



Adding to Our View of Early Childhood Multicultural Education

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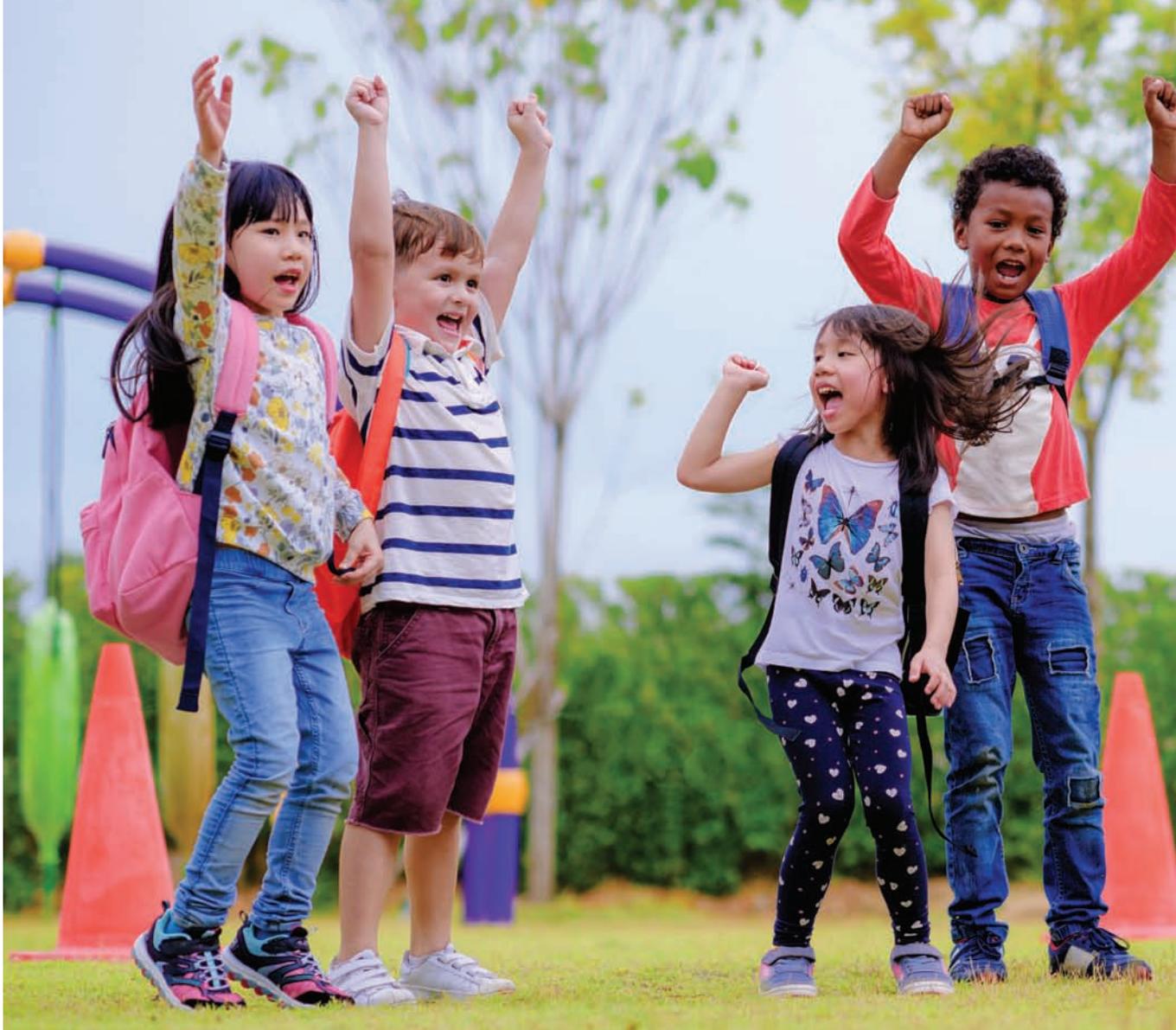
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Adding to Our View of Early Childhood Multicultural Education



Sometimes, innovation means recognizing and acknowledging when an approach needs to be refined and expanded in order to reflect new understandings about ourselves and society.

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Soon after the civil rights movement, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, multicultural education was born. It began at the college level, with the creation of women's studies, ethnic studies, and programs focusing on specific racial groups. Soon, K-12 multicultural education followed; in 1989, *Anti-bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*¹ was published, focusing on the early childhood ages.

Since then, many others have added to the early childhood multicultural education body of knowledge. The field of multicultural education has expanded to include language diversity, sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, and multiracial and multiethnic families. However, while some new ideas and theoretical frameworks have been added to the content of multicultural education, such as white privilege, critical race theory, and an increased focus on social justice, the basic approach to early childhood multicultural education—or anti-bias education—has not fundamentally changed since its inception.

I propose an alternative. It is not an attempt to compete with what I call the traditional model; rather, it is simply a suggestion to expand how we view the very important area of early childhood multicultural education by including some additional ideas and perspectives.

The early childhood field offers a variety of perspectives on understanding child development and learning, from Piaget and Vygotsky to Erikson, Skinner, and Bandura; alternative approaches to curriculum, including High Scope, Bank Street, the Creative Curriculum, Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia; and alternative ways to help young children learn and develop self-regulation. This range of approaches and perspectives adds diversity and strength to the field. Why should we not consider a variety of perspectives on and new ideas about teaching multicultural education to young children?

A good summary of the traditional view of early childhood multicultural education can

be found by looking at the goals of anti-bias education expressed by Derman-Sparks and Edwards.²

- Goal 1: Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.
- Goal 2: Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep, caring connections.
- Goal 3: Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
- Goal 4: Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudices and/or discriminatory actions.

A New Approach

While the new approach overlaps the traditional model in many ways, it also differs substantially. The first difference is that goals are not used; rather, the model focuses on foundational concepts of the approach itself. Reasons for this difference are: 1) many of the important concepts of multicultural education are developmental—changing over time (and age); 2) young children’s behavior is affected by ecology, and each child’s ecology is different; 3) language is dynamic—what may be considered accurate language today may be obsolete and inappropriate tomorrow; and 4) concepts of social justice change over time—and the full understanding of social justice changes over developmental age. The new approach focuses on these specific, foundational concepts:

- Diversity begins with each individual child.
- Identity is developmental and ecological—an interaction between both.
- Culture is dynamic.
- Racial, ethnic, national, regional, religious, and other groups with which individuals identify are ever-changing social groups influenced by history, traditions, persecution, and cultural practices.
- It is important to focus on similarities between people, and not differences.

- The ability to withstand prejudice and to resist bias—and to behave in an unbiased manner—is the result of a combination of developmental age (moral reasoning) and ecological support or lack of support.

Diversity Begins With Each Individual

This is probably the biggest difference between the new approach and the traditional approach to multicultural/anti-bias education. The new approach begins with the individual child. Then, different ecological factors that make up the child’s unique identity are added: family income, religion, race, family structure, nationality, language, ability/disability, and so on. Each of these ecological factors has a different impact for each child, and each is processed and integrated by the individual child to create his/her individual identity.³ Thus, a child’s identity is dynamic. It continues to change throughout childhood and, indeed, the entire life of the person, and different ecological factors have different influences over time.

This contrasts sharply with the traditional model, which tends to treat each child’s identity as static and as a direct function of the various social groups to which the child belongs, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and so on. Further, when it comes to the child’s race and ethnicity, the traditional model simply adopts the latest official government categories. The new approach offers many advantages:

- Societies around the world are becoming more and more diverse, with the acceptance of multiracial and multiethnic families, absorption of immigrants who do not fit neatly into official categories, and advocacy by many who challenge the arbitrary nature of racial and ethnic categories. In the United States, many Americans identify more closely with national or even regional groups, such as the Hmong and the Maya, than with the large U.S. census groups, and individual Native Americans tend to identify with their nation or tribe, and not the overall Native American category. This new approach matches more closely to how most people actually identify themselves.



- It's a much less confusing approach for young children. According to Piaget,⁴ preoperational children—2 to 7 years of age—tend to focus on appearance, so racial and ethnic distinctions often make very little sense to them.⁵ Many Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and mixed race children can look very much alike to a young child.
- It does not reinforce racial and ethnic stereotypes. Categorizing people by racial labels reinforces stereotypes, especially in preoperational children whose thought processes tend to be stereotypical.⁶
- It empowers each child to actively construct and reconstruct their unique identities, based on adding a variety of ecological factors and not on trying to fit themselves into a social or physical box.

Identity Development Is Developmental and Ecological

A child's sense of gender identity follows this developmental process:

- Identity
- Stability
- Gender constancy.

Just as the child's gender identity progresses through distinct developmental stages,

so does the child's sense of racial identity development. These stages are the result of cognitive maturation and experience, and differ according to the society in which a child lives. However, for many children, such as multiracial and multiethnic children and transracially adopted children, this developmental progression is more complex and difficult, and is affected by a variety of ecological factors, such as culture, gender, school or early childhood program, family, role models (real and symbolic), and so on.⁷

For example, a young mixed-race child in the United States is continually being asked, "What are you?" In the United States, identifying as mixed-race challenges our codified history of traditional single race categories. However, a mixed-race child in Brazil is never challenged about his race by peers, adults, or teachers. Being mixed-race is a natural part of the Brazilians' view of race.

Further, a person's racial and/or ethnic identity is dynamic, changing as the child matures and continuing to change throughout the person's entire lifespan. For example, in her 50s, my African American wife became an enrolled member of the Chickasaw Indian Nation, and now sees this as an important part of her

identity. A person's identity might change by discovering new information about her genetic and/or cultural heritage and also as a result of travel. When my biracial son left the United States, he was accustomed to being formally recognized as Black. When he arrived in Brazil to play soccer, his identity there was viewed as *pardo* (mixed-race).

Culture Is Dynamic

It is well known that immigrants' views of the majority culture change from generation to generation, as they become more assimilated; it is also well known that other aspects of a person's life can change their own traditions, behaviors, and cultural perspectives, such as marriage, moving (within a country or to another country), changing their religion, and so on. Some people make specific choices that enhance their cultural life, such as joining a cultural or advocacy group or having their children attend a French, Latino, or Chinese school.

All children are born into families, communities, and cultures. But these cultures change and shift. For example, the cultural context of a child born into a Mayan village in the Guatemalan Highlands will shift if that family moves to Mexico City or Houston, Texas. One of my grandchildren has a unique culture because his mother is biracial (black/white), his father is French, and he is being raised in Houston. However, if his family moves to Europe, which they might do in the future, his cultural context will shift.

An African American child born to a single, poor mother has a very different experience from one born into a two-parent, professional family. However, if that family were suddenly to divorce, the cultural context would probably shift.

Identity Groups Are Organic Social Entities, Not Official Government Categories

One of the more interesting things about government racial and ethnic categories is that they differ from country to country. In

Brazil, the major categories are Afrobrasilian (Black), Amerindian (Native American), Amarillo (Asian), *pardo* (mixed race), and European. In Belize, they are Latino, Creole, Maya, Garifuna, and Mennonite.⁸ One reason for these differences is because each society attempts to reflect what Jefferson Fish⁹ calls folk categories—the organic groups that develop in each society as a result of history, persecution, wars, immigration, social rules, and so on. Contemporary governments do not create categories; they attempt to politicize groups that already exist, for a variety of reasons that differ according to each society.

When I worked with the U.S. Census Bureau on issues related to a multiracial census category (the United States still does not have one), an official told me that the Nationalist Chinese, who did not like being counted with the Communist Chinese, continually pressured the census to add a nationalist Chinese category. And all my Native American friends identify with their particular tribe or nation, and not with the general Native American category.

Thus, in this model, identity is based on the racial, ethnic, regional, and/or linguistic groups with which individuals choose to affiliate, and not the official census or government categories. People wanting to educate themselves about the true human diversity in their communities and nations must be much more informed and nuanced than automatically placing people within the broad government categories. In fact, in this new model, the individual gets to inform others; and the others (i.e. teachers) must consult with individuals regarding the identities they subscribe to and they wish their children to adopt.

Focusing on Similarities

As Piaget so accurately pointed out, preoperational children focus on physical characteristics of objects: color, shape, size, sound, and smell, etc. Characteristics like language, language accents, clothes, parents' physical features, etc., are also very obvious to young children. At this age, children are therefore naturally predisposed to discriminate

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An Innovative Learning Environment case study from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Centre for Educational Research and Innovation

Multicultural Education in Miwon Primary School in Korea

A 3-year project at Miwon Primary school, located in Gapyeong-gun, Gyeonggi-do, Korea, included numerous activities in multicultural education and a program focusing at students with multicultural/multilingual backgrounds. Examples of activities are supporting classes and extra language courses for students with multicultural backgrounds and their parents (also during holidays), and for all students multicultural and Korean culture experiencing days, after-school classes taught by bilingual parents, and bilingual presentation contests. Students also produced movies on multicultural topics. Read the case study at: www.oecd.org/education/ceri/49945435.pdf

children according to their physical characteristics (*discriminate* is used here as a scientific term, not a social one—it has no value). These characteristics include eye and hair color, skin color, hair texture, eye shape, language, accent, clothes, disabilities, behaviors, and so on. This is normal and appropriate.

However, the new model focuses on how we are all fundamentally the same. It is not a colorblind approach; physical differences are acknowledged and embraced. Rather, it is an approach that emphasizes we are all fundamentally the same—with feelings, fear, aspirations, friends, families, homes, communities, and so on.

As Piaget also pointed out, children at this age are developing schemas that explain how the world works and how it is organized. While young children tend to see the obvious physical differences between people, our task as early childhood educators is to help them develop schemas that fully embrace human diversity of all forms and that are fundamentally grounded in the view that we are all the same, and everyone should be treated in the same way. We enable young children to use these physical characteristics to understand the richness of human diversity, but emphasize that all of us ultimately have the same reference group orientation: human beings.

Disabilities and Abilities Are Socially Constructed

I often ask my college students to imagine a society in which archery is the primary professional sport. An entirely different group of people—with different physical characteristics—would be popular and wealthy. By the same token, our view of what constitutes abilities and disabilities is also socially and culturally defined. As Gargiulo and Bouck point out,

We must remember that exceptionality—having a special need—is always relative to the social or cultural context in which it exists. For example, the concept of normalcy, which forms an important part of the definition of exceptionality, depends on the reference group (society, peers, family), as well as specific circumstances.¹⁰

As an example of how this sense of normalcy has changed over time, consider that when most families lived on farms, very active children were considered an asset, because many of the chores required active, physical involvement. Now, we expect children to sit quietly and to follow complex verbal directions. Today, children who exhibit active behaviors often are diagnosed with ADHD.

Rather than taking the view that children with disabilities should be included in the everyday curriculum and activities—a view commonly called inclusion in early childhood programs—this model takes the position that children should not be singled out or labeled in the first place. Rather, the program must be flexible, adaptive, and responsive enough to *naturally* and proactively include all children within its activities and curricula.

Conclusion

In many ways, this new approach to early multicultural (anti-bias) education overlaps with the traditional multicultural education approach. Further, my attempt here is not to compete with the existing body of knowledge, but rather to add to it—providing practitioners, teachers, and

curriculum specialists with additional insights and perspectives. Some of these new perspectives involve a radically different way of understanding individual identity and group belonging, and a different way to teach differences and similarities. Further, this model appreciates the developmental age of children in early childhood programs, and takes to heart the developmental nature of acquiring complex societal constructs, developing moral attitudes, and embracing social justice behaviors.

Notes:

- ¹ Derman-Sparks & the ABC Taskforce. (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- ² Derman-Sparks, L., & Edwards, J. O. (2010). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- ³ Wardle, F. (2017). Children are not racial categories. Viewpoint. *Young Children*, 72(2), 85-89; West, M. (2001). The third culture child. *Young Children*, 56(6), 27-32.
- ⁴ Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- ⁵ Wardle, F. (1999). *Tomorrow's children. Meeting the needs of multiracial and multiethnic children at home, in early childhood programs, and at school*. Denver, CO: CSBC.
- ⁶ Piaget, J. (1952).
- ⁷ Aboud, F. E. (1987). The development of ethnic self-identification and attitudes. In J. S. Phinney & R. J. Rotherham (Eds.), *Children's ethnic socialization: Pluralism and development* (pp. 32-53). Newbury Park, CA: Sage; Poston, W. S. C. (1990). The biracial identity development model: A needed addition. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 69, 152-155.
- ⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.belize.com/belize-demographics>, January 7, 2018.
- ⁹ Fish, J. (2002). A scientific approach to studying race and intelligence. In J. Fish (Ed.), *Separating science from myth* (pp. 1-28). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Publishers.
- ¹⁰ Gargiulo, R. M., & Bouck, E. C. (2018). *Special education in contemporary society. An introduction to exceptionality* (6th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage. p. 5