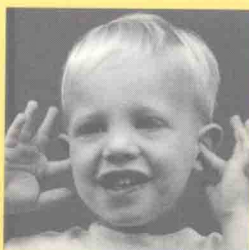
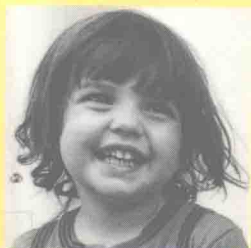
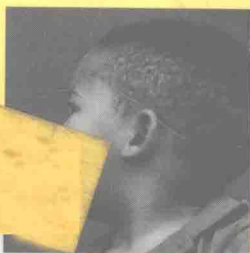


Multicultural Issues in Child Care

SECOND EDITION



Janet Gonzalez-Mena

Multicultural Issues in Child Care

Second Edition

Janet Gonzalez-Mena

Napa Valley College



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Preface

As we approach the twenty-first century, we are forced to make some decisions: Will we honor the diversity present in our early childhood education settings or will we continue to create and implement policies that disregard differences? Will we continue to allow the mismatches between the culture of the family and the culture of the child care center?

Two sample studies—one in California and one in Canada—indicate the need for Canadian and U.S. early childhood educators to respond to diversity. In a California survey of 450 child care centers in five counties, it was found that 96 percent of the surveyed centers serve children from two or more racial groups and 82 percent serve children from two or more language groups.¹ The same survey also found that child care staff are untrained in the cultural matters of the diverse population that they serve.

A similar study in Canada found much the same situation. Information was gathered from 77 child care centers, 199 teachers, 78 schools of Early Childhood Education, and 14 family groups in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. One-third of the teachers interviewed did not believe their training prepared them to work effectively with a diverse population. Many parents and teachers had experienced difficulties in communicating across cultures in early childhood settings.²

Further, according to the *Toronto Globe and Mail*,

Ethnic diversity strains day-care staff...Cultural clashes between staff and parents are common as the ethnic diversity of day-care users grows and staff training fails to keep up, says a cross-Canada study. According to Judith Bernhard, author of the study, "right now, (day-care) staff are just guessing at what they should be doing. Their intentions may be good, but the results often are not."³

There is a need in Canada and the United States for more training in issues of cultural diversity. Early childhood educators need to broaden their view of appropriate practices to include cultural sensitivity. You'll see that this book is about getting along with people who are different from you, have different ideas about how children grow and develop and how adults and children should behave.

We unconsciously teach the children whose lives we touch about ourselves through everything we do. Though we may seem to be operating out of universal child development principles, 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, rear them, determine program curriculum, handle daily routines, and even view the landmarks of physical development. Children learn from their parents, caregivers, and early teachers how to behave in culturally distinct ways. Consciously or not, we work to make the children we care for and teach into the kind of people who fit our culture. It is vital that this process reach the level of awareness. That's what this book is about.

This book serves well as a companion to *Infants, Toddlers, and Caregivers* by Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (Mayfield, 1996) because of its heavy emphasis on the beginning years. 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. *Multicultural Issues in Child Care* takes off from where Derman-Sparks stopped. Her focus is on an antibias approach to preschool curriculum; the focus here 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 daycare training.

The material in this book is designed to be practical rather than theoretical; however, theory abounds in the notes following each chapter. The sometimes lengthy notes invite the advanced student to go further and explore themes and issues that are only mentioned in the text.

How This Edition Is Different

This new edition contains more examples of cultural differences and the potential conflicts that can arise. Concrete examples were a feature of the first edition; this edition contains even more. The new references show the burgeoning interest in cultural differences. Native Americans are writing more about their culture and, therefore, they are cited more in this edition than in the last.

An important new feature is the bibliography, which lists many books and articles to help students learn about new ideas and cultures.

Acknowledgments

This edition has been influenced by the knowledge I gained through making a video series on cultural diversity with a multiethnic group. I want to thank the people who helped me complete that project: Magna Systems, Early Childhood Training Series: Diversity, Beverly Aguilar, Dianna Ballesteros, Rose Chou, Susan Dawson, Nancy Ducos, Susan Leong Lee, Lillian Nealy, Intisar Shareef, and Dora Pulido Tobiassen. Special thanks to Shanta and Milan Herzog, coproducers, and to Bill Edwards who made it all possible.

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NOTES

1. Chang, Hedy. *Affirming Children's Roots* (San Francisco: California Tomorrow, 1993).
2. Bernhard, Judith, Lefebvre, Marie Louise, Chud, Gyda, and Lange, Rika. *Paths to Equity: Cultural, Linguistic, and Racial Diversity in Canadian Early Childhood Education* (North York, Ontario: York Lanes Press, 1995).
3. Toronto *Globe and Mail*, January 5, 1996.

To my husband, Frank

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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Introduction

This book is about conflict. When cultures collide, we can't just "make nice" and hope the differences will resolve by themselves. We have to first notice them and then we must address them. Many of us trained in early childhood education encounter cultural differences every day and don't even know it. This book is designed to open people's eyes to cultural diversity. After they read this book, many people tell me that they view the world and its people differently than before.

It's wonderful to talk about how we're all different but yet also alike. However, this book isn't about that subject. The reality is that we've got to deal with some tough issues if we're going to respond sensitively to diversity in early childhood programs. The following quote explains why:

Diversity that somehow constitutes itself as a harmonious ensemble of benign cultural spheres is a conservative and liberal model of multiculturalism that, in my mind, deserves to be jettisoned because, when we try to make culture an undisturbed space of harmony and agreement where social relations exist within cultural forms of uninterrupted accords we subscribe to a form of social amnesia in which we forget that all knowledge is forged in histories that are played out in the field of social antagonisms.¹

Bell hooks expands on the preceding quote:

When everyone first began to speak about cultural diversity, it was exciting. Finally, we were all going to break through collective academic denial and acknowledge that the education most of us had received and were giving was not and is never politically neutral.²

Hooks explains how painful it was for some in academia to face the loss of their authority as they discovered the limitations of their knowledge. Chaos and confusion arose in the classroom when “universals” were found to be culturally specific. The safe, harmonious, “fun side” of diversity disappeared. Some in academia were distressed. As hooks puts it:

What they saw happening was not the comforting rainbow coalition where we would all be grouped together in our difference, but everyone wearing the same have-a-nice-day smile.

It's only after we realize that conflict is where growth occurs that we know what we ought to aim for. We need much more training on how to express conflict and then training on how to use effective management and coping strategies to deal with it. We need to know how to restore balance when faced with views different than our own and also to recognize that this balance is always temporary. It is only after we realize that conflict is good and that it won't go away that we will be able to effectively respond to diversity in early childhood teacher training and, therefore, in early childhood classrooms.

As early childhood educators, we need much more training on how to react to a conflict. We need to learn how to put judgment aside and start a dialog based on respect and a willingness to listen.

For example, if a child came to my program with red streaks on her neck and I was told that she was “coined,” I'd need to find out more about that procedure before I called the child abuse authorities. If I suspend judgment for awhile, I can make an informed decision about the meaning of the behavior and whether the lasting marks really are injuries. What may be regarded as child abuse by one person may be regarded as a health measure by another.

You may need to trade roles to understand the above situation. Here's an example. What if I moved to a country where they had never heard of immunization? What would be the reaction to sticking needles in a child's arm if no one knew about DPT shots? Would it be fair to accuse me of abusing my children if I gave them shots? At first glance, the practice seems abusive. After all, the preventative nature of the shot can be obscured by the immediate reaction of pain, swelling, fever, and general malaise. I believe I am protecting my children when I get them immunized, even if the effect is negative for a few days. It is important to take your time in judging parents who rub coins on their children's necks for health reasons. You may not understand the purpose of the practice.

Of course, one must not abandon judgment permanently. For example, if I were a caregiver in a dialog with a parent who was telling me to put her baby to sleep in a prone position, I couldn't just listen and agree. I couldn't reassure myself that it's best to put babies to sleep in the way they are used to. It is my responsibility to mention to this family the research on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). A prone sleeping position isn't safe. The same applies to

putting a baby to bed with a bottle. Parents need to be made aware of the possible consequences of such practices.

The difficult aspect of a conflict situation in a child care setting is that most practices don't have obvious consequences or proven risks. In other words, they aren't clearly right or clearly wrong. Differences in practices often depend on differences in priorities. There are times when we get ourselves in situations where we believe so strongly that we are right that we can't see the other person's view. We, of course, can only see the world through our own eyes. It takes imagination to see another person's view. Most of us need help in increasing our imagination. This book is designed to give you that help.

This book is also designed to express the message that in a conflict situation—when two views oppose each other—it doesn't mean one is wrong and one is right. As early childhood educators we should all practice saying on a regular basis, "I'm not saying you're wrong; I'm just saying I disagree with you."

One basic area of difference is the conflict between independence and interdependence goals. Independence and individuality are considered universal goals in most early childhood training programs. As a European-American, I believe in promoting independence and individuality. My understanding of child development leads me to promote independence and individuality. However, I am aware that other cultures downplay independence and individuality. If I have families in my program whose priorities are different from mine, I must respect the differences. I must also work with those families to figure out WHAT TO DO about our differences. What practices reflect independence goals? What practices reflect interdependence goals? What practices promote individuality? What practices promote embeddedness in the group? These are important questions to answer if you are a teacher working in a cross-cultural situation. This book is designed to help you start asking these questions.

Getting answers to those questions involves interacting in real-life settings. The problem is that many early childhood educators are more likely to either ignore problem situations or to argue about them. The kind of interaction needed is called *dialog*. Dialoging is different from arguing. Arguing has persuasion behind it. We argue to win somebody over to our side. However, in dialoging, rather than trying to convince someone of their own viewpoint, people try to understand the other perspective. The idea is not to win, but to find the best solution for all people involved in the conflict.

Here's a summary of the differences between an argument and a dialog:

- The object of an argument is to win; the object of a dialog is to gather information.
- The arguer tells; the dialoger asks.
- The arguer tries to persuade; the dialoger tries to learn.
- The arguer tries to convince; the dialoger tries to discover.

- The arguer sees two opposing views and considers hers the valid or best one; the dialoger is willing to understand multiple viewpoints.

When faced with a conflict or problem, the natural reaction of most people isn't to start a dialog. Speaking for myself, once I begin to address a problem or conflict, I'm likely to start arguing. When I do that, I'm always so anxious to win that I begin to make assumptions and to jump too quickly to conclusions. When I argue, I try imposing my own solutions without listening carefully to the other person. Sometimes, the other solutions are as good or even better than mine. I could save a lot of emotional energy and, perhaps, damaged relationships if I avoided the argument and focused on trying to create a dialog.

During several videotape sessions in which a group of early childhood educators role played parents and teachers in conflict, I saw that others tend to argue the same way that I do. After watching those tapes repeatedly, I began to notice that people used certain types of body language when they tried to express the correctness of their views to the other person. They tended to stand firm and tough, with a defensive position, when listening to the other person. When it was their turn to talk, they leaned forward and made cutting or pushing gestures with their hands. Just by looking at each person, you could tell that they were fighting about something. Without even listening to what they were saying, it was obvious that they were in a potential win-lose situation.

Dialoging is very different from arguing. I also got to see examples of dialoging in those role plays and the difference was evident in body language. I saw people who were also equally emotional and firm in their stances; however, they used their bodies and voices differently. Their purpose was to hear the voice of the other person. Their gestures reflected their attitude, hands especially. Instead of waving fists or making strong pushing or cutting movements, their hands tended to be open. The open hands was a reflection of the open mind—or maybe it was the reverse.

So, how does one switch from an argument to a dialog in the heat of the moment? Start by noticing your body language. Sometimes by just changing your body language you can switch your energy. After that, it's a simple thing: listen to the other person. To truly listen, one must suspend judgments and, instead, focus on what's being said. Really hearing someone is extremely simple, but it's not easy.

"I don't need the kind of training you're talking about," some early childhood educators tell me. "I don't have diversity in my program. The families I work with all come from the same ethnic background." My answer is: every program has diversity. Sometimes it shows, sometimes it doesn't. I've seen and experienced many arguments among staff or between staff and parents even when there was no obvious cultural diversity. One example (and I could give hundreds) was an argument between a family and a program that were racially and ethnically similar. The family followed a strict vegetarian diet, which caused many

problems for the teachers who didn't know what the family wanted for their child. The misunderstandings would have been easier to accept if the parent had come from another country, had dressed in exotic clothes, and had a religious reason for their preferences. Although clear cultural differences are present in some child care settings, less obvious individual differences are always present, even in settings where everyone seems to come from the same background.

The supreme challenge of this book is to give specifics of both clear and not so clear cultural differences without giving misinformation. The issue that confronted me as I worked on this book is truth. How could I tell the truth about culture when it is such a slippery subject? I addressed this challenge by using several approaches.

I used my own personal experience whenever possible. My experience isn't valid for everybody, but it's true for me. I also used *stories*—some of which were true and some of which were based on truth but stretched to fit the situation. Story telling provides a basis for the reader to create truth as well as to understand a point in a different way from academic discourse.

Most importantly, I used information and quotes from direct sources as much as possible. I let people talk about their own culture. You'll see in the bibliography that I searched for books and articles by writers who belong to the culture they write about. Some are less academic than others. Some of the book publishers are small and less known than others.

Remember, knowing something about a culture doesn't mean that you can predict how a person from that culture will behave in a given situation. We must be very careful about generalizations. There are enough stereotypes in the world now—let's not add to them.

When I began writing this book, I used all of my experiences in cross-cultural exchanges and my readings in anthropology, linguistics, and communication theory, particularly intercultural communication. I had to look outside my own discipline of child development to get a broader picture of cultural diversity.

But, even with all the studying, I didn't understand the full picture until I discovered the antibias curriculum developed by Louise Derman-Sparks and her Antibias Curriculum Task Force. *The Antibias Curriculum* does not pertain to infants, which is a subject of major interest to me, and there's only one chapter on adult relations, but the spirit of Derman-Sparks' book inspired me to look for my own meanings of antibias curriculum.

The particular message I took from her book and expanded in my book is this: If you continue to follow your own ideas about what's good and right for children in child care, even if those ideas are a result of your training, you may be doing a disservice to children whose parents may disagree with you.

This book is about conflict. That's what makes it so interesting. This book asks more questions than it answers. That's what makes it frustrating. Reading this book is not a neutral experience.

NOTES

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