

Co-Existing with Different Cultures: Implications for Early Learning Environments

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Introduction

Gonzalez-Mena (2005) indicates that children learn about diversity through their interactions with significant adults, Crowther (2003) emphasizes how the learning environment where children play can assist children's knowledge of diversity, and Rhomberg (1999) points out the importance of providing children with daily experiences that foster the acquisition of diversity concepts. Hall and Rhomberg (1995) and Rhomberg (2007) highlight the fact that successful early learning environments which target the appreciation of diversity promote the ability to coexist with different cultures in infant through to school-aged settings.

This paper examines components which facilitate the creation of learning environments that support holistic inclusion. It will provide some insight into the meaning/s of 'culture', suggest useful strategies and methodologies for co-existence with different cultures, investigate barriers preventing meaningful co-existence with diversity, explore how this affects and relates to early learning environments, and consider the direct impact evidence-based research results could have on program design and practices which support co-existence with different cultures in early learning environments.

'Culture' Described

Any kind of discussion which involves the word 'culture' warrants a definition of the term 'culture'. For the purpose of this paper, 'culture' will be referred to from Rhomberg's (1999: 18-23) perspective: "*concepts related to all and everything that has to do with living one's life.*" These concepts, known as anti-bias/diversity concepts, or Areas of Bias, according to Rhomberg (2007) refer to a variety of dimensions, and are listed and described below:

<i>Ability</i>	physical, mental, emotional capabilities
<i>Age</i>	perception of what makes someone old or young
<i>Appearance</i>	body height, scars, burns, freckles or other bodily marks
<i>Belief</i>	religious, political, spiritual and 'believe in nothing' beliefs
<i>Class</i>	social and economic elements that indicate a person's status
<i>Culture</i>	common traits of living that are shared with members of the same group
<i>Family form</i>	structure and composition of families and roles assigned within the family
<i>Gender</i>	a person's sex, male or female, and roles assigned based on sex
<i>Language</i>	the spoken word and all of its global variations, scripts

<i>Lifestyle</i>	ways of living one's life (e.g., on a boat, in a tent, travelling/nomadic, not related to class)
<i>Race</i>	a set of physical characteristics genetically determined, such as skin colour, hair; each race might incorporate many ethnic groups
<i>Sexuality</i>	sexual orientation and preferences (for younger children reflected through family composition, such as single-parent families, same-sex parents, a mother and father, etc.)

All individuals are due respect and acceptance irrespective of differences. Yet it is differences, as outlined above, which cause individuals to discriminate and be discriminated against. In order to co-exist with different cultures and avoid discriminatory behaviours, within the 'concept' framework of differences, professionals working in early learning environments must confront and challenge their values, beliefs and actions regarding differences and diversity. This will assist in attaining the goals and principles regarding differences/diversity on which early learning environments should base their program. To this end, Derman-Sparks (1989) identified four anti-bias goals and six principles.

Goals and Principles

Professionals who consider the following goals when designing the learning environment will create possibilities for co-existence with different cultures and diversity within those environments. The learning environment should:

- Promote positive sense of self but not superiority
- Promote empathy with diversity
- Promote problem-solving/critical thinking regarding differences
- Promote action when encountering unfairness related to differences

Similarly, the following principles, if adhered to in early learning program models, will support the goals and result in positive co-existence with various cultures and the concepts related to these:

- A curriculum for every child: all children are continuously developing attitudes about people different from themselves
- An everyday integrated approach, not 'added on', diversity is reflected in every activity, equipment, staff and volunteers
- Avoid tokenism, reflects diversity by having more than one diversity concept
- Experiences/curricula are developmentally grounded: start with the issues arising from the children's attitudes, observations, actions, such as gender, age, ability and all the concepts related to diversity/anti-bias as described in the Areas of Bias
- Include teacher and parent as part of the process
- It takes time

Each of the principles and goals is connected either to a physical environmental component or to an activity-related element. The goals in particular can be tied to specific skills, which in turn are linked to one or more developmental areas of growth. Acquisition of these skills takes place through a progression of stages. The first of these is Awareness. Awareness leads into Familiarity which then leads into attainment of Empathy and finally results in Activism.

Meaningful Integration

As with the acquisition of any concept, acquisition of those concepts associated with anti-bias/diversity depends first and foremost upon the creation of an awareness of these concepts. These progression stages can be achieved by exposure plus experiences to each of the areas of bias. In tune with the principles of Anti-Bias, this 'exposure' experience can be realized through the meaningful integration of diversity concepts and providing an holistic atmosphere within the early learning environment on a daily basis. An early learning environment devoid of any or most of the areas of bias concepts will prevent the co-existence with different cultures. What does this meaningful integration encompass? According to Rhomberg (2007: 17),

"An anti-bias method considers practices that build upon awareness and realization of self, then of others, moving onto recognition and understanding of self and others in relation to sameness and differences. This scaffolding builds upon exposure to 'individual-specific' familiar concepts related to anti-bias/diversity and leads into experiences with unfamiliar diversity concepts. The intent is to integrate an 'unfamiliar' concept at each step, in order for it to become a 'familiar'."

The anticipated outcome would be an empathetic and valued understanding and acceptance of all the diversity concept components. This would then enable a global understanding of people and items connected to them.

How can professionals involved in early learning environments facilitate the possibility of implementing these anti-bias practices? What follows is an explanation of three methodologies: Incorporation, Personalization, and Expansion/Extension, as suggested by Rhomberg (1999), each of which can either be used on its own or in conjunction with each other, depending on the age/s of children served, and can provide approaches that will ease the implementation of meaningful integration.

Methodologies Explained

Incorporation approach:

This approach can be applied to all ages. It is of particular importance when working with the infant and toddler groups, because of these ages' developmental inability to fully understand abstract concepts. Authors such as Bowman *et al.* (2001), who have studied

Piaget and Vygotsky's works, as well brain researchers Shonkoff and Phillips (2001), indicate that direct experiences inform thinking and learning.

The *Incorporation* approach requires *exposure* to one or more of the twelve areas of bias and previously described concepts, through inclusion of, or *incorporation* of concrete items, materials, toys, that realistically and non-stereotypically reflect one or more of the concepts related to the Areas of Bias. This exposure, from infancy on, promotes awareness of self and others, leading to positive feelings of self and a sense of familiarity about others. Seeing images similar to self and families reflected in items, helps foster a positive self concept in each child - the first goal of anti-bias. Exposing infants to items and encouraging interactions with items which encompass each of the Areas of Bias becomes crucial if we wish children to be *familiar* with and comfortable with diversity and eventually acquire *empathy* for others, the second goal of anti-bias. The ability to empathize eventually leads to the preschooler's and school-ager's capability to critically think about unfairness and advocate on behalf of self and others when in unfair situations, the third and fourth goals of anti-bias.

Exposure entails concreteness. Concrete items reflecting areas of bias need to be available in children's environment on a continuous basis. Tied in with this is the examination of these environments to ensure that stereotypical messages, tokenism and exclusion of any kind are not present. Items such as puzzles, blocks, shakers and sensory materials are considered to have anti-bias concepts incorporated into them when one or more of the Areas of Bias can either be seen (e.g. family composition picture), taken in through the sense of smell (e.g. a spice in playdough), heard (e.g. the sound of an instrument or music/songs; another language) or touched (e.g. dolls of various skin colours/races). How many Areas of Bias any one item can depict, will depend on the age and development of the child. Through the incorporation approach, early learning environments can constantly expose the child to each of the diversity concept areas. Commonalities as well as differences will become part and parcel of daily life, making what could be perceived as something 'extraordinary', ordinary. Through ongoing design and delivery of developmental activities that naturally incorporate Areas of Bias reflective materials, children will eventually accept diversity as a natural part of life. Co-existence with different cultures is a natural outcome.

Personalization approach:

This approach can also be used with all ages and refers to the fact that actual, real *persons*, 'representative' of one of the concept Areas of Bias, are invited into the program, and are encouraged, as well as given the opportunity, to interact with the children. This can happen through the person's involvement in the delivery of an activity. Examples of

those who might be invited into a program include family members of children and staff, community organizations catering to the needs of specific groups as well as friends of a centre's families and staff. Thus, people of varying abilities, ages, races and cultures, reflecting each of the concept Areas of Bias can be present in a program. Active participation of persons reflecting global diversity not only exposes children to, and thus makes them aware of differences in people, it also assists in enabling familiarity with people who might not usually be involved in the children's lives.

Positive interactions with diverse people provide opportunities for strengthening self-awareness as well as an awareness of others. Very naturally, similarities and differences can be explored; fear of the unfamiliar can be eliminated. Utilizing the *Personalisation* approach when involved in the design and implementation of activities will help achieve the facilitation of a positive self identity, and because of the personal aspect contained in the approach, will naturally lead children towards feelings of empathy and respect with people who are 'different'. The presence of a real person reflecting diversity, whose interactions with the children provide positive experiences, accomplishes the second goal of anti-bias: empathy with diversity. It could also lead into the third and fourth goals of problem solving/critical thinking about differences, and unfairness, and on action-taking that addresses unfairness. Whether these two goals can actually be achieved, will depend on the type of comments and questions from the children; this in turn will depend on the ages and experiences of the children. Thus, the *Personalisation* approach could effectively facilitate each of the four goals of anti-bias education.

A word of caution regarding its use: whatever activities/interactions guests are invited to join in or lead, stereotyping a person into a particular 'niche' must be avoided. The intent of this approach is to enable children to understand that any person is capable of doing 'all that has to do with living'; that this is not contingent upon abilities, looks, social class, or any of the concept areas included in anti-bias education; that there are many ways of doing all that has to do with living: there is no one or only way of doing all of these. Therefore, if, for example, the plan is to invite a person who is older to be involved in a cooking activity, hopefully the same person can also be invited back to be involved in an active physical activity. This prevents acquisition of the possible stereotype that people who are older are inactive and sedentary. Sensitive reflection on the part of the practitioner is required when considering the Personalization Approach.

Extension approach:

This approach can be used with the preschool and school-age group only. The approach consists of the use of open-ended or divergent questions, such as, during a puzzle activity, 'do you think someone who is blind could do a puzzle?' that could catapult any activity into one of the concept Areas of Bias. In so doing, the approach promotes critical thinking

and possibly pro-action to right unfairness and effect change that will respect and acknowledge differences. Because of the capabilities required to think and give answers to the divergent questions, it is inappropriate to apply this approach to the infant and toddler ages.

When used in conjunction with the Incorporation and/or Personalization approaches, almost any activity can be facilitated in such a way that familiarity with many of the 12 concept Areas of Bias can be achieved with the implementation of a single activity.

Potential Barriers

There will always be barriers when attempting to implement any of the aforementioned. Some, such as personal values, tokenism, and stereotypes have been woven into the above discussion. Two others to be aware of are lack of appropriate anti-bias policies and lack of sufficient anti-bias concept reflective materials.

From the results of a 2002 evidence-based research study, Rhomberg (2006) found that all participants faced challenges when attempting to implement anti-bias components, most notably lack of support from immediate supervisors, lack of appropriate materials and lack of supportive anti-bias content in policies. In addition, thirty one percent of respondents were uncomfortable with people of different faiths, sexual orientation, and families with same-sex parents. This would indicate that when professionals are planning for early learning environments, some would find it challenging to integrate content related to these subjects into their program, minimizing or excluding it.

Implications For Early Learning Environments

Co-existing with different cultures demands moving beyond the usual. It asks professionals working in these environments to constantly rethink, revise and react on new information and research and on informed and knowledgeable observations on their part. Kassotis (2003) proposed four keys for success, useful in attaining an atmosphere of co-existence with different cultures: creation of the environment, non-systematic implementation of concepts, systematic implementation of concepts and ongoing integration. Inclusion of these will create an holistic welcoming atmosphere for everyone; children, families, staff, volunteers and visitors.

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