

Representation Matters: Creating space for culturally appropriate resources.

Pedagogical practices may differ from one setting to another but ensuring that children can 'see' themselves in educational resources is key for creating an inclusive participatory learning environment. Young children possess a strong awareness of their own unique identity, are acutely sensitive to their surroundings, and can rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places, and routines in their lives. In peer interactions children prove time and again that they are competent and capable of participating in sensitive discussions and will demonstrate empathy and understanding from the perspectives of others. These moral judgments are usually based on their funds of knowledge modelled within significant relationships in the home, localities, and communities. The ability to adapt teaching practices to support the 'unique individual child' (Colilles, 2020) encourages children to share their understanding and, in so doing, ensures the growth of meaningful learning experiences. Notwithstanding then the early years environment is an essential component in supporting children's development of a strong sense of identity.

Breaking down barriers to participation

Approaches to inclusive concern breaking down barriers so that all children feel and are included in the process of learning. It involves the development of relationships of trust (Conkabyir, 2020) between the educator and the child. Creating a sense of belonging and participation is about reflecting on and responding to sensitive and sometimes nuanced issues that impact on children.

Inclusive practices may need to be adapted to respond to the rich conversations that children will be engaged in about ethnicity and race whilst re-enacting their 'lived' experiences shared from their home environment. This is where resources that support role play in the home corner can offer opportunities that nurture and value the contributions of *all* children. Correspondingly socio-dramatic play provides a space for rich dialogic conversations between children so that they can explore perspectives surrounding similarity and difference to self and others. Clark's research validates my views surrounding a need for a 'shift' in teaching practice to illuminate new and ethical ways of challenging the unmeasurable when it comes to development of inclusive and anti-discriminatory practice "*...practice that tunes into young children's views and experiences can draw attention to the difficult to measure and bring other kinds of knowledge into focus*" (Clark, 2020:137).

I therefore signal the need for early years educators to listen, hear, reflect on pedagogical practices and then to act to ensure that children are not inadvertently disadvantaged or silenced in the processes of learning. Positioned next are some helpful prompts for reflection on teaching practice.

Questioning Pedagogy!

- Do decisions ensure that each child has time, space, and materials to [fully] participate?
- Does practice include 'All' voices or are some privileged over others?
- Is the culture of the 'classroom' similar to or does it mirror what children have already experienced before in wider society?
- How do decisions, participation, and communicative practices invite children, their families, and friends to become **active** participants within the 'school' community?

The centrality of Play

The centrality of play cannot be underestimated in participatory approaches with young children, as it provides a lens into children's many ways of thinking about and understanding their world. An environment where the centrality of play is embedded provides affordances for children to become deeply engaged in ideas they already know about ethnicity and race. Usually, these ideas are drawn from externally encountered and internalised experiences which have the potential to be combined in new ways of knowing so that children's understanding deepens. It is well documented that children will share new meanings in their play with peers so environments for learning (circle time, mealtimes, book areas, role play corners) have the potential for giving children control and power in learning activities that facilitate developing construction of an ethnic identity. Essentially, the power of play forefronts children's capacities to demonstrate what they can do but more significantly capacities to share what they do know about ethnicity/race when they are in control of their learning.

Culturally Appropriate Resources (CAR)

Inclusive and enabling environments should ideally create contexts in which children are encouraged to reconnect with what they know and understand about cultural and raced contexts by introducing 'culturally appropriate resources' (Colilles, 2020) into programmes of learning. These types of resources facilitate exploration, enable participation and connection with home-setting cultures and support children's reconstruction of knowledge about their developing identities. They provide opportunities for children to build upon and interpret ideas about themselves and others in shared narratives.

So, creating environments to support children's developing identity might mean incorporating approaches that invite children to share their home experiences. This could mean exploring what types of cultural practices children engage in at home, such as celebrations or re-enacting rituals and routines then mirroring these cultural experiences into learning experiences in the setting. Observation and listening to children's perceptions in their play repertoires will be key here, as will conversations with parents/carers to develop in-depth knowledge and understanding about the children you are working with.

Igniting children's curiosity about their own identity and the identity of others should be actively encouraged because children will be having these conversations amongst themselves outside of the adult gaze anyway. Shared narratives amongst adults and children can extend children's existing ideas where their perceptions will deepen about the cultures and identities of themselves and other children, which is particularly important when working with children from diverse backgrounds. Shared stories surrounding perceptions of a 'raced' identity' help us **all** to understand the many ways in which children relate to, connect, and describe ethnicity, identity, and culture. You simply cannot underestimate the power of sharing stories!

Affirming ethnicity & culture might mean:

- Positioning artifacts and familiar items into the role play area to facilitate play and discussion.
- Offering resources in a variety of ways for children to explore and engage with a positive sense of ethnic self, belonging and understanding.
- Ensuring resources are familiar, reflect and connect children to their home, culture, their family, and community life.
- Incorporating multilingual activities (stories, songs, books costumes versus fabrics).

Do resources:

- enable children to think about their ethnic origin and culture?
- Enable expression of a positive sense of self, belonging and wellbeing?
- Foster exploration of familial language, values, and beliefs?

Working in partnership with parents:

Of course developing knowledge about the children you work with will take time. Practitioners (key person approaches) can develop knowledge in planned training experiences but the best way to develop knowledge about the diverse backgrounds of the children should begin with conversations with parents/carers or family members. Creating opportunities for transforming children's learning experiences within provision should be achieved in collaboration with the significant people who know the children best. Here are some pointers for reflecting on and questioning partnership working:

Does working in partnership with children/parents/carers:

- offer parents/carers opportunities to share suggestions that may transform routines.
- support learning about children's funds of knowledge linked to routines.
- invite families to share traditional foods and recipes that are prepared and eaten at home.
- explore how/what foods are cooked at home and with children that can be replicated in role play areas.

Next steps might involve reflection on and adaptation of existing spaces and resources so that all children are supported in this important aspect of learning.

Questions for self-reflection:

- Are materials for play and learning interesting for and reflective of the learners you work with?
- Does the environment for learning incorporate resources that are respectful of family, social, and cultural practices, and traditions?

Conclusion

Play can be a useful 'vehicle' for connecting with the ideas that children may choose to share, breaks down barriers to participation, and ensures equity in teaching and learning is provided. Essentially practice that gives due regard and responds to the perspectives of *all* children, their parents and families, positions democracy at the heart of participation and practice (Pascal and Bertram, 2012).

Affording space, time and opportunities for deep exploration (in play) is highly beneficial for all young children but more importantly when children see themselves in educational experiences then learning can truly begin!