COLLOQUIUM

Cross-cultural Infant Care and Issues of Equity and Social Justice

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ABSTRACT Intact identities of children, not of the dominant culture, is both a goal and an issue of equity and social justice. Identity development of some children can be compromised in cross cultural care if they are immersed in the dominant culture. Culturally sensitive care is a preventative strategy for early childhood professionals to use in order to keep these children rooted in their culture and attached to their families.

My passion lies in understanding how to settle the disagreements that occur in cross-cultural infant care. When early childhood professionals resolve differences about best practices with parents in ways that discount diversity and impose the dominant culture, they tread on issues of equity and social justice. In my experience, professionals who have conflicts with parents often end all discussion by quoting policy, standards, regulations, or research. Not only is that way of cutting off communication a form of institutionalized oppression, but it harms children and their families. This article is about other ways of reconciling differences between professionals and parents.

When professionals disregard what parents want for their children, they put identity development at risk. Also, attachment to family may become compromised in the face of significant differences between professional carers and home (Chang & Pulido, 1994). The equitable approach is to honor diversity and seek to understand what culturally sensitive care means for each family being served. To meet such a goal, professionals have to establish close communication with families and work together with them toward positive outcomes for children's identity, sense of belonging, and cultural competence (Bernhard et al, 1995; Bhavnagri & Gonzalez-Mena, 1997; Gonzalez-Mena, 2001).

Finding Out about Cultural Differences

Part of professional training should include communication strategies to enable professionals to learn about differences from the source, i.e. the families served. For example, a strategy called 'active listening' (Gordon, 1970), used by professionals to talk to children, can also be used with adults. Gordon taught a long time ago to put aside judgments in order to hear what another person really thinks or feels. Strategies are important, but attitude is even more important. If the professional truly desires to understand, it shows in the way he or she listens and responds. Defensiveness can get in the way of clear communication, so self reflection should also be part of the professional's training to help when conversations touch personal history or open old wounds.

Seeing more than one point of view is the goal of communication. Differences cannot be negotiated until understanding is reached. It is the professional's job to make sure the discussion keeps going even when the going gets uncomfortable. Trying to negotiate solutions when either party lacks understanding is premature.

Problem-solving Differences

In my experience as a parent, early childhood teacher, and childcare administrator, I have found that solutions to problems resulting from differences between professionals and parents tend to fall into three categories. Those three categories are caregiver enlightenment, compromise, and parent education. There follow examples of what I consider equitable solutions in each category.

Resolution through caregiver enlightenment. An example happened in a nursery where I used to work. A baby who screamed hysterically when put into a crib could easily settle down and go to sleep in the playroom. Though the caregiver thought that babies belong in cribs, she got a different view from the family, who explained their baby had never slept alone. They thought it cruel punishment that he had to sleep by himself in the nursery. Instead of quoting regulations or even trying to convince the parents their baby had to get used to a crib, the caregiver let him put himself to sleep in a protected corner in the playroom. She knew it was against regulations but resolved the problem through discussion with the licensing worker. It finally came down to a sanitation issue, so when they resolved that, a waiver was granted. In this outcome, the caregiver understood the family's perspective and as a result made a change in her own behavior *and* the program nursery's policy.

Resolution through compromise. In this outcome, both parties give up something in order to resolve the issue. Here is a hypothetical situation that occurs in nurseries all the time. A parent hates to see her baby's clothes dirty while a caregiver believes firmly in the value of messy exploration and sensory

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activities. The caregiver tells the parent to dress the child in old clothes. Finally, the two sides decide to compromise. The caregiver will make sure the child is covered up during messy play; the parents agree to dress the child in slightly less dressy outfits. They both give a little.

Resolution through parent education. Sometimes, a change in parental behavior is appropriate, especially when parents decide for themselves to change. I use myself as an example. When I enrolled my children in a cooperative pre-school, I was using spanking at home to discipline. In the pre-school, which had a parent education component, I came to see that I was working at cross-purposes because, though I was opposed to violence, I was teaching it. I learned better ways to discipline and I stopped spanking.

Resolving Conflicts by Embracing Contraries

There is another way to solve problems in the face of opposing views that results in equitable solutions different from those in the three categories above. When contradictions arise, we do not have to choose one side over the other. We can work out how to choose both at the same time. Though the outcome may look to some like compromise, the difference is that nobody has to give in. This choice is a departure from Western thought and proves difficult for those of us who pride ourselves on being logical thinkers.

I think of the process to reach this outcome as 'embracing contraries' (Elbow, 1986), and to achieve the outcome one must think holistically rather than dualistically. When we leave dualistic thinking, we move away from dichotomies such as right/wrong, good/bad, appropriate/inappropriate. Thinking holistically lets us approach differences in ways that open the possibilities for solutions that do not show themselves otherwise. If we can accept that there is always a larger picture, once we see it, we find we can generate a number of alternative solutions.

Dr Intisar Shareef (1999) a professor of early childhood education at Contra College in California, explains about embracing contraries:

> *You have to listen to people as though they were wise. The point is to broaden your perspective so you can take in someone else's, so you can, in fact, be influenced by it. That doesn't negate what you think is true because truth is not something rigidly bound.*

Third space is the term that Dr Isaura Barrera, a professor of special education at the University of New Mexico, uses to describe what I am calling embracing contraries and she calls negotiating cultural bumps. Barrera (in Barrera et al, in press) sees third space as large enough to encompass many perspectives. She says that in third space you can see multiple truths and the validity of each. Further, you can see beyond perspectives to a larger, unifying picture. To get to third space, you have be aware that it exists. You also need communication skills. Patience and willingness to be uncomfortable are important too. Barrera

helps people reach third space through teaching something she calls 'skilled dialogue.'

Conclusion

Childcare can have enormous implications for the identity development of the children of families whose culture is different from the dominant culture. How do children become competent in their own culture if they are immersed in someone else's? How do they develop an identity that keeps them rooted in their culture and firmly attached to their family? These are important issues of equity and social justice. Only when professionals understand culturally sensitive care and are in close communication with families can they know how to work toward positive outcomes for children's identity, sense of belonging, and cultural competence.

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