

MULTICULTURAL CHILDCARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN AUSTRALIA

Bev Hall

L'Australie est un pays multiculturel, multilingue et multiracial. Pour cette raison, l'auteur de cet article encourage vivement le développement d'une démarche multiculturelle dans les programmes d'éducation des petits, pour satisfaire aux besoins particuliers des minorités ethniques non-anglophones, et des enfants aborigènes. Bev Hall examine les bienfaits de l'éducation multiculturelle, et les programmes déjà établis en Australie. L'objectif final du multiculturalisme est de mettre fin au racisme et d'encourager le pluralisme ethnique: ceci avancera la cause de la paix et de la compréhension mondiale.

Over 40 percent of Australians were born either overseas or of parents born overseas. Australia has the highest per capita intake of migrants in the world. Australia is a multicultural country of over 140 languages and ethnic communities. These facts – coupled with an indigenous population of over one hundred Aboriginal languages and tribal groups – make Australia not only multicultural, but multilingual and multiracial from the arrival of the first fleet. Even in that first fleet of 1788, many nationalities were represented, including Negroes, southern as well as northern Europeans, Irish and British.

Some extremist groups want Australia to be monolingual and monocultural: this is a basic denial of the human rights heritage and the culture of at least half the Australian population. It is a basic denial of historical fact on which the Australian nation of today has been built. Australia, with such a diversity of peoples, has opportunities to capitalize on these assets, to enrich the nation culturally and to develop a more tolerant, understanding and enlightened country with respect for its diverse cultures, language and racial groups.

All members of the community – including Aboriginal peoples – should have equal opportunity to realize their full potential and have equal access to programmes and services:

The education of all children will be richer and more meaningful if there is a blending at the beginning of the educational process. We cannot go on imposing an Anglo-Saxon culture on our ethnic minorities. The creation of a harmonious society demands that educators take account of these other cultures.¹

The concept of multiculturalism arose historically as an attempt to meet the needs of non-English speaking ethnic minorities and Aboriginal peoples. It has become evident that an all-embracing programme is required for all children in Australia, because we live in a multicultural society:

A truly comprehensive bilingual education programme can serve not only the non-English mother tongue children who must necessarily become bilingual, but also the ordinary monolingual child who speaks nothing but English.²

The aim of a multicultural approach is to develop equality in the sharing of resources, services, political power and civil rights: it develops skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for participation in a democratic society, and it aims to develop a positive self-concept in order to deal effectively with the social and economic demands of the surrounding environment. Multicultural programmes need to be designed in a two-way interchange of language and culture, if society is to rise above the ignorance, intolerance and misunderstandings presently prevailing in the community at large. Education cannot begin to be effective until the minority group child's heritage is respected. Educationists, particularly in the early childhood field, will need to become aware of the facts that ethnic and Aboriginal children can contribute to and enrich the Australian way of life. Educationists at this level should lead the way by considering positive integration and co-existence; they are morally bound to avoid the destruction of a child's ethnicity and to aid in its constructive enhancement.

Bilingual education is a response to the failure of schools and teachers to meet the needs of minority group children who are academically retarded for two years or more while they are forced to

learn English and reject their mother tongue. Minority groups have been kept ignorant of their history and have been made to feel inferior in a variety of subtle and not so subtle ways. It is important for Australians to become aware of the enrichment that many cultures have to offer and the great variety of human experiences cultural diversity endows. Ethnic pluralism can help in overcoming the homogenization and depersonalization of the mass society. Schools have become vehicles for assimilation.

A multicultural approach means that children are not forced to "choose" between their parents and the school. This approach enables the individual to become an active participant in the education system. It also encourages the mothers of these children to feel they have something to contribute, instead of feeling isolated from Australian society because of language and cultural differences. The education system – particularly at the early childhood level – needs to respond to meet the needs of this society and educate for cultural pluralism.

Programmes need to be designed not only to meet the English needs of non-English speaking children, but to culturally enrich the English speaking children. The basic aims of all programmes in early childhood multicultural education are:

- to develop pride in the children's culture and mother tongue;
- to teach the mother tongue of the children, rather than a mixture of languages which are neither one language or the other;
- to teach English as a second language;
- to teach community languages as second languages to English speaking children;
- to prepare children for school
- to provide a variety of needs for the communities involved and to involve these communities.

The most successful method to date of developing bilingual/multicultural programmes in Australia involves a team-teaching approach. This requires two teachers – one speaking in one language

Child Care



Illustration by Catherine O'Neill

Credit: Agenda for Women's Equality (Ottawa)

and the other speaking in the other language – to all children all the time. Other methods are variations on this model; still others use only ethnic aides as 'interpreters' to enrich the children's language experiences. This latter approach does not allow for special training of many migrant and Aboriginal women with bilingual skills. Ethnic aides also need the opportunity to develop their skills to recog-

nisable educational qualifications. In many centres using 'aides' English is usually 'picked up' rather than taught as a second language, whereas the ideal for a successful programme requires qualified teachers, not only in the community and Aboriginal languages, but in English as a second language.

The concern in recent years for a multicultural approach stems from the situa-

tion that children from minority group backgrounds are not participating in or rarely using existing services: research has established that the overwhelming reason is that services are insensitive to the needs of minority group children and generally haven't provided staff who at least know another language other than English. Other problems reveal the need for more work-based care, and generally more services in areas of need. Most of the women needing this care are of non-English speaking backgrounds and work in unskilled areas. The least that can be offered them is good quality, relevant and sensitive childcare and kindergarten services for their children. Many women in Australia have been forced to accept substandard arrangements – even though Family Day Care was brought in to offset shortages in childcare centres. Family Day Care exploits the woman in the home and involves up to 3 children being minded by untrained women in their own home (so saving costs for the government in overhead), but being paid an amount agreed to by the mother and caregiver. The provision of more government-funded centres and trained staff with kindergarten and childcare programmes incorporating multicultural/bilingual programmes would go a considerable way towards improving the situation. Several states are developing the concept of twenty-four hour care for shift workers, but to date only about three exist in Australia.

Each state in Australia has approached these developments in a variety of ways and to varying degrees. The longest and most successful bilingual/multicultural programmes are the Greek Welfare Society's Childcare and Family Centre at Richmond in Victoria and the Italian Childcare Centre in Perth. The latter was established and funded by the Italian government because the Australian government has been slow in responding to the needs of ethnic communities. South Australia initiated the first bilingual programmes in in-session kindergartens (half-day), but the officialdom concerned did not really support them and tried to maintain them as compensatory programmes (rather than bilingual) and didn't give status beyond that of aides to the 'ethnic teachers.' These centres not only had to struggle for acceptance, but were constantly starved of funds.

These programmes involved Aboriginal, Greek, Italian and Yugoslav peoples.



Illustration by Jiang Ke (6 years old)

The Yugoslav community in South Australia has been waiting six years to build a centre due to bureaucratic inefficiency; it is a good example of the problems faced by community groups in trying to meet childcare and kindergarten needs for themselves. In 1977 the Kindergarten Union reluctantly introduced programmes using 'ethnic aides.' These aides should be given opportunities to become teachers and achieve the same status as Anglo-Australian teachers and so pave the way for the development of equality between teachers and workers who speak different languages and come from different cultural backgrounds. As early children's services are female-intensive areas of occupation, this would open up opportunities for women to gain employable skills. In New South Wales and Victoria special courses designed for migrant and Aboriginal women to gain skills in early childhood education and recognized certification have been established. In South Australia and other States this is not yet the case, except for a course for Aboriginal people in South Australia.

Programmes vary not only between States, but within each state. Multicultural programmes and their interpretation vary from 'interpreting' to teaching children in several languages, at least conversationally, in childcare and kindergarten centres. In New South Wales a central Resource Centre for Multicultural Materials has been established at the Lady Gowrie Child Centre. This is the only substantial resource centre in Australia for multicultural and bilingual resources and materials for early children's services centres. There is a multicultural Resource Centre in Victoria, established by the Free Kindergarten Union which provides materials to kindergartens, but these materials concentrate on English as a second language rather than on a bilingual approach. This is a common approach to the provision of services based on a compensatory model. There is a need to advance to the next stage, which builds on bilingualism in a multicultural approach.

In Western Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia there

are now ethnic liaison workers in early children's services. Queensland has two part-time workers on short term contracts; very little progress has been made in the Australia Capital Territory in recognising the advantages of developing a bilingual/multicultural approach. The Northern Territory has established Aboriginal bilingual programmes in kindergartens which proceed into primary school as a transition to English by upper primary level.

In South Australia a new office has just been established to bring together all departments and interests in the early childhood education field. The Children's Services Office may serve as a model for other states in trying to co-ordinate and plan more effectively all services under one department – instead of five or more authorities all competing with each other. The new office has adopted a policy of multiculturalism; all services will be required to become sensitive to the needs of minority groups. We are demanding that the new office in S.A. also be a model for establishing a career structure with



Mother and Daughter, 1923 (acrylic on canvas) Illustration: Sandra Jane Shaw (photo: Marion Barling)

appropriate wages and conditions and with a required minimum training comparable to similar professional groups. Children particularly between the ages of 0 and 8 need the best services a society can offer, not a piecemeal, substandard approach: this requires improvement in wages and working conditions, training, and community recognition of the value of the early childhood educator. These early years are the most crucial in a child's life and support for programmes and workers in this field is long overdue.

The ultimate aim of multiculturalism is to break down racism, intolerance, ignorance, sexism and prejudice, and to bring about greater understanding. It is only now that we are coming to recognise the multicultural nature of our society and learning to respect each other. The development of a multicultural, polyethnic approach will bring about a more realistic, enriched and enlightened Australian society. If encouraged in other countries – particularly between developed and developing countries – it could bring about a

more tolerant and enlightened world. If conflicts are to be reduced, then we must start with educating our children to learn to respect each other with allowing all children the opportunities to reach their full potential. This approach will assist in the desire to maintain peace and, if adopted on a global scale, would offer our children not only the enrichment of learning in a multicultural context, but a future in a world of peace and understanding.

¹Gwen Davey, "Multicultural Listening for Early Childhood," *Education News*, Vol. 16. No. 9 (1979).

²A.B. Gaarder, Statement by Chief Modern Foreign Language Section/U.S. Office of Education, before the Special Subcommittee on Bilingual Education of the Committee on Labour and Public Welfare, (U.S. Senate: May 18, 1967).

Bev Hall attended Forum '85 as a member of the UNAA Status of Women Committee, South Australia.

THE REWARD OF BITTERNESS

Pressing the smile on a piece of paper
To one's own lips
Would not change life's sunset.
Every day the song of birds
Incites me to speak,
But the snake inside me swallows
my voice.
In the middle of the night
I saw the moon fertilizing light,
rainless clouds
And your form, like an almond tree,
Bent over the window of my being.
Two lines.
Like lovesick footsteps
Want to journey together.
Darkness stretches its hands inside me.
Now in my veins the darkness crawls
Instead of the blood.
Watching the crying sun waiting outside
The morning of my being refuses
the freedom.
Water drops on leaves, keeps falling
Even after the rain.
If such a drop falls on my lips
I cannot call it the rain of love.
When we can erase dates and memories
Perhaps life's sunset then
May change.

Kishwar Naheed
Lahore, Pakistan

A LINE WITHIN CIRCLES

Whenever he lit his excuse-lamp
I lowered the wick of my belief-lamp.
His excuses were strange:
He could not swim,
Yet pretended that the sweat-soaked
clothes
Were wet only because he had not
dried himself
After the swim.
He could not fight
Yet said that his shirt was torn
In a brawl.
He could not forget
Yet, in shuffling dates
Reduced days to moments.
He could not keep captives,
Nor could he set free.
He could not forget,
Nor could he remember.
He raised walls upon walls on
flimsy foundations;
He made dreams lies.
His hobby was to find reflections in
moving water.
His pastime to hold his breath
And descend into water.
Now he is pretending to hold his breath
But lamps keep going out.
I raise the wick of my belief-lamp
Only to find my own self,
Like his diminished dead self.
Also shrinking.

Kishwar Naheed
Lahore, Pakistan