

**Inclusion in Early Childhood Education:  
*Programming for Early Childhood Education in a context of increasingly  
diverse settings: Lessons learned from Dominica***

**BARBADOS EDUCATION CONFERENCE  
DECEMBER 2008  
BEVERLY LEBLANC**

### INTRODUCTION:

The U.S Department of Education uses the term Linguistically and culturally diverse as an educational term to define children enrolled in educational programs who are either non-English- proficient (**NEP**) or limited-English-proficient(**LEP**). Educators use this phrase, linguistically and culturally diverse, to identify children from homes and communities where English is not the primary language of communication Garcia (1991).

The Education For All Global Monitoring Report, 2007, made it clear that children in early childhood settings must be supported and taught in their first language in order to develop sufficient confidence before beginning to acquire a second language. Linguistic specialists argue that children who learn on their mother tongue for the first six to eight weeks of their lives perform better on test scores and develop higher self esteem than those who have to cope with learning in the official language from an early age or who make the transition from mother tongue to official language too soon.

The children and families served in our early childhood programs reflect the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the nation. The nation's children all deserve an early childhood education that is responsive to their families, communities, and racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. However, for young children to develop and learn optimally, the early childhood professional must be prepared to meet their diverse developmental cultural, linguistic and educational needs; they should respect children's linguistic cultural backgrounds and the diverse learning styles. As a result children learning and development will be enhanced. The challenge however is how best to respond to these needs.

### THE CHALLENGE :

The Caribbean is a region of great cultural diversity and Dominica is no exception. Over the past two to three years Early Childhood Educators in Dominica have been faced with the new challenge of how best to respond to the needs to the increase number of children from culturally diverse backgrounds. While in the past all children entering early childhood education settings (preschool or day care) spoke either English or our local dialect Creole . This is no longer so. Dominica is now an island of great cultural diversity .Our population is now made up of Chinese, Haitian, and Spanish (Cuba and Venezuela)nationals. This is as a result of migration or governmental agreement. Consequently, our Early childhood education centers (ECEC) are now a garden of flowers. While our diversity creates opportunities to learn and share both similar and different opportunities, our teachers are not equipped with the knowledge and skills as to how to tend the growth of plants. The early childhood educators now have to become more knowledgeable about how to relate to children and families whole linguistic or cultural background is different from their own. Furthermore they are to provide high quality care and

education for the increasing number of children who are likely to be linguistically and culturally diverse.

Responding to the linguistic and cultural diversity can be challenging. At times the challenges can be complicated further by specific needs or issues of the child, family and program. Educational programs and families are now faced with the responsibility to respect and reinforce each other as they work together to achieve the greatest benefit for all children. Our challenge is to create bilingual learning environments as these are the most developmentally appropriate for children's growth, learning and development. The question is how?

These challenges are real but early childhood educators need to view them as opportunities to reflect, question and effectively respond to the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse children. They should view these challenges as the opportunity for early childhood educators is to be trained in additional languages or to recruit additional staff who can speak the language already. However this in itself as good as it sounds will be difficult. All our centers are privately owned. The income is very low. How do I as the officer tell a teacher she needs to pay for Spanish classes or get a tutor to teach her Chinese. I can hear the question and see the look on the faces as they ask me ***The million dollar question : "Ms LeBlanc where am I going to get the money? While I share the view that Early Childhood Educators should try to encourage families to volunteer their time , we have to also consider the constraints.***

Some would argue that if we encourage the use of many languages in our centre, this would be divisive and might lead to children being intolerant of one another. We need to understand that the opposite is true: children will understand that each other has a different language and culture, that each is equally important (not one more important than the other) and that we can learn to tolerate and support one another in our play and learning.

It is important that educators ensure that children learn to tolerate each other and appreciate each others differences as well as language (boys and girls, different races, different ethnic backgrounds, different cultures). In October 2007, The ECERS(Early Childhood Environments Rating scale) survey was completed with funds by UNICEF. One of the areas of focused was "Promoting acceptance and Diversity". This item express as a minimum:

- ✚ **"Some racial and cultural diversity visible in materials(for example multi racial or**
- ✚ **multi cultural dolls, books or bulletin board pictures, music tapes from many cultures)**
- ✚ **"Material show diversity (for example different races, cultures, ages abilities and gender) in a positive way**

- ✚ **Staff intervene appropriately to counteract prejudice shown by children or other staff adults (for example discuss similarities and differences, establish rules for fair treatment to others (or no prejudice is shown)).**

This is what was described as **GOOD**: to achieve a good rating many books, pictures and materials showing people of different races, cultures, ages, abilities and gender in non stereotyping roles are made accessible and some props representing various cultures are included in dramatic play (dolls of different races, cooking of different cultures, cooking and eating utensils from various cultural groups). An **EXCELLENT** centre would make sure that the inclusion of diversity is part of daily routines and play activities (for example the foods of different culture are a regular part of meals and snacks; music tapes and songs from different cultures are included at music time): and activities are included to promote understanding and acceptance of diversity (for example parents are encouraged to share family customs with children; many cultures are represented in holiday celebration) .

The results were similar to the results of 2000 when the similar survey was done. The findings showed that most centers made adequate provision of materials and toys reflecting diversity in cultures, races, ages abilities or gender. Staff were not observed making opportunities to discuss similarities and differences with children or to be taking care to establish rules for fair, treatment of others- not only others in the group, but those in their communities and those they will be meeting in school and the wider world assisting children to develop their own rules for generous, fair and non discriminatory treatment of one another is the entry point in this area of work. Early childhood workers therefore need the support of training to develop strategies for the management of “difference” and conflicts arising because of it”

### **LESSON LEARNED:**

It is important for teachers to become more knowledgeable about how to relate to children and families whose linguistic or **cultural background is different from their own**. For example I stepped in the classroom and there was this little 2 year old boy running about the place. No one interacted with him and he just kept on doing his own thing. When asked why he was not taking part in the activity. The response was "Oh he is Spanish". I wondered what would be the response were it a girl? What is going to happen to this little boy when he gets to kindergarten? Again the teacher has no knowledge of Spanish so she does not know how to relate to him.

**One is left to wonder:How could the teacher affirm and respect this little boys background?**

**In the interest of the child how should the educator respond?**

While in Dominica we may not say it publicly many of us are anxious about the changing racial and ethnic composition of the country. I know I am. Recently a few early childhood educators and I were having a conversation. I said , do you realize that very soon the last names like Paul, Joseph, George and even LeBlanc will be in the minority or soon become extinct and we will be replaced with Lui, Menendez, Jean Claude. They laughed as they looked at me in amazement. But with our diverse population these are soon going to be the most common last names some that our educators may have difficulty pronouncing. Nevertheless , while the challenges may even seem to be too numerous for one teacher or provider to manage, despite the complexity, early childhood educators should consider the following recommendations if they are to assume the tasks and meet the challenges of diversity.

### **Recommendations for *Responsive Learning Environment***

EC Educators should:

- stop and reflect on the best ways to ensure appropriate educational and developmental experiences for all young children so the unique qualities and characteristics of each individual child is acknowledge
- Recognize that all children have unique qualities and are cognitively, linguistically and emotionally connected to their language and culture of their home.
- Acknowledge that children can demonstrate their knowledge and capabilities in many ways.
- Make the most of children's potential, strengthening and building upon the skills they bring when they enter programs
- Focus on the learner and allow opportunities for children to express themselves across the curriculum including art, music, dramatization and even block building.
- Understand that it takes time to become linguistically proficient and competent in language. Hence they need to be patient and tolerable. While young children may seem fluent and at ease with English they may

be incapable of understanding or expressing themselves as competently as their English speaking peers.



***Recommendations for working with families (Parent Involvement)***

Parents and families should be actively involved in the learning and development of their children. ***Therefore EC educators should seek to:***

- Actively involve parents and families in the early learning program and setting
- Encourage and assist all parents in becoming knowledgeable about the cognitive value for children of knowing more than one language and
- Provide them with strategies to support, maintain and preserve home language learning
- Actively seek parent involvement and establish a partnership with children's families
- Make provisions to communicate with families in their home language and provide parent-teacher encounters that both welcome and accommodate families.

***Recommendations for Professional Preparation***

Early Childhood educators should be provided with ,

- Professional preparation and development in areas of culture, language and diversity. Efforts to understand the languages and cultural background of young children are essential in helping children to learn.
- Recruit and support early childhood educators who are trained in languages other than English.

***Recommendations for programs and practice***

***Early childhood educators should:***

- recognize that children will acquire the use of English even if their home language is used and respected.
- Support and preserve home language use
  
- Develop and provide alternative and creative strategies for young children learning

**CONCLUSION**

When early childhood educators acknowledge and respect children home language and culture, ties between the family and programs are strengthened. This atmosphere increases opportunity for learning because young children feel supported, nurtured and connected not only to their home communities and families, but also to teachers and the educational setting.

Administrative support for diversity should be the goal of the educational setting and at the same time educational practices should focus on educating children toward the school culture and preserving and respecting the diversity of home language and culture that each child brings to the early learning setting. The immigrants who come to our shores in Dominica are not mere visitors, they are there to stay, therefore early childhood professional and families must work together to achieve high quality care and education for all children.