



Phone Link Ups

Thinking About Culture: Moving Beyond Tokenism

'Lukewarm acceptance is more bewildering than outright rejection'

Martin Luther King Junior

There are ranges of ways people understand the word culture. More traditionally, culture is understood in terms of a way of life specific to a group of people from a particular ethnic background.

Within children's services, the term culture is more prominently understood as a way of reflecting cultural diversity and as such supposedly leading to a more inclusive child care environment.

Critical Reflection

1. How do you currently understand the concept of culture?
2. How do you make sense of your own culture?

"One of the ongoing issues in work linked to understanding and respecting cultural diversity is that there are many ways to understand what we mean by the word 'culture'. Some people see culture in a very broad way as the language, values, norms and behaviours that are shared by a particular group of people in their everyday lives. For instance, the language, values, norms and behaviours shared by a particular religious group, age group (teenagers, over 50s, etc.), class, gender or ethnic group.

Others see culture in a narrower and more concrete way. It is linked to the visible material differences between people that are seen in the arts, foods and clothes of a particular society or nation state. For instance, 'Aussie food', Chinese art, Scottish dance, etc" (CIEC DVD Rom)

Given the diversity of definitions associated with culture, take some time to consider these different approaches outside of the educational discipline

Anthropology the way of life of a people, or what an individual needs to know to survive in a society

Sociology culture encompasses ideas, knowledge and recipes for doing things, it includes fabricated tools and is the product of social action that may be drawn upon in the further conduct of social life

"The way (people) perceives the world, the way they communicate with one another and, the things they do and their values. Culture is the system of shared knowledge which people use to govern their own

actions and interpret the actions of others" (p.12) Partington, G., & McCudden, V. (1993). Ethnicity and Education

Group-think




You have received a scholarship to work in a children's service in Japan. You are excited about the opportunity to immerse yourself in the unknown and take a well-earned break from the service you have worked in for over 9 years.

Your first week in Japan is an exciting time. You struggle with the language differences and many of the cultural norms. Nonetheless you take this in your stride and consider this a unique learning experience.

Your first week in the service was a wonderful experience meeting your new colleagues, children and families. At the first staff meeting, the service Director informs you that they know very little about Australia and requests that you plan 'Australia' into the curriculum so the staff and children can learn about Australia.

- How do you undertake this process?
- What would you plan in response to this request?
- What resources, artifacts would you require?

Louise Derman-Sparks and the *Anti-Bias Task Force* have pioneered much of the work specific to cultural diversity in children's services. In her book Derman-Sparks argues that an inclusive educational environment for children:

-  Reaffirms
-  Challenges and
-  Exposes children to a range of diversity

In addition to this, regulatory frameworks such as the Commonwealth Governments Child Care Quality Assurance System and the State Governments Children's Services Regulation make it necessary that providers of children's services provide an inclusive environment that reflects a range of diversity

"The licensee and Authorised Supervisor of a children's service must ensure that the dignity and rights of each child being provided with the service are maintained at all times and that: ... are treated without bias regardless of ability, gender, religion, culture, family structure or economic status ... is given support in the child's learning experience"

(Children's Services Regulation Part 6 Operational Requirement, Division 1 General 65 Interactions.)

Critical Reflection





3. How does your children's service currently reflect cultural diversity in the physical environment?
4. How does your children's service currently reflect cultural diversity in the curriculum and teaching approaches offered to children?

Integral in working with culture in children's services is taking time to 'unpack' our personal understandings, values and experiences of culture. Much of our own opinions and values are learnt from previous experiences. Therefore we must take time to consider our personal position on not only other peoples culture but our own.

Critical Reflection





5. What are the cultures within your setting that you understand because you share them?
6. What are the cultures within your setting that you need to learn more about because they differ to yours?
7. What are the challenges and dilemmas you face in learning about cultures different to your own?

To extend our understandings about the benefits, which arise from reflecting culture there are a range of teaching strategies educators can actively, pursue as part of their cultural diversity program. These include:

-  Multicultural education
-  Anti bias education
-  Social justice education
-  Anti -racist education

Multiculturalism can be defined as 'different cultures participating in a society unequally...multiculturalism [is] the existence of a number of distinct ethnic or cultural groups within one nation-state. It can be a matter of statistical fact and/or promotion by government policy' (Elizabeth Dau, pg 2001)

The main principles of anti-bias education and working with children include:

-  Construct a knowledgeable, confident self identity (for children to be confident about who they are)
-  Develop comfortable, empathetic and just interaction with diversity (for children to be accepting of difference)
-  Develop critical thinking (for children to be critical about injustice)
-  and the skills for standing up for oneself and others in the face of injustice (for children to act upon injustice) Derman-Sparks, 1989, p.xi

"Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is awakening in a house with adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education not only equips them for employment but also reinforces their knowledge and understanding of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination"

Mick Dodson, Annual Report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1993

"We just live with racism every day. It's like getting up, washing your face and having a cup of tea"

Goldstein understand racism as 'any act or idea which limits, denies or grants opportunities, services, resources, rights or respect to a person on the basis of skin colour' (Lee, 1993, p. 103)

There is over 50 years of research specific to children's understandings on culture and race. This research has taught us the following:

-  Children noticed and commented on skin colour, hair and eye colour, and hair texture

- They talked about their own colour and commented on similarities and differences in each other, in dolls, in stimulus pictures and in figures illustrating picture books
- Children used racial cues to identify and classify themselves and others
- As the children practiced their categorisation and classification skills using races as a basis, many incidences of over generalisations occurred;
- Children explored various aspects of race, including the extent and permanency of racial attributes (particularly skin colour) and the relationship between race and gender
- Black children consistently choose white dolls as those that they'd like to play with and as the ones that look pretty (Go-Paul McNicol, 1995).
- Black children showed a bias towards lighter skins (Averhart & Bigler, 1997).
- Black children showed racial preference to whites (Kelly & Duckitt, 1995; Johnson, 1995).

There are many ways to begin discussions with children about social and cultural diversity and its meanings and its effects in their lives.

One way is to use stories to raise issues with children. Stories can be used to:

- Prompt discussion with individual children what they know about social diversity
- Allow children time to reflect on diversity issues
- Develop conversations through asking for their ideas, thoughts and questions about diversity
- Generating small group discussions that allow you to understand the similarities and differences between what specific children know and understand

Further to this educators can deconstruct children's understandings of racism through the following ways:

- Uncover children's 'racial' meanings. For instance, what meanings do the children give to being black or white?
- Offer children alternative 'racial' meanings.
- Examine with the children their 'racial' assumptions. For instance, what assumptions do they have about what it means to be black or white?
- Explore with the children who benefits from their 'racial' assumptions. For instance who benefits from the assumptions they have about being black or white.
- Talk with the children about the extent to which their understandings mean that some people have more power than other people. For instance, do their understandings mean that black people or white people have most power?
- Encourage the children to think about the extent to which this is fair, or not fair and whether alternative understandings are fairer. (G. MacNaughton 2003 Techniques for Teaching Young Children)

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