-care to full day-care, from nursery to kindergartens and preschool. Besides this, there is the usual perception (and in most cases, true) that “free” services are inferior in quality compared to the paid-for services normally operated by private enterprise which are far beyond the reach of those in the lower socio-economic strata of society (normally the minority cultural groups). Hence there is the further possibility of enrollment in certain services to be segregated along ethnic or socio-economic lines. In Malaysia this is certainly true where there is a marked pattern of racial segregation, not so much policy-driven, but mirroring the preferences of parents to send their children to centers that cater to their language of choice, which in most cases is their first language. This of course has serious implications for national integration as it does not contribute to a conducive environment for young children learning to live and interact with others from a different cultural background. It is mostly in the urban areas that there is a better mix of children from different cultural backgrounds. Another issue pertaining to enrollment by ethnicity is that most times enrollment is determined by location or proximity and if the population is naturally ethnically segregated by area of domicile, then the chances are that centers will also see the admission of relatively homogenous pupils. For example in some Australian cities such as Sydney or Melbourne, there are certain localities that are clearly identifiable as Vietnamese, Lebanese, Greek, Chinese etc. Also, it is possible that some parents might be influenced by the idea to enroll their children where there is a greater likelihood of their children having peers speaking the same home language.

### **Curriculum orientation – pedagogy and resources**

The curriculum is the means by which learning outcomes will be achieved. So too it is hoped the goals and objectives of multicultural education. Multicultural education is not to be taught as a “stand-alone” subject. Rather it is to be infused throughout the curriculum. Banks (1994) has divided multicultural curriculum reform into four approaches. These include: 1) the contributions approach, 2) the additive approach, 3) the social action approach, and 4) the transformation approach. This fourth approach is particularly powerful in addressing the erroneous view of teaching multicultural education as a separate subject. In a transformation approach, the structure and basic assumptions of

the curriculum are changed so that students can view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

For an example of this approach we can look to the New South Wales's curriculum framework for Children's Services (Stonehouse 2002). This framework advocates a firm and true commitment to multiculturalism. The curriculum framework consists of four "major obligations" which are the central focus of practice and provisions. One of these four obligations is: honouring diversity. Here diversity is understood not only in terms of cultural and linguistic background but also all other forms such as gender, lifestyle, socio-economic status, family composition, abilities, and personal beliefs and values.

The term "honouring diversity" is used deliberately as honouring begins with respect and moves to respect in action and practice. Honouring diversity requires that difference rather than uniformity is not only expected, but also seen as desirable. (p.27)

Similarly, the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines published by the Queensland School Curriculum Council (1998) affirms the importance of considering diversity and creating an inclusive curriculum for its learners. It has "cultural understanding" as one of seven foundation learning areas described in these Guidelines. It focuses on developing a growing awareness and appreciation of one's own cultural identity and the cultures of others.

...teachers also model and discuss behaviors that value diversity by drawing on children's home and community experiences when negotiating curriculum. They engage children in learning experiences in familiar community settings. (p.17)

It is generally upheld that good early childhood pedagogy reflects and empowers the diverse cultural backgrounds of the children and families with whom they work (Robinson & Jones Diaz 2006). This positive representation of the diversity of children's identity in the daily programming and planning of early childhood education is considered to be crucial for developing individual children's positive self-esteem as well as fostering their appreciation for the diversity that exists more broadly in society.

In terms of pedagogy and resources, some general considerations would be as listed below (Glover 1996; Early Childhood Australia National Council 2007):

- Children in the classroom are seated or carry out their activities in mixed (ethnic/cultural) groupings if possible
- Posters, books, CDs, images, songs and other resources used in either the classroom or playroom setting represent realistic linguistic, cultural and social practices of the children.

- Stereotypic images are avoided and there is a careful balance of resources that represent both traditional and contemporary images of cultural and language practices.
- Texts in children’s languages, including books, newspapers, games, electronic media and popular culture texts are used throughout the day across different curriculum areas.
- Programs provide opportunities for all children, staff and families to use a variety of communication forms including languages other than the majority language. (The provision for language development will be discussed in greater detail in the next section).
- Programs reflect the diversity of cultures represented by the broader community and extend both children’s knowledge of their own culture and knowledge of cultures other than their own.
- Programs, policies, practices and curricula are not only culturally inclusive but consciously work to recognise and take action against bias, combat racism and reject stereotyping.
- Parents and community are consulted in developing programs and value differences are clearly identified and discussed.
- Where bias occurs, staff will intervene where bias occurs to teach children how to advocate for justice and equity.

Some of the possible issues and challenges that are related to the provisions above include the choice of children’s books. It is a common misconception that children’s books about another culture are usually authentic. Teachers who want to share other cultures may unintentionally choose books that are racist or not representative of a particular group. The Council on Interracial Books for Children published *Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks* in 1980 (see Derman-Sparks 1989). The guidelines suggest: 1) checking illustrations for stereotypes or tokenism, 2) checking the story line, 3) looking at the lifestyles (watching out for the “cute-natives-in-costumes” syndrome, for example), 4) weighing relationships between people, 5) noting the heroes, 6) considering the effect on a child’s self-image, 7) considering the author’s or illustrator’s background, 8) examining the author’s perspective, and 9) watching for loaded words.

Secondly, most teachers tend to utilize the “tour and detour” approaches when teaching multicultural education. Louise Derman-Sparks (1993) uses the phrase “tourist-multiculturalism” to describe approaches that merely visit a culture. The tour approach to education involves a curriculum that is dictated primarily by months or seasons of the year. For example, some teachers believe an appropriate time to study festivals of other cultures is during those times the festivals are celebrated; or dedicate a week to getting to know other cultures, and then invite everyone to bring items from home that reflect their particular culture. These tour and detour methods trivialize, patronize, and stereotype cultures by emphasizing traditional costumes, foods, and dances while avoiding the

true picture of the everyday life of the people from that culture (Derman-Sparks 1993). Students often come away from such teaching with even more biases.

According to the Inner London Education Authority (1985, cited in Glover 1996), materials facilitate bias against groups through invisibility, tokenism and/or low status presentation. Invisibility occurs when the teacher omits certain groups or cultures from the classroom so that these become invisible as though they do not exist. If cultures are brought into the classroom and merely given tokenistic treatment, to be discussed or viewed for the sake of being made visible, then no authentic representations are made available. Bias and stereotypes are propagated also when cultures are represented in situations or contexts of an inferior status compared to the majority culture. Similarly inappropriate use of resources and materials in a trivialized or tokenistic manner, centered on cultural artefacts, e.g. language, food, music, clothing, celebrations without developing understanding of their true meaning and significance of the values and beliefs underlying them, does not bring about learning that is useful.

While resources and materials play an important role, the caregiver's role is critical. Lane (1988, p.3 cited in Glover 1996) states this point strongly:

It is no good having black dolls if black people themselves are not valued, if racist remarks and graffiti are not recognized and challenged, if factual questions about racial differences are not answered correctly, if no attempt is made to find out what children are learning, feeling, believing and if strategies are not devised to openly discuss with children, in ways they can understand, why racism is wrong.

Another challenge would be in getting parents and families involved in planning or even giving input and feedback on programs so as to be culture fair and inclusive. Program staff actively use information about families to adapt the program environment, curriculum, and teaching methods to the families they serve. However, frequently not many parents are willing or able to take time to do so in a meaningful way. In such a scenario, it is crucial that early childhood professionals take the initiative to collaborate and communicate with parents so as to obtain as much information as possible about their concerns, and home backgrounds. To better understand the cultural backgrounds of children, families, and the community, program staff (as a part of program activities or as individuals), participate in community cultural events, concerts, storytelling activities, or other events and performances designed for children and their families. (Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation – NAEYC Standard 7, 2007).

Another aspect that poses as a challenge to early childhood educators is the continuity and consistency of messages that children receive between school and home. In this context, it is vital that families and parents themselves are supportive of the ethos of multiculturalism so as not to contradict or work against what is being learned in schools. Families sometimes inadvertently, consciously or unconsciously, contribute to children's bias and prejudice towards people of other cultures. They do this in three main ways:



direct tuition, indirect tuition and role-learning (Milner 1983). In direct tuition, parents and other family members tell children what is “right” and what is “wrong”; what they should say and do in specific situations (for example: do not play with the Indian boy next door, as he is different from us). Indirect tuition occurs unintentionally when children spontaneously imitate a family member’s behavior, while role-learning involves teaching children who they are and how to behave towards others and an understanding of the roles of others. For example their role as a member of the Catholic Church is to treat others as God’s creation and to “*Love their neighbours as themselves*”. Thus families can contribute either positively or negatively to the development of multicultural attitudes of their children.

### **Language development**

Generally, the educational system in most countries utilises the national language (usually the majority language) as the medium of instruction. However multiculturalism and the recognition of the pivotal role of language in learning makes it obligatory for a diversity of language, literacies and communication styles to be recognised, valued and used within all early childhood services. The provision for children to learn the majority language whilst maintaining their first language should be supported and encouraged. This of course is to propose bilingualism or at least support for the home language as a policy even at the early childhood education level. Research has shown that there can only be advantages to the child besides protecting and respecting the home language. For example, since the 1960s, research has shown that multiple language skills do not confuse the mind. Instead, Hakuta (1986) reported that such skills when well developed, seem to provide cognitive advantages, although such effects are complex and difficult to measure.

This main issue and challenge for the provision of bilingual education is one of human resources. Not many countries will have the personnel who themselves are bilingual or multilingual, and specifically in the target languages. Very few countries, including the USA and Malaysia, do have at least at the preschool and elementary school levels education systems that cater to the home languages of their pupils. Hence children with languages other than the national language are supported with resources and appropriate speakers of the relevant language to maintain, to develop and extend their language and concept development within early childhood services.

In other countries such as Australia, although there is no official provision for early childhood education to provide services that offer instruction in the home languages of children (coming from non-English speaking families), there is a stated policy that all languages are honoured and respected. This means that children are not reprimanded when they use their home languages in these settings. Families (usually fathers, mothers, grandparents) are invited to come in and share or tell stories using their home languages to the other children or families. All children have the opportunities to listen to, use and learn the majority language in a supportive environment where resources, materials and people are used to scaffold their learning of the majority language. There is ongoing

advocacy as well as practice in those centers where resources and bilingual staff are available to provide relevant experiences to children in their home languages as well. This is because it is recognized that children's use and development of their first or home language is as critical to their language and cognitive development. By gathering information from families about the different social contexts in which the home language is used, practitioners can gain a better appreciation of children's experiences with their home language. The information collected about children's use of language is integrated across different curriculum areas and implemented in daily experiences. Needless to say, the availability of staff who are competent in supporting children's language learning, both the majority and home languages is an important prerequisite. The contribution of multilingual and bilingual staff is an asset to any children's service. Therefore, it is essential that early childhood services personnel from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are employed wherever possible. Where the culture and language of staff is representative of the local community the program explicitly recognizes and incorporates these skills.

### **Early childhood education staff**

Few can deny that apart from their own family, staff working in children's services potentially impact on children's developing attitudes towards cultural diversity more than any other persons in a child's life. Therefore, it is essential that staff undergo and receive appropriate training or staff development programs which incorporate the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for such a responsibility. In countries that have a well developed early childhood education system in place, most staff if not all would have acquired a minimum standard of qualification before they can be recruited into the service. However for those developing countries who have only just recognized the importance of having a strong foundation by having quality early childhood education, the picture might not be as encouraging. It is possible that many staff would only have had high school education or less, without any specialized training in early childhood education.

Education courses for early childhood personnel should have elements in both content and delivery that address diversity of cultures (Verma 2003). Pre-service preparation in the form of authentic situations where student teachers are placed in multicultural or classrooms made up of cultures different from their own are especially effective in getting teacher candidates to re-examine their existing beliefs and preconceptions. For example, Baldwin et al. (2007, p.326) reports that service-learning (collaborative community-based practicum):

...positively affects teacher candidates' dispositions toward teaching in diverse settings. Teacher candidates learned about diversity and even began to question societal inequities that they encountered. Service-learning has the potential of empowering teacher candidates to confront difficult issues of societal inequities and to begin the deconstruction of lifelong attitudes and the construction of

socially just teachers.

Courses need to recognize and reflect differing beliefs about childhood held by different cultures. Within relevant courses, particular emphasis is to be given to the understanding of how children develop language, and teachers ought to be provided practical experiences in teaching a second language. Besides pre-service training, continuing education on multicultural issues should be made readily available for all staff working with young children. Service staff are to be assisted to engage in professional development, which enables them to examine their own values and assumptions in relation to race, culture, class, sexuality and gender and the impact these may have on their practice. Once again, this provision will differ depending on the state of development of early childhood education in that country. Additionally the commitment to staff's continuing professional development will also be dependent on the centers' own philosophy and belief in this critical pedagogy and reflective practice which underlies an authentic perspective of diversity.

And finally as mentioned in the preceding section on language development, the processes and criteria for the selection of staff and student-teachers should reflect and be responsive to the diversity of cultures that make up the society. All children's services should, in their employment practices, seek to employ staff members who reflect the cultural diversity of the country even if the actual enrollment of pupils does not reflect it.

In societies which are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, there is usually a corresponding representation of early childhood personnel that are available for engagement in the services. However there might be concerns regarding the balanced representation of "all cultures" at all levels of responsibility or category of service. In other countries, there might also be issues with such cultural representation, for example if certain categories of early childhood services are dominated by a specific cultural group. Such a situation is evident in Malaysia where there tends to be a preponderance of the majority group in government or "public" early childhood services. Hence there is relative invisibility of the other minority groups in the role of early childhood teachers or caregivers in these centers.

## **Implications and Dilemmas**

This section discusses some implications and possible dilemmas that may arise related to the issues and challenges discussed above. These implications and dilemmas need to be addressed and made visible to those involved in the business of providing early childhood education while being committed to multiculturalism. Only when these matters are resolved, can multicultural education then have a fighting chance of successfully being implemented.

*Within the ECE setting*

- *The teacher: personal beliefs and values*

When you think about it, it actually takes a very special person to be able to implement multiculturalism in their classrooms. This is because that person has to respect individual rights to self-identification, and recognize that no one culture is intrinsically superior to another. At first glance this does not seem to be asking too much, but if we analyse it deeper, religion is one aspect of culture and how many people can really say sincerely that their religion is not superior to the other religions. It is understandable that most people who admit to belong to a religious faith would regard their respective faith as being the one true religion, and all other religions as “false” or “deficient” compared to theirs. If we accept this premise, then how sincere can a teacher be when she tells her students that everyone is equal, all cultures and beliefs should be respected as they are equal even though they are different. Is she being hypocritical and merely paying lip service to the philosophy of supporting diversity in education?

What then of others who cannot bring themselves to put all religions/cultures on par with their own? Are they then considered unsuitable material to become educators of young children? If so, then how do we go about recruiting teachers – do they have to sit for an eligibility test, or take an oath of allegiance to the multicultural philosophy? What guarantee is there that they mean it or that the test is construct-valid?

In this matter, what is more important is that educators take a reflexive approach in their practice with children and families in order to understand how their subject positions in discourses can perpetuate, consciously or unconsciously, the social inequalities that prevail in society. Reflexivity is about developing a critical self-conscious awareness of one’s relationship with the “Other.” The following excerpt illustrates the importance of the teacher’s ability to be self-critical:

The skills, knowledge and attitudes of the staff are the most important influence on the quality of the program....the success of their efforts to take into account the .... diversity that characterizes the community depends not mainly on their knowledge of other cultures....but on their willingness to be flexible, to change, to look critically at their own biases and prejudices, and their appreciation of diversity. (Stonehouse 1991, p.40)

Critical reflection and dialogue encourages self-interrogation and questioning of institutional practices that continue to suppress human potential (Hackman 2005; Oakes & Lipton 2003; Sleeter 2001) so that even if one still believes in the superiority of one’s own culture, there has to be an understanding that everyone else will have the same right to believe in the superiority of theirs as well. In this context then it is vital for educators to possess a respect for diversity. Respect means more than just acknowledging and/or tolerating difference. It is a set of conscious practices that involve:

- Understanding and appreciating interdependence of humanity, cultures, and the natural environment.
- Practising mutual respect for qualities and experiences that are different from our own.
- Understanding that diversity includes not only ways of being but also ways of knowing;
- Recognizing that personal, cultural and institutionalized discrimination creates and sustains privileges for some while creating and sustaining disadvantages for others;
- Building alliances across differences so that we can work together to eradicate all forms of discrimination.

### *Outside the ECE setting*

- *National identity versus self-identity, cultural identity*

With globalization and transmigration occurring in more and more countries, and especially the ones who have a more open policy of immigration to combat the problems of low population numbers to fill up the employment needs of the country, we see the movement of people inwards and people coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Such nations have to grapple with the problem of national unity as well as social cohesion. A common language (and more often than not, the majority language) is seen as a tool for forging this national identity. However when governments attempt to make all citizens master the national language tensions start to build-up as not everyone is able or even willing to do so.

Furthermore, with world bodies such as UNESCO declaring the rights of individuals and children to an education which is both accessible and of quality coupled with research which shows that the mastery of the basic skills is most effective if taught in the home language of the child, the issue of national identity versus cultural identity comes to the fore as one issue to be managed by nation states.

Can nations cater for the provision of early education, if not, basic education to be conducted in the home languages of its citizens. Is it financially viable to do so? If not, is it going against democratic principles for the nation state to make it mandatory for all to learn just the national language? Are there alternative options which can be pursued so as to satisfy both national and individual needs? As we have seen some countries like Malaysia has attempted to cater to the needs of its minority groups for elementary education to be conducted in their home languages. In the United States, there is also some provision for bilingual education. However for those countries which just do not have the resources, human or financial, to do so, other ways of supporting multiculturalism will have to be worked out if it turns out that state provision for home language development might not be feasible.

- *Role and influence of the mass media*

It is undeniable that the mass media because of its capacity for wide coverage and exposure exerts a big influence on how people including young children develop their images of different cultures. The mass media includes the newspapers, television, radio, films etc which convey either explicitly or subliminally negative messages about different cultures. One recent example is the tendency to portray people of Arab origin as terrorists and this finds its representations in cartoons, caricatures etc. If these images are not tempered by adults e.g. parents' explanations and corrections to neutralize the negative stereotyping that might occur, then its cumulative effects might be very difficult to undo at a later stage.

Young children are especially attracted to advertisements as they are usually catchy, musical, colorful, and funny. It is important that these advertisements reflect the composition of the country's population at the very least, if not the world. If persons of different cultures are not featured in these advertisements, then they become invisible and by default not valued as models to endorse those products advertised. During the writer's stay in Australia it was very obvious that advertisements in Australian television were dominated by "white Australian" actors only. There were very few ads that had other cultures represented, and even those portrayed them in relatively subordinate roles. This situation is consistent with the findings of a study by Goodall et al. (1990) on representation of minority groups in advertisements.

## **The Way Forward**

Notwithstanding the implications described above, there seems to be at least one doable way out of such dilemmas, one that utilizes the anti-bias approach. This approach extends multi-cultural education with added emphasis on teaching children to recognize and challenge bias. In addition, it also incorporates the application of the global ethic of reciprocity – treat others as you would like to be treated; or "do(ing) unto others, wherever possible, as *they* want to be done by." (Karl Popper, cited in Wikipedia 2007).

In the classroom setting this translates into having the early childhood expert provide every child opportunities to:

- Construct a knowledgeable, confident self-identity
- Develop comfortable, empathic and just interactions with diversity, and
- Develop critical thinking skills and the skills for standing up for oneself and others in the face of injustice

How are these to be done? – In order to achieve the above, early childhood settings need to prepare an environment which presents diversity positively through resources and materials that do not perpetuate stereotypes. Offensive images are avoided and careful consideration of sensitive religious and cultural values are always maintained. Staff build

up children's self-esteem and confidence in their self-identity so that they are comfortable with themselves and in this way also less likely to be prejudiced against others. The use of cognitive approaches where children are guided to develop higher order thinking skills and specific vocabulary to be able to recognize generalizations and bias and to defend themselves and others in the face of injustice.

In addition, cooperative learning situations can be provided so that children share common problems, goals, tasks and success with individuals from groups other than their own. This can be in the form of excursions, experiments, problem-based projects, and even learning from inter-school exchange visits, or even inclusion of professionals from cultural minorities. Children will benefit from such inter-group relations and develop a host of interpersonal competencies including respect, empathy and perspective-taking.

To complement direct approaches, where children are "coached" in the "right" thing to say or do in specific problematic situations, activities where children themselves are encouraged to speak on aspects of diversity should be provided. In such situations, they are facilitated to explore and ask questions about the differences they notice, and their questions are answered accurately and honestly in a manner commensurate to their levels of understanding.

Another option is the whole-school approach which involve changing school or center structures and conditions to reflect and promote diversity, and challenging all negative attitudes and behaviors. No matter how unpleasant it may be, any discriminatory behavior by staff, children or parents must be confronted. Ignorance and avoidance will only send a message that such negative behavior is acceptable and a naturally occurring "teachable" opportunity is lost.

In the final analysis, for multiculturalism to succeed in the early childhood classroom the onus seems to fall largely on the shoulders of the teacher/caregiver who are the individuals that the children look up to as role models as well as for guidance and affirmation. Hence it is expecting a lot of the teacher if it means a change in paradigm, or even deep-seated beliefs and values to accommodate one of respect for diversity. But then anything less will mean short-changing an authentic and genuine regard for multiculturalism.

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The writer is proposing that multicultural education be made an important component in early childhood education. The current trend in demography in most countries is one of increasing heterogeneity which gives rise to racial tensions and cultural conflicts. People need to come to terms with the fact that we need to co-exist in harmony, and this can only happen if there is genuine respect and acceptance of differences. Attitudinal and value systems can change only with knowledge and understanding. It is within this context then, that the writer sets out to present the issues and challenges of implementing multicultural education in early childhood. These challenges are discussed in relation to four main provisions advocated for implementing multicultural education. Multicultural education is a set of educational strategies developed to assist teachers when responding to the rapidly changing demographics of their students. It provides students with knowledge about the histories, cultures, and contributions of diverse groups; it assumes that the future society is pluralistic. It draws on insights from a number of different fields, including ethnic studies and women studies, and reinterprets content from related academic disciplines. It is a way of teaching that Early Childhood Education is a branch of education theory. It reflects the teaching of children both formally and informally. It is mainly for children between the ages of 3 to 5 years. Early childhood educators and parents try to build elasticity in a child at an early age. A teacher's responsibility is to create a challenging environment where children can learn through first-hand experiences. Early education is the foundation for building coping strategies for greater challenges in life. 14. Economic Benefits in form of Education Benefits. Don't get confused about the headline!