Principles for culturally responsive teaching in early childhood education

ECE resources

There can be no recipe or script for culturally responsive teaching because every group of families and children has differing backgrounds and unique needs, capabilities, and interests. Early childhood teachers need to know about this diversity in order to adapt their practice to suit the cultural practices, beliefs, and values of the child and their family, and to support all children to participate fully while maintaining their cultural identities. This guide offers some general, research-based principles and suggestions to empower teachers, in concert with families, to discover different ways of dealing with issues of diversity.

Reflecting on oneself and one's own culture

It is not possible to be sensitive to someone else's ways of being and doing without first being sensitive to the impact of one's own cultural values, beliefs, and practices[1]. Teachers should continually explore their own cultural and ethnic identities by reflecting upon their upbringing and family values, their cultural beliefs and biases, and the assumptions around learning and childhood to which they lead[2]. These assumptions and beliefs will influence teachers' perceptions (for example, of children's competency or agency) and practices (such as soliciting children's opinions). Be aware that the practices and principles that are currently valid according to the dominant culture are not universally true, but also the product of a cultural context[3].

To reflect on your own cultural beliefs and assumptions, you might:

- Think about particular decision points or teaching practices and interactions with diverse families that you find challenging or uncomfortable, in order to uncover hidden values and beliefs[4].

- Consider in what ways your practices and routines are influenced by dominant cultural practices, particularly in regard to eating, sleeping, toileting, communication, reading and play.

- Notice how pedagogical and bureaucratic practices privilege some families over others, and critically examine whether your perspective on 'quality' early childhood education needs to be adapted to incorporate diverse perspectives. For example, valuing children's independence may mark some children as needy or deficient, while notions of parent partnership may marginalise families for whom it is not appropriate or easy[5].

Reflecting on other cultures

While ethnicity and culture must be recognised as important in the identity of children and families, stereotypes must be avoided. Gaining some knowledge about the cultures of the children and families that attend the setting is a starting point for understanding children and families[6], but it is important to be aware that there are many differences between and within cultural groups, and that cultural identities are complex, fluid and multiple[7].

To reflect on other cultures, you can:

- Develop your cross-cultural competency by immersing yourself in real life experiences in order to develop connections and deep understanding, and take every opportunity to become involved in family and community events[8].

- Find out about and aim to understand[9] the specific practices, perspectives, and beliefs of families.

- Appreciate different ways of viewing children's development[10], which does not mean discarding your own beliefs and practices, but instead stretching your knowledge and thinking to be open to possibilities that are not necessarily incompatible[11]. For example, the provision of a writing area with letters to copy may help to satisfy the expectations of some families for their children to be involved in more structured academic work, while remaining congruent with teachers' free play philosophies.

- Use minority families' multiple meanings and perspectives to help you deconstruct practice, and critically challenge the status quo and longstanding pedagogical practices and beliefs[12]. For example, family beliefs might encourage you to challenge concepts of children eating or sleeping independently, and come to value elements of interdependence within these routines.

Developing positive attitudes towards diversity

Attitudes related to being comfortable and supportive of diversity are more important to developing cross-cultural competencies than becoming an expert on every possible kind of cultural practice and belief. Positive attitudes involve commitment to culturally responsive practices and to social justice, genuine interest and curiosity to learn about families' cultures and lifestyles, flexibility and openness to change, humility, empathy and sensitivity[13].

To support the development of positive attitudes to diversity, you can:

- Create positive environments which are inclusive, safe, caring, and respectful, where difference is seen as normal and there is unconditional acceptance[14] for all children and families.

- Enact values such as welcoming, kindness, hospitality, respect, and taking care of and responsibility for others, and reinforce them daily: for example, you might greet children and their families by name when they arrive each day[15].

- Share a belief that all children can succeed[16] and see success as complex in regard to children and families' diversity[17].

Working with families as a valuable resource

Genuine, heartfelt, and long-term relationships are a key priority for learning about home practices and beliefs, and for bridging cultural distance and disconnect[18], where it may exist. Research shows that teachers find it difficult to build appropriate knowledge of children from minority backgrounds without parental input[19]. Use strategies such as appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication, attentiveness, respect, sincerity, home visits, and invitations for genuine collaboration, and allow lengthy periods for getting to know each other[20]. Be careful that surface appearances do not influence behaviours, interactions, or perspectives, and try to suspend judgement and accept what families tell you as valuable information[21].

When working with families, you can:

- Promote conversation and dialogue through careful use of time and space, and cups of tea or coffee! Focus on receiving and acknowledging families' perspectives rather than on projecting your own ideas, or trying to interpret the situation from your own cultural, philosophical and pedagogical standpoint[22].

- Engage in discussions about values, sharing your own experiences, beliefs and values, and encouraging families to talk about their own values[23]. Weave families' values into the curriculum and

negotiate goals, pedagogies and programmes, but without merging minority views into the dominant culture[24].

- Acknowledge and address cultural inequities and disadvantage[25]. Be aware of common areas of disconnect and try to be proactive in identifying the critical issues for families. Create opportunities to discuss these in ways that are respectful, non-judgemental, and participatory.

- Encourage families to play active roles in the setting. Don't pressure families to share or perform aspects of their culture, but focus on valuing the cultural practices of minority families and building confidence in families to share their practices with the setting's community[26].

- Encourage families to participate in constructing knowledge about children, and in decision-making about children's learning and development through conversations or e-portfolio annotations.

Observing and analysing

Analytical approaches which incorporate both observation of children and dialogue with families can be useful to help guide the construction of a culturally responsive curriculum. Theoretical frameworks such as 'funds of knowledge' (which focus on practices that are passed on through families over generations and adapted to new situations) can support teachers to recognise, value, and explore children's interests, skills, knowledge, and learning embedded in their everyday practices, routines and activities at home[27].

To inform your practice through observation and analysis, you can:

Spend time observing what families do and how they talk about what they do[28], as well as who children are, how they think, what they value, and everything they can do.

Respond to conversations initiated by children and ask children about their families, what they did over the weekend, and what they are interested in. Notice the ways children communicate: consider how they do or do not use humour, relate to other people, approach new tasks, and react to praise[29].

Notice children expressing their working theories about their culture, identity, and language, and intentionally plan conversations and provocations to encourage children to share their thinking[30].

Consider themes of power and inequity when observing children[31]. For example, note patterns in interactions which indicate social exclusion, and ways in which children are using culturally diverse materials.

Responding

Cultural responsiveness involves interpreting and delivering the curriculum in a way that is effective for each child and appropriate to their social and cultural context. This involves deep and critical thinking, and adapting and modifying your approach to teaching and learning as your understanding of the unique and diverse needs of children grows. Recognising that all children are different does not mean they need the provision of different experiences but rather that you understand the diverse ways they respond to shared experiences[32]. However, basing curriculum on children's lives and building on the social and cultural capital of children, families, and teachers will allow for greater multicultural significance in the programme[33].

To enact a responsive curriculum, you can:

- Design learning experiences that position children as experts in relation to their particular interests and funds of knowledge from home, and enable them to utilise familiar learning strategies[34]. Make

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pedagogical decisions that suit children's particular characteristics and learning preferences rather than a generic ideal[35].

• Value playful ways of knowing and being to empower children's language, play and ideas, and create space for them to explore their home and community funds of knowledge by making materials and spaces available that connect with children's experiences and contexts.

• Offer various opportunities to learn, including learning through observation, trying things on their own, or with a partner or group. Encourage the use of cultural strategies (such as home language, social choices such as high respect for teachers, parental practices, and attitudes to learning such as persistence and commitment[36]) as well as interactions and relationships with peers and teachers of a similar cultural and language background.

• Negotiate caregiving routines sensitively and use culturally familiar language and cultural norms in interactions with children. For example, you might use humour, or employ direct requests ('put on your coat') rather than indirect ones ('do you think you could put on your coat?'), if children are more familiar with these[37].

See all aspects of the curriculum, including ideas of child-centred play and exploration, as open to challenge and reworking, and find relevant, local concepts for responsive curriculum and assessment. For example, you might decide to use stories of ngā Atua Māori to exemplify the learning dispositions you want children to develop.

Explicitly interrogate incidents of racism and cultural stereotyping[38], and engage children's curiosity regarding social and cultural differences and similarities through group dialogue, problem solving, and inquiry.

Resourcing

Resources can be found in staff, management committees, children, and families. Teachers and families may have skills that they have not shared, and children too have a high capacity to direct their own learning and play, and to support each other[39]. Research shows that, while children's learning experiences depends on the use of the cultural tools of the family, these cultural tools are only employed if the early childhood setting environment is receptive to them[40]. When children can find their family culture in the setting and apply their cultural tools, they are able to mix, transfer and borrow skills, values, and knowledges in order to have their needs met and experience success[41].

Physical resources should be responsive and sensitive to families' cultures and heritages, and embedded into the daily programme, rather than relegated to a wall display that is rarely referred to, or an occasional celebration of a cultural festival[42]. Books, images, and posters show children what and whom is valued, so these should reflect and validate children's cultural identities to help children feel emotionally secure, as well as offer them a range of positive identities and possible futures[43]. Be aware that children who are unfamiliar with any of the practices or activities of the setting may be marginalised as they do not know what they are supposed to do[44]. Activities such as hand painting and sand play, or questioning and verbalising opinions, may be unfamiliar to children of particular cultural backgrounds, or children might have difficulty adapting to a self-directed play environment[45]. Providing dress up costumes or food props related to different cultures will do little to mitigate this[46].

To ensure your resources are culturally responsive, you can:

• Invite families into the setting and personalise opportunities for them to get involved. Seek people in the community to teach children about a different culture or language, and try to build sustained and reciprocal relationships rather than one-off events[47].

• If you are from a minority cultural background, implement your own cultural resources within the setting's programme[48].

• Be careful not to celebrate superficial differences (such as food choices) and dig deeper to identify resources that support children's and families' funds of knowledge[49]. For example, specific cooking implements and recipe books may provoke children to enact cooking routines from home, while well-chosen finger puppets may encourage children to share their knowledge of cultural stories.

• Encourage children to use their home languages with teachers and each other, and intentionally learn phrases from children so that you can build on their linguistic skills during learning and teaching[50]. Encourage children to teach each other their home languages.

• Offer open-ended and manipulative materials, rather than culturally specific materials, or resources that should be used in a particular way, so that children without knowledge of these are not disadvantaged, and can construct and express meaning according to their own experiences and understandings[51].

Further reading

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