

Cross-cultural childrearing

Individual children bring their own unique characteristics to the early childhood environment. These characteristics have been influenced by their home environment, the wider community in which their families operate and the cultural and linguistic values held by their families. All families have very different expectations about the child's position in the family, the way the child speaks to other members of the family, and about the child as a member of the family setting. These differences may become more marked on entering an unfamiliar environment such as a nursery or childcare centre.

A number of researchers (Derman-Sparks 1992; Lubeck 1996) argue that the dominant culture of the European-American-centred classroom may be at odds with the learning styles and practices of minority ethnic children. Lubeck (1996: 20) urges educators to understand how early childhood practices help to maintain social inequality by creating status differentials between and among people and by reinforcing ideologies most likely to have been acquired by the dominant classes. Many studies have examined the discontinuities and continuities between the home and school experiences of children from diverse ethnic, racial, gender and social class groups (see Philips 1972, 1983), as well as between the difference of cultures children can experience in pre-school and schools (Heath 1982; Schofield 1982; Willett 1987). Observed cultural and gendered differences include: differences in non-verbal behaviours, dialect features of speech, accepted turn-taking practices and definitions of leading and following, adult and adult roles and adult and child roles, cooperation and competition.

In studies conducted by Heath (1982), she observed the way teachers built bridges so that the children could 'learn school'. For example, teachers upset with children who did not behave as they expected, learned to revise and clarify implicit definitions of how time and space were to be used in their classrooms. They also learned to express requests directly, while providing opportunities for children to learn mainstream forms through stories, puppets and other means.

Although early childhood educators play an important role in the care and education of children, they need to take account of what parents want for their own children. They should consider the diverse backgrounds of the families who are part of their programmes and they should work with parents to understand the cultural and linguistic values and goals parents have for their children. These are crucial to the identities of children, families and communities.

Children begin learning to be members of their own culture from birth.



They are exposed to culturally appropriate ways of behaving from an early age. This includes personal behaviour (the way we sit, stand, walk or gesture), interactional behaviour (personal space, eye contact, use of gestures, the rules followed, for example, good table and non-acceptable behaviour). Some aspects of the culture are more visible, including food, art, music, literature, festivals and important celebrations. Childrearing practices also differ and are often based on beliefs held by families over generations about what children need, how they should be handled, what girls and boys should or should not be able to do, how they learn and develop, and what personal characteristics should be learned.

In any early childhood programme, different cultures operate, and these include the different cultures of the children from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as the home cultures of the staff. These all interplay with the culture of early childhood professional practice which is predominantly Anglo-European. But in recent years, this early childhood culture has begun to reflect other influences. The traditional 'developmentally appropriate curriculum' (Bredekamp 1987) has been revised to include three new areas of knowledge and practice. These consider what is developmentally appropriate, what is individually appropriate, and what is culturally appropriate. Gonzales-Mena (1998: 226) suggests that the early childhood culture is expanding beyond its European roots to increasingly reflect the diverse cultures of the many professional educators and the families they serve.

It is essential that those working with young children understand the conflict that is sometimes faced by very young children coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. One example of this is the different priorities families have in relation to independence or interdependence. Gonzales-Mena (1998) highlights the two major tasks newborn babies are faced with: 1) to become independent individuals and 2) to establish connections with others. The task of the parent is to help them with both. Their culture affects the way they address these tasks and determines the goals they have for their children. Gonzales-Mena (1998: 227) provides two approaches:

- the self is a separate, autonomous individual whose job it is to grow and develop into the best he or she can be in order to become part of a larger group. Personal fulfilment and/or achievement are all important.
- the self is inherently connected, not separate, and is defined in terms of relationships. Obligations to others is more important than personal fulfilment or achievement.

Difficulties may arise when young children are faced with conflicting expectations. The family may value interdependence, their major concern being to assist their children to maintain connections. They may worry



about their children becoming too independent. On the other hand, the culture of the early childhood setting may value independence and encourage self-help skills. Problems may arise when parents expect their child to be fed at the childcare setting, as these meal times are seen as providing important opportunities for interaction between child and parent. Parents may be upset at the centre's policy to encourage children to become more independent.

Gonzales-Mena (1998: 229) argues that 'the independence and interdependence approaches represent two different ways of looking at getting needs met'. In different cultures, some children will grow up with a strong positive feeling of community that can provide support when they receive negative messages about themselves or about their communities.

What is important for early childhood educators is to recognize the different cultural influences that are present, to be accepting of other ways of viewing childrearing, to respect the ability of parents to raise their own children and to be aware of negative influences which can oppress people. This is important because self-esteem and identity depend on whether these factors are recognized and treated with respect. As children enter new environments, cultures change as do individuals. Children start from different cultural backgrounds, and whether they keep their cultural values or whether they are changed or lost altogether will depend partly on the ability of the early childhood staff to support the child's development. Ultimately it should be the children's decision as they grow older to decide what is of importance. However expert in terms of child development we may be, we should not presume to make decisions for them. In earlier chapters, positive ways of supporting children in early childhood programmes have been discussed.

Home culture and language

Even though families might have emigrated to a new country they bring with them the parenting and cultural roles that they have experienced themselves. These beliefs and values are reinforced, or depending on the experiences they have in the new country, may be changed or rejected as new generations are born. Although there may be similarities as well as differences across cultures, there will be differences in the way children have been exposed to ways of talking and listening, and parents may have clear expectations of the way children will use language, including who talks to whom, about what topics, and who responds.

Over the past 20 years, research in a variety of social and cultural communities has broadened our knowledge and understanding of specific

cultural and linguistic patterns used by families and communities with varied sociocultural characteristics. Findings from research have shown complex patterns of language use, socialization patterns and learning. Pease-Alvarez and Vasquez (1994) and Clarke (1996) argue that the home language and culture plays a critical role in children's overall development and that people from different cultures have access to very different language socialization experiences. These experiences can result in different paths to second language learning.

Pease-Alvarez and Vasquez (1994) draw attention to the work of Heath (1983) and Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) who show that the way parents and other adults interact with children is influenced by the culturally-specific views about childrearing and language learning they hold. Middle-class white Anglo-European parents who believe that language learning is facilitated by adapting situations to their child, tend to modify their language, and accommodate their own talk to build on their children's conversations, and use topics that take account of their children's interests and abilities. Pease-Alvarez and Vasquez (1994) claim that these patterns of verbal behaviour have not been observed in some non-western and working-class communities where parents believe children learn best by adapting to their surroundings. If practitioners are aware of these differences they can plan to work with children as individuals, rather than labelling them as competent or incompetent. Assistance from parents is limited to modelling language or using cues to attract their attention, rather than scaffolding children's verbal contributions as part of a conversation.

Entering a new world: the early childhood setting

Most bicultural children have to learn English as an additional language (EAL) in order to interact in the nursery or childcare, and to assist integration into the wider community. As bicultural children move into a different context they come in contact with a variety of social and cultural influences and find themselves having to interact with adults and children from a wide variety of backgrounds and a wide variety of experiences. This contact contributes to the way they perceive themselves, their families and the place they have in it.

What happens when these children enter the new environment of the early childhood setting? Many enter an unfamiliar world where they encounter a set of language and cultural practices that may be very different from the practices they are used to. English, their second (or additional) language is likely to be the primary medium of communication. More often than not, the views and experiences of the children have not been



good at promoting types 2 and 3 but fail to make adequate provision and processes to achieve 1, 4 and 5. The two latter types are more highly correlated with successful parent involvement towards real partnership and towards a better education for children. Early childhood settings might want to conduct an audit of what they do under each of these headings to support and involve parents.

Strategies for improving parent involvement

The rest of this chapter is drawn from a study conducted by Siraj-Blatchford and Brooker (1998); it was funded by one London local education authority catering for a particularly diverse population. The study involved seven schools which worked with children aged 3–7 and 8–11 years, and it looked at how parent involvement could be enhanced in the early and primary years across the authority. It was useful to start with what good practice existed within the seven settings involved in the project and the efforts they had made at improvement. Numerous activities which promoted good relations with parents and encouraged parents to take an interest in their child's learning and well-being, already existed in the project settings. New initiatives were begun during the process of the project and were felt by the settings' representatives to have raised morale and enhanced the ethos of the early childhood setting significantly.

By this stage a great deal of progress had been made by the schools in the roles and perspectives of parents and staff. These school representatives agreed that some 'outside' input had been helpful to them for most effective achievement in their own school. The following recommendations are based on the research findings and current research literature on parental involvement, child achievement and improvement in an educational and care context.

Improving ethos

- 1 Parents are not a homogeneous group and can therefore hold different culturally conceived ideas about the role of education and the teacher. In some cultures the role of the teacher is seen as distinct and separate to the role of parenting, and staff need to take some time explaining and illustrating how the child can benefit from partnership and continuity of educational experiences across the setting and home. It is sensible for staff not to make assumptions about parents' knowledge, beliefs or experiences but to create a friendly atmosphere where parents can talk

openly about their experiences and feelings. Additionally, sufficient interest should be taken in parents as individuals, and their views and feelings should be sought on general matters pertaining to the early childhood setting and particularly to their child. This sort of interest and care fosters trust and an open and secure ambience.

- 2 All staff can work towards partnership by creating an ethos of belonging to the early childhood setting. This ethos can be characterized by:
 - regular and effective communication;
 - willingness to share information with parents about their child and the early childhood setting;
 - willingness to ask parents for advice about their child and to seek their views on key issues such as curriculum, childrearing and assessment;
 - working towards common goals, taking time to explain and listen carefully;
 - visibly displaying a liking for parents and respect for their feelings;
 - being approachable and open to negotiation;
 - sharing responsibility and a willingness to work together;
 - illustrating that the child is at the heart of the education provided and therefore that the care/family unit is all-important.
- 3 An atmosphere or ethos that encourages a sense of belonging should aim to:
 - make everyone feel that they are wanted and that they have a positive role to play in the early childhood setting;
 - show parents that they can always make their feelings, views and opinions known to the staff, and that these will be dealt with respectfully and seriously;
 - demonstrate that the parents' diverse linguistic, family make-up, cultural and religious backgrounds are valued and seen as positive assets to the early childhood setting; and
 - show that the early childhood setting is an organic part of the community it serves and so understands the concerns, aspirations and difficulties the members of that community might face.
- 4 A booklet or parent guide (if required, in the appropriate community languages) can make these points clearly and succinctly. Parents with particular needs, for instance, a disability like dyslexia, an addiction like alcohol, or depression and stress should be offered support through other agencies.
- 5 The staff can display photographs with the names of all the workers in their early childhood setting; they can inform parents of staff who are leaving and give information on new staff. Some of the day's activities

could be displayed for the parents at the start of each day. Significant events of the day could be displayed when parents come to pick up their children, and in those few minutes when parents are waiting for children or staff, staff can easily supplement the regular personal contact with casual exchanges but this is no substitute for the regular contact.

- 6 Parents' first impressions are critical and the environment they come into will tell them a good deal about the values held by the early childhood setting. A bright, lively environment with displays of children's work, multicultural and multilingual material and information for parents on local activities, events and support groups can make for a comforting and secure impression. It is also essential to have somebody around who can make time to listen to parents and not rush off. Parents do not always want to talk to staff, they may just want time out to have a coffee and meet and talk to other parents or use the toy library with their toddlers.
- 7 Providing spaces for parents and their babies and toddlers is a valuable and very welcoming service. Parents are individuals, have specific circumstances and they have varied needs. This is true also of the service, which may be restricted in what it can provide, depending upon whether it is school, a nursery centre or a combined facility, childminder or playgroup. Expertise of staff will vary considerably as will the material resources available. It is up to individual early childhood settings to optimize their facilities and expertise to provide the best service possible, and parents should be treated as top priority.
- 8 Most early childhood settings have parents on their governing bodies or management committees and their views will be important in evaluating parental participation. More often than not, these parents are seen as representatives of the whole parent body but this cannot be so. Early childhood settings in diverse, multiracial areas often have no minority ethnic representation. It is almost impossible to represent every parent's views, but that is no reason to avoid consultation with as many parents as possible. Staff have to find ways of communicating with the full range of parents to get a better balance of perceived parental needs across class, gender, race and disability within the community. Where the local community appears to be homogeneous (although this is very doubtful) efforts still need to be made to represent the wider community.

Partnership between parents and staff, home and early childhood setting has been part of educational discourse for almost 30 years. However, there is still little consensus over what form this partnership should take.