

# Beginnings

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It is critical for the growing number of interracial families in this country (including those who have adopted biracial children) that the current multicultural education movement support their honest and sincere attempts to raise healthy biracial children. Anything less shows the child care program does not fully understand the basic philosophy behind multicultural education.

## References

Cross, W. E., Jr. "A Two Factor Theory of Black Identity: Implications for the Study of Identity Development of Minority Children. In J. S. Phinney and M. J. Rotheram (editors), **Children's Ethnic Socialization: Pluralism and Development**. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987.

Project Race — 1425 Market Boulevard, Suite 1320-E6, Roswell, GA 30076, (404) 640-7100.

Wardle, F. **Biracial Identity: An Ecological and Developmental Model**. Denver, CO: Center for the Study of Biracial Children, 1992.

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program to support their family. If they are unclear about the issue, offer to support them with a list of support groups, books that are available, contact with other interracial families in the school, magazine and book articles (like this one). Also discuss how the parents want their child's heritage to be supported when multicultural activities are presented in the classroom.

- **Curriculum materials and activities.** Get your hands on all of the few biracial books and materials you can. Also make your own — taking pictures of biracial children in your classroom (with parent permission) and cutting out magazine pictures to create interracial families — and have your children make their family trees. My daughter created her biracial family by pasting cut-outs of a Black woman and white man on paper, then drawing the biracial children with crayons. Purchase Crayola's™ multicultural crayons and Lakeshore's™ multicultural paints.

Provide lots of activities for mixing colors: paints, crayons, colored tissue paper, colored glass, food coloring, color wheels, etc. And encourage discussions by all children about physical features — skin color, eye color, eye shape, hair color, hair texture, and heights.

Most importantly, in designing your multicultural environment and activities, don't teach the concept that the world is divided into neat ethnic and racial groups (for example, don't use a poster that has a Black child, white child, Asian child, Hispanic child, and obviously Native American child).

- **Distinction between personal identity and reference group orientation.** Cross (1987) has strongly disputed the idea that reference group orientation (feeling positive about belonging to a racial/cultural group) in young children equates to high self-esteem and personal identity. He shows that the young children's positive concept of self-identity is created by the child's image as viewed by individuals (self, parents, teachers, etc.), not in relation to a group. What is important is "How do you see yourself?", not "How do you see yourself in relation to a racial or ethnic group?"

Cross's research is critical to the healthy development of biracial children. It stresses the role of the teacher in helping the biracial child feel confident and competent. It destroys the argument of those

who say biracial children must identify with a minority group in order to develop a strong identity.

Research also suggests using a biracial label for our children helps develop this strong personal identity.

- **Demographic forms.** Determine if, in fact, your program is required to use these forms. Then ask the funding source how best to respond to children who cannot be accurately counted by using the forms. Finally, work with your administrator to develop a procedure that supports the interracial parents' rights to identify their children accurately.

Options include: rejecting counting by race, offering a multiracial category (see Project Race in "References"), allowing parents to write in their children's identity, or suggesting parents leave the form blank.

A program concerned about meeting the needs of all their families cannot ignore this issue.

- **Support individual growth.** Every child in the school must know he is important and can succeed. Every child must see himself as an individual with specific characteristics, not as a child with a group label. Children should learn that they come with a variety of physical and cultural attributes, and a collection of individual strengths. Provide a vast number of activities where children can explore their individuality.

- **History of mixtures.** Contrary to popular and academic belief, this country is a powerful example of the strength and diversity that occurs by the mixing of differences through marriage: languages, national origins, religion, race, ethnicity, politics, and economic backgrounds. Through art, stories, books, role playing, picture books, visitors to the classroom, and field trips, show your students that this country has a proud history of gaining strength through mixed marriages of all sorts.

- **Stress diversity.** Prejudice is based on a fear of the unknown. Young children are very curious and open. Thus, this is the ideal time to expose them to a variety of art, music, dance, literature, history, religion, language, racial and ethnic diversity, clothes, games, family structures, towns, villages, buildings, and food. Teacher prejudice toward any of these issues must be openly explored before topics are introduced into the classroom.

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fully accepted. Historically white Americans have totally shunned these children, while Blacks or other minorities have begrudgingly assimilated them into their communities (unless they were light enough to pass as white).

Today much of white society is beginning to view biracial children as a natural extension of our multicultural society, while the current acceptance of separatism, politically correct thought, and Malcolm X thinking has made these children less than acceptable in the minority community (especially if they are raised as proudly biracial).

Interracial families experience group antagonism more from a sense of isolation and lack of support (from extended family, school, and community) than outright prejudice — which still does exist.

- **Family.** As with all children who attend our programs, the family is both the child's foundation and the social unit we must be sensitive to and support. Because the interracial family is the primary context in which the biracial child's identity develops, it is inaccurate to call the biracial child bicultural. The child's family context is an integrated milieu of both parents' backgrounds: it synthesizes the majority and minority contexts.

- **Community.** The community should support the family's values and aspirations. Biracial children are not accepted by many components of the community: newspapers, magazines, churches, TV programs — including children's programs like Sesame Street — movies, children's books, and single race families in the neighborhood. This places tremendous responsibility on the child care program to support these families.

## Challenge to Teachers

For teachers to support the development of biracial children they need to respond to each of these ecological factors. Some problems teachers face are:

- **Lack of a biracial community.** While there are about 60 national educational groups that provide information and support to biracial families, the vast majority of interracial families feel alone, isolated, and overwhelmed. There is little agreement among these families as to fundamental issues each family must face: individual and group antagonism, raising children, confronting federal and

school forms, and pressuring child care and school programs to be responsive to their children's needs.

- **Lack of group history.** Much of the rationale for multicultural education is the belief that psychological self-worth is closely tied to cultural pride and identification. For example, we believe Black children will gain a greater sense of self-worth by knowing the history and richness of Black culture, and by identifying with the Black race.

Biracial children have no such group to identify with. There are no posters of famous biracial heroes, no collections of multiracial biographies, almost no children's books that portray interracial families positively, and no biracial-centric curriculums.

- **Demographic forms.** Almost all early childhood programs categorize children according to OMB (Office of Management and Budget) policies (USDA lunch programs, Head Start, Chapter I, court ordered desegregation, etc.). None of these forms have a category for biracial children. As my 15 year old daughter angrily said, "I will not write in 'other'; I'm not an other."

Many interracial parents take exception to these forms. Some insist on writing in biracial or multiracial; others refuse to fill them out. To the interracial parent these forms symbolize official group antagonism.

- **No curriculum materials.** How can teachers help biracial children feel good about their racial and cultural heritage when there are almost no curriculum materials available? And when many leading advocates of multicultural education omit our children?

- **School antagonism.** What is most frustrating to many interracial parents is when the school or child care is an agent of group antagonism toward their child. School psychologists, special educational professionals, multicultural education specialists, teachers, and social workers often perpetuate stereotypes about biracial children, and insist they be lumped together with children of their minority parent's race.

## Specific Suggestions

- **Ask the parents.** In your initial conference with interracial parents, ask them how they support the racial identity of their child, and how they want the

# Interracial Families and Biracial Children

by Francis Wardle, PhD

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Most traditional approaches to multicultural education view each child as existing within an exclusive, unique cultural group. The child's total reality — and the way he perceives the world — is determined by membership in this group: he is as different from a child belonging to another group as one culture is, collectively, from another.

A biracial child does not fit into one of the traditional cultural groups. Many biracial children hear at an early age, "What are you, anyway?" How should teachers respond to these children and their families? Most multicultural books and curriculums take one of two approaches: ignore the existence of these children or assume biracial children belong with the cultural group of their minority parent.

Neither approach is acceptable. Estimates suggest there are from 1 to 10 million biracial children (under 18) in this country. (We really don't know, because officially biracial children do not exist.) Many of these children are not being raised as products of their minority parent's culture. Some — often in single, white, female-headed households — have almost no exposure to their minority heritage; others are raised as products of a truly integrated biracial cultural environment.

Any educational program seriously interested in implementing a multicultural approach must address the needs of biracial children and their families. Further, they must recognize these children are part of a unique cultural group: they are neither white nor Black (or the identity of their parent of color, if not Black). Early childhood programs must support these families' right to raise their children according

to family choice, beliefs, values, and customs. We must realize that culture and cultural groups change, and are never static.

## Ecological Components

In today's society there is the assumption that race defines culture, which itself defines context. The biracial child is the product of the interaction of both the majority context (white) and the minority context (parent of color). The biracial child of a single white mother living in a white community has a different context from a biracial child whose two biological parents live in an integrated neighborhood. A biracial child adopted by white parents experiences still another context.

- **Minority context.** Clearly the biracial child is a minority (many claim this is sufficient rationale to define the biracial child with the identity of his parent of color exclusively). The biracial child will suffer the prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping all minority children experience growing up in America.

- **Majority context.** All minority children must learn to succeed within majority society, using majority rules (without rejecting their own cultural foundation). The biracial child is no different, except that he is exposed to both contexts from early on, and often raised to be comfortable integrating both. According to Cross (1987), this may actually place the biracial child (especially if raised with a pride in his total heritage) at an advantage.

- **Group antagonism.** While there have always been biracial children in America, they have never been