



# Developing Programs with Windows and Mirrors

by Margie Carter

A few years ago, I met Emily Style at a training offered by the SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project. She offered a metaphor for thinking about curriculum that has stayed with me. Style suggested that we see our curriculum task as providing both windows and mirrors in order “to reflect and reveal most accurately both a multicultural world and the student herself or himself.”

When I apply this concept to the early childhood field, I think about the environment for the adult learners as well as the children. If we want them to provide this for children, our caregivers and teachers need classroom and in-service settings where there is a mirror reflecting their realities, who they are and how they see the world. Likewise, they need us to offer windows, a way of seeing and respecting the lives of others.

So much of what we do in the name of embracing diversity tends to have a superficial quality to it. Our task goes way beyond learning about other cultures and getting along together. In our interactions, structures, and policies, we must steadily work to overcome ingrained patterns of power, white privilege, and

what Luisa Teish calls “the ism brothers.” And whatever side of the privileged/disenfranchised coin we are on, neither children nor adults can adequately address inequality or injustice until we are confident in our own sense of self.

True self-respect and confidence, in contrast to an inflated or fragile ego, comes from knowing one has a voice and is heard, valued, and respected. From there, one can more clearly see and value the perspectives of others. Even when eagerly approaching a new window, we often encounter blind spots and distorted images. Lisa Delpit (1988) reminds us: “We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment.” That’s why having a solid sense of self is so essential. Otherwise, we feel threatened and get defensive.

Whether we work in diverse or homogeneous settings, the task for early childhood programs is to create a cultural climate that is full of mirrors and windows so that people see themselves reflected and have regular opportunities to consider different perspectives. Creating this climate requires examining what and who is included in the environ-

ment, the policies, and the decision-making processes. We must also assess the less tangible elements of the atmosphere, like whose voice pervades and whose viewpoint defines our working concepts (such as developmentally appropriate practice or family composition). If the climate for the adults gives attention to these issues, it will impact their considerations with children.

## **A Climate with Mirrors**

How can you develop a work climate where people’s lives are visible, with their passions, sorrows, and hopes acknowledged? Tangible things in the environment, the way time is spent, and the focus of interactions all serve to reflect who’s there and what’s important to them. Here are some ways to provide those mirrors.

### **STRATEGY**

**Create “a place where I belong.”**

To discover how your environment currently fosters or defeats a sense of belonging, create a scavenger hunt that sends staff members around the building to find something that represents each of the following:

- something that reflects what you like or are interested in;
- something that tells who spends time in this place and what they do here;
- something that sparks a favorite childhood memory;
- something that makes you feel respected;
- something that insults your intelligence;
- something you don't understand.

The discussion following this scavenger hunt can lead to specific action plans for creating a place where all staff members see themselves reflected. It can also provoke a new assessment of how many ways the children and their families see their lives reflected in your program.

### **STRATEGY** *Refocus your entryways and newsletters.*

When someone first steps into the doorway of your program, what images does she or he see? Is there a bulletin board cluttered with notices, reminders, or commercial displays, or does one immediately get a sense of the people and values of this early childhood community? If pictures or children's work are displayed, are they haphazardly tacked up or carefully arranged to highlight an example of how children, families, and teachers are valued in this program?

Likewise, if you produce a newsletter for parents, is it full of cluttered announcements and trivial details about the happenings in the program, or does it feature stories of the real lives and deeper values and

happenings among the children and adults?

Consider adding real and metaphorical mirrors in these places by displaying visual storyboards which give visibility to the children's conversations, thought processes, and emerging skills. Have staff members create beautiful bio-boards for your entryway and designate a space which features how different families approach such things as holidays, a new birth in the family, mealtime, or rites of passage. Make this the focus of your newsletters as well, asking staff and parents to write about such things as:

- a favorite childhood memory that relates to their current activities with children;
- a person they look to for inspiration or leadership;
- a book or author who has influenced how they see and relate to children;
- something metaphoric like a fable, poem, or song to describe how they experience their time with children or respond to a particular event.

### **A Climate with Windows**

As you offer mirrors that reflect people's real lives, you simultaneously create windows for seeing other points of view. Finding ways to consider other perspectives is central to any effective team building, ability to work with conflicts, and efforts to embrace diversity. Sometimes ordinary moments create a peephole window, while other experiences throw open the sash and let in a gust of wind. A balance of comfort and disequilibrium moves people along in learning to work with diverse viewpoints and challenge traditional patterns of power.

### **STRATEGY** *Learn about listening.*

To build a community and work with the differences that will exist in any group, good listening habits need to be developed. Introduce the following framework and activities to promote listening between staff, parents, and the children. Begin by introducing the concept of three different kinds of listening:

- **Autobiographical listening.** You hear things that relate only to your own experience or perspective.
- **Merry-go-round listening.** You are waiting or biding your time until it's your turn to speak.
- **Deep listening.** You are genuinely trying to understand and learn something new.

Whether in a one-to-one exchange or during staff meetings, the practice of deep listening goes a long way toward enhancing the self-esteem of both the speaker and the listener. Develop the skill by devoting a few minutes of each meeting to any of the following:

- Role play the different kinds of listening and discuss how each feels.
- Share a story in pairs, and examine the kinds of listening that occur.
- Point out the kinds of listening at work during a group discussion.

### **STRATEGY** *Explore different values.*

Teachers and caregivers benefit from the opportunity to examine and name the influences on their own values and preferred practices.

A simple way to do this in a staff meeting is to write on separate pieces of paper possible opposing viewpoints on policies and then post them around the room. Ask everyone to find one viewpoint they wish to discuss, go to that paper, and talk with others there. They don't have to agree with the viewpoint, but they should at least have strong sentiments that they would like to discuss. Viewpoints you could have on the papers include:

- Children should be seen and not heard.
- Children should primarily be allowed to make choices and negotiate with adults.
- Children should primarily be offered limited choices and non-negotiable guidelines from adults.
- Children should call adults by their first names.
- Children should address adults by Mr. or Ms. or Teacher with her or his name.
- Children should sleep in a room separate from their parents.
- Children should stay bonded with their parents by all sleeping in the same bed or room.
- Children should be allowed to play with food products.
- Children should be taught that food is precious and should not be played with.

Debriefing this activity can lead to an examination of how we are defining developmentally appropriate practices. Are there any unacknowledged biases or blind

spots built into our thinking? Acknowledging that there are different points of view doesn't mean giving up one's own or letting go of program standards. Rather, it suggests an awareness of chosen values and preferences and invites others to negotiate with values and practices that are important to them.

### **STRATEGY** **Hold video parties.**

Periodic social get-togethers for staff, perhaps also including family members, can provide informal opportunities to learn more about each other. These occasions can also be used to provide a collective window for considering other points of view, by watching and discussing provocative videos together.

Videos which offer a glimpse into other cultural perspectives include *Preschool in Three Cultures*, *The Songs Are Free*, *Lone Star*, *A Family Gathering*, and *Torch Song Trilogy*. Videos that may serve as a more jarring gust of wind include *The Color of Fear*, *Brother's Keeper*, *Schindler's List*, *Fires In the Mirror*, and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Some of these can be found in regular video stores, while others are available in libraries and catalogs of PBS shows. For years I've encouraged early childhood programs to literally put more windows and mirrors in their environments, knowing this can enhance the quality of time people spend there. Thanks to Emily Style for expanding this as a metaphor in our work to create programs which are truly inclusive and empowering for children and adults.

## Reference

Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3).

***Margie Carter lives in Seattle and travels widely to speak and work with programs to bring metaphors alive. Her new book with Deb Curtis, The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing, and Improvising in Your Center (Redleaf Press, 1998), offers many examples of this process in action.***