



Inclusion Fact Sheet

Exploring diversity and equity in education and care services

‘We must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words but to live by them’.

(John F. Kennedy)



National
Alliance

Respect for diversity and working for equity is highlighted in the *Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* and the *My Time, Our Place* as key principles underpinning early and middle childhood educational practice. Both learning frameworks note that ‘respecting diversity means within the curriculum valuing and reflecting the practices, values and beliefs of families’. The frameworks also state that educators ‘who are committed to equity believe in all children’s capacities to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities’ (2009, p.13; 2011, p.11). This fact sheet will explore diversity and equity, highlighting the differences between the two. Questions are included to promote reflection and discussion.

Respect for diversity and working for equity are critical aspects of the work educators do every day to create a more socially just community for all. The table below details what this might look like, while also highlighting the differences between the two.

Reflecting diversity

- Ensuring environments reflect diversity
- Including provisions which promote a sense of belonging for all
- Changing practices to ensure the participation of all children
- Making allowances for difference

Working for equity

- Naming discrimination
- Acting on discrimination
- Uncovering unfairness
- Ensuring visibility for ALL people
- Challenging views, ideas and practices which remain unchallenged

Lane (1988, cited in Glover, 2001, p. 7) argues that issues of discrimination cannot be addressed by paying attention to diversity without working for equity. She suggests that, ‘it is no good having black dolls if black people themselves are not valued, if racist remarks... are not recognised and challenged, if factual questions about racial differences are not answered correctly, if no attempt is made to find out what children are learning, feeling, believing and if strategies are not devised to openly discuss with children, in ways they can understand, why racism is wrong’

Research by Robinson and Jones Diaz (2000) invited early childhood educators to rate a number of diversity issues which early childhood educators saw as being significant and relevant to children and early childhood education. The results demonstrates what they refer to as a ‘hierarchy of tolerance’, with gay and lesbian issues, Aboriginality and class identified as being the least relevant and significant areas of diversity. As such, the authors suggest that paradigms and commitment to equity vary amongst educators based on the area of diversity.

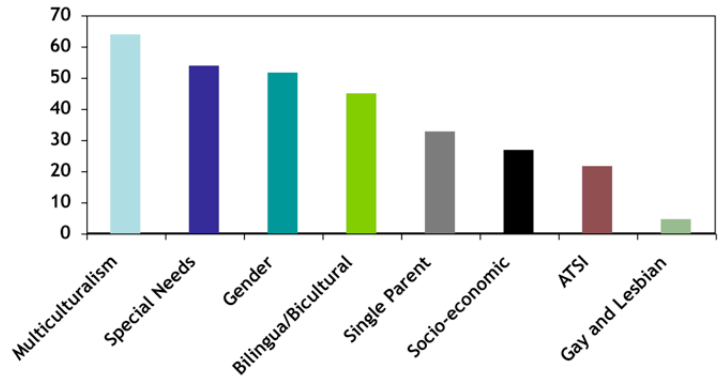


Figure 1: A hierarchy of tolerance (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000)

This is further supported by research by Robinson and Semann (2008), which explored perceptions and values held by early childhood educators around gays and lesbians, and the issues that contribute to these views. Like Robinson and Diaz, the authors research found that talking to children about gay and lesbian issues was not seen as important when compared to other areas of diversity and that a range of ‘excuses’ were mobilised in order to leave issues of inequity and discrimination unchallenged.

Working for equity, requires individuals to examine the personal biases that might impact on what they do and say and what they don’t do and say. It means in truly working for equity individuals cannot pick and choose which aspects of diversity they speak up about, and whom they will stand up for. It requires individuals to reflect on which aspects of diversity and difference they might be more familiar and comfortable with, and which they are not. Working for equity also means taking notice when and how individuals might justify these decisions on the basis of “not wanting to offend or get it wrong”, because “families won’t like it”, or because “children aren’t interested”.



Questions for reflection

- What are some aspects of diversity we understand because we share?
- What are some aspects of diversity we need to learn more about because it is unfamiliar/uncomfortable?
- What are the challenges we face in learning about aspects of diversity we don't know and understand?
- How might we overcome these challenges in order to work in a fair, respectful and just way? (Centre for Equity & Innovation in Early Childhood, 2006)

In addition to examining our own personal biases and reflecting on why we think the way we do; it is important to create a safe space to ask questions and engage in conversations with colleagues and peers, adopting a team approach to promoting diversity and working for equity. This doesn't mean we will always agree and neither should we have to. It is also likely that it won't always be an easy conversation or a comfortable space to be in. However, it does mean ensuring everyone has a voice and recognising that people will participate in different ways. It means building trust, honesty and respect. It also means suspending judgments and being curious about different ways of knowing and understanding in order to examine and rethink our own perspectives. There is no one way or right way to do this work. However, it is important that it is done. Martin Luther King reminds us 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter'.

Questions for reflection:

- How do we, in our teams, respectfully consult and collaborate?
- How do we practice honesty and transparency?
- How do we give and receive openly?
- How do we encourage questioning, wondering and exploring?
- How do we sit with heartache and struggle? (Innovative Resources, 2008)

Some top tips for getting started

- Take time out to reflect on and examine your own attitudes towards diversity and difference
- Demonstrate positive attitudes to difference through respectful relationships and open communication

- Use positive language to promote and celebrate differences and similarities
- Work as a team and share responsibility for all children, including those with additional needs
- Make time for your own professional learning and development. Seek out and utilise information and resources to support your work
- Engage in critical conversations with colleagues and peers to consider multiple understandings and perspectives
- Be cautious when researching a particular aspect of diversity, e.g. disability, culture, taking care that your approaches to teaching and learning do not reinforce stereotypes about difference
- Be open and honest in answering children's questions about difference
- Challenge children's ideas and viewpoints that are biased and discriminatory. Support children to explore where these understandings come from and offer alternative information and perspectives
- Work in partnership with families to utilise their expert knowledge of their child
- Create a culture where asking questions is encouraged and valued.

In thinking about these ideas, consider the following questions:

- What is one idea that you might be able to action in the coming week? Think about the what, when, how (and importantly) the why of this action.
- What is one idea that you might like more time to reflect on and think about?
- What is one idea that you would like to discuss further with colleagues and peers? How and when might you initiate this conversation?



Further reading

If you would like to read some more, you might find the following document interesting: *Exploring Multiculturalism, Anti Bias and Social Justice in Children's Services* by Miriam Giugni. Go to <http://www.cscentral.org.au/publications/index.html>

References

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