

## Practice

### *Avoiding the deadly "FIVE Fs"*

In striving towards an inclusive environment for children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, many educators make the effort to ensure that backgrounds of children and their families are represented with visual displays such as flags from the different countries.

There may also be toys, materials and instruments such as a didgeridoo, sticks and mandolin in the rooms to reflect diversity. Perhaps on "Harmony Day", the children will be invited to come in their national or traditional costumes and they may even be asked to bring long a traditional dish to share with the others in class.

The thought behind this is well intentioned – by creating an environment that reflects the national and cultural heritage of children, we are honouring their cultural diversity, we are respecting their traditions, practices and beliefs. We are making them feel included and accepted in our multicultural society.

These commonly practiced expressions of cultural diversity can broadly be classified into the Five "Fs". They are:

- **Flags** - *Displaying flags of the different countries from which our students originally came from (or their families)*
- **Fashion** - *On Harmony Day (or other occasions), we invite children to come to the early care and education setting wearing their tradition or ethnic costumes*
- **Food** - *On Harmony Day (or other occasions), we invite the children and families to bring traditional dishes/food from their ethnic/faith community*
- **Faces** - *Displaying photographs or art pieces of people representing different ethnic communities or of different national heritage*
- **Festivals** - *Celebrating significant traditional, ethnic, cultural and religious festivals which we find relevant to our children. Examples include: Eid-ul-Fitr (Islam), Christmas, Easter (Christianity), Rosh Hasanah (Judaism), Diwali (Hinduism) or having s Turkish, Italian, Greek `Day`*

The thing that makes these five "Fs" deadly is the tendency of early childhood professionals to believe that we have 'done enough' once these expressions are present in their early care and education environment. We feel a sense of pride even. It is true that in most settings, these cultural markers are not even given full expression let alone recognized.

In actual fact, confining our attempts to create an inclusive environment by using the "Five Deadly Fs" misses the mark totally. The attempts are akin to tokenism, focusing on a "tourist-like" approach to understanding and appreciating multicultural and multi-faith diversity in our society.

What is needed are day to day, week to week, month to month, year to year expressions of inclusivity in our actions, no matter how small and seemingly insignificant. We need to model this behavior in our language, expressions and all our actions as educators.

**Ideas that help you to avoid the “FIVE Fs”:**

- Hold up a mirror and reflect on your values, attitudes and behavior.
- When an “A-ha!”<sup>1</sup> moment surfaces, a learning opportunity should not be missed. Whether in class or in the playground, we need to intervene and point out appropriate values, attitudes and behaviour. Point out stereotypes in books and stories and try to get the children to explore alternative viewpoints. Nurture the habit of “questioning the narrative” to explore history and reality from various viewpoints.
- Working in teams to observe each other and look out for each other is one way to check ourselves. Talk, share and discuss what you would like to focus on – a known weak area, a suspected blind spot, a tendency to brush aside a different point of view or way of accepting things that does not neatly fit within our area of experience.
- Use technology! Have yourself video-recorded and review the video clips.
- Keep a journal. Write down relevant thoughts, emotions and experiences for reflection and analysis.
- Expand your experiences and relationships. Get to know as many families and friends from as many cultural and faith backgrounds as possible. Learn about their way of life – their culture as it is in Australia. Learn about the challenges and opportunities that face them and their communities. Try to see, feel and think from their point of view. Apply those lessons in the early childhood setting.
- Do your research. Find out as much as possible about multicultural Australia from friends, professionals, publications and professional development opportunities.
- Attend professional development sessions, workshops and conferences. Be an active member of a community of multicultural practitioners/educators. Share and learn experiences from each other. Support each other.

**Reflective questions we may ask ourselves include:**

- Are my actions and responses to children really inclusive?
- Are my actions SEEN and UNDERSTOOD to be inclusive by the children, their parents, my colleagues and the wider community?
- Do I have any ‘blind-spots’<sup>2</sup>?
- Are my responses to situations based on facts, reactions or assumptions?
- How broad are the experiences I draw from?

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> “A-Ha!” moments are happenings that offer powerful opportunities for teaching, learning or self-discovery. They are spontaneous and usually happen without planning. For example, the children are learning to solve a puzzle. They suddenly discover that it is better, faster, easier and more fun to work together and help one another rather than do it alone. The teacher, seeing children evolve from working by themselves to co-operating and helping one another sees the satisfaction and sense of achievement on their faces. The teacher seizes the “A-ha!” moment and discusses with the children getting them to be more aware of what they have just discovered (perhaps accidentally). She/he reinforces the learning and gets

*them to share their newly discovered insight with the rest of the class so that more children will benefit from the “A-ha!” learning moment.*

*<sup>2</sup> Blind spots (defined in the context of personal development) refer to the aspects of ourselves we aren't fully conscious of. This can refer to a broad spectrum of different things – our traits, values, actions, idiosyncrasies, habits, feelings, thoughts, idiosyncrasies, etc.). Sometimes, our friends, family, co-workers (thirds party observers) can see 'blind spots' when we are unable to. In the context of professional and personal development, we would benefit from them sharing their awareness with us. Sometimes, they are also unaware of our 'blind spots' (in the Johari Window Self Awareness Model, this is called the 'unknown area/unknown self). This makes it harder for us to be more fully conscious of ourselves.*

#### **REFERENCES**

1. Beverly Tatum: “Why are all the Black Kids sitting together in the Cafeteria”? (2003)
2. Making Multicultural Australia - [www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au](http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au)
3. Racism No Way: Anti Racism Education for Australian Schools  
[www.racismnoway.com.au](http://www.racismnoway.com.au)
4. Australian Multicultural Foundation : [www.amf.net.au](http://www.amf.net.au)