

Reflecting children's cultures and languages in Ms. Macy's early childhood classroom

This is important, not only for the Korean or Chinese or Hispanic children but for the English-speaking children too. I want them to know that there is a variety of languages and a variety of cultures in our world.
—Ms. Macy

The number of culturally and linguistically diverse children in the United States is increasing. In 2007 the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) estimated that children whose primary language is not English made up 42 percent of the total public school population and that this number will rise to about 50 percent by 2025.

In spite of this explosion of diversity, the demographics of teachers have not changed. Approximately 87 percent of U.S. teachers are from white middle-class backgrounds (Gay and Howard 2000), and most teachers in practice have difficulty teaching culturally and linguistically diverse children (Irvine 2003; Ladson-Billings 1994; Sleeter 2001).

Many researchers indicate the importance of reflecting children's diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in classrooms—but don't say how to do it (Gay 2000; Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Irvine 2003; Ladson-Billings 1994). Hence, many teachers have difficulty incorporating diverse cultures and languages into their class lesson plans, play, and social interactions.

The purpose of this article is to help fill that gap in early childhood classrooms. The examples and descriptions presented here reflect many years of observations in Ms. Macy's classroom. Hopefully they will provide explicit and practical suggestions for how teachers can reflect children's cultural and linguistic knowledge in day-to-day teaching practice.

Ms. Macy and her pre-kindergarten class

Ms. Macy is an Anglo-American, native-English-speaking woman in her mid 40s. She has taught PreK

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for more than 20 years. To serve diverse students more effectively, she added an ESL (English as a second language) certificate to her teaching credentials in 2003.

At the time of this study, Ms. Macy's PreK class consisted of 14 students: eight boys and six girls. The children represented eight different cultural backgrounds: Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Latino, African-American, Turkish, Brazilian, and white. The white children numbered only three.

Diversity in the class environment

Gay (2002) insists that preschool curriculum be designed to be responsive to the children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Further, *curriculum* refers not only to the formal teaching activities but also the symbolic curriculum, including class decorations, bulletin boards, learning center props, symbols, and pictures used with the class.

In Ms. Macy's class, the library center, for example, includes books written in the children's primary languages, in dual languages with the primary language and English on the page, and in English. Even the books written in English reflect the cultures of the children in the group.

I have many books from different countries and so the children can see writing in their home language. I look for books that have something similar in English like traditional tales (Little Red Riding Hood or The Three Little Pigs) or a universal theme like an Eric Carle story. I try to select books that I might be able to overlap in English and I often invite a bilingual teacher to come and read the book in the child's home language. —Ms. Macy

Next to the book center, Ms. Macy has a listening center with the audio versions of books in the children's home languages. Ms. Macy says that even the children who do not know the language enjoy listening to the audio versions of books. She says that the audio versions of books stimulate the children's development of English as well as their home language.

When children are in the listening center, they pretend they're the teacher. They sit in my chair and hold the book open with the CD. They might not necessarily know that language or use that language but they do follow along and turn the pages, listening carefully to

language cues. Listening to recorded books in other languages is important for their speaking and their listening development. —Ms. Macy

The home center always draws children. Ms. Macy changes the materials and props of the home center at least once a month to reflect the children's cultures. For example, one month it was a Japanese restaurant with menus in Japanese, mock sushi, and a Japanese tea set. In another month, it was an international boutique where the children could wear traditional clothes from Korea, Japan, Turkey, and China.

The walls of her classroom display vocabulary posters in Korean and Japanese; alphabet charts in three different languages; and a number chart in four languages.

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE CHILDREN
TO HEAR AND SEE
THEIR HOME LANGUAGE.

Presenting various forms of the children's home languages is beneficial for culturally and linguistically diverse students because it helps them feel that the class is as comfortable as their home. It encourages them to use their background knowledge and to express their thinking in English. Besides the benefit of reflecting the children's backgrounds, presenting a variety of languages is helpful for English-speaking children because it raises their cultural awareness and motivates them to learn other languages and become familiar with other cultures.

Children are naturally motivated to learn. They communicate with each other inventively and figure out for themselves how to share information. They want to learn each other's languages. Often they master an activity or interaction ahead of my plan. —Ms. Macy

Diversity in class instruction

Integrating the children's cultural and linguistic knowledge into school learning is the most critical aspect of culturally responsive teaching (Gay 2002). Teachers in multicultural classrooms ideally design a culturally

responsive curriculum and establish cultural congruity in classroom instruction. When the children's funds of knowledge are integrated into school learning, they are able to incorporate it with what they already know and what they learn at home (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2005). Developmentally appropriate practices (2009) affirm that it is important for the children "to hear and see their home language."

Ms. Macy eagerly tries to incorporate the children's diverse backgrounds into her formal class instruction. For example, when the children are studying animals as part of a science activity, she shows a picture or model and is careful to ask children the names of the animals in their home languages. Transcribing and charting the names enables all the children in the class to learn animal names in all the languages spoken. The group follows similar procedures when talking about the calendar, community helpers, and seasonal clothing during circle time.

Ms. Macy often integrates culture and language as part of literacy development. For example, when the children were reading and discussing a book about gardening that involved a bunny and a bear, one of the Korean children connected the story to a Korean folk tale about the hare and the tiger. Then a Chinese child recalled a similar traditional story about a hare and a tiger. In this situation, Ms. Macy fostered the connection between the children's background knowledge of their own cultures with what they were learning in class that day.

Actually, the children connect the contents of the class to their own cultures and home languages in almost every class.

Today we were reading a book about an octopus, and Young said, "Well, you know, Ms. Macy, in Korea we pronounce it as *munno*." After she pronounced it, I said, "Why don't you teach that to the class? Don't just tell it to me. Stand up and be the Korean teacher." So she did.

Then Hoon whispered a fun fact about Korea—and I did try it when I went to Korea—they eat octopus. So I said, "Hoon, that's a great fun fact. You need to teach the class."

So he came up in front of the class today and he said, "You guys, did you know in Korea we cut off the legs and we put it in a cooker and we cook the legs and the meat gets smaller and then we cut it up and we eat it." I said, "I tried it." John said, "I tried it." I said, "It's kind of chewy."

Then Isaiah said, "In Brazil we eat it, too." So Isabella said, "I wonder how you say *octopus* in your country in Brazil." So Isaiah taught it, and then Isabella said, "What about Japanese?" So Naoki taught it too. By the end of the lesson we learned to say *octopus* in five languages.

It was fun to communicate ideas about the octopus and a great learning opportunity. We took the learning a step further to honor the children and their primary languages. —Ms. Macy

Whenever the children reference their cultural and linguistic knowledge, Ms. Macy respects their thinking and encourages them to bring those ideas to class. She believes that this helps the children feel more connected to the group.

Diversity in everyday life

Multicultural education is not a little performance.

It should be reflected in every activity, every day.

—Ms. Macy

Reflecting children's cultures and languages in routine activities is critical, especially for the young children who learn so much from daily interactions with others. Ms. Macy emphasizes that it's important to be exposed to diversity at an early age so that children learn appropriate attitudes toward different cultures and languages, raising their cultural awareness in a

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non-threatening way.

As an example, Ms. Macy's class celebrates each child's birthday as other classes do. However, the children in her class sing the birthday song in four different languages: English, Korean, Chinese, and Spanish.

At birthdays we sing in all the languages. I ask the children which language they would like to use first and follow their lead. Sometimes a Korean student might ask for English first and the class complies. The celebration isn't over until we've sung in all the primary languages of class members. —Ms. Macy

In addition, all the children in her class are able to speak simple greetings such as "Hello" and "Goodbye" to each other in all the class languages. When she discovered that some of the children were teaching friends those greetings in playground interactions, she expanded their experience in circle time by inviting the children to be language teachers. She also built on this interest by placing phrase cards (Hello, I love you, Friend, Happy Birthday, for example), in the dramatic play area. Children are able to copy and read the words and send pretend postcards to each other at the class post office.

When Ms. Macy needs to get the children's attention, she sometimes counts, "One, two, three"—in the class languages. All children in her class understand the simple counting in each language. Rote counting is reinforced in free-play time.

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Ms. Macy offers another example of cross-language learning. Children compare—and use—animal sounds by language and culture.

When the children explore animal sounds, they realize that different languages express "Meow" and "Arf" differently. Instead of making assumptions, everyone learns that people in different countries imitate particular sounds in unique ways. —Ms. Macy

Simply calling children together can involve cultural practice. For example, Korean girls, when they call to each other, add "—ya" or "—a" at the end of the name depending on whether the name ends in a vowel or a consonant. After noting the children's habit, Ms. Macy conferred with the Korean bilingual teacher and learned that this was an affectionate way of calling to people in Korean culture. So she adopted the practice.

SIMPLY CALLING CHILDREN TOGETHER CAN INVOLVE CULTURAL PRACTICE.

Food is often culturally distinctive, and Ms. Macy reinforces differences and similarities. The children experience a wide variety of food items at school potluck parties or international festivals. The children's parents sometimes bring their traditional food on a special occasion, such as lunar New Year's Day or Asian Thanksgiving.

Ms. Macy visits the Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Latino markets near the school to prepare diverse snacks from the children's home cultures. By shopping at the local market, she attempts to gain more of the children's cultural knowledge from their communities (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005).

Diversity: Not just for special occasions

Many scholars (Gay 2002; Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2005; Copple and Bredekamp 2009; Nieto 2002; and Irvine 2003) view children's cultural and linguistic knowledge as valuable resources for their development and encourage teachers to integrate

this knowledge into all classroom interactions. In early childhood education, important learning crosses cognitive, social, emotional, and language domains and builds through meaningful interactions with adults, other children, and the environment. The scope of school learning is expanded to their everyday lives.

In Ms. Macy's class, reflecting, respecting, and reinforcing the children's culture and language is not reserved for special occasions. As Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2007) insist, reflecting the children's diverse cultural and linguistic knowledge is "woven into, not added onto, the existing curriculum, so it is a change in perspective rather than an elaborate new curriculum." In Ms. Macy's class, evidence of the children's cultures and languages is found everywhere and in every moment. Culture and language are not separate from everyday life.

While scholars are consistent in attesting to the importance of integrating children's cultural knowledge into the curriculum, most fail to offer practical support for authentic implementation. This visit to Ms. Macy's PreK classroom highlights both the positive results of integration and many straightforward, pragmatic steps all teachers can take to build cultural knowledge and respect—in every class member.

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