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**Reducing Bias and Opening the Doors:
Another Look at Why
Early Childhood Programs Need Culturally Diverse Staff**

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Families from every cultural and socioeconomic background have periodic needs for full and part day early childhood education (ECE) services (i.e., child care and preschool). Responding to this need for ECE programs coming from a highly diverse population presents multiple challenges to communities, organizations and individuals who are providing these services.

Teacher-caregivers, for example, in early childhood education programs such as Head Start, may feel challenged as they try to develop relationships with children and families from multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds that are different from their own. Some ECE staff members may find their personal values in conflict with program values in regard to enrolling, for example, a new family that is composed of three children and two fathers. Directors are sometimes unsure over where to start first in creating changes in their program that will respect and reflect differences.

The Purpose of this Article

Numerous authors have addressed the need for culturally diverse staff members in early childhood programs and other social services. In this article, I am going to address an issue about the impact of staffing decisions in full day programs in particular, especially those that serve the youngest of children (infants through preschoolers). To support this argument, I will bring in some relevant brain science research findings and principles.

I intend to present an argument that ECE programs *must* work to recruit and/or develop staff members who represent the cultural diversity of the local community (at minimum) as well as some of the cultural diversity of the

world community (when possible) if they are to achieve three program goals which many ECE programs hold in common.

The *first* of these goals is to make sure that *all* children and families in the community would feel welcome and safe to participate in the program.

The *second* goal is to provide an environment which supports each individual child to reach their potential in development and learning to the fullest.

The *third* is to reduce the development of biases and simultaneously support the development of multicultural competencies in all the children.

Individuals and ECE programs can profess any or all of these goals, but actually achieving them is another matter. Teachers and directors may become frustrated when their efforts to be accessible, inclusive, and non-biased are not successful. They make changes to the décor of the center, purchase multicultural dolls, books, and posters. These environmental changes are essential basics to a welcoming environment, but *the quality of the relationships between people is what really counts*, and will help determine how each of us *feels* in this environment.

From Developmentally Appropriate Practices to Developmentally Appropriate "Micropractices"

Teaching, caregiving, and parenting are made up of thousands of little behaviors and practices, or what can be called "micropractices".

Micropractices, according to Nancy Fraser, are "the social practices which comprise everyday life in modern society."¹ Micropractices are learned by everyone, including teachers, caregivers, and parents.

We learn micropractices from the people around us, starting in the first days of life. Our collections of micropractices are then reinforced, expanded, and modified throughout the life span. They come from:

¹ Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions" downloaded on 2-3-2008. <http://www.cceol.com/asp/getdocument.aspx?logid=5&id=46012559-0797-4925-9627-4BCC951F32D6>

- our own growing up and our experiences being parented and cared for, which reflect our home or family culture; and,
- interactions with close friends, relatives, and caregivers each of who may reflect a shared culture or different cultures.

As we move out into the wider world, we learn micropractices from people outside of close friends and family (school, work, etc.).

Babies and children come to know their parents and other family members by the specific micropractices they use in all their interactions.

Micropractices can include behaviors such as: eye contact, touching, talking, handling, and carrying. They can also include how they quiet the child, feed the child, play with the child, and so on. We are usually not conscious of our micropractices, but the child observes and experiences them, mentally mirroring² the movements and intentions internally, and storing them for future use.

Unseen Adjustments

Early childhood programs can be seen as transition experiences, or "bridges", between home and school. Traditionally, preschools were designed to reflect both the home and the school with the intent of helping children adjust as they transitioned into elementary school.

When children enter child care programs (or any ECE program, for that matter), they have many adjustments to make. They have to learn new routines, new rules and guidelines, and meet new children and adults.

Children entering child care programs will also need to make some "unseen" adjustments by having to learn *additional* patterns of micropractices from each of their primary teacher-caregivers.

If a child and his or her teacher-caregivers do *not* share a similar cultural experience, then the possibility exists that the adjustment time may be more extensive and potentially stressful. If their cultural backgrounds and micropractices *do* align, the adjustment is likely to be smoother. And, the younger the child, the more critical this alignment is, as gestures and other

² For more information, see Mirror Neuron article under Supporting Developing Brains in this web site: www.developingbrains.org

non-verbal behaviors (specific types of micropractices) are the infant or toddler's *primary means of communication*.

Staff members in a child care program, who reflect the cultural diversity of the program population, should be able to *more authentically* bring the children's home cultures into the relationship that the children and their caregivers develop. It is less likely that this authenticity can happen if the staff does not reflect the diversity of the community. It is essential to remember, though, that just because we know a person's cultural background, we cannot assume to know how she or he will interact with any given child.

However, when the teaching-caregiving staff members of a child care center are *all* (or almost all) coming from backgrounds that are within the boundaries of the dominant culture, the children who are *not* from the dominant culture will most likely *be denied* relationships with adults in which there is a high degree of mutual understanding through shared micropractices. They will lose the opportunity for more successful and personal communication which can *support knowledge construction and the formation of meaningful relationships*.

Pierre Bourdieu describes how the structures of a particular type of environment in which people live create predispositions, tendencies, or inclinations to behave in certain ways, which he labels as "habitus". Habitus is learned or acquired unconsciously, without thought about obeying any particular rules or having an "end" in mind. In other words, *we unconsciously learn ways of behavior by being in environments*.³

Using industrial workers for his example, and comparing them to their company bosses, Bourdieu states:

"Habitus are generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices - what the worker eats, and especially the way he eats it, the sport he practices and the way he practices it, his political opinions and the way he expresses them - [that] are systematically different from the industrial owner's corresponding activities."⁴

³ Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 72.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, Practical Reason. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 8.

Bourdieu goes on to say:

"But habitus are also classificatory schemes, principles of classification, principles of vision and division, different tastes. They make distinctions between what is good and what is bad, between what is right and what is wrong, between what is distinguished and what is vulgar, and so forth, but the distinctions are not identical. Thus, for instance, the same behavior or even the same good can appear distinguished to one person, pretentious to someone else, and cheap or showy to yet another."⁵

For an example from Early Childhood Education, Janet Gonzalez-Mena cites a study that focused on the differences in the way young European-American (white) children and young African-American (black) children tell stories.⁶

"The two styles are distinct and, interestingly enough, though white adults see the white style as superior, black adults find the other style more interesting and effective. As a result of these differing opinions, white teachers at sharing time tend to interrupt the black children and, instead of helping them, actually hinder their storytelling."

Gonzalez-Mena reminds us that "teaching should be done so that it adds to [children's] skills and doesn't take anything away from them.... The ideal is that children benefit from learning new cultural systems and still keep their home culture." Unfortunately, in most cases, "the dominant culture competes with the home culture and the home culture loses."⁷ And, moreover, the home culture is viewed as "deficient" rather than as "different". Having teaching staff from cultural backgrounds that reflect the cultural backgrounds of the population served by the program increases the likelihood that children will be fully supported in their learning and development.

Welcoming Families

The importance of having a culturally diverse staff includes the people who work in the "office" of the program (directors, secretaries, education

⁵ Bourdieu 1998, op. cit.

⁶ Janet Gonzalez-Mena, Diversity in Early Care and Education: Honoring Differences. 5th Ed. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008, 16.

⁷ Gonzalez-Mena, op. cit., 17.

coordinators, parent involvement staff, cooks, etc.). When the staff members come from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is more likely that parents will find someone who “feels” familiar to them, even in the most mundane activities, like signing in their child, or paying their tuition.

Using the practice of social work as an example, Adrienne Chambon comments that “to document micropractices in social work is, for instance, to break down the practice of intake to its finer actions: to document what a social worker does at her desk as she fills out a form...the small decisions and interactions...”⁸ This is where connections are made, through the way that business is carried out, often expressed in non-verbal behavior.

Culture Partially Resides in Non-Verbal Behavior

In a 2007 study involving culture specific gestures, Molnar-Szakacs, Wu, Robles, and Iacoboni found that a “shared motor repertoire [of hand gestures] leads to more effective communication”⁹ between people. In other words, when we are talking with someone whose “little” behaviors¹⁰ are similar to our own, we make a deeper connection, we understand what the other is saying or intending more fully.

The authors described how there are *two categories of hand gestures*: ones that accompany speech; and, those that are autonomous gestures (also called “emblems”) that do not accompany speech. An example of an autonomous gesture or emblem is the “thumbs up” sign that many people from the U.S.A. use to indicate a positive response to something.

According to the authors, there are several characteristics of emblems (autonomous gestures):¹¹

1. emblems are “highly social in nature”,
2. emblems convey meaning *without* the use of speech,
3. they intend to communicate,

⁸ Adrienne S. Chambon, “Foucault’s Approach: Making the Familiar Visible” in Reading Foucault for Social Work. Adrienne S. Chambon, Allen Irving, and Laura Epstein, Eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 62.

⁹ Istvan Molnar-Szakacs, Allan D. Wu, Francisco J. Robles, and Marco Iacoboni, “Do You See What I Mean? Corticospinal Excitability During Observation of Culture-specific Gestures.” PLoS ONE 2 (7):e626.doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0000626, 4. www.plosone.org/ (downloaded 8/30/2007)

¹⁰ **These “little” behaviors can include behaviors like: tapping the first finger for emphasis, putting the hand to the forehead, etc.**

¹¹ Molnar-Szakacs, et. al., op. cit., 1.

4. both the sender and receiver understand the meaning of the emblem,
5. emblems may be used alone or with speech, and
6. the *form* of the gesture is arbitrary and "highly specific to particular linguistic groups, regions or cultures and their forms are replicated in the same form from person to person in a given cultural area."

Mirror Neurons and Gestures

When we perceive gestures or emblems, mirror neuron systems in the brain's motor area are activated *as though we are doing the gesture*. In addition, we understand the *meaning* and the *intent* of the gesture. Thus, gestures actually help infants learn language and develop cognitive skills.

As a child develops, they learn the cultural emblems of the people who raise them and who are in their environment, and they develop a motor repertoire (or collection) of gestures *specific* to the culture. "In other words, cultural learning determines an individual's motor repertoire, and if the motor repertoire of two individuals is shared, there is a strong motor resonance¹² between these individuals.... Conversely, there should be less internal simulation [or copying] of an observed action, if that action is not part of the observer's motor repertoire,"¹³ which is what the authors found.

In fact, as it turns out, the "human mirror neuron system specifically, is *differentially sensitive* to *ingroup* vs. *outgroup*¹⁴ members."¹⁵ For example:

1. "while observing the actions of an ethnic and cultural *ingroup* member, we show stronger motor resonance";
2. "persons tend to have higher empathy for *ingroup* members";
3. people tend to favor *ingroup* members "in reward allocations and in esteem"; and,
4. "cognitively, people remember more detailed information about *ingroup* members than *outgroup* members."¹⁶

In the study by Molnar-Szakas, et. al., they used American and Nicaraguan actors, who performed their own or the other group's culture specific

¹² Motor resonance refers to activation of areas of the motor cortex in the brain. When 2 people are engaged in a similar motor activity, they feel particularly "connected" and "in tune" with each other.

¹³ Molnar-Szakas, et. al., op. cit., 2.

¹⁴ Ingroup refers to people with whom you share a cultural background/experience, and outgroup refers to people who have a cultural background/experience that is different from your own.

¹⁵ Molnar-Szakas, et. al., op. cit., 3.

¹⁶ Molnar-Szakas, et. al., op. cit., 3.

emblems while the American study participants observed them. The subjects' corticospinal excitability (CSE) was recorded as an indicator of motor resonance.

The human mirror neuron system is sensitive to and able to identify elements in a "shared motor repertoire, but it is also sensitive to ethnic group membership."¹⁷ The authors of this study found that "observing the actions of an individual who is an ethnic *ingroup* member and shares a culturally acquired motor repertoire yields higher motor resonance, compared to observing an individual who is an ethnic *outgroup* member and has an unfamiliar culturally acquired motor repertoire."¹⁸ Though, as the authors note, in both cases there was an increase in CSE, though the excitability of the motor area in the brain was greater when the subject observed an *ingroup* member.

Thus, we can expect that children will connect with teacher-caregivers from any cultural background, but when there is an ethnic/cultural match, the connections will be more robust. The child will pay more attention.

An unexpected finding of the study was that when the Nicaraguan actor displayed American emblems, there was a decrease in corticospinal excitability. The authors interpret this as "likely due to a perceived incongruence between the actor and the action they are performing."¹⁹

Applications

Two applications of this study's findings to the issue of providing socially and culturally appropriate care²⁰ for children in early childhood programs come to mind. First, having a culturally diverse and representative staff is essential to ensure that each child in care can find high level motor resonance with one or more adults. The second application is that staff members should not attempt to "copy" the gestures of a culture not their own in an effort to enhance communication. This might "trigger a

¹⁷ Molnar-Szakas, et. al., op. cit., 4.

¹⁸ Molnar-Szakas, et. al., op. cit., 4.

¹⁹ Molnar-Szakas, et. al. op. cit.

²⁰ **Socially and Culturally Appropriate Practices are a key principle of Developmentally Appropriate Practices.** See Sue Bredecamp and Carol Copple, Eds., *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*, Revised Edition, Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1997, 8-9.

differentiation response rather than one of *identification* with²¹ that caregiver, thus defeating the purpose.

Culturally diverse and representative staff in ECE programs will enhance learning and development, especially of young children. Since gestures help babies learn language and develop cognitively, a high degree of motor resonance between an adult and baby will support learning most optimally. For young children as well as adults, a high degree of motor resonance will **promote more effective communication, essential to the co-construction of knowledge.**

Motor resonance, itself, is enhanced when two individuals share the same culture and micropractices, which includes non-verbal gestures or emblems. When child care staff members are from *diverse* ethnic and cultural backgrounds, which are *representative* of the population(s) being served by the program, there is a greater likelihood that children will find motor resonance with one or more teacher/caregiver. In addition, as children become *familiar* with people of cultures different from their own, they can begin to develop multicultural competence and reduce existing or potential bias, as I will discuss below. If a child in care can really connect with one adult, then they will have the cognitive reserve or energy to get to know someone who is different or new.

If these conditions can be achieved, then the program is providing an opportunity for each child to learn about other cultures, while at the same time the program is supporting each child's home culture. Thus, diversity in staffing is a key and essential element to achieving developmentally appropriate practices for *all* children in early learning programs.

Reducing Bias through Cultural Diversity in Staffing

When people from differing backgrounds and experiences come together, an opportunity for learning is opened up, as well as an opportunity for intolerance to block learning. All people harbor biases about somebody or some group or category of people. In order to reduce the impact of bias in early childhood settings (or any other setting), the first thing people have to do is recognize where bias and privilege are within themselves, and then work to reduce it by confronting it directly.

²¹ Molnar-Szakas, et. al., op. cit.

Bias and prejudice can be categorized as being either explicit or implicit.²²

Explicit bias is the overt prejudice that we associate with racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan or the Nazis as well as individual hate crimes and acts of discrimination committed against people who are perceived to be members of targeted social, ethnic, or religious groups. This type of bias would rarely, if ever, be seen in contemporary ECE programs.

Implicit bias, according to Siri Carpenter, is the "assortment of stereotypical *beliefs and attitudes* about social groups: black and white, female and male, elderly and young, gay and straight, fat and thin. Although these implicit biases inhabit us all, we vary in the particulars, depending on our own group membership, our conscious desire to avoid bias and the contours of our everyday environments."²³ But, these implicit beliefs and attitudes *can* influence our behavior toward others.

Understanding Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is a product of human cognition. It is normal for us to categorize. In order to make sense of the world and adapt to it, we have to be able to label what we perceive (name it) and then use our knowledge of the properties, behaviors, and interactions of these categories in order to interact with the social and physical world. Babies' first meaningful speech is the labeling of people, actions, animals and objects.

As a child learns about the world around them, they begin to co-construct²⁴ "meanings" (values, emotions) that are attached to people, behaviors, relationships, animals, objects, etc. Children watch adults and other children and pay close attention to their body language in an effort to figure out how these other people "feel" about whatever is going on. This is called "social referencing" and it functions through our mirror neuron systems. We see this when a child starts to pick a leaf from the ground and looks to their parent or sibling for approval or disapproval. "Should I pick this up?" they are asking in their mind when they watch the reaction of the other. The child "mirrors" the feelings that the adult or sibling displays and *feels that same way* her or himself. Thus, the child learns whether or not that plant

²² Siri Carpenter. "Buried Prejudice." *Scientific American Mind*. April/May 2008, 33-39.

²³ Carpenter, op. cit., 33.

²⁴ **Children co-construct knowledge through interaction with other adults, children, and by "talking to themselves" according to Lev Vygotsky.**

leaf on the ground is o.k. or not to touch, to eat, or to step on. They learn how that plant is valued by others in their group.

These same processes happen in regard to learning about people who are perceived as being similar to or different from yourself and those around you. As we begin to be able to cognitively sort people along various characteristics, we begin to notice other people's reactions to similarities and differences, and many of these associations "reside outside conscious understanding."²⁵ Children learn, for example, how to "see" their grandparents from how their parents treat them, and they learn how to "see" the man begging on the corner by how their parents react to him. Children notice how their mother or father interacts with a store clerk depending on whether or not the clerk speaks their home language or "looks" like them.

Some implicit biases seem to have strong emotions connected to them. Siri Carpenter cites the following study:

"In a 2004 study Ohio State psychologist Wil A. Cunningham and his colleagues measured white people's brain activity as they viewed a series of white and black faces. The team found that black faces - as compared with white faces - that they flashed for only 30 milliseconds (too quickly for participants to notice them) triggered greater activity in the amygdala, a brain area associated with vigilance and sometimes fear. The effect was most pronounced among people who demonstrated strong implicit racial bias [on a test that measures bias]. Provocatively, the same study revealed that when faces were shown for half a second - enough time for participants to consciously process them - black faces instead elicited heightened activity in prefrontal brain areas associated with detecting internal conflicts and controlling responses, hinting that individuals were consciously trying to suppress their implicit associations."²⁶

Implicit biases appear to be learned at a very early age (between 3 and 6 years), but how they are learned is typically hidden from us. Siri Carpenter cites an interesting study that explores this issue of how we learn bias.

²⁵ Carpenter, op. cit., 34.

²⁶ Carpenter, op. cit., 35.

"In a recent unpublished study psychologist Luigi Castelli of the University of Padova in Italy and his colleagues examined racial attitudes and behavior in 72 white Italian families. They found that young children's racial preferences were unaffected by their parents explicit racial attitudes (perhaps because those attitudes were muted). Children whose mothers had more negative *implicit* attitudes toward blacks, however tended to choose a white over a black playmate and ascribed more negative traits to a fictional black child than to a white child. Children whose mothers showed less implicit racial bias on an implicit bias test were less likely to exhibit such racial preferences."²⁷

Pulling all these perspectives together,

- since many adults are not aware of their implicit biases (such as white privilege and negative stereotypes about members of minority groups), and
- since children "pick up on" or mirror the implicit biases in the adults who care for them, and
- since we tend to favor and treat more "nicely" those people who are members of our "ingroup";

It follows that:

- in child care centers where the majority of the staff are of the dominant (white) culture, children who are also of the dominant culture, will readily pick up on their preferred treatment they receive, and will mirror the implicit biases that the staff members carry against people of "outgroups", and
- children of minority cultures in those same child care centers, will be subject to the near universal acceptance of and the expression of these biases in both overt and covert behavior, and will get less support in their learning.

How can the transmission of bias be countered in ECE programs?

There are several strategies that can be employed. The **first strategy** is to consciously make an effort to recruit and hire people so that the total staff profile is representative of the cultural diversity of the community. Does this mean that teachers who come from the dominant (typically "white")

²⁷ Carpenter, op. cit., 35.

culture *cannot* effectively teach and nurture children who are members of a minority group in some manner? The answer is both yes and no.

Talented teachers can impact any child to the extent that they can develop an authentic relationship with the child. However, if any teacher harbors implicit bias and stereotypes about a particular category of people (African-Americans, disabled, people who don't speak English, recent immigrants, etc.), and if there are children who "fit" that category in the class or group, those children will not receive the support that they need and deserve, because the children will "feel" the bias coming from the teacher. This creates a very stressful environment and it inhibits learning and memory formation.

How prevalent is implicit bias in people?

In one study that was measuring implicit bias, researchers found that African-American (black) people tend *not to* demonstrate the level of implicit bias that *is* demonstrated by European-American (white) people. In another study which examined conversations between black and white people:

"whites and blacks came away from the conversation with very different impressions of how it had gone. Whites typically thought the interactions had gone well, but blacks, attuned to whites' nonverbal behavior, thought otherwise. Blacks also assumed that the whites were conscious of their nonverbal behavior and blamed white prejudice."²⁸

While every person has biases, European-Americans seem to harbor significant implicit bias, including that which is targeted at African-Americans, but, as the researchers found, European-Americans (who also benefit from white privilege) are *not sensitized to see it in themselves*.

Thus, it is unlikely that people of the dominant (European-American) culture will "spontaneously" try to challenge and suppress the expression of their implicit biases in their work with children and families. This brings me to the second strategy for countering the development and expression of bias.

The *second strategy* involves all staff members in Early Childhood programs taking purposeful steps to recognize and confront their own implicit biases.

²⁸ Carpenter op. cit., 36.

Studies have reported that people who put forth concerted effort to be non-prejudiced and take concrete steps to get rid of bias seem, indeed, to have less implicit bias. Individuals who have "white privilege" will need to examine where this is and begin work to address it also, as it can hinder serious work to reduce implicit bias.

A **third strategy** focuses on the ways we can *prevent* implicit bias from forming in young children. If children, at an early age, have significant caregiving experiences from people who are like them *and* from people who are different from them, they are more likely to make positive associations about all kinds of people based on their experiences. These *positive* associations, made at a young age, will be the "filters" (so to speak) through which they will see new people in the future.

Conclusions

For too long, early childhood programs have ignored the mono-cultural nature of the typical personnel who work with young children and their families. Staff members have assumed that as long as they "love children", then "all is well" and all children in their care will flourish. However, just as children need to be cared for by both men and women, and that relationships with women cannot be "substitutes" for relationships with men; children need to be cared for by people with whom they "resonate" as well as by people whose micropractices are new to them. If we want all children in ECE programs to flourish, then we need to look beneath the surface to see the variety of people who are *necessary* to make a significant difference in their lives.

All knowledge is co-constructed. When children have deep levels of communication with the adults who are supporting them, when our relationships have high degrees of resonance, then the scaffolding we provide for children is "customized" (or individualized, so to speak). It is more likely to meet their specific needs for support. Likewise, when children develop relationships with adults who are different from them, they begin to construct positive associations with "difference" and will potentially be more open to new people and experiences in the future.

Resources:

Share the Flame: Strategies for Growth, Development and Change

<http://shareflame.com/> Debra (Debi) Jenkins is a college instructor who specializes in human development, early childhood education, and diversity training. This is her site that describes the individual and group trainings that she conducts, with the ultimate purpose of implementing strategies for effective individual responsibility and organizational movement toward deeper and more multifaceted understandings of differences. Share the Flame web site has an area of Links to other web sites addressing issues of power, status, and rank.

Starting Points video series (3 half hour videos) is designed for educators of culturally and linguistically diverse children. This series provides early childhood teacher-caregivers some practical suggestions that can be implemented immediately. Narrative was written by Rae Latham and Joseph Walter. This video series is available from Educational Productions in Beaverton, Oregon, and on the web at <http://www.edpro.com/>.

- Tape 1: "I don't know where to start" 2002
- Tape 2: "Getting your message across" 2002
- Tape 3: "Bringing Language Alive" 2003

Understanding Prejudice <http://www.understandingprejudice.org/>

This site has "educational resources and information on prejudice, discrimination, multiculturalism, and diversity, with the ultimate goal of reducing the level of intolerance and bias in contemporary society."

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