Valuing Cultural Diversity in the Early Years

©By Marilyn Chipman, Ph.D.
Metropolitan State College of Denver
Equity Assistance Center

Seven infants were born in the United States in the same city, on the same date, on the same hospital maternity ward. LaShaniqua, Feliciano, Huong, Christopher, Simeon, Najeeb, and Amy each entered the world without any “past” and yet their “futures” will be affected by factors beyond their control. Due to the group into which each was born, society’s view of and treatment of these infants will be different as their lives unfold. Ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, and the challenge of disability are but a few of the factors that may determine the paths along which each child will be permitted or forbidden to travel. By merely being born, these children enter a battle that already was engaged before their births.

 Innocent newborns sleeping peacefully in their hospital bassinettes do not know anything about their cultural groups. If the infant is from an underrepresented culture, then in three or four short years the very young child may become acquainted with the sharp sting of discrimination. As the forces of socialization come into play, each infant will be influenced differently. Some, like Euro-Americans Christopher and Amy, will be the beneficiaries of societal systems that historically have been weighted in their favor. Others, like African-American LaShaniqua or Hispanic-American Feliciano, will encounter the modern face of centuries-old prejudices that could derail their progress in life. Huong, whose immigrant parents are newly arrived from the Pacific Rim, may be exposed to struggle and multiple barriers. Simeon, of Jewish descent, will alternately be accepted and rejected depending upon the situational context at the time. As a Muslim, Najeeb’s life journey may be filtered through the lens of society’s tense reaction to political and international events. While the females in all groups will have more difficulty than the males in many arenas of life, the ethnic-minority females will experience the hardest time of all. If any of these infants becomes physically or cognitively challenged, the disability may subject that child to still
another level of discrimination and biased interactions. Yet like their strong ancestors before them, they will survive and make contributions to the greatness of our land.

Infants born today will become schoolchildren in less than five short years. How can the school prepare them for life in our multicultural society? An understanding of multicultural education must begin with a three-pronged approach:

*An awareness of the historically pluralistic nature of our population;*

*An analysis of the philosophical framework for educating children from diverse backgrounds;*

*An acknowledgement of the powerful role of the American school in educating our children.*

**A History of Pluralism**

This land of America always has been characterized by pluralism. The very fabric of our nation was woven with various hues and textures. Diverse groups – Native Americans, Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Hispanics – all have had an integral part in the shaping of our country.

Let us see just a few examples of this. The American Indians were the first inhabitants, so while other groups *came to this country*, the fact is that for the Native Americans, *this country came to them.* Immigrants from Europe chose to cross the Atlantic seeking religious and political freedom. Workers from Asia chose to accept the invitation to come work on such major projects as the transcontinental railroad. Hispanics chose to come northward from Mexico. Although they found barbed-wire fences rather than a welcoming Statue of Liberty at their point of entry, still they were able to persevere and establish communities. Africans never were given the original choice either to come or to go, for as slaves they were forced to leave their homeland against their wills and denied knowledge of their roots. Yet once freed, their descendants chose to remain and forge a brand new life for succeeding generations.
Contributions to America’s greatness have been made by all even under the harshest societal conditions. Laws that once sanctioned discriminatory treatment of various groups have been repealed and we have pushed forward towards the goal of equity. Thus it is that politically, socially, or economically disenfranchised people around the world still cherish the belief that the United States offers a utopian better place for all. The wide diversity of people-groups who now live in this land represent hundreds of different nations and cultures striving to live together in harmony.

A Failed Philosophy

A century ago the “melting pot” philosophy was espoused wherein all ethnic groups were encouraged to assimilate. Cultural assimilation is the process by which an individual or group acquires traits and habits that are inherent within another group. Although some members of ethnic groups may take on the characteristics of Euro-Americans, they still will experience discrimination because of their different physical appearance. In other words, some groups cannot ever “melt in”. Thus the original philosophy was inherently flawed.

The melting pot analogy has been replaced by that of a stew pot. In preparing a delicious stew, the cook uses a variety of ingredients. Yet the meat, potatoes, and vegetables all retain their identities. Further, the stew is more than just delicious … it is life-sustaining. All cultural groups are integral to sustaining the life of our nation. Therefore children of diversity should not be asked to negate or deny their cultural heritage by “melting” in order to be accepted and to excel in school. To ask this of any young child is unfair, and expressly so since the characteristics that cause the difference are outside of the child’s ability to alter.

The School as Power

Society is comprised of various institutions that are the “power-brokers” for the socialization of its members. The family, the church, and the government are among the prime examples of such, and yet it is evident that the school must be included on this list. Its powerful impact upon the lives of citizens cannot be overlooked.
Although the 21st century has brought a marked increase in the numbers of home-schooled children, the vast majority of young children are found within the setting of a place called school. Preschoolers eagerly await the big day when they officially can enter that “real” building inhabited by their older siblings or other children whom they know. Once there, they are admonished to pay attention, to study hard, and to obey their teachers. On returning home each evening, usually the little ones are asked, “What did you learn today?” This helps to ensure that early in life they internalize the notion that those things taught by the teacher in a place called school are important and true. Not only did the children at an impressionable age accept what was taught, but so did the teachers. After all, the instructor’s manual from the trusted publisher told them how to do it.

Unfortunately, at one time the school system magnified the story of one particular group and ignored or marginalized the contributions of the rest. In children’s storybooks, in classroom films, on bulletin boards and posters, and even in the dramatic play areas, the white was beautified while the black, brown, red, and yellow were ignored or represented in token form. Thanks to the efforts of multicultural educators, changes have taken place. The curriculum has become a mirror for young children, one in which they can see images of themselves and of those like them. For too long it was a wall blocking all likenesses of themselves and their heritage from view or portraying them negatively.

A paradigm shift was necessary in order to challenge the existing canon and correct errors in content and methodology. Multicultural awareness recognizes that at some point in the school experience, each child should see himself or herself centered on the stage of history as well as within the current context. This metamorphosis benefitted not only the children but also the teachers. Planning lessons from a culturally-relevant curriculum guide that presents the true story of all groups of people has helped to sensitive the best teachers of young children to the needs of their students.

**Difference Is Not Deficiency**

Attitude formation begins early in life. Measures must be in place to ensure that little children are not emotionally destroyed due to being different. A disdain for differences, especially those that are physically evident, can manifest itself in a
child as young as the age of three years old. As teachers shape young lives, they send a message of worth or non-worth to the youngsters in their classrooms. Adults who are responsible for educating young children in a diverse society help them to learn at an early age that difference is not deficiency. Such awareness is vital for all children and can take the form of something as simple as learning to pronounce a child’s “different-sounding” name correctly and ensuring that the other children in the room do so as well.

It is important that teachers of the very young examine their inner feelings relative to diversity. This includes their attitudes towards race, ethnicity, religion, regional background, disability, social class, or any other factors that influence a child’s life. Little children imitate the behavior of those adults whom they wish to please and, in a place called school, there is no one whom the child wishes to please more than the teacher. If personal prejudices are not dealt with, they will surface and manifest themselves in classroom interactions.

The youngest student can notice and subconsciously internalize three distinct types of teacher behavior directed toward the child who is considered to be different. The teacher may ignore the child, consistently calling on others while refusing to respond to or offer help to her or him. The teacher may treat the child as infantile, talking down to her or him in a condescending manner or gushing with ill-feigned praise over the slightest task completed. The teacher may show open ridicule or repulsion towards the child, displaying exasperation when he or she seeks even the smallest attention or favor.

The teacher also must realize that being silent is not an option. The old adage, “Silence is golden” does not apply in the classroom. If a teacher does not immediately step in to stop hurtful words or actions directed towards a child who is perceived as being different, then the adage becomes “Silence means consent”, for it gives tacit approval to both prejudice and discrimination.

In all of these unfortunate instances, the other students will imitate what is being modeled, carrying it over into the cafeteria, the playground, and the school bus. Even if the teacher is unaware of reacting in such a negative manner, the impact on both the individual child (feelings of self-hatred) and the other
youngsters (feelings of superiority) will be the same. Whether or not the actions are intentional, both *worth* and *non-worth* is being established.

The valuing of cultural diversity in the early years is necessary even if there are no children with perceived differences in the immediate classroom. The teacher still can have positive images of children and families of many cultures and lifestyles, thereby sending the message that the acceptance and validating of differences is an expected part of American society.

**Looking Back and Looking Ahead**

A century ago when our nation was largely agrarian, the young were socialized in a pattern of extended families with established roles and expectations that were clearly set forth for each member of the household. The individuals whom the young child saw in the marketplace, the church, and the one-room schoolhouse basically were homogeneous in appearance as well as in life-style. Such is not the case in America in the second decade of the 21st century. More than ever, young children are socialized in urban settings. Neighbors and friends come from many backgrounds that are unlike their own. Thus the earlier in life that the lessons of self-worth and of the equal-worth of others is imparted, the more beneficial it will be.

At the beginning we met seven infants, all born in America on one date, all diverse, who will grow up to become members of the adult community of the 21st century. They may serve at the helm of family, government, religion, business and commerce, military, and education. Also, our nation still stands as a utopia for many from around the world, inviting an international populace to find safety, promise, and successful lives on these shores while strongly embracing their heritage and lineage.

The social imperative is clear. The pedagogical implications are too monumental to be ignored. Where will we go from here? Pluralism takes many
forms among those for whom America is home. Cultural diversity was part of our nation’s past. It is one of the most prominent and distinguishing characteristics of our present. It is the essence of our future. Early childhood educators who are dedicated, sensitive, and aware of equity will meet the challenge of preparing the next generation to live together in harmony.

Marilyn Chipman, Ph.D., is an administrator in the federally-funded Region VIII Equity Assistance Center at Metropolitan State College of Denver. She also is an affiliate associate professor within the Department of Teacher Education. Her main areas of focus are early childhood education, family/school/community partnerships, and the impact of cultural diversity on students of color from Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade.