

## Respecting Diversity in our Multicultural World

I recently visited my son, his French-Canadian wife and my two granddaughters aged 4.5 years and 2.5 years in Montreal. Apart from the normal pleasures of visiting family, I gained a whole new understanding of 'respect for diversity.'

My respect for diversity—especially in childcare settings—now goes far beyond providing a learning environment with resources which reflect a range of cultures. It sees educators evaluating the learning environments they provide on the basis of how well they meet the needs of a young child from a different culture. Let me explain this further.

While in Montreal, I visited a number of early learning centres. Their room sizes, designs and layouts were much the same as those in Australia, as were the resources in the rooms. For example, they contained: children's lockers; dramatic play area; reading corner; painting easel; drawing and collage materials; puzzle area; and science table.

However, many differences were apparent. As an adult from another culture, it was these differences that intrigued me. This was accentuated because I am an educator. At the same time, however, I wondered how I might feel if I were a small child from Australia, and decided that I probably would be more overwhelmed than intrigued, and that the differences would far outweigh the familiar elements.

Differences such as: the sounds (language and music); the signs on the walls; the colours and patterns of mats and wall-hangings; the items in home corner which had the same function but were somehow unfamiliar; the play characters like Cailou (pronounced kayou – a little boy popular in French Canadian culture) and Passe-Parlout; the books; the Inukshuk (an Inuit meeting place) erected in the outdoor play space; and, the food and its aromas.

I looked around for anything a small child from Australia might find familiar and reassuring in these settings, but found little—a mother and baby animal matching game with a kangaroo and her pouch-young; building blocks; and, painting easel. I am sure, however, that the educators would verbally comfort the child (although not in the child's own language) and would accompany this with caring non-verbal communication and tone of voice.

My thoughts turned to Australian early childhood settings. How would my grandchildren or a child from Japan, Spain or Africa respond to their first day? How would they feel? What would they find familiar and reassuring? What toys would they gravitate towards? What sounds would they hear? What food would they smell? Would the educator and peers understand what they say? Would the children understand what was said to them?

So my message to educators based on this personal experience is clear: look closely at the environments and resources you provide. It may well be that they fall way short of meeting the needs of children from other cultures and of developing cultural awareness in children from our predominant Australian culture.

When selecting resources, put yourself in the place of a child from different culture needing to pick up a familiar book or card game or hear a song that the child can join in. Then consider the other children using those same new resources and having their eyes opened to the play possibilities of cultures from around the world. Further, visualise yourself as an educator using these resources to facilitate children's awareness of cultures other than their own.

Since Montreal, my vision now is to provide every child with a learning environment that evokes the excitement and wonder I saw in my own grandchildren when: their little hands explored; their eyes found play possibilities or books; their ears heard familiar tunes; and, their appetites eagerly anticipated favourite foods. Dr Brenda Abbey owns and operates Childcare by Design [www.childcarebydesign.com.au](http://www.childcarebydesign.com.au) which provides the full range of consultancy services to childcare services across Australia and overseas. She is the author of Managing compliance in childcare services and has just released a DVD EYLF: Putting it into practice



[www.globalkidsoz.com.au](http://www.globalkidsoz.com.au)

globalkidsoz.com.au

**SIMPLY MULTICULTURAL**  
**SIMPLY ACCREDITED**

CHILD CARE  
by Design