5.4: Approaches to the Environment and Culturally Responsiveness

The following article, used with permission, shares four different approaches that are used to embrace multiculturalism and provides some information about being culturally responsive. You will explore having a multicultural classroom using an antibias curriculum in depth in Chapter 6.

Think About It…

As you read the article, reflect on your reactions to and thoughts about the different approaches described by Levy. What are strengths of each? What concerns do you have with each?

Culture in the Classroom

For a number of years teachers have become more interested in multicultural education, with the assumption that such approaches help children feel more welcomed, validated, integrated, and able to cooperate with others in their classroom (Allen, McNeill, & Schmidt, 1992; Bredenkamp, 1986; Byrnes & Kiger, 1992; Gollnick & Chin, 1994). In my experience, in addition to these benefits, exposing young children to different cultures makes for a fun and exciting learning environment! There are four main approaches to teaching young children about different cultures. These are multicultural education, anti-bias curriculum, global education, and international education.

Multicultural Education

Patty Ramsey (1987) defined multicultural education as a perspective which:
• “encompasses many dimensions of human difference besides culture, such as race, occupation, socioeconomic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, and various physical traits and needs;
• is relevant to all children, even those who live in homogeneous areas; and
• extends beyond the boundaries of this country to beliefs and attitudes about people all over the world” (pp. 2–4).

In practice this means that if your class includes a variety of cultures or abilities, the group spends time learning about and cultivating an understanding of those unique features.

The teacher pays careful attention to the types of literature available to the children and to the activities presented, while also encouraging children to cooperate. If there is little diversity within the group, the teacher presents many different cultural practices during the school year. For example, in many classrooms December is spent on the theme “Christmas around the world.” The overall goal is to expose children to differences at an early age so that they can begin to appreciate and value them rather than to dismiss them.

**Anti-Bias Curriculum**

The Anti-Bias Curriculum is a handbook written in 1989 by Louise Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force. Their intent was for this curriculum to be used throughout the day, integrated into daily interactions and activities within the classroom—not for teachers to set aside a special time to use the curriculum. The basic goal of the Anti-Bias Curriculum is to help children develop positive self-concepts without acquiring attitudes of superiority and ethnocentrism. The authors write, "It is value based: Differences are good; oppressive ideas and behavior are not. It sets up a creative tension between respecting difference and not accepting unfair beliefs and acts."

Derman-Sparks and Ramsey have collaborated on many projects and articles. They see the Anti-Bias Curriculum as a corollary to the multicultural approach and a helpful tool for teachers in confronting their own biases while empowering children who may have previously been stereotyped by others in the classroom.

**Global Education**

Global education, usually used with middle and high school students, helps children recognize the interconnectedness of the world through a study of the problems and issues that cut across national boundaries (Tye, 1990). It involves perspective-taking and the realization that while there are differences among people, there are also common threads that connect us all. Because of its abstractness, this approach is not commonly found in early childhood programs.

**International Education**

International education exposes children to a single culture for a period of at least a year. Over the course of that year, children move beyond celebrating holidays toward a more detailed study of culture, including clothing, food, music, shelter, celebrations, city and country life, and family dynamics. The level of information depends on the children's stage of development. Through sustained experience, children move beyond a superficial knowledge of a country and culture and into a true understanding of the people who live there.

To illustrate the difference between the multicultural and international approaches, the analogy of a party is useful. If you attend a party and briefly chat with seven people, the next morning you may have difficulty remembering which story you
heard from which person. You would have only a surface knowledge of each of the seven people. This is similar to the multicultural approach, in which young children learn a small amount about many cultures.

On the other hand, if you met only one new person at the party and spent the entire evening speaking with him or her, you would have a far greater knowledge and appreciation for who that person was as an individual. This is similar to international education, in which young children focus on a single culture and learn about it in great detail over an extended period of time.

Whether you use a single approach or combine several approaches, you must make educated decisions about how you use multicultural curriculum in your classroom. The last thing that you want to do is further enforce stereotypes.

Culture in the Classroom

There are many ways that cultural differences are taught to young children. Everything we do tells children about how we see the world and what we think of others. Think about how you communicate to the children in your care. How do you communicate culture explicitly (i.e., directly) and how do you communicate culture implicitly (indirectly)?

Explicit communication involves the activities and themes you plan for the children, the artifacts you provide from other cultures/countries, the books you make available, the toys and games you choose, and how you actively present information to the children. These are the hallmarks of your program.

Implicit communication includes the background items that don't necessarily define your program but which are important parts of daily activities and the learning environment. The background music you choose, the name of your classroom, how you define groups of children, the way you interact with the children, what information you value, how you resolve conflict, and how you arrange the room are all examples of implicit communication.

Each aspect of your program is an opportunity to provide cultural education. For instance, my classroom reflects the international education approach. The classroom name is Kenya. Much of what we do each day is similar to other developmentally appropriate kindergarten programs. However, we also include a strong cultural element. Kenya is not our entire curriculum, but is an important piece of it.

Teaching culture requires a substantial commitment from teachers to learn personally about other cultures. Over a number of years, each program evolves and increases the depth of information provided. As time goes on, the teacher becomes a reservoir of information and activities. In a field where burnout is common and salaries are low, there is not sufficient respect and appreciation for what teachers accomplish. It is often hard to accept this added challenge of continued learning. I have included culture as an essential element in my classroom for the past eight years. What I have noticed during that time is that cultural education is imperative at every stage of children's development. While teaching methods may change based on the age of the children, cultural awareness always remains important.

The Kenya Classroom

Explicit Components

- Month-long themes on African animals, Kenyan tribes, geography, African folk tales, music, and the people of Kenya are used.
• Our reading area is under a "Baobab" tree. A wide variety of books which reflect children of different races, genders, ethnicity, and cultures are provided, including a large number of Africa-related stories and fact books.
• Musical instruments from Africa are provided.
• We create soap sculptures of "wooden" animals and bowls.
• Mancala and other African games are available in the puzzle and game area.

Implicit Components

• I sing a homemade melody to gather children on the playground, "Friends from Kenya, please line up."
• "Misa Luba" African melodies serve as our clean-up music.
• We use lots of brown and black to decorate our room.
• Blankets are used for storing toys, games, and books as well as for rest time.
• Sheer leopard print curtains are hung on "spear" curtain rods.

Confirmation from the Children

I began teaching four- and five-year-olds about Japanese culture. During my five years in the Japan classroom, my curriculum evolved. Each year new things were added and more information gathered. I received a grant to travel to Japan and developed a sister school relationship with a lab school in Kyoto. Two interns from Japan worked in my classroom over the years. Other Japanese guests also visited our classroom. I contacted the Japanese Consulate in Boston, Massachusetts, and made numerous trips to museums in the area to gather information about Japanese life and art forms. By my final year in the Japan room, approximately 50 percent of the curriculum centered around Japanese culture.

Then I moved to a classroom where I developed a program for kindergartners which reflected Kenyan culture. I felt overwhelmed leaving an established curriculum which had become second nature to me. It was at this point that I needed to evaluate what I wanted to communicate to the children and how to approach a new culture.

Many of the children who were entering my class had been in the Japan classroom. After settling ourselves into what kindergarten meant and becoming comfortable with the basic routine, we talked, as a group, about how best to learn about Kenya. I read a basic book about Africa to the children. They found many aspects of the book fascinating. We listed topics we wanted to learn more about. It was then that I realized that I had not only taught these children about Japan, but also how to learn about another culture. As a group they identified the things that might differ about another culture – things like holidays, customs, language, geography, housing, clothing, and animals. Their reactions and input helped me to understand that I had achieved what I had set out to do—to help children become inquisitive and open to other places in the world which are different from their own surroundings.

On another occasion, while we were studying African animals, I read a book called Elephant Crossing by Toshi Yashida. The children became very excited. They realized that the author's name sounded Japanese. We looked in the back of the book and found that the author was from Tokyo (which they remembered was the capital of Japan). The children couldn't get over the coincidence that a Japanese man would write a book about African animals. The pure joy the children took in this experience was breath-taking and confirmed that spending an extended period of time focusing on one culture gave them a sense of ownership, pride, and comfort.
Many other experiences reaffirm the impact of the international education approach on the children. One day, a young girl was working in her journal. She began by drawing a tree. As she drew the tree, it changed from an apple tree into part of a Brazilian rain forest. She added many details that she had learned while in the Brazil classroom, nearly three years earlier. As she wrote the names of the animals in her picture (using invented spelling), she told me that she wanted to share her masterpiece with her past teachers in the Brazil room. "Maybe it will help those kids learn about the rain forest animals," she proudly said.

The journal entry came at a perfect time. Many discussions with teachers in my school have centered around the amount of effort required to teach children about other cultures. Some express the sentiment that it doesn't always seem worth the minimal outcome they are able to detect. This was a perfect opportunity to show the other staff that children are assimilating valuable information even though it may not always be apparent. It was exciting for them to share this wonderful experience and to witness how deeply affected the children can be when given the opportunity to learn about other cultures!

### Set Clear Goals

As teachers, we must make educated curriculum decisions. Investigation of the different approaches to culture education should be undertaken before you choose a direction for your curriculum. The following questions will help guide your curriculum decisions:

- Are there a variety of cultures represented in the young children in my care?
- What is the goal of exposing children to different cultures? (i.e., What message do I want to teach the children?)
- What cultural information do the children already have? Is it enough?
- Will teaching children about many cultural practices from a variety of cultures or from a single culture be more beneficial?
- Which cultures do I have information about? Is this information accurate or will it only build on existing stereotypes?
- Where can I get accurate information on a culture?
- Will I have support for my commitment to teach culture from other teachers and families?

I am a proponent of the international education approach because I believe that exposing children to a single culture for an extended period of time enables them to retain more information and be more sensitive as they approach other cultures. Each teacher, however, must decide which approach best fits the goals he or she is trying to achieve. There is no doubt that children are our future. The key to the future lies in helping the next generation to respect and embrace diversity rather than fear and reject differences. By exposing children to culture in the classroom, and being confident that our methods are worthy and effective, we can influence the future, and make it a brighter, more peaceful one!