Using Technology in Early Childhood Environments to Strengthen Cultural Connections

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This application-oriented article describes the use of technology in the early childhood environment to support the development of cultural competence. Four objectives are identified and specific examples are described to aid practitioners in developing media presentations that serve to reinforce multicultural theory through the integration of technology in a manner that is suitable for young children. All of this information is shared with an eye toward methods of developmentally appropriate practice and the incorporation of technology as deemed valuable in regard to the licensure, certification, and accreditation standards of early childhood professionals.

Society is changing. In order to survive and thrive in a new, diverse nation, individuals must adapt. The children who will guide the future must be equipped with skills to navigate on uncharted waters. As stated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s publication, The Children of 2010 (Washington & Andrews, 1998), “In a nation where no single race or culture will ultimately be in the majority, the next generation will be called upon to work together—to move beyond the injustice, intolerance, resentment, and anger that has been such weighty baggage in United States history” (p. 14). Children can’t achieve this hope alone. They need help cultivating the interpersonal skills that will allow them to accept and appreciate both the commonalities and the differences that exist all around them.
Drawing on the work of James A. Banks (1996) and Stacey York (1991) the following objectives are identified to support developmentally appropriate work with young children in the area of multiculturalism and diversity.

The children will:

- form an awareness of self and explore individuality in relation to their place in the larger group;
- gain knowledge of the traditions, rituals, and practices that combine to form an individual’s cultural heritage;
- build a sense of identification with others through the recognition of commonalties and move toward an appreciation of differences; and
- recognize unfair characterizations and begin to understand their roles as agents of change.

Frequently commercial curriculum materials, play props, literature, games, and activities are not the most appropriate when attempting to construct an environment for children that will support the growth of cultural competence. Commercially produced materials often contain stereotypical images of costumed children in various geographical regions; the use of the English language is almost exclusive; and alternative family styles, gender roles, ability levels, and mixed-age relationships are not often seen. Fortunately, the developmentally appropriate use of technology in early childhood environments is now viable (Haugland, 1999) and can aid early childhood professionals in the development of methods and materials that are made in the classroom with a focus on strengthening critical cultural connections for each child.

True multicultural education involves the integration of diversity concepts into every aspect of the curriculum (Banks, 1996). Often educators fall into the “tourist” trap and treat multiculturalism as a thematic unit or a specific lesson that must be covered. A month spent studying Mexico, for example, is added to the early childhood curriculum. During the Mexico unit children dine on traditional Mexican foods, listen to Mexican music, wear sombreros and serapes, and learn about Cinco de Mayo celebrations. This practice is called the tourism approach and involves the children looking at groups of people or geographic areas as if they were touring a strange and exotic place. The tourist approach serves to highlight differences, which is not the purpose of multicultural education (Banks). Unfortunately, the media permeating children’s lives generally follows the tourism approach as well, often going so far as to exaggerate differences as a comedic device. When
children see artwork of adult Mexican males napping against a cactus, watch Speedy Gonzales cartoons, and see Mexican children photographed exclusively in traditional costume, a patronizing caricature of an individual from Mexico begins to form.

All children are harmed by this practice. Those from Mexico or of Mexican decent are clearly marginalized by these images, but other children also are impoverished. Children should not be exposed to material that trivializes others and does not deal with their real, day-to-day living. Children can easily develop a false base of security founded on perceived superiority over others. Unfortunately, they may begin to form pre-bias prejudices if they are not given the opportunity to learn alternative methods of thinking and behaving (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 1989).

Instead of resorting to the tourist approach to multiculturalism, educators should highlight commonalities among people and integrate diversity issues into every aspect of daily activity with children. Since commercial materials may not be suitable, technology offers educators the opportunity to integrate multiculturalism in an appropriate manner by developing material specific to the needs of the program.

**Objective One: The Children Will Form an Awareness of Self and Explore Individuality in Relation to Their Place in the Larger Group.**

From a child’s earliest sense of awareness until approximately the age of two the major developmental task in which they engage is identifying themselves as a person separate from others. Young children must gain a clear sense of who they are and where they fit into their family, the community, and their peer group before they can begin to understand others (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force 1989). Teachers of very young children set up an environment that is rich in opportunities for the exploration of both the familiar and the unfamiliar. They are primarily in the role of a facilitator of knowledge (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 1993).

Activities that label and observe facial features, skin color, and hair color and texture are suitable first steps into the world of diversity. Taking photographs of each child, both individually and within a group helps them examine their own features, compare themselves to one another, and discuss the physical characteristics that make them who they are. Children are capable of all of these tasks. They are not oblivious to differences, but generally have not yet learned to place the value judgements on them that adults often do. An open, honest atmosphere in which to explore is crucial to multicultural education in the early years.
Digital cameras are immediate and therefore are extremely useful in documenting occurrences as they happen. When the need to wait on the developing of film is eliminated children can view high-quality photographs of activities immediately after they take part in them. This immediacy is especially important for young children who are visual learners and are often not yet able to think symbolically.

Group photographs posted in the facility can easily take the place of commercially prepared posters and displays and have the added benefit of allowing the children to build up an appropriate context in which to understand and accept individuality and differences. Commercially produced media generally feature caricatures of ethnic children dressed in native costume while digital or scanned photographs of each child represent the real world and provide fertile ground for the growth of cultural competence.

Photographs of daily activities or special visitors can also be displayed at the end of the day to give parents or others who transport a child from school or day care facilities a peek into the day’s events. Instead of the generic “What did you do today,” parents can be encouraged to ask specific questions of their children, such as “I see that you talked about hair today. On the way home we are visiting Aunt Regina. What color is her hair? Is it the same color as mine? She is my sister.” Families can play a greater role in their child’s learning when they reinforce and build on multicultural ideas learned at school.

Teachers can expand the use of digital photographs in the classroom. Flashcards can be made by printing the photographs and laminating two cards, one with the child’s eyes and the other with a view of the full face. The children use the cards to identify the eyes and faces of each child. This activity would be appropriate for use with children of toddler age. Digital or scanned photographs can be inserted into a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation or a Hyperstudio stack to allow for its continued use in many different capacities. The presentation can document a day in the facility and record each child’s arrival, playtime, snacks or meals, and departure time. The presentation can then be used to replace commercial children’s software, which may not be considered a viable representation of diversity for use in the early childhood classroom.

**Objective Two: The Children Will Gain Knowledge of the Traditions, Rituals, and Practices that Combine to Form an Individual’s Cultural Heritage.**

It is crucial for early childhood professionals to help young children gain awareness of and appreciation for their own culture. By putting forth
every effort to gain a familiarity with each child’s family of origin, teachers or caregivers help children through this stage of multicultural education. Families are embedded in their native culture to varying degrees, assumptions about cultural and ethnic association cannot be made (Lane & Signer 1996). One way to find out about a child’s family and its unique aspects is through the use of electronic family portfolios. An electronic family portfolio contains information and artifacts that are of import to the child and his or her family members (Dodd & Lilly, 1997). A digital camera or scanner and a presentation software package are used to put together this document for each child.

Family portfolios can empower children as decision-makers by enabling them to choose what will be included in their program. Furthermore, as children help select materials for their portfolios, family history and special traditions can be discussed that may never have been addressed with the children in the past. In addition, family members can visit the classroom or facility in order to construct portfolio materials. Family members can also help the child present their finished product to the rest of the group to facilitate diversity exploration among peers. Each of these practices aid in cementing the important bond between the child, their family, and the school or care environment.

Conferencing is also a technique that teachers and caregivers use to build relationships with families. Individual technological portfolios can be constructed for each child to facilitate positive connections with parents during conference visits. Photographs, artwork, and documentation of each child’s development can be displayed on a computer screen. Sound files add an extra dimension to the portfolio, and electronic voice recordings allow the child to narrate sections of the presentation. Personal electronic portfolios can give a visual representation of a child that paper and pencil files cannot. A great deal more data can be incorporated into an electronic portfolio, allowing areas of interest or concern to be easily highlighted. Moreover, the portfolio can easily be updated, daily if necessary. An electronic portfolio can open dialogue in a unique manner to support and maintain the open and honest exchange that is an important aspect of a positive association between parents and caregivers or teachers (Newman, 1998).

The community in which a child lives also plays a part in shaping individual cultural constructs. It is important that early childhood educators integrate activities that authenticate significant community connections and allow children access to people and events outside of the facility. Customized technological activities can bring the community into the classroom or care facility. Actual photographs of community helpers such as police officers,
health care professionals, firefighters, grocers, and postal workers can be matched with photographs of the equipment or supplies that they use in their work. A “virtual field trip” can be conducted by the teacher that tours the community taking photographs of buildings, vehicles, and other points of interest. Presentations, games, and activities that utilize community resources help reinforce relationships already formed between children and their community as well as introduce them to new concepts. An early childhood professional that makes his or her own materials can do so with an eye toward the integration of specific multicultural concepts. Through the use of professionals of both genders, such as a female police officer, or a male nurse or including those of mixed age groups, races, and ability levels children’s concepts of what is “normal” can be greatly expanded.

Objective Three: The Children Will Build a Sense of Identification with Others Through the Recognition of Commonalities and Move Toward an Appreciation of Differences.

To gain an understanding of others, children must first identify with them in some manner. Activities that stress characteristics that groups of children have in common are the first step toward this objective. An activity involving transportation is an example of an activity that builds a sense of unity among children. Every child travels to school; they all might not arrive in the same way, but they all use some type of transportation. A discussion in regard to the various types of transportation used by the children on a daily basis can broaden to incorporate the idea that children in some parts of the world travel to school by bicycle, some travel by boat, some use a bus, and some walk. Photographs of each child arriving at school can be used to graph a chart of various types of transportation. The Internet or a technological encyclopedia can yield photographs of children around the world traveling through the use of various modes of transportation. In addition, presentations can easily be supplemented with high-quality children’s literature. Ann Morris’ book On the Go explores the diversity of transportation with photographs by Ken Heyman and simple text. As children begin to isolate events that are common to all and events that are unique to various cultures or geographic regions, they can develop a deeper understanding of multiculturalism.

Cooking activities are also appropriate to support this objective. Everyone eats, but people eat different types of food, prepare the food in different ways, and use different utensils. Preparing rice for a snack or meal can expose children to many different multicultural concepts. Many families eat
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rice, but they can get the rice for their meal in different ways. Some families go to the grocery store and buy a bag of rice. Some families grow rice, and still others purchase their rice already cooked. Rice can be prepared and served many different ways; boiling rice in a pot over a flame or frying rice in a wide wok are both options. Some people mix their rice with fish, pork, or vegetables. Some people eat butter and sugar on their rice. Others eat their rice plain. Rice can be served in small, shallow bowls or on wide, flat plates and can be eaten with forks, spoons, chopsticks, or the fingers. Technology compiled during a rice activity can be used to construct either classroom or individual books, games can be made, and posters or collages can be put together. For example, photographs can be printed and laminated so that children can work on sequencing as they put each step of the process in chronological order.

These activities support the young child’s development by making learning relevant to their daily lives (Roopnarine & Johnson, 1993). When children see a visual representation of themselves involved in activities and hear sound files replicating the events, their ability to remember the occurrence is heightened. As an adult helps guide children through the experience of using the media, their sense of reliving the event can be richly enhanced. Each time children are exposed to a situation they integrate it more fully into existing paradigms and real learning takes place (Roopnarine & Johnson).

**Objective Four: The Children Will Recognize Unfair Characterizations and Begin to Understand Their Roles as Agents of Change.**

Young children are capable of empathy, which is the trait that is needed to explore how marginalized groups feel when majority groups treat them with prejudice. The Thanksgiving tradition in the United States is an area in which young children can consider unfair representatives of American Indians. Throughout the month of November, children in the United States are constantly exposed to caricatures of Indians involved in the first Thanksgiving dinner. Black-clad pilgrims and near-naked Indians gather together to eat turkey and corn with a complacent contented demeanor. These images are piled on top of other images of American Indians in children’s media.

The Disney cartoon “Pocahontas” falsifies the life of a real American Indian woman for entertainment purposes. The stereotypical picture of an American Indian who communes with nature and can talk to the animals is also reinforced by the cartoon. Classic “Looney Tunes” and other media portray American Indians as savages who scalp and raid with a bow and arrow. In addition, many programs use the “red” man who speaks in monosyllables
as a comic foil. When the cumulative effect of these negative images is considered, it is no wonder that children develop unrealistic paradigms in regard to Native Americans.

Technology can help a teacher gather cartoons of American Indians and allow children to compare and contrast those images with both historical and contemporary photographs of American Indians as they live, work, and raise families. A picture of a stereotypical Indian teepee will elicit immediate recognition in children who may not realize that American Indians may live in frame houses, in brick condominiums, and in city apartment buildings at this point in time. It is appropriate to counter the negative media images that permeate a child’s life with positive, realistic, and contemporary images that depict American Indians both as they really were in the past and as they are now. Children can consider why it might hurt an American Indian’s feelings to be portrayed in cartoons as a savage. They can even begin to make decisions about hanging

Thanksgiving decorations on the wall that show American Indians in a negative light, and watching cartoons that are discriminatory in nature. To see children take control of an unfair situation and work to make positive changes is what multicultural education is all about.

Conclusion

Clearly the family is the child’s first teacher, but the community in which the child lives and the media to which the child is exposed can be strong determinants of values and beliefs (Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hines, 2000). Children generally are not required to learn cultural competence in their homes since the skills are not needed in that environment (Clark, DeWolf, & Clark 1992). The preschool classroom or child care setting is often the child’s first exposure to diversity and, therefore, is a natural starting point for multicultural awareness (Swick, Bowtle & Van Scoy, 1994). Therefore, teachers or caregivers are given an excellent opportunity to integrate the various images that children are exposed to into a workable model of non-bias behaviors and beliefs. Using technology in a developmentally appropriate manner to facilitate cultural connections with children is a viable way in which to transform current curricula in order to fully integrate multicultural concepts and develop an understanding of diversity that can last a child a lifetime.
References


