Diversity in Early Care and Education

Honoring Differences

Fourth Edition

Janet Gonzalez-Mena

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HONORING DIFFERENCES

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To my husband, Frank Gonzalez-Mena

What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death. The ideal of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life.

—Octavio Paz

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Preface

This book is about honoring and respecting diversity. It's not about adding chopsticks and kimonos to the dramatic play area or serving tortillas sometimes instead of bread. Certainly those are valid ways of recognizing diversity, as are carefully considering what to hang on the wall and selecting what kinds of books to make available for the children. Selecting materials and other physical objects is the easiest part of honoring and respecting diversity. It's also fairly easy to expose the children to the contributions of people from groups that traditionally have been underrepresented as contributors to society. Adding units or themes that relate to diversity is another way to address diversity and expand the regular curriculum. All these approaches represent forward movement, but this book goes far beyond those preliminary steps.

This book addresses teaching children about diversity, equity, and social justice and integrating these topics into the regular curriculum so they are not just add-ons. To do that we have to start with ourselves, and focus on the roles that adults play in children's lives. We can't just focus on antibias lessons for the children. Children are watching us every minute; they pick up on our behaviors and attitudes and see with whom we develop relationships. It's easy to conduct a circle time on being fair, but the message won't get through unless adults model what they teach. Teaching children to take social action in the name of equity is one thing, but doing it ourselves is another. So the goal isn't just to get along better, but to *work together* for equitable decision-making when it counts. We have to approach crucial conversations on a level playing field and quit trying to put ourselves in a superior position. We have to learn to honor perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs that are different from our own. That may be easier when we work with people we feel comfortable with, but

what about the people who make us uncomfortable? Maybe their ideas don't fit ours, maybe their values aren't the same as ours. It is in these situations that, through relationship building, we can experience amazing transformations. Therein lies the challenge and the benefits of diversity work. It can be hard, but it's always enriching. The rewards are worth the challenges!

One of the goals of diversity work in early childhood settings is to eliminate harmful mismatches between the family and the program through professional sensitivity and responsiveness. When we examine what we do, we may seem to be operating out of universal child development principles, but the truth is that those principles occur in a cultural context. You can't remove from a cultural framework the ways you relate to children, teach them, care for them, determine program curricula, handle daily routines, or view the landmarks of development. Children learn from their parents and teachers how to behave in culturally distinct ways. Consciously or not, we try to make the children we work with into the kinds of people who fit our culture. It is vital that we become aware that we are doing this, and developing that awareness is one of the goals of this book. Without that awareness, families and teachers may be working at cross purposes.

An article about guidelines for enacting such change in the American Psychological Association's *American Psychologist* (2003) starts, "All individuals exist in social, political, historical, and economic contexts and psychologists are increasingly called upon to understand the influences of these contexts on individuals' behavior."[1] That is what this book is about.

This book, formerly named *Multicultural Issues in Child Care*, serves well as a companion to *Foundations of Early Childhood Education: Teaching Children in a Diverse Society, 3/e* by Gonzalez-Mena (McGraw-Hill, 2005); and *Infants, Toddlers, and Caregivers 6/e* by Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (McGraw-Hill, 2004). It also fits well as supplementary reading to any child development text because it covers the cultural aspects of development.

This book may also be viewed as a companion to Louise Derman-Sparks's *Antibias Curriculum* (NAEYC, 1989), complementing it nicely. *Diversity in Early Care and Education* picks up where Derman-Sparks stopped. Her focus is on an antibias approach to preschool curriculum; the focus in this book is on an antibias approach to cultural information, adult relations, and conflicts in goals, values, expectations, and child-rearing practices.

This book can be used by anyone involved in teacher training or early childhood education. It serves as a text or supplement for infant-toddler courses; child care and early education classes; supervision and administration classes; social service classes for child care workers; child development and child psychology classes; and Head Start, preschool, child care, and family day care training.

The material in this book is designed to be practical rather than theoretical; however, theory abounds in the notes following each chapter. Readers who choose to skip the endnotes and go with the flow of the reading still receive a good grounding in the subject matter because the chapters are complete in themselves, without the notes. Suggestions have been made to incorporate the information in the notes into the text. I have resisted because doing so would lengthen the book and one of the most attractive features of the book is that it is short and easy to read.

What's New in This Edition Besides the Name

Expanded Definition of Diversity. This edition took a big step to expand diversity of all sorts. You can't just look at culture without considering the interplay of race, gender, ability, social class, status, income, sexual orientation, religion, and age. Those attributes of culture are now integrated into every chapter. The book has always been concerned about identity, culture, and oppression. Now even more, those three subjects are examined as factors in adult relations and in adults' decisions about how to care for and educate children. Promoting equity and helping early childhood professionals stand up against oppression have always been important goals of this book.

Coverage of Children with Special Needs. Among other new subjects, this edition of the book particularly emphasizes creating full inclusion programs so that children with special needs don't find themselves segregated. It's against the law to isolate children with disabilities from participating with their typically developing peers unless there is a compelling reason to do so. You'll find discussion of and examples related to ability, interwoven with religion, social class, and status, all of which are related to culture.

Expanded Audience. Other changes help the book appeal to a wider audience. The first edition was written mainly for professionals who worked with infants and toddlers. This edition goes beyond that one group to include all early childhood professionals—practitioners and administrators of all sorts, including directors and their staff, preschool and primary teachers, and family childcare providers. The book no longer focuses on childcare alone, but also on any kind of early care and education program, as is appropriate in a field where we no longer separate care and education in our terminology. Even going beyond programs for children, anyone providing a service to families with young children will find this book useful.

New Pedagogical Features. New pedagogical treatment makes the book more appealing to students. There are now focus **questions at the beginning of each chapter** and a **summary** at the end.

This always has been and will continue to be a process-oriented book designed to help readers look inward and work on themselves before they look outward at what they can do to promote positive attitudes toward diversity in others. There are three ultimate goals of the process. One is to help early care and education professionals improve their person-to-person skills in ways that honor diversity. The second is to uncover institutional policies and the resulting practices that are exclusionary. The final goal is to encourage people to work to *change* exclusive policies and practices. Maybe that goal is too radical for a book like this, but that's a logical next step when policies or practices are oppressive.

This book is *not* about activities for children to help them develop positive attitudes toward diversity. Louise Derman-Sparks's *Antibias Curriculum* book does that. This book is about adults interacting with each other in equitable and empowering ways. Adults are the models for children and no matter what adults tell or teach children about equity, it's the unspoken messages that are the most powerful lessons. This edition goes even further in helping readers improve their unspoken messages by understanding their own behaviors and improving their cross-cultural communication skills.

The **numerous stories and examples** have always made this book strong, and this edition contains even more. **Photographs** are a new addition. There is also a new feature called **"Points to Ponder,"** which is designed to be thought provoking and perhaps lead to classroom discussions.

Updated Scholarship. A good deal has been written in the years since this book was last revised. The suggestions for the "For Further Reading" sections reflect the new literature. Also, a number of new resources appear in the bibliography—another popular feature of this book. One of the advantages of this little yellow book is that it opens doors for people. They get ideas from reading it, and then they can learn more by exploring the many suggested readings in the chapter endnotes and the bibliography. I often hear from people who found the chapter notes extremely stimulating and learned a lot by following where those notes led them. This is the kind of book that challenges people to go further and then shows them ways to do that. For some people this book has been the beginning of a path that they are still following.

Acknowledgments

I have learned so much more about diversity since the last edition that I want to acknowledge those who contributed to that learning. I don't mean to ne-

glect the many people who in the past gave me the foundation on which to build what I am learning now. I'm still grateful to them, but my list grew unwieldy when I tried to include everyone who has ever helped or supported me in learning about diversity.

I want to give special recognition to a few people who have continually involved me in what they were doing so that I was pushed to learn, not only about them but also more about myself as a white person. These people supported me through the ups and downs that occur when the learning is emotional and some of the lessons are hard as I continued to discover what it means to be me in a racist society. Many thanks to Intisar Shareef, Marion Cowee, Dora Pulido-Tobiassen, Judith K. Bernhard, Hedy Chang, Lisa Lee, and Christina Lopez Morgan.

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NOTES

1. American Psychological Association, "Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice and Organizational Change for Psychologists." *American Psychologist* 58, no. 5. (May 2003), pp. 377–402.

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Introduction

This book is about honoring diversity in the work early childhood professionals do with children and their families. It's about appreciating differences, living with them, gaining from them, and even celebrating them. To avoid deficit models requires understanding ways of thinking and behaviors that deviate from what is considered the norm. This book is designed to increase your knowledge so you can see behaviors that you consider inadequate in a positive light. Often behaviors that don't seem to be "normal" are really competent adaptive responses that contribute to the survival and enhancement of the individual or group. In other words, this book is about regarding differences with mutual respect as well as looking at them as sources of strength.

CHALLENGES IN HONORING DIVERSITY

Honoring diversity can be hard when ideas about right and wrong clash. Imagine this scene.

> You are an early childhood professional visiting other programs. You walk into a classroom in one center and find the adults scattered around the room, seated on low chairs or down on the floor at eye level with the children, who are all around 4 years old. The adults are fully focused on the children, talking to them, responding to them, and now and then bringing out some new materials or rearranging the environment. Once in a while, they have to help settle a conflict between two children. They aren't talking to each other. These adults are consciously doing what

the literature tells them is good child development practice. They are also unconsciously reproducing the role of an old-fashioned, mainstream, nuclear-family housewife—the mythical one who was always there for her children, raising them in a fashion that kept her isolated from other adults. Part of this role is to focus on children as individuals, give them the attention they need, and to help each become his or her own person.

Now imagine yourself walking into a different setting.

It's a similar room, but this time the adults are sitting on adult-size furniture in one area talking to each other. One holds a baby on her lap, another has a toddler standing at her knee. Most of the other younger children are playing at the adults' feet; the older ones are scattered around the room. The adults are more focused on each other than the children, yet they manage subtly to incorporate the children into their adult world without shifting their focus dramatically when they do. They seem to know what's going on in the room at every minute, although they obviously aren't supervising. They are definitely not doing "good child development practice." They are, however, reflecting an upbringing in an extended family or kinship network where children fit into adult situations. These adults are not concerned with making the children into individuals or making sure that each is his or her own person, rather they are more interested in making sure that the children get along with each other and not disturb anybody.

It's easy to guess that a trained early childhood professional would find the first situation superior to the second one and would find it difficult to honor diversity. When something doesn't match your training, style, set of goals, or beliefs about what's good for children, accepting it is a challenge.

OPERATING OUT OF UNCONSCIOUS SYSTEMS

What you saw in the previous two scenes represented diverse values, ways of doing things, beliefs about how things ought to be. The two scenes also showed how people are governed by systems that are often out of the area of their consciousness. We become conscious of our systems when they bump up against ones that are different, and we notice that we have a reaction. I'm willing to bet that one of the previous scenes triggered a reaction in you.

In early care and education programs we are lucky to be in the position of potentially discovering an enormous amount of information about ourselves and how our systems work. Even if there isn't obvious diversity in the program's population, there is bound to be at least one person or family considered weird, different, or difficult who doesn't follow what you regard as right, sane, or normal. You can begin to see your own system working when you think about or interact with that person or family.

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