Reflecting Diversity in Classroom Materials

Reflecting cultural diversity in the classroom involves more than simply displaying unusual objects that set one group apart from another or celebrating a variety of holidays. Diversity applies to who and what we are every day. Here are some ideas for materials that will acknowledge and respect the cultural diversity of the children and families in your program. For all areas, labels and other written materials should appear in English and children's home languages.

Art area—Crayons in different skin tone colors; materials that showcase and encourage children to make the arts and crafts found in their culture and community (for example, ceramic bowls and statues, clay to make pottery, woven wall hangings and placemats, yarn and frame looms)

Block/construction area—Animal figures representing both typical and unusual pets (such as dogs, cats, snakes, pigs); toy vehicles representing different types of jobs (such as construction equipment, farm tractors, taxicabs); diverse building materials used locally (such as wood, bricks, ceramic tiles, boards made of recycled plastic)

Book area—Books in English and children's home languages; books depicting a variety of family constellations, races and ethnicities, cultures, and ages (including the elderly); books showing both men and women engaged in a variety of activities at home, work, and leisure; books depicting children and adults with various disabilities

Dramatic play area—Boy and girl dolls representing several ethnic groups; kitchen utensils and food packages like those found in children's homes; dress-up clothing with items from different cultures and occupations; child-size disability aids (for example, walkers, crutches, eyeglasses with lenses removed)

Music area—Recordings with songs reflective of children's cultures; musical instruments used in different cultures

Science area—Real examples and/or photos of plant and animal wildlife native to the area; tools and other items related to local weather patterns (such as for snow removal, sun protection, rainy season, hurricane preparedness)

Display work created by and of interest to children

Seeing concrete reminders of their own work prompts children to recall and reflect on what they and their peers have done. It can also lead them to expand on their ideas and pursue an interest or a project on subsequent days. Walls, shelves, and pedestals are all places to display examples of children's artwork and emergent writing, products of their science experiments and discoveries such as models or simple charts, photographs of children working together and of their play constructions, rules they create for a game they invent, family photographs, mementos of field trips, turn-taking lists for distributing snacks or choosing a song, and so on. The displays should be changed periodically, so "children's recent work predominates" (NAEYC 2007, Criterion 3.A.06). Displays that have been up too long cease to attract attention.

Displays should focus on the activities, products, and interests of the children, not the adults, which means information for parents and teachers should be posted somewhere other than the classroom, if possible, or in a small area of the room. But displays of children's work are an excellent way to document and share with parents, administrators, visitors, and others what children are learning.

Scheduling the Program Day

The intentional teacher's goal here is to offer children a rich and varied mix of learning opportunities within a supportive framework of routine.

Establish a consistent yet flexible daily routine

Routine provides young children with emotional stability and security. They know what will happen, when it will happen, and what is expected of them. Routines such as their teachers' morning greetings can help soothe any anxiety young children might feel in separating from their parents: "[It] may seem like an obvious ritual, but being fully greet-

ed in a conscious, sincere way sets a positive tone for a child's day" (Evans 2005, 50–51). A warm greeting from a teacher and time for children to say goodbye to their families for the day is also reassuring for family members as they entrust the care of their child to someone outside their home. For dual language learners and their families, hearing a greeting in their home language adds to the sense that the program is a place where they can feel safe and respected.

The number and nature of the day's components should be carefully chosen, in the same way that areas and materials should strike a balance between too much and too little. Dividing the day into a few meaningful blocks of time avoids transitions that are too frequent, which can be disruptive for young children. The sequence and length of activities also provide children with important experiences in temporal relationships and help to develop early mathematics concepts. A reasonable amount of flexibility is also needed to allow teachers to capitalize on spontaneous teaching opportunities and extend children's interests.

Further, recurring routines let children revisit materials and repeat activities. In our eagerness to broaden their experiences, we sometimes forget that children need to deepen their understanding of familiar materials and subjects, too.

A consistent routine also gives teachers a framework for planning, as they think about how to integrate content into each component of the day. For example, children can explore the use of numbers through one-to-one matching at greeting time (counting the number of children present), choice time (tallying how many children are playing in each area), and small group time (charting how many children use each paint color). The daily structure also prompts teachers to think about content broadly so they can include the full range of cognitive domains (introducing different subjects across activities) and social components (altering group size and composition; creating communities of children with shared interests and experiences) over the course of a day.

Every day, some parts of the schedule should offer children options, allowing them to share control with teachers. Even during adult-led activities, they should be able to count on having choices—for example, in how to use the materials or with whom to partner.

Allow for a variety of types of activities

Effective teachers schedule each program day to offer opportunities for the following:

- Choice and self-directed play (including time for children to make plans and antcipate what they will do)
- Cleaning up and taking care of individual needs (including use of self-help skills)
- Group activities in which teachers introduce key concepts and skills or read aloud
- Indoor and outdoor play, including movement activities
- Socializing with adults and peers
- Problem solving with materials and people
- Sharing snacks or meals

- Rest time (depending on children's ages and the length of the program day)
- Transitions
- Consolidating and reflecting on learning

A range of learning activities such as these allows children to learn content using all their senses, abilities, and interests, and to make meaningful connections.

A consistent schedule means the sequence of components is predictable, but what happens within any one component varies from day to day, depending on the children's interests and teachers' objectives. For example, small group time occurs at a fixed time of day, but the particular activity is different from one day to the next. This variety is important to accommodate children's range of interests and ways of learning, so that all children can find many engaging things to do throughout the day. Also, variety, like consistency, allows children to share control with adults.

At the same time, effective teachers know that too much variety can overwhelm young children. A varied routine does not mean trying to cram every possible experience into each day. Rather, the daily schedule, executed repeatedly over weeks and months, creates the structure within which content can be varied, sequenced, repeated, supported, and extended.

Use a variety of groupings

Children need opportunities to work alone, alongside each other, in pairs, and also in small and large groups. Some groupings happen spontaneously. Teachers create others, particularly small and large groups, to encourage different learning opportunities. Most obviously, groups present situations in which social learning occurs as children watch, listen, play, solve problems, and share their observations and ideas with peers. Group times also provide many rich opportunities for language development. Children hear new words introduced by teachers or used by peers, and refine their own ways of speaking to more effectively communicate their needs and intentions to others. These types of social interactions are particularly valuable for dual language learners, whose eagerness to be part of the group is an important motivator for learning the language of their peers. Groupings of various sizes are also another way that young children become aware of quantity—one of me, two of us, a few children in a small group, lots of children in a large group.

Effective teachers attend to individual and group dynamics. From observing children's comfort levels and preferences with various groupings, they can plan strategies to ensure that each child feels secure and supported in trying out new or uncomfortable situations. For example, a teacher might put quiet children in the same small group, where they might be more likely to speak up knowing they won't be talked over by louder, more verbal children. Or a dual language learner whose English-speaking skills are comparatively well developed can help another child whose English is not yet as advanced. The same might apply to grouping children who share a home culture, where those who have been in the school community longer can help newcomers feel comfortable as they adjust to new surroundings and a new culture. Such strategies give each child the opportunity for a rewarding and positive experience during each segment of the day.

Allow just enough time for each type of activity

The time allotted for each activity should not be so short that children are frustrated in achieving their objectives (whether exploring or creating), nor so long that they become impatient or bored. Children's individual preferences and developmental levels will natu-

rally vary. For example, preschoolers are able to sustain choice time for a longer period than they could when they were toddlers. Another way to accommodate variations is by overlapping time frames. For example, one child might need a few extra minutes to finish an art activity during choice time while the other children wash up for snack time. Quick eaters could clean up and go outside with one teacher while slower eaters linger and chat with a second teacher.

This flexibility can make transitions smoother and avoid the abruptness and loss of control that can upset young children. When a classroom is beset with problem behaviors, often it is the schedule that needs managing, not the children. At other times, the content, not the length of the activity, needs to be adjusted. Perhaps children are being asked to accomplish too much, or the task hasn't captured their interest.

Interacting With Children

Children's interactions with teachers and peers, more than any other program feature, can determine what children learn and how they feel about learning (Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson 2011; Driscoll et al. 2011; National Research Council 2000a). In the early years, learning is largely a social process. Connecting with young children means recognizing that relationships are the basis of instruction and learning (NAEYC 2001, 35). Even children's encounters with materials are often mediated by others. It is, therefore, critical that teachers understand how children develop and offer them the kinds of support and encouragement that promote growth and progress.

The following sections outline the core strategies by which intentional teachers establish and maintain an interactive environment that supports children's learning and development. (See also the box on p. 19.)

Meet children's basic physical needs

All children have basic physical needs regarding food and nutrition, toileting, physical and psychological comfort, and safety and health. Having one's essential needs met, beginning in infancy, forms the basis for the fundamental trust all humans need to grow and develop. Attending to children's needs for physical care also helps meet their psychological need to feel safe and secure.

Children's needs change through their early years, but adults maintain an important role in helping to meet those needs. Infants need feeding, changing, cuddling, and playing; toddlers venture out to explore on their own but check back frequently to verify that their trusted caregiver is still there and available. At 3 and 4 years old, children can function independently or with peers for longer periods of time if they have established this basic trust early on. The security of knowing that caring adults will meet their basic needs prepares young children to venture beyond the familiar, setting the stage for all future educational experiences.

Create a warm and caring atmosphere

Children feel secure and successful when teachers interact positively with them, both verbally (listening, conversing with interest and respect, using a calm voice to problem solve) and nonverbally (smiling, hugging, nodding, making eye contact, getting down to children's eye level).

Warm, sensitive, and nurturing interactions are more beneficial for children's development than harsh, critical, or detached adult behavior (e.g., Kontos et al. 1994; White-