



Improve Your  
Questioning  
Techniques

Asking Questions that Support  
Children's Understanding  
about **Diversity**

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Education of Young Children

# Supporting Children's Understanding About Diversity

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The children in Ms. Talia's kindergarten classroom are eagerly awaiting the visitors for their family traditions museum. The children have been learning all about each other's family backgrounds, languages, and traditions, and they have created exhibits about them. The classroom is filled with the voices of excited children and artifacts from their families. At one table, Theo starts sharing his family tradition with Ms. Lina, a classmate's aunt.

After he explains about Friday night dinners and game night at his poppa's house, he asks Ms. Lina, "How come you speak English like me?"

Ms. Lina smiles and replies, "Why wouldn't I speak English like you?"

Theo pauses and then says, "'Cause you look like Ariel's mommy, and she doesn't speak English good and it sounds funny."

Across the room, two children from the classroom next door stop by Maya's table and start looking at her pictures and a blanket from her exhibit. Maya explains that her special blanket was made from Indian saris belonging to the women in her mother's family.

As she shows the pictures of her family, Simone asks Maya, "How come your mommy and daddy don't match? Your mommy has brown skin, and your daddy has white skin. That's weird. My mommy and daddy both have white skin."

These interactions in Ms. Talia's classroom are nothing out of the ordinary. They represent the many ways that young children make sense of the various aspects of human diversity that surrounds them.

The term *diversity* is often used to refer to people who look, speak, or act in ways that are different from what is considered the societal norm. A more inclusive view of diversity suggests that it is part of the natural order of human existence, that the multiple ways people look, speak, and act are all beautiful and normal. This view focuses on celebrating

the numerous lifestyles humans have in the world and appreciating the ways diversity enriches our human experience. While some people think that teachers need to focus on the ways that people are similar, many multicultural educators agree that it is only when people understand and appreciate diversity that they can truly understand how we are similar (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010; Ramsey 2015).

As racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity in the United States continues to expand, young children are more likely than past generations to see people who do not look, speak, or act like them. Through their countless observations and interactions, children are always applying what they already understand about human diversity, and then either confirming or adapting what they know. In the opening vignette, both Theo and Simone are applying their emerging understandings of ethnicity, language, race, and family. Theo assumes that Ms. Lina would speak English with a Dominican accent like Ariel's mother because Theo thinks that Ms. Lina looks Latina. This assumption is based on his understanding of what makes someone Latina in terms of how she looks and sounds. Theo has not yet developed an understanding that Latinos are a diverse group, that they can be fluent in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and other languages to varying degrees, and that some Latinos might speak English with an American accent. Simone also makes assumptions about families and race. Based on her prior understandings, she assumes that members of a family must be of the same race and therefore have the same skin color. In both instances, Theo and Simone are presented with information that does not fit into their existing understanding of human diversity. Their questions are evidence that they are trying to reconcile this new information with what they already know.

## Getting Started

When children make comments such as Theo's and Simone's, some adults respond by telling them "Don't say that," or "That's not nice." In other cases, adults might explain what is wrong about their comments. In both of these responses, children are being *told* about diversity rather than being supported to reach a new understanding—the understanding that people within and across various racial, cultural, and linguistic groups do not all look, think, speak, and act the same. Good teaching practices tell us that children learn best when they are given opportunities to construct their ideas, and the same logic holds true for how you can support children's perspectives of diversity with high-level questions. Rather than merely telling children about diversity, allow them to express their ideas and then help them reach a new understanding about the richness of human diversity by asking thought-provoking questions.

## Supporting Children's Learning

Children need learning experiences and opportunities that help them develop an understanding of diversity as the norm. This can be accomplished in several ways that build on one another:



- » Provide experiences that help children develop positive individual and group identities. It is only when children appreciate their own racial, cultural, and language backgrounds that they can learn to appreciate the backgrounds of other people around them.
- » Use classroom materials (e.g., books, dolls, figurines, visual aids, and art) that represent people from diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.
- » Avoid stereotypical representations of groups (such as Native Americans in teepees) in lessons and classroom materials.
- » Provide experiences and materials (such as a wall of children's family photos) that allow children to see that there is diversity even within a particular racial, cultural, and linguistic group.
- » Balance celebrating diversity with unity by pointing out both the commonalities and differences across shared human experiences, such as how birthdays are celebrated.
- » Infuse diversity into all aspects of the daily classroom routine, environment, and activities, and not just as a special lesson or unit. For example, notice and discuss the different types of styles, colors, and textures of hair among children in the class, or the variety of languages spoken by the people in your school. As children make observations and ask questions that relate to issues of diversity, use these teachable moments to address their questions and talk about their ideas.
- » Provide opportunities for children to interact with people from a wide range of racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds by reaching out to colleagues, friends, families, and local community members.

Ms. Talia uses some of these strategies for the family traditions project described in the vignette. She has the children work with their families to identify their own traditions. The class then learns about their classmates' traditions, like names, recipes, vacations, and heirlooms. During the project, Ms. Talia reads stories about family traditions that include characters from many different backgrounds, such as *The Relatives Came*, by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Stephen Gammell; *I Love Saturdays y domingos*, by Alma Flor Ada, illustrated by Elivia Savadier; and *The Granddaughter Necklace*, by Sharon Dennis Wyeth, illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline. These collective experiences show the children that there are many types of family traditions and that each one is equally and uniquely enriching to families.

Although Ms. Talia has a classroom that celebrates diversity, there is a continuous need to observe and respond to the children's inquiries and assumptions about human diversity. Based on Theo's comments to Ms. Lina, Ms. Talia knows that she needs to provide the children in her class with materials and learning experiences that show that there are multiple ways to be Latina. By asking high-level questions such as "What are some ways that you are similar to and different from your friend Kendrick [another African American boy in the class]?" and discussing children's ideas, she can highlight that, among many other differences across Latino cultures, not all Latinos speak English, Spanish, Portuguese, and other languages the same way.

Let's imagine that Ms. Talia witnessed Maya and Simone's interaction. She knows that many of the children in her class come from monoracial, monolingual, and monocultural families, and she wants to use this opportunity to expand the children's understandings of diversity and families.

**The following day, Ms. Talia asks during the class meeting, "What were some of the exhibits at our family traditions museum? What is a family tradition?" (Level 1: Remember).**

**The children recall and share their responses, such as "One of my favorite exhibits was Maya's blanket. It reminded me of the quilt that my grandmother made for me when I was a baby."**

**"Did anyone else notice anything that is similar to something in their family?" questions Ms. Talia (Level 3: Apply). Later in the conversation, she adds, "Simone, I noticed that you also visited Maya's exhibit. Please describe her family tradition to us. Why is it considered a tradition?" (Level 3: Apply).**

**After Simone explains that Maya's blanket is made from Indian saris, Ms. Talia asks, "Simone, you noticed something about Maya's mother and father. Explain to our class what you noticed in her pictures and what you asked her," (Level 3: Apply). Simone responds, and the teacher summarizes her explanation. "So Simone noticed that Maya's mom is Indian and has brown skin, and her dad is Italian and has peach-colored skin. She said that they don't look the same and was wondering why. Simone, why was that surprising to you?" (Level 2: Understand).**

Simone answers that everyone’s skin in her family matches. Ms. Talia says, “Hmm, you know what? This reminds me of when we studied our families. One of the things we talked about was who was in our family, and we made a graph of the number of people in our family. Let me go get that so we can look at it.”

After she displays the graph, she asks the children, “What does our graph tell us about families?” (Level 4: Analyze). A child responds that all families are different and have a different number of people in them. “Yes, all families are different. One way they’re different is in how many people are in the family. In what other ways are families different?” (Level 3: Apply).

The class shares several responses, and Ms. Talia expands on these by reminding them of family similarities and differences based on the diverse traditions they saw in their family tradition museum exhibits.

“Now let’s go back to Simone’s question about whether or not families have to have matching skin color. We can look at our class book on our families to see if we can figure out the answer to that question,” says Ms. Talia. As she flips through the pages with photographs, she asks children to make observations about the people in their families. She stops in between to ask, “In what ways are our families similar? In what ways are they different?” (Level 4: Analyze). Next, she asks them each to look closely at their family photo and decide if their family members all have the same skin color (Level 4: Analyze).

Ms. Talia wants the children to move to an understanding that families can look and act very differently. She thinks about how she can help them create a more



inclusive definition of families as a circle of people who love and care for one another.

With this in mind, the next day she asks the children, “How might it feel if someone told you that your family is strange or not a real family? Why would you feel that way?” (Level 5: Evaluate). After the children share their responses and agree that it would be hurtful, she reads a modified definition of *family* from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* to the class. “‘A family is a group of individuals living under one roof and usually with one person in charge.’ What do you think about this definition? Does it include your family? Whose family might it leave out?” (Level 5: Evaluate).

Given the children’s responses, she tells the class that they are going to make their own definition that includes all families. As a group, the class shares ideas about what the definition should include (Level 6: Create). After creating a list, they evaluate each idea to make sure it is fair and doesn’t leave anyone out (Level 5: Evaluate). Once the children create a common definition, they draw pictures of their own families and dictate to Ms. Talia why their families are special and what makes them a family (Level 6: Create).

As you work with children to deepen and expand their understanding of diversity, higher-level questioning and critical thinking are essential. The questions you ask must build on what students know and have experienced. Find a balance between guiding the conversation with respect to diversity and engaging in discussions that are responsive to what children are saying and seeing. Be flexible and slow down the pace as needed. It is also important to use high-level questions and cognitive learning experiences continuously throughout the year. Through our commitment to providing opportunities that *show* children that diversity is all around them and a natural part of human existence, children can develop a true appreciation and understanding of the richness of the world in which they live. If appreciation and understanding of diversity are cultivated from a young age, it will translate into empathy and compassion for others, whether we are the same or different (Souto-Manning 2013).

### The Picture Book Connection

*All the Colors We Are/Todos los colores de nuestra piel*, by Katie Kissinger, photographs by Wernher Krutein

*And Tango Makes Three*, by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, illustrated by Henry Cole

*Apple Pie 4th of July*, by Janet S. Wong, illustrated by Margaret Chodos-Irvine

*Last Stop on Market Street*, by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson

*Moses Goes to a Concert*, by Isaac Millman

# Expand Children's Thinking and Learning by Asking Questions

1

## Remember

(identify, name, count, repeat, recall)

- What are some ways we can say *friend* in other languages?
- Think of a time when someone teased you because you looked different from them. How did it make you feel?
- What holidays do we celebrate as a class?

2

## Understand

(describe, discuss, explain, summarize)

- How would you describe the oldest living person in your family? Tell me about something special that person can do.
- How would you describe what is beautiful about your hair?
- How does a person who is deaf communicate?

3

## Apply

(explain why, dramatize, identify with/relate to)

- Think about how you feel when you celebrate Hanukkah or Christmas. Why might a friend celebrating Diwali also be excited about their celebration?
- Why are all family traditions special?
- Why do you think some boys might feel shy or worried to play with dolls?

4

## Analyze

(recognize change, experiment, infer, compare, contrast)

- What are some similarities between you and Charlie from the book *My Brother Charlie* (by Holly Robinson Peete and Ryan Elizabeth Peete, illustrated by Shane W. Evans)?
- How would you feel if your friends wouldn't let you play with them on the swings because you look or speak differently than them?
- Let's look at our books on scientists and athletes. How many of them feature boys, and how many feature girls? What do you think about that difference?

5

## Evaluate

(express opinion, judge, defend/criticize)

- In the book we read, children with brown skin were not allowed to attend the same school as children with light color skin. Why was this fair or unfair?
- In the book *Something Beautiful* (by Sharon Dennis Wyeth, illustrated by Chris K. Soentpiet) the girl found some beautiful things about her neighborhood and some things she wanted to change. What are some beautiful things about your neighborhood and some things you want to change?
- What do you think makes someone a good friend (president)? If you were choosing a friend (voting), what kind of characteristics would you look for?

6

## Create

(make, construct, design, author)

- How can we redesign our classroom so that it is easier for a friend who uses a wheelchair to move around?
- How would you redesign the packaging on your favorite toy so that either a boy or a girl would want to play with it?
- Make a page for our class book that explains what makes your friend beautiful.