

The Importance of Promoting the Acceptance of Diversity

by Renee McLaughlin



One of the most intriguing challenges facing educators today is providing programs that present all children with the opportunity to flourish. Many educators are seeking ways to implement programs for all children; however, they are discovering that there is no quick fix. Children represent a multiplicity of family types, ethnic groups, cultures, and abilities. Creating an atmosphere in which both harmony and diversity can reign presents a considerable challenge.

In the field of education we have heard many different terms to refer to programs that represent all children such as; “multicultural”, “anti-bias,” “bias-free,” “diversity,” “bicultural education,” “mainstreaming,” and “inclusion.” Often these different terms sidetrack us as we try to decipher the terminology. We need to concentrate on how we can provide for individual children’s diverse educational needs.

Multicultural education began as a way to provide equal educational opportunities to culturally or linguistically diverse children. Today, multicultural education has a much broader scope and seeks to recognize many other individual differences, including race, culture, religion, gender, age, and abilities. What strategies can we use to provide a multicultural, diverse, inclusive program? This sounds overwhelming at first so let’s break it down into several general areas that need to be addressed; meeting individual needs, creating an atmosphere of acceptance, addressing personal biases, and encouraging open communication.

First, we need to meet individual needs of children. That is to understand each child as a unique individual. This is a vital step because children’s verbalizations during play and learning activities can help identify their preferences, strengths, and weaknesses. Educators need to provide all young children a chance to learn through

“hands-on” active play. These activities need to reflect each child’s individual abilities without sacrificing a child’s opportunity to socialize. Families are another valuable source of information for teachers. Holding parent teacher conferences, going on home visits and generally having clear lines of communication will help in this area.

Secondly, educators can create an atmosphere of acceptance. Personalize the classroom. This can be done by looking at the classroom environment from the eyes of a child. Add pictures to reflect items that are familiar to the children, display children’s art work and personal pictures for them to see. Introduce the diversity perspective by providing books, pictures, and materials with a broad range of people who vary in their customs, languages, gender, age, and abilities. Avoid depicting people in a stereotypical manner. An example of this would be, while it is historically correct to have pictures of soldiers fighting, we need to balance that with pictures of soldiers helping communities rebuild as well. We need

to have pictures and books and materials that reflect all people in different ways, doing different things. It is all about balance. The presence of children with special needs and challenges provides very natural opportunities for children to explore their natural curiosity and will lead them to ask questions about the challenges that these children face. Educators need not be afraid to answer children’s questions about this subject and remember it is okay to say you do not know, but together you can find out.

Next, educators need to address personal biases. It is very important to honestly evaluate our personal biases to make sure we do not project our biases onto our relationships with each child. Educators need to gain a different perspective by talking with people who have different perspectives on cultural heritage or to attend trainings that challenges you to recognize and evaluate your own personal biases. Another way to promote acceptance is to foster social interactions in the classroom is to help everyone develop attitudes

of acceptance. Using cooperative learning activities, such as, dramatic play experiences, or group discussion activities, can increase positive social interactions between children and families. Educators should also model respect and acceptance. When this type of behavior is modeled it may encourage children to be more tolerant in their actions. In fact, research done by M.F. Hanline suggests that the educator may be such a strong socializing agent that simply reinforcing the cooperative play of children with special challenges and their peers can encourage repeated social interactions (Hanline, 1985).

Lastly, educators must encourage open honest communication with willingness to address sensitive issues concerning inclusion and cultural diversity. Children being curious by nature will notice and ask questions about differences. Educators must not ignore a child’s questions about differences and offer a candid explanation to help eliminate any possible misconceptions, confusion or fears that children may have regarding classmates.

Implementing these suggestions requires educators to evaluate their attitudes toward diversity, to adopt an environment that is inviting and open to

questions, develop open communication with families, and checking personal biases. At the heart of the program for all children is the

flexibility to adapt lessons to fit children's individual needs.

References:

Hanline, M.F, (1985). Integrating Disabled Children. *Young Children*, 40(2), 45-48.
Carta, J.J., Atwater, J.B., Schwartz, I. S., and McConnell, S.R. (1993). Developmentally appropriate practices and early childhood special education. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 13(3), 243-254.

Other articles to read:

Young Children, January 2008 - The Importance of Including Culturally Authentic Literature by Katrina Willard Hall.
Scholastic Early Childhood Today – May/Jun2001. Vol. 15, Iss. 8; pg 21.A place for everyone: Nurturing each child's niche by: Bruce D. Perry
Scholastic Early Childhood Today Nov/Dec 2002. Vol. 17, Iss. 3; pg.36. Teaching kindness and compassion in a diverse world. Lynn T. Hill, Andrew Stremmel, Victoria Fu.

SAMPLE MLA ARTICLE:

Christie, John S. "Fathers and Virgins: Garcia Marquez's Faulknerian *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*." *Latin American Literary Review* 13.3 (Fall 1993): 21-29.