

# Teaching for Diversity: The Pre-school Setting

by Eliana Elias

Planning curriculum for pre schoolers is always one of my most challenging tasks as a teacher. Pre schoolers are interested in everything, just about! It is easy to come up with many activities and projects. It is, however, "tricky" to prepare for the responses and questions that come from the children. In a child-centered classroom, where curriculum evolves from a dynamic partnership between children and teachers, no activity can be reproduced. The slants added by the individual children bring the flavors teachers need to continue to learn about teaching, about children and about themselves.

In serving a variety of families, with different needs and backgrounds, teachers need to become even more sensitive to the issues that are pertinent to individual children. Children of color, children of gay and Lesbian families and adopted children, for instance, will need teachers who are capable of understanding how racism, homophobia and adoptism are (sometimes involuntarily) reproduced in subtle ways in the classroom. The planning of the curriculum and appropriate responses to children's questions and comments are powerful ways to counterattack biases and to help children develop a healthy sense of self.

Let me take you into my classroom, on a brief tour of what one of our days is like. My students are 3-1/2 to 5 years old. In taking this trip, I hope to be able to open a window into a world where words and comments are seen as tools which help shape children's images of the world and of themselves. The curriculum carefully presented to the children, in an attractive and aesthetically pleasing environment, is a vehicle that allows children and teachers to interact and to discover new concepts. Each conflict, each "mistake," each concern, is seen as an opportunity for growth and learning.

Today we are studying colors. During our morning staff meeting, we plan the day's activities, which are to integrate colors throughout the room. We want to provide children with as many opportunities as possible to understand color, its use, and its properties. We also want to encourage children to discover ways to test their own theories. As we plan the curriculum, we think of individual needs. We know Carlos and Jonathan like to use paint brushes, so we have a big mural outside. We know that Rita, Wendy, Jasmin and Rose will probably sit at the Playdough table, as they usually do. With this in mind, we provide Playdough of different colors. We know that Martha and John will want to use manipulatives, so

we provide different color beads for making necklaces. Julian and Andrea love water play, so we color the water in the water table and we provide small containers and eye droppers for children to mix their own colors.

We also use our planning time to take a deeper look into how color is seen in our society. We talk about different ways through which we all acquire biases against darker colors. We bring up examples of how people react when they see brown color paints covering paper, and how "dark" is, sometimes, synonymous with sad, gloomy, or bad. During this time we remind ourselves of how children can absorb all of these subtle messages and how they might internalize these messages as they grow older. For children of color, internalization of these messages can be seen through the children's lack of self-esteem and loss of self-confidence. For White children the results can be just as damaging. They might grow up with the unchallenged thought that they are somehow superior, and that the lightness of their skin is, in itself, a passport to privileges. With all of these thoughts in mind, we open the doors to our children. Twenty of them! They are a diverse community of learners, who come into the classroom thirsty for knowledge and social contact. We hope we can offer them a day when they all feel accepted and cared for, a place where they can share their feeling and questions.

As we watch the children's interactions with the materials and with one another, we become partners in their learning by providing guidance and challenges when needed. The girls at the Playdough table are concerned with mixing the Playdough to achieve certain shades of color. They learn about controlling variables and elaborating hypotheses. The children playing with the water are interested in experimenting with concepts of sinking and floating, although they pay no attention to the color we added to the water. The children involved in beading make patterns, count and measure. Everybody is learning, and teachers watch in amazement, waiting to be needed.

Then, I hear the first signs of distress. John, an African American child, seems upset. "That's not fair!" he repeats again and again. I sit next to him and wait for him to calm down. He is finally able to explain: "I can't make a beautiful necklace. There aren't any pretty beads left." The only ones left on the table were the black and brown beads. I responded to John by assuring him that we could get him other colors, but that many people thought that those beads were beautiful.

Many children responded by listing their favorite colors, which included black and brown.

Rita, Wendy, Jasmin and Rose interrupt their exploration with the Playdough and ask me to come settle a disagreement between them and Jonathan, who vehemently defended his point: "Teacher, Rita and Wendy want to get married. Only boys can marry girls, right?" Without taking sides, I step into the role of the facilitator: "Actually, I have met women who have married women.... I wonder if you know of a woman who has married another woman." With a smile, and a confident arm up in the air Wendy shouts: "I do! My moms married each other!!!" I take this perfect opportunity to open an "unplanned" chapter in our curriculum. We talked for a long time about families. Jasmin talked to us about her baby sister, and how hard it was when she cried. Rose talked about coming out of her birth mom's tummy, and how she had sisters still living in her country of birth. She has a chance to answer questions from the other children and to speak proudly about both her birth and adoptive families. I talked about all my brothers, and how they were always trying to teach me something. After many giggles, we cleaned up the room, and settled down for group time. We sang songs and said good bye.

Throughout my day, the job of teaching children how to grow cognitively is intertwined with the job of teaching them how to develop respect for themselves and for each other. We value differences and different ways to solve problems, thus helping children develop a conceptual approach to understanding and accepting differences and individual needs. As I prepare the children to become readers, problem-solvers, thinkers and scientists, I also want to prepare them to live in a diverse community and to build a place for their unique contribution to the world.

The children's real names are concealed to protect their privacy.

For more information on the impact of curriculum planning in the earlier grades and issues of diversity, please read Patricia Ramsey's *Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World: Multicultural Education for Young Children*. NY. Teachers College Press. 1987.

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