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Rice, Rice, Rice in the Bin:

Addressing Culturally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Classrooms

Sham'ah Md-Yunus

Chloe, Ben, Kim, and Jose were playing at the sensory table. Their teacher had filled half of the bin with rice. She added food coloring to the rice to make it appealing so that the children could observe, interact, and play with the rice. The following comments were heard:

Chloe (scooping the rice and pretending to measure it in a cup): “I want to cook some rice for dinner.”

Ben (showing a plate to Chloe): “Can I have some rice?”

Kim (standing by the bin): “I don’t like rice. It’s gross!”

Jose (pretending to eat the rice): “My mom cooks rice. I like rice.”

Mei (looking curious): “What are you making? Why are you playing with rice? It is not to play with!”

Mei did not understand why the children were playing with rice. At home, her mom cooks rice for meals. She refused to play with these children because they were playing with rice. She knew that rice was for eating, not for playing.

This scenario is typical in early childhood classrooms across the country. Children readily explore and play with food items such as rice at the sensory table. They investigate the texture of the rice and weigh it as they begin to assimilate and construct basic math and science concepts. Rice not only has been documented as an interesting play material for children, but also as a means to teach and learn about diversity (Derman-Sparks, 1989; York, 1991).

Limits to Using Food for Play

Using food as a play material has had a long history in early childhood classrooms in the U.S. (Dahl, 1998; Edwards, 2000; Fuhr & Barclay, 1998; McMullen et al., 2007).

Teachers use beans and rice for sensory motor skills, to make art projects, and to introduce early math concepts through cooking activities. However, when using food as play materials teachers need to:

- Be sensitive to the ways in which cultures differ and the ways in which these differences impact attitudes toward classroom activities including the use of food items.
- Be knowledgeable about children's cultural backgrounds and have accurate information about the food items they are using with children.
- Avoid making assumptions based on their own cultural beliefs about how and why food should be used in activities in their centers (Freeman, 2004; Hsieh, 2004).

Teachers' awareness of their own values as the basis for their teaching practices and beliefs is critical for avoid conflicts in beliefs and expectations with families. Zan (2004) found that conflicts between parents and teachers – as a result of differences in cultural values -- create stress for children.

Why Rice?

Rice can hold different cultural meanings. In Asian culture, playing with rice is not only inappropriate, but also insulting (Liu, 1991, 1999; Olmsted & Montie, 2001).

Mei sees children playing with rice and is confused about why they are playing with something that she eats. Why do teachers use rice as a play material? Are there no other

play materials that can provide learning and sensory experiences skills? Is the U.S. so rich that it can waste food (although rice is fairly inexpensive compared to the other play materials)?

In supervising of pre-service and student teachers in preschool settings, I found that almost all the classrooms had rice in the sensory table. I saw that while the children were playing with it, sometimes the rice scattered on the floor. The teacher swept it up and put in the trash can. Are they receiving the message that food is an appropriate play material or that it is ok to waste food? What are early childhood teachers modeling when they utilize food as a play material and throw it away when the children are finish playing with it? It begs the question, are these practices appropriate for young children?

The next question is what skills or concepts are young children learning from playing with food or wasting food? Obviously, sensory motor skills are being targeted with the use of dry rice at sensory table, but these skills can also be developed by using recycled food or other non-food materials from the environment such as inedible nuts from trees such as buckeyes, beech, and chestnut and seeds from pine cones.

In order to create a healthy environment in which there is respect for the values and traditions of other cultures, teachers should reassess if they should use food as play materials. There are potential dangers in the use of food for:

- The children may develop an attitude that it is okay to waste food items.
- Asian children whose diet includes rice may wonder why they can't play with cereal and sandwiches, since other children play with "their" food.

- Parents from a variety of cultural backgrounds may perceive using food as play materials as inappropriate because they may associate it with the concept of playing with food at mealtimes.

Using rice as play material disrespects the traditions and the value of rice to Asian people. Most non-Western cultures believe in conserving food and not wasting it, therefore, there is a certain amount of reverence given to food, including rice.

Addressing Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs

With the increasing number of families from minority groups in the U.S. schools, culture collisions and tensions between teachers and families are possible. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in the year 2006:

- 33% of the total populations of the U.S. are minorities.
- Of these, 45 % of their children are under the age of 5. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006)

Schools are increasingly diverse. Therefore, implementing culturally responsive practice in the early childhood classrooms is critical for teachers.

Many teachers seem to know what appropriate practice is, but need assistance in its implementation. According to Hyson (1991), practices in early childhood education are a reflection of teacher beliefs, parental expectations, administrative pressure, and broad societal imperatives. Some teachers acted more culturally appropriately in guiding and nurturing children than in providing activities and materials for learning (Hsieh, 2004; Hyson, 1991; Hyun, 1998).

Hyun (1998) supports the idea that teachers teach and learn in environments that require in-depth reflection on their own lives and values. She argues that having a

personal understanding of one's own biases is an important step toward truly legitimizing developmentally and culturally appropriate practice in the education of young children.

Teachers may consider four approaches when dealing with cultural conflict in the classroom:

Observational approach. Teachers need to observe children's interactions in different situations and listen to their conversations to have a better understanding of their behaviors and interests. Children from different cultures and family backgrounds behave differently when they are alone, in small group play, or sitting with the rest of the class during circle time (Lee, Md-Yunus, Son, & Meadows, 2008). When these children see practices that are different from what they are used to, they question what they are learning in schools. For example, using pudding to learn about sensory motor skills and using marshmallows in art projects may send the message to the children from cultures other than America that food can be used as play materials. Maybe some of them wonder why they used marshmallows in art projects and their mom used them to make rice crispy treats at home. Also, children who like to eat cooked rice may be reluctant to play at the sensory table that has rice because they do not want to play with things that they eat.

Autobiographical approach. Hyun (1998) suggests an autobiographical approach as a way for teachers to articulate and develop their multiethnic perspective-taking through field-based teacher preparation courses. In the process of reflecting on and writing about their experiences, early childhood teachers can explore how they develop an understanding of diverse cultures (Hyun, 1998). This can aid them in identifying their cultural lens and seeing how their own culture will affect their beliefs and practices.

Phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach “examines life experiences through knowledge and understanding” (Byrne, 2001, p. 67).

Phenomenologists believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world and understanding of life can emerge from collective life experiences, our background, and the world in which we live.

Teachers need to be careful when they use their knowledge about specific ethnic cultures so as not to make any assumptions about cultural characteristics, which would negatively influence a truly pluralistic society. Using a social phenomenological approach, teachers can explore, construct, and reconstruct their understandings of the world.

Integrated approach. To incorporate a multicultural curriculum in the classroom and to celebrate cultural diversity, an integrated approach is needed. This approach is focused on the basic information of children’s daily experiences and incorporates a learning opportunity to explore differences and similarities.

When integrating daily experiences into children’s learning, teachers need to present the information in terms that are concrete, accurate, and meaningful to children and not present stereotyped imagery. For example, to raise children’s awareness of Asian culture, some teacher use the theme of “Chinese New Year” and have kindergarten children make art projects with Chinese fans or do the lion dance. However, this happens only during the week of Chinese New Year, and during the rest of the year, Chinese culture is never mentioned. This is called the “tourist approach” or the “contributions approach” (Banks & Banks, 2003) and is “characterized by the insertion of ethnic heroes and discrete cultural artifacts into the curriculum, selected using criteria similar to those

used to select mainstream heroes and cultural artifacts” (Banks & Banks, 2003, p.198). Discrete cultural elements such as the foods, dances, music of ethnic groups are studied, but little attention is given to their meanings and importance within ethnic communities (Banks & Banks). Teachers need to involve children in multicultural activities year-round and integrate them into the daily curriculum activities so that children can relate them to their own lives.

Teacher Reflection

In addition to the approaches described here, teacher educators might also consider some of following steps to help them develop a broader perspective of diversity, and remove the barriers that can be caused by cultural differences:

- Be aware of how your culture, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations have shaped you as person and teacher.
- Look for similarities as well as differences between your culture and those of the children and families you serve. Be open and try to accept and acknowledge both.
- Seek more information to understand what culture means to each family and the ways in which it is reflected in children’s behavior. Continue to observe and listen; as trust grows, share some of your questions and your own experiences and beliefs.

The challenge is to get beyond asking what is right and wrong and being able to see another person’s point of view and communicate openly, always keeping in mind the common goal of supporting the child. Children can be confused or forced to choose which culture to identify with and which to reject (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Copple, 2003). A child who chooses to identify with his or her family may appear to refuse to

play at the sensory table leading to the worst error that teachers make – treating cultural differences in children as deficits (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Such situations hurt children whose abilities within their own cultural context are not recognized because they do not match the cultural expectations of the school (Elkind, 2005; Gonzalez-Mena, 2002).

Bias and stereotypes undercut all children's healthy development and leave them unprepared to interact effectively with people from different cultures (McCartney, 2006; Sheets, 2005). Teachers are in a unique position to help children understand the diversity of people and experiences in the world around them. Modeling respect for their own food -- as well as for the beliefs of others about food -- is one way teachers ensure that their classroom environment and teaching practices model the culturally appropriate practice.

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