
Title	The Challenge of Responding to Differences and Diversity in Early Childhood Education.
Author(s)	Gillian Potter
Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 21(2), 20-30
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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The Challenge of Responding to Differences and Diversity in Early Childhood Education

Gillian Potter

INTRODUCTION

With globalization, increased mobility of families and the resultant changes to social and cultural profiles of many countries, early childhood education is in an exciting, challenging and in some ways, uncomfortable position. For many years, teachers influenced by developmentalists have tried to respond to the diverse needs of individual children. They have been concerned with planning and implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum. While this is still important, there are now harder questions to answer in relation to children's socio-cultural contexts and the many societal influences impinging on their lives and learning. These questions should serve to focus the attention of early childhood educators on their ability to respond to the challenges of differences, diversity and change:

- What do teachers *really* know about children at the close of the 20th century and what *is* really theoretically relevant to the contemporary world of children's learning?
- How comfortable are teachers with critical reflections on their understanding of developmentally appropriate and socio-culturally sensitive practices?
- What do teachers really know about inclusivity and anti-bias in the curriculum?
- What is their understanding of and response to the role of gender, culture, class, race and ethnicity in a child's living and learning?
- Whose needs have been met in the classroom and whose have been excluded?
- Whose voices have been heard and whose have been silenced?
- Are teachers attuned to the challenges of *critical pedagogy* — thinking twice before doing and saying anything, challenging their own long-held assumptions and prejudices and actively encouraging the children to view the world from different perspectives?
- What do teachers know about the effects of living with violence, poverty and discrimination on children's cognitive and emotional development?

The answers to these questions will be as diverse as the respondents themselves. However, given the complexity of teachers' work in the 21st century, the questions are worthy of attention. This paper explores some related issues and possible responses to the challenges facing early childhood educators in contemporary society.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES

There is a shift in early childhood education; it is reaching a new level of understanding that broadens analysis from the individual to the cultural context (Kendall, 1996). Developmental milestones can only be understood in the context of the child's social life and so the issue is not just whether a child acquires the desired knowledge and skills, but how and to what extent the sociocultural context influences that learning.

When teachers take seriously the interaction of development and culture, (that is, people's ways of doing things, their values and belief systems), their responsibilities are heightened. Bowman and Stott (1994) remind us that two of a teacher's key roles are those of inquirer and learner.

As we work to understand the importance of family, community, culture and society in each child's development, each teacher's challenge is to move with a curious mind toward new perspectives rather than back away from them (p. 21).

In the past, some educators have acted as if there were a single body of knowledge to be acquired, that every child needed to learn that body of knowledge and that all children within the class would be taught by their teacher. Classrooms were set up accordingly and the teacher assumed control over the acquisition of knowledge by the child. Over time, however, many early childhood educators have come to recognise the skills of young children in the construction of their own knowledge both in and out of the classroom. They have come to appreciate the dynamic nature of learning, the importance of the environment and the role of significant others in the learning process. Hence, they have developed strategies to facilitate children's learning, to motivate curiosity, to develop skills in making choices, to work collaboratively and to learn through discovery.

This style of teaching reflects a teaching philosophy of teaching similar to that favoured by Gardner (1991). He suggested a way of looking at learning that is more compatible with the need to provide

learning opportunities for children who are very different from one another and thereby acknowledging the diversity of young children, their skills and their needs. He discussed the notion of 'multiple intelligences', the seven different ways that people know the world: language, logical-mathematical analysis, spatial representation, musical thinking, the use of the body to solve problems or to make things, an understanding of other individuals and an understanding of oneself. He believed that everyone is different in the way they use these intelligences to solve problems, to assess situations, to learn new information and to carry out tasks. Furthermore, he believed that each person has some intelligences that are stronger than others and so individuals have their favoured learning style. They approach-problem solving differently — they may ask different questions, they may like to listen more or conversely, to discuss more, or they may like to observe rather than participate. As a result, teachers must understand that all people are individuals, each with his own learning style. The children in the classroom have diverse needs but they also bring diverse skills to the learning context. The challenge for the teacher lies in the recognition and use of those skills. As teachers immerse themselves in the challenge of discovering and responding to these differences and diversity, they learn about new ways of operating effectively in the classroom.

THINKING ABOUT THE DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING AS A RESPONSE TO DIFFERENCES AND DIVERSITY

In responding to the diverse needs of children, Marzano (1992) focuses on the complex systemic and dynamic relationship between how teachers teach and how children learn. He developed a model of classroom functioning which he called "Dimensions of Learning." He focused attention on authentic student learning as opposed to the instructional model and based his "Dimensions" framework on the premise that learning involves the interaction of five types or dimensions of thinking (p. vii):

- positive attitudes and perceptions about learning
- thinking involved in acquiring and integrating knowledge
- thinking involved in extending and refining knowledge
- thinking involved in using knowledge meaningfully
- productive habits of mind

These dimensions of thinking emphasize that learning is a process of constructing meaning. If teachers promote and develop these styles

of thinking, it follows that the students will at least have enhanced opportunities to take increased responsibility for their own learning and to develop the ability to continue learning throughout their lives. Analysis of these dimensions indicates the following underlying principles, many of which are congruent with valued principles of early childhood educators.

- Instruction must reflect the best of what we know about how learning occurs.
- Learning involves a complex system of interactive processes that includes the five dimensions of thinking.
- Focusing on large interdisciplinary curriculum themes is the most effective way to promote learning.
- The curriculum should include explicit teaching of higher level attitudes, perceptions and mental habits that facilitate learning.
- A comprehensive approach to teaching should include both teacher-directed and student-directed opportunities.
- Student assessment should focus on how students use their knowledge, not on recall of low-level information.

The works of Gardner (1991) and Marzano (1992) focus teachers' attention on ways of thinking about children as individuals with unique learning styles, needs, skills and interests. They suggest that the role of the teacher is to promote the skills of the individual, to facilitate the learning process in a dynamic interactive environment and to explicitly teach when the need arises. Indeed, if time is taken to reflect on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and to make links between that and the writing of Gardner, Marzano and Kendall, the theme of cultural/developmental interaction mentioned earlier can be noted. Furthermore, the developmental/personal interaction theory of Biber, Shapiro & Wickens (1971) contributes to the discussion. They noted the importance of the sociocultural context, the environment and co-operative interactions to children's learning. Biber *et al* (1971) wrote:

Interaction refers to the emphasis on the individuals' interaction with the environment. It indicates the central importance of the child's interaction with other people, adults and children as well as with material objects of the environment; it refers also to the interaction between cognitive and affective spheres of development (p. 6).

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND INTERACTION: A RESPONSE TO DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY

Hill (1996) discussed the many benefits of collaborative work for children. She focused on the strength and productivity of working together, where the diverse skills of the individual contributors are valued.

Collaborative classrooms are inclusive classrooms: diversity is valued because it enriches the process and products of learning. Collaboration also enables the following:

- *Higher achievement*
Children are able to construct and organize their knowledge.
- *Deeper understanding*
With the exchange of different viewpoints and ideas, the listing of problems and joint problem-solving, higher-order thinking skills are used and deeper levels of understanding are reached.
- *Enjoyable learning*
Groups learn more and have more fun. Often individuals become frustrated in problem solving or lose interest but interest and motivation are sustained when working in a group.
- *Development of leadership skills and group skills.*
These skills enable children to understand each other's perspectives.
- *Promotion of positive attitudes*
Collaborative working environments encourage positive expectations about resolving differences and working with others, regardless of ability or ethnicity.
- *Inclusivity*
Care and respect are promoted and positive relationships are built. This encourages the communication of diverse ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes and promotes mutual understanding.
- *Promotion of self-esteem*
Positive attitudes toward collaborative learning experiences promote self-worth, self-acceptance and self-evaluation unlike competitiveness that can lead to feelings of rejection and failure.
- *A sense of belonging*
Collaborative environments satisfy children's needs for recognition as part of a working and productive group. This is particularly important for children whose experiences prior to coming to school have not prepared them for the "ways and language of school".

- *Development of life skills*

Collaborative skills help children to become contributing members of society.

Collaborative learning is a tried and tested strategy that meets the diverse needs of children whether it be to facilitate the learning of the disabled, the ethnically different, the poor, the shy, the aggressive, the conservative or to assist the brilliant, the leader and the discoverer. Collaborative learning environments can empower and enable all children.

In this new learning culture, teams of talented people can share leadership, synergise energies towards a shared vision and work in ways that will take them to places which as individuals they never dreamed they could reach. (Hill, 1996, p. 103)

SOCIO-CULTURALLY SENSITIVE PRACTICE: A RESPONSE TO DIFFERENCES AND DIVERSITY

As was stated at the beginning of this paper, early childhood educators have been committed to developmentally appropriate practice for many years but that now, there are other variables that impinge on education provision for young children.

The guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp 1987) were intended as directives for how young children should be cared for and educated. They described what constitutes “best practice” in early childhood education programmes for children 0-8 years of age and focused on what should be present for young children. However, a dilemma arises as the guidelines included assumptions that reflect the “deficit” model: that early childhood education is a way to ameliorate the poor performance of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, unstimulating home environments, culturally-deprived homes with families who need training to interact with and stimulate their children. The guidelines defined dominant cultural practices as normal and universally applicable. They claimed that it is incumbent upon those who are knowledgeable about child development to impart this knowledge to parents and they focused very narrowly on children and their families to the exclusion of the community culture and the diverse society in which those families are positioned. Developmentally appropriate practice alone is insufficient.

In 1995, Freebody and Ludwig suggested that this “deficit” attitude to parents and children from socioculturally disadvantaged contexts is

still widespread within education circles. They reflected on the qualitative data which they had collected from teachers and commented:

To be financially poor was to have parents who not only lacked financial security but also intelligence, knowledge, propriety and responsibility. Thus if children had problems, their parents were frequently held responsible. On the other hand, homes designated as middle class were regarded in highly favourable terms. They were seen to provide the cultural and intellectual capital, including literacy instruction and modelling, and material and emotional resources which allow for students to succeed in school (p. 4).

It is not constructive for educators to look for excuses for children's underachievement at school in the cultural and family context in which the children have grown up. There is no future in entering into the debate on "who is to blame" and it is particularly shortsighted to ignore the complexity of the environment in which each child lives. Early childhood educators have long talked about individual differences. Today, in a rapidly changing and increasingly diverse society, those differences are challenging teachers as never before. A socio cultural perspective of behaviour implies the study of **differences** rather than deficit. Purcell-Gates (1995) threw down the gauntlet to teachers when she wrote:

Educators' judgements of deficiency, dysfunction and irresponsibility are all culturally relative stances. They are made by educators who cannot or will not step outside their ethno-centric world to attempt to see their students from another perspective. When one is a participating member of a socio-cultural group in power, this may be an acceptable response to the failure of schools. It is not a moral one, though, or an effective one and serves only to perpetuate the situation (p. 186–7).

Socio-culturally sensitive practice acknowledges all learners as members of a culture; that culture is like a lens through which the members view the world and make sense of it. However, a person is not a member of just one culture. Cultural identity is more complex. Factors like ethnicity, race, gender, religion, socio-economic status, family education levels etc., are all intertwined. So it is difficult for a teacher to plan and implement an anti-bias, sensitive and inclusive curriculum. Working within a socio-cultural perspective, teachers build

their practices on the knowledge, skills and social concerns of the children in their class, recognising that there will be both similarities and differences between students. They try to identify:

- what is important in the homes and in the community
- what languages and cultural activities are valued in the home and community
- what parents want for their children
- what parents do with their children in terms of play, literacy and numeracy activities, outings, television and exposure to media and technology and how these activities might influence the growing child
- what opportunities the children have to engage in activities which could be considered similar to mainstream schooling
- how bridges can be built between the home and school cultures to facilitate continuity for the child who is trying to function effectively in both cultures.

Many teachers are seeking constructive ways of working with children to help them to become successful learners at school. They are focusing on explicit teaching of knowledge and skills, they are exploring community funds of knowledge in order to build upon what the children are already familiar with and they are becoming more critically reflective on their own every day teaching practices and behaviour. The latter is not always comfortable.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: A RESPONSE TO DIFFERENCES AND DIVERSITY

To be successful in an environment where diversity and differences are valued, teachers must embark on a journey of critical self-analysis to identify their position. They must consider their values, beliefs, basic assumptions and attitudes which influence their behaviour and personal approach to differences and diversity. They must be mindful of what they say, do and teach in the classroom. By understanding and constantly monitoring their own behaviour, teachers will then be able to engage effectively with **all** children, particularly those whose cultural contexts are different from their own.

Furthermore, if teachers wish to empower children to recognize their options in life, they must be able to recognize, appreciate and respond appropriately to differences. Developing an anti-bias curriculum demands that teachers themselves become aware of biases in their own thinking and that of society. They must develop skills in

selecting appropriate teaching strategies and resources that model and facilitate inclusivity and children's understanding of it. In addition, they must assist children to value themselves and others. Children can be assisted to identify how they construct their knowledge and their self-identity. They are then in a position to choose what is important to them, what influences they will allow and what directions they will take. They will then develop a sense of "agency" where they can actively engage in developing self. Through class discussions about these things, children learn the language of identity, community and belonging. They also learn the language of valuing self and others.

Children need to be educated to deal confidently and fairly with each other and others in a diverse and complex society. (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994) Their capacity to reflect and to see things from another's point of view is not fully developed and they need to be helped. Stonehouse (1991) suggested that teachers need to:

- encourage positive interactions
- call attention to the views of others
- encourage communication with others
- ensure that children resolve conflict in constructive ways
- promote cooperation and not competition.

The foundations of emotional, intellectual and social development are laid in the early years of care and education. The kind of education a child receives at this stage is therefore vital to his identity and future well-being (Siraj-Blatchford, 1997, p. 59).

Critical pedagogy thus demands attention at two levels: critical self reflection by the teacher in order to understand his own position, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour on the one hand and the development of "agency" in the children on the other hand. This means that children are empowered and enabled to understand themselves, to value themselves and to consider their options while appreciating and valuing others. The goals of an environment that values difference and diversity should therefore be:

- positive cultural, racial and class identities
- high self-esteem and confidence in one's efficacy
- awareness of other's emotional, cognitive and physical states
- the ability and motivation for co-operative play and work
- skills and trust in the process of conflict resolution

- autonomy in making moral decisions and the ability to actively analyse and influence the social environment
- a sense of social responsibility and an active concern for people's welfare.

The physical features of early childhood environments must therefore be used to help children experience in concrete ways, differences and diversity in culture, race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, disability and age. Encourage children to speak up, ask questions and test assumptions.

CONCLUSION

It is crucial that early childhood educators “get it right” in the early years of children's living and learning. As we grapple with the challenge of responding to the diverse needs of children, we must remember the following:

- When students are treated as competent, they are likely to demonstrate competence.
- When teachers provide instructional scaffolding, students can move from what they know to what they need to know.
- The focus of the classroom must be interactional and collaborative with a focus on academic and cultural excellence.
- Real education is about extending students' thinking and abilities with the development of passion for knowledge and learning and the ability to critically challenge.
- Effective teaching involves in-depth knowledge of both the students and the subject matter.

Gillian Potter is an Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education in the Specialised Education Academic Group of the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. Her research interests lie with young children's literacy development, collaborative teacher research for professional development and children's perceptions of their world. Her most recent research was with early years teachers working with children from socio-culturally diverse contexts.

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