



Multicultural Issues in Child Care

THIRD EDITION

Janet Gonzalez-Mena

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Napa Valley College



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Preface

This book is about *honoring* diversity. It's fun to *celebrate* diversity and learn about differences such as I use a fork and you use chopsticks, or you prefer bread and I prefer tortillas. It's a lot harder to respect differences that make us uncomfortable, especially if we disagree with them or they don't seem to make any sense. This book explores the hard parts of diversity with the goal of eliminating harmful mismatches between the family and the child care program. Those mismatches occur when cultures clash. Sometimes family goals and practices bump into program philosophies, policies, standards, and regulations, which makes it hard to honor diversity and still uphold the foundations of the profession. This book doesn't advocate throwing out standards or breaking regulations. Please don't discard your carefully thought-out philosophy, but do be aware of families who have no choice but to be in your child care program regardless of how it fits them. In that situation, you'll find this book a valuable resource not only to understand those families but also to figure out what to do about the differences without giving up what you believe in.

How prepared are early childhood professionals to detect and respond to mismatches? Not very, according to two studies, one in California and one across Canada.¹ These studies found plenty of diversity in child care programs, but they also found that the staff of these programs lacked training in cultural differences. They had little understanding of the values, beliefs, priorities, and practices of the families in their programs.

There is a great need 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 kinds 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 *Foundations: Early Childhood Education in a Diverse Society* by Gonzalez-Mena (Mayfield, 2001) and *Infants, Toddlers, and Caregivers* by Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (Mayfield, 2001). 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 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. I continue to get feedback that students don't read the notes at the end of each chapter. I never intended for all students to read the notes. My idea was for the endnotes to be a choice, not a requirement. They are there for those readers who want to go further, understand more, explore different cultural sources on the subject. Several people have told me that they appreciated the endnotes and have read them thoroughly. I am a person who loves endnotes. When I'm interested in what I'm reading about, I want to see what else the author and others have to say about it. I also appreciate being able to choose to skip the endnotes and go with the flow of the reading, but still receive a good grounding in the subject matter. 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

I added information about the latest edition of NAEYC's book *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*,² which adds culture as a third base of knowledge to the two original bases of knowledge in the 1987 edition. So now there are three bases of knowledge from which to draw when making decisions about appropriate practice in early childhood programs. The three are as follows:

1. Child development principles (what is known about how children develop)
2. Individual differences (what is known and observed about individual children's needs, strengths, interests, and variations in development)
3. Cultural differences (what is known, observed, and uncovered about how families' approaches to early care and education differ and how to honor differences)

In order to consider all three bases of knowledge we often must reconcile what seem to be opposing points of view. We must move from the polarization that results from dualistic thinking to using a more holistic mode of thinking. I added a process to help readers move to holistic thinking, a process that I call "RERUN."

The For Further Reading sections have been expanded with new books and articles. I also updated the bibliography and added seventy-eight more books and articles.

Because my burning interest is infants and toddlers, I tended in the past to focus on that age group. This edition, however, has more of a preschool slant than previous editions, so perhaps that will broaden its appeal. The infants and toddlers are still there, but now there are more preschool examples than before. Also, I added more information to the discipline sections and in some cases substituted the word *guidance* for discipline as has been suggested. Guidance is preferred by many early childhood educators because it brings less emotional baggage with it and feels more positive. In the spirit of honoring diversity, however, I also left in the word *discipline*. There's also a new section on time-out as a guidance technique, which, I have discovered, is a hot cultural topic.

What Is the Same in This Edition

I did some fine-tuning, including changing three chapter titles to match the content better, but the basic structure of the book remains the same. Although

it has been suggested that I put everything dealing with communication into one chapter for consistency, I have intentionally left communication spread throughout the book. This is a process-oriented book and a major theme is communication and diversity. One chapter still focuses specifically on the subject, but communication continues to be woven into every chapter.

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 neglect 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 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.

Several groups have added richness to my life, and being a member of them has increased my knowledge. One is a nameless group composed of fifteen people who came together at various times to make five videos called "Early Childhood Training Series: Diversity" produced by Magna Systems. The other five groups have names: BANDTEC (Bay Area Network for Diversity Training in Early Childhood); Leadership in Diversity, sponsored by the California Association for the Education of Young Children; Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education; California Tomorrow; and WestEd Program for Infant-Toddler Caregivers. Thank you to the groups and all their members!

I want to acknowledge the following people who have enriched my thinking, added to my knowledge, and in some cases also helped me practice my communication skills: Susan Matoba Adler, Beverly Aguilar, Elena Aguirre, Cecelia Alvarado, Jennifer Anthony, Dianna Ballesteros, Isaura Barrera, Navaz Bhvanagri, Betty Blaize, Mimi Bloch, Phyllis Brady, Kathryn Burroughs, Barry Bussewitz, Gaile Cannella, Anne Chaney, Rose Chou, Marcela Clark, Renatta Cooper, Joan Bell Cowan, Gunilla Dahlberg, Barbara Daniels-Love, Louise Derman-Sparks, Nancy Ducos, Diane Duval, Bill Edwards, Julie Olsen Edwards, Enid Elliot, Gisela Erne, Lyn Fasoli, Stephanie Feeney, Lily Wong Fillmore, MyTra Fitzpatrick, Lella Gandini, Magda Gerber, Eleanor Clement Glass, Richie Golden, Cathy Gutierrez Gomez, Lynn Graham, Jim Greenman, Deborah Greenwald, John Gunnarson, Janice Hale, Maureen

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I want to also acknowledge the Mayfield folks who made the publication of this book possible. Thank you to Frank Graham, Mary Johnson, Marty Granahan, and Windy Johnson. Thank you to my reviewers: Roberta Bilous, Harrisburg Area Community College; Lynn Graham, Iowa State University of Science and Technology; and Ralph J. Worthing, Delta College.

Last, I want to thank my family, and especially my husband, Frank, who gave me some of my early lessons on appreciating diversity.

NOTES

1. Hedy Chang, *Affirming Children's Roots*. San Francisco: California Tomorrow, 1993.
2. Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple, eds., *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1997).
3. Judith Bernhard, Marie Louise Lefebure, Gyda Chud, and Rika Lange, *Paths to Equity: Cultural, Linguistic, and Racial Diversity in Canadian Early Childhood Education*. North York, Ontario: York Lanes Press, 1995.

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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Introduction

This book is about conflict. When cultures collide, we can't just "make nice" and hope the differences will resolve by themselves. First we have to 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. This book isn't as much about "celebrating diversity" as it is about honoring differences we don't understand or agree with. This book is about *change*. Author bell hooks writes about the excitement some have in anticipating change:

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.¹

Change is hard, especially for those who have authority and see that authority is being challenged. Again, hooks writes about the difficulty those teaching in institutions of higher learning had upon discovering the limitations of their knowledge and giving up notions of universals. Confusion and chaos arose in their classrooms. The rainbow coalition—the safe, harmonious, "fun side" of diversity—suddenly disappeared.

The same situation is happening to early childhood students and practitioners who learn that the information in their child development texts doesn't apply to all children. Research that appears to be universally applicable isn't. The standards of the profession aren't one-size-fits-all, no matter how much we want them to be. Most disconcerting of all for some readers is to learn about the inequities that still exist in our society. Other readers have experienced those inequities and are well aware of their existence. It is only after we all set out together to eliminate the inequities that we will live in a truly just society. Believe it or not, this little yellow book is about social justice. That may surprise you, especially when the subject matter centers on the common, everyday occurrences in ordinary child care settings. With those occurrences come bumps and scrapes as the beliefs, ideals, values, traditions, and practices of adults who share the care of young children collide with each other. Those bumps often result in conflict, and conflict has the potential to result in positive change. The message of this book is don't avoid conflict; face it, and deal with it!

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 from 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 a while, 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 preventive 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 an open mind and imagination to see another person's view. Opening our mind is a choice we make. 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 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 were 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 judgment 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." I have two answers to that statement. One is, if your program reflects your community, I'd have to wonder if perhaps the people who are different from you are hidden somewhere, either in your community or in the one next door. Is there a reason that your paths never cross? Is there a reason for the sameness in your program? Can you change that? What is stopping the ethnic and racial mix that is rapidly becoming the norm around the country? My second answer is that 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 parents 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 was 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. Storytelling provides a basis for the reader to create truth as well as to understand a point in a different way from academic discourse.

Most important, 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