

Diversity Issues Are Sneaky

By Lisa Lee

Program Associate

Parent Services Project, Inc.

Lisa is a member of the Bay Area Network for Diversity Training in Early Childhood (BANDTEC) and a current CAEYC Leadership in Diversity Project Intern.

Diversity issues are sneaky. They always seem to come home. There is always more to learn and as I think about issues of race, language and culture and their connection to identity development, I never have to look far for lessons.

"...[Bob] was surprised that his daughters didn't know the common Chinese name for 'cha sui bow,' a popular steamed pork bun we had eaten as children. It was often in their home, but upon seeing it in the store window, his oldest daughter requested that he buy 'that white bread thing.'"

From many angles, my cousin Bob and his wife have "made it." Third generation Asian Americans, they are raising two young girls in the suburbs who love tap dancing, have every Disney video, and are surrounded by the advantages that come with education, hard work, and the "American Dream." Except when the girls' preschools and schools counted on them to celebrate "Chinese or Japanese" holidays, diversity and identity issues seem far away to them and their parents. The girls seemed happy, well adjusted and liked by their friends.

One day, they happened to go to Chinatown. The girls commented, as they usually do, as they walked among the many people shopping in the crowded, open-air markets. "Ooh, the food is smelly here. The Chinese people talk funny." When Bob and I talked about that day, he shared that he was surprised that his daughters didn't know the common Chinese name for "cha sui bow," a popular steamed pork bun we had eaten as children. It was often in their home, but upon seeing it in the store window, his oldest daughter requested that he buy "that white bread thing."

Not surprisingly, Bob and his wife were concerned that the girls were losing a connection to their ethnic culture. Did the girls feel proud to be Asian Americans? Were they beginning to internalize subtle biases about being Asian? Should they worry about the "distance" that their children seemed to place between themselves and the "Chinese people" who are different from them? Often we think that the responsibility we have as parents and teachers is to protect our children from racism and biases that comes from the outside. Perhaps some of the most important work is to concern us with what our children think on the inside.

Earlier this summer, I was speaking to an early childhood teacher who is an African American mother. As she reflected on how issues of diversity impacted how she raised her son she said, "I don't know what happened to my child. From the time he was a baby, I raised him to be comfortable around people of diverse backgrounds. I protected him as much as I could from the racism that exists. I told him 'you can be anything you want to be in this country.' And then when my child went to college, he came back with a new awareness. All of a sudden he was Black." Another mother, a Latina, who was also an early childhood educator, said the very same thing. All of a sudden her daughter came back from college and she was "more Latina than I was. She asked why I didn't raise her more as a Latina? Now she even works for the Latino community."

Together we reflected about how many parents of color share similar struggles. How important is connection to culture and community? How do parents build self-esteem in their child and connection to community? What are the best ways to ground them in reality yet protect them from racists' messages that may push them away from positive self identify?

At a multicultural child care center, 40 children spoke nine languages. One day their teacher realized that all of the children in her program were speaking English, even those whose home languages were other than

English. They not only spoke to the teachers but also to their families who spoke languages other than English. Were the children feeling ashamed of their home language? How would they know that their language and culture was valued? Worried about the possible loss of children's home language, she made a concerted effort in her class- room to recognize language. At the morning circle time of each day, she would ask the children who spoke another language, "How do you say 'good morning' in your language?" And throughout the day she would regularly ask, "How do we say this in Spanish? In Japanese? In Chinese?" Soon all the children took pride in knowing words from many languages. She felt positive that the children began to value the ability to speak many languages. However, one morning, as the children were saying "good morning" in nine different languages, a white boy whose home language was English look puzzled. When asked what he was thinking, he concluded, "I don't have a language."

As an early childhood educator, I think about this story a lot. It raises many questions for me. What does it mean for a child to think that everyone else is "special?" Will he grow up envious of other cultures, not realizing that he too has a culture? What harm do we do when we send messages, perhaps unconsciously, to a child that his way of speaking is so "normal" that it doesn't exist. Where does the awareness (or lack of awareness) of being part of the dominant culture begin? And, as educators and parents, what role must we play to help children of the dominant (white) culture grow up with a positive identity and an awareness of the privileges they own, while supporting them to be partners with others to stand for social justice?

All of us must tangle with the issues of race, language and culture as we rear the next generation of children. From the family of color with the advantages that come with economic security to the family whose white child grows up thinking that he doesn't have a language. From the parent of

color who wants her child to grow up "to do anything and be anything" to those of us who grew up in a world where we were the "normal" ones ...we all have lessons to learn.

If we are aware, we can only conclude that the lessons and work begin at home. It is sitting at the dinner table where our children live and grow. Racism and bias touch all of our lives in that sneaky, unassuming every day kind of way. It impacts how parents will choose to raise their children and how children will feel about who they are.

Reprinted by the Early Childhood Equity Alliance with permission from the author and BANTEC