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**Essential Practices for Early Childhood Educators Who Value  
Multicultural Perspectives**

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Multicultural Perspectives**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this humble effort to my parents who have always believed in me and given me unconditional love and support. I also dedicate this report to my sister who is very special and has always been there for me whenever I need her. Most of all, thanks to God who has made everything possible.

## **Abstract**

# **Essential Practices for Early Childhood Educators Who Value Multicultural Perspectives**

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This report addresses the importance of multicultural education in early childhood classrooms as well as three essential practices for early childhood educators who value multicultural perspectives. The early childhood classroom is the first place in which children develop their identities and recognize cultural differences. Multicultural education can offer opportunities for children to value and understand cultural diversity as they have more experiences outside of their homes and neighborhoods. While there are many kinds of practices that support a multicultural perspective, this paper focuses on three multicultural practices that early childhood educators can incorporate in their classrooms in order to create authentic multicultural classrooms and to promote multiculturalism. The three practices are 1) integrating culturally relevant pedagogy/culturally responsive teaching, 2) understanding multicultural families, and 3) pursuing social justice. These practices can help early childhood educators better

understand multicultural students and families and have more meaningful interactions and partnership opportunities with them.

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## **I. Introduction**

Early childhood classrooms are often the first place where young children have everyday experiences outside of their homes. Young children experience huge changes as they enter school settings after leaving their primary environments which are most often their homes and neighborhoods (Lasser & Fite, 2011). In these early learning settings, children increasingly encounter children and adults who differ by race, ethnicity, gender, class, culture, and/or language. As children interact with people around them, they develop their identities and recognize cultural similarities and differences among people (Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009). At the same time, children absorb the overt and covert messages about people's differences and form stereotypes and biases which can influence their self-concept as well as attitudes toward others (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Given that early childhood is an important period of time for children's learning and development, supporting children to value and respect diversity is a vital task for early childhood educators. By integrating multicultural education into their classrooms, children will be able to better understand differences among people and to value diverse perspectives.

Populations in many countries are diversifying. In response, more countries have started to think carefully about multicultural education, even countries that have traditionally been monocultural (Eldering, 1996). For instance, South Korea (where the author was born and attended school) used to be a homogeneous country for a long period of time. However, the demographics have been recently changed due to marriage-

migrants, foreign workers, ethnic Chinese immigrants, and settlers from North Korea (Finchum-Sung, 2012).

In terms of the U.S. context, the population is historically more linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse than many countries. Yet in the U.S., children of immigrants are one of the most quickly growing populations of the United States, with one in four children being an immigrant or having at least one immigrant parent (Turney & Kao, 2009). 44 percent of all children are from minority groups and the proportion will increase into 62 percent by 2050 (NAEYC, 2009). Children coming from non-dominant groups or non-traditional homes including children of color, children from immigrant families, and children from LGBT families can suffer from discrimination and educational difficulties (Hyland, 2010). Because of the differences in values and culture compared to the dominant group, minority children are often viewed as culturally deficient (Carter & Goodwin, 1994). The deficit perspective on the homes and behavior of minority children explains gaps in achievement or learning. Instead of blaming historically disenfranchised families, it is necessary to include multiple points of views on these families in multicultural practices in order to provide equitable educational experiences.

To examine multicultural practices that might be helpful to early childhood educational settings, this paper pursues two main questions. First, what is multicultural education and why is it important? Multicultural education is important for all students since it helps them recognize, respect, and view diversity in a positive manner (Bishop, 1997). There are multiple ways to define and implement multicultural education.

Examining the concept of multicultural education and its significance can help early childhood educators broaden their notion of multicultural education and recognize the necessity of incorporating multicultural education in the classroom. Second, how can early childhood educators create an authentic multicultural classroom? Merely adding multicultural materials to the classrooms does not automatically bring meaningful change to teaching and learning (Riojas-Cortez, 2001). Organizing an authentic multicultural classroom requires transformation in the curriculum and pedagogy by including diverse voices of children and families and problematizing inequities in classrooms.

To answer these two questions, I focus on three practices that can help create an authentic multicultural classroom. Again, there are multiple ways that multicultural perspectives might be brought into the ECE classrooms however this report will focus on three research-based approaches that focus on curriculum and pedagogy.

## **II. Literature Review: What is Multicultural Education? Why is it important?**

Multicultural education supports children in developing cultural competencies by learning about, understanding, and respecting cultural diversity (Gay, 1994). Cultural competencies help children operate successfully in different cultures. Multicultural education also offers equal educational opportunities for culturally diverse children, teach children to value and understand cultural differences, and preserve cultural pluralism (Gay, 1994; Gibson, 1984; Moya, 2002).

In the U.S., linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse (LCSD) children are often marginalized and discriminated even in the early part of schooling because European-American middle-class cultural values are dominant in schools (Bennett, 2001; Ogbu, 1992). In schools, minority culture is often dominated by mainstream culture so LCSD children are often being forced to assimilate in mainstream ideology by giving up their own culture and language. Kaomea (2005) conducted a case study in a Hawaiian school where the children learned about the lives of Native Hawaiians who were negatively depicted as ignorant and violent from the Hawaiian studies textbooks. Affected by the books and teacher's instruction, the children were internalizing the pervasive colonial discourse of viewing Native Hawaiians as barbarous and cruel. Even though the study did not include further responses from children, this study implies that this derogatory message about Native Hawaiians can negatively affect students who are the descendents of native Hawaiians and make them put distance between them and their own culture. The study of Saracho and Martinez-Hancock (2007) describes the difficulties of Spanish-speaking children who felt confused because of the

differences between home and school culture. Sometimes they denied their first language to adapt to school culture. Due to the discontinuities between school culture and home culture, LCSD children often experience learning difficulties (Bennett, 2001; Gibson, 1984; Hyland, 2010). At the same time, it is likely that LCSD children may start to undervalue their own racial and cultural identities and consider it as inferior than dominant culture if their cultural heritage is not visible and not being accepted in schools (Espinosa, 2005; Rhedding-Jones, 2002). Multicultural education enables young children to challenge the notion of LCSD individuals having deficits and to foster socially just communities (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2013).

Multicultural education can help counter dominant cultural advantages by changing how young children view themselves and their families and by impacting how they see those around them in a positive light no matter the cultural differences. Bennett (2001) explains that there are four genres of multicultural education - curriculum reform, equity pedagogy, multicultural competence, and social equity. First, transforming traditional curriculum which is largely Anglo Eurocentric necessitates inclusion of knowledge and perspectives which have been ignored and suppressed. Utilizing students' own culture and history as a learning context and supporting students to acknowledge other cultural perspectives is essential (Ogbu, 1992) Second, equity pedagogy requires change in teacher's attitudes and expectations for minority students to provide equal opportunities for all students to reach their fullest potential. Third, multicultural competence includes abilities to interpret overt and covert communicational cues such as language, signs, or body language and to interpret customs different from one's own with

open mind. Lastly, social equity teaches children to advocate for themselves and create a space for freedom, equality, and justice for all. These four genres should be considered when developing multicultural education for young children in order to help them develop multicultural competence. It is essential to transform the curriculum so that it includes and reflects diverse perspectives of LCSD children and integrates equity pedagogy that supports children reaching their full potential through culturally relevant experiences. At the same time, young children can learn how to challenge stereotypes, prejudices, and unfair practices by pursuing social equity.

To successfully implement multicultural education, teachers need to remember five dimensions of multicultural education (Banks, 1993). According to Banks (1993), teachers need to 1) integrate contents which illustrate examples and information of diverse ethnic groups; 2) be aware of the effect of implicit cultural assumptions and biases on knowledge construction process; 3) help children reduce prejudice regarding racial identities; 4) use equity pedagogy to increase academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic class groups; 5) reconstruct school culture for diverse students to help them experience educational equality and empowerment.

Multicultural education is about equity and about whose voices are heard and read in early childhood classrooms (Nieto, 2000; Souto-Manning, 2013). Yet, many teachers lack knowledge, experiences, needs, and resources of LCSD children and families since the education they received is primarily based on values and beliefs of dominant cultures (Sleeter, 2001). Implementing multicultural education that reflects the voices of all children is not an easy task. Educators can decide to pursue equity in their early

childhood classrooms and then investigate and reflect on their stances, privileges, identities, and biases (Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser, 2009; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Garcia, 1998). Chen et al. (2009) offers a self-study guide for teachers to reflect on their awareness, classroom environment, pedagogical environment, and relationships with families and community in relation to multicultural education principles. Some of the self-awareness questions include (p.105):

- Am I aware of my own cultural identity and history? How comfortable am I about who I am?
- Am I aware of biases I may hold?
- Do I view diversity and exceptionalities as strengths and that ALL children can succeed?

After examining one's own identity and bias, educators need to engage in a critical process of examining their own teaching by asking these questions (Souto-Manning, 2013, p.13):

- Does every child who enters my classroom have an opportunity to achieve success to her or his fullest capability regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, home language, dis/ability, and other cultural identifiers? Do I tend to advantage children whose race, ethnicity, or religion similar to my own?

- Do I understand that equity requires eliminating disparities of access to opportunities and resources – what some might call fairness or justice? And, sometimes, do I fail to meet this requirement?
- When I advocate for equity in educational access do I take into account all types of “access”? Do I consider physical access as well as social, economic, and cultural access?

Multicultural education urges teachers to examine themselves before they implement any multicultural practice. After that, early childhood educators, who want to integrate multiple perspectives in their classroom, need to reform their curriculum by integrating contents regarding diverse cultural groups and pursue social equity by challenging assumptions and prejudice in order to support the development of multicultural competence among young children (Banks, 1993; Bennett , 2001).



### **III. Theoretical Framework**

Providing multicultural education means organizing a multicultural environment where children can experience, learn, and value diversity through interactions between individuals (e.g., child-peers or child-teacher). The social environment around children is crucial because they learn through participation in social interactions and cultural activities (Vygotsky, 1978). Social experiences gained from interactions impact not only what children learn, but also how they think. They acquire knowledge about the world even before they understand specific meanings of language (Freeman, 2011). Learning can be seen as a process of enculturation that occurs by internalizing the discourses and practices of one's culture. In this sense, organizing culturally responsive environments is necessary to help children embrace multiple perspectives and respect diversity since they learn from socially constructed environments. Multicultural education is also important for early childhood educators because they play a significant role in children's learning. Teachers have their own figured world which is "socially and culturally constructed realms of interpretation" (Holland et al., 1998, p.52). A figured world is where people develop new identities (Urrieta, 2007). A multicultural classroom can be regarded as a figured world because not only children but also teachers can build one's sense of self (identity) by participating in multicultural activities and respecting diversity. Early childhood educators have their own image or conception of multicultural classroom (figured world) in their mind. By engaging in multicultural practices, teachers position

themselves through social interaction and author their identities as educators in order to create the figured world of an authentic multicultural classroom.

In this report, the two theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky (1978) and Holland et al. (1998) help explain the role of socio-cultural perspectives in multicultural education. The theory of Vygotsky (1978) explains the influence of social environment on interaction and suggests the importance of integrating multicultural education in early childhood classrooms. Although Holland et al. (1998) did not explicitly explain a teacher's identity in educational settings, the theoretical concepts are useful to understand identity production among teachers as they interact with people around them in a multicultural classroom.

### **Vygotsky's Importance of Environment**

Vygotsky viewed the relationship between the individual and the physical/social environment as inseparable. According to Vygotsky, children are born as social beings that use signs (language) or tools which are saturated with meaning created by adults even before they fully understand the significance of the signs or tools. Through the process of social interaction, words of adults come to have the same meaning for children. This represents the close connection between children's individual development and the social milieu in which the child is residing (Tudge & Rogff, 1989). The signs or cultural tools that mediate the interaction between children and the world include language, counting systems, mnemonic techniques and algebraic symbols, paintings and sculptures, music, and writing (Smidt, 2013). Language plays a crucial role in mental

functioning and becomes the foundation of thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). With the use of language or tools which are created within cultures, learning becomes social as children are interacting with adults and peers. In order to acquire culturally meaningful knowledge or behavior, social interactions between a child and a teacher are essential. During interactions, children pay attention to the words and behaviors of teachers so that they can use them and reproduce them later on. For instance, the language that teachers use when addressing racial and ethnic differences becomes a tool for children to understand those differences (Park, 2010). Children are social beings so everything they see, hear, or feel from teachers helps them internalize cultural understanding or commonly-held concepts.

According to Vygotsky, a child's learning process is followed by a developmental process that leads to zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD is the "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Children can practice skills and internalize higher mental functions by solving more advanced problems with the help of teachers or more capable peers. Only when children are participating in activities which problematize their bias and prejudice toward racial and ethnic differences, will they be able to solve problems and construct new ways of viewing identity and diversity (Park, 2010). Scaffolding, which is the guidance of a teacher to help children solve problems, is also an important process to promote learning and development (Wood et al., 1976).

The early childhood classroom is a crucial social milieu for children where they use language and other cultural tools (e.g., toys, dolls, books, or pictures) that contain social messages to interact with peers and teachers. Throughout these interactions, children receive, reproduce, and internalize messages about race, ethnicity, gender, and class from the environment and teachers. Teachers need to organize authentic multicultural classrooms in which the language and cultural tools of all children including LCSD children are equally represented and cherished. For example, Riojas-Cortez (2001) describes a bilingual preschool classroom of Mrs. Garza who valued children's language and their cultural traits. In Mrs. Garza's classroom, children's first language (Spanish) was included during activities and children's funds of knowledge were valued while they were engaging in socio-dramatic play. Mrs. Garza had in-depth cultural knowledge about her students that helped her make the curriculum relevant to children. In another study, Souto-Manning (2013) illustrates the multicultural approach of Ms. Baines who was a teacher of African-American 1<sup>st</sup> grade students and who successfully managed to bring community resources and home literacies into classroom. The students made books through an oral history and exploration of the community where they lived. They studied the history of a 40-year-old local barbershop and documented it within their community. This project represented the community that the children were living in and connected their home lives with school lives. Both Mrs. Garza and Ms. Baines managed to represent and value the culture of their students by including their language and bringing their home experiences into the classroom (Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Souto-Manning, 2013).

## **Holland et al.'s Identity Production**

According to the book, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), there are four main contexts which are the foundation for the production of identities. Identity is a concept of how people view and interpret themselves in relation to the worlds they take part in (Urrieta, 2007). Some scholars have used identity production contexts in various ways to study identity and agency in relation to education (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Hatt, 2011; Leander, 2002; Urrieta, 2007). Although Holland et al. (1998) did not explicitly mention teacher's identities in educational settings, the theoretical concepts can be used as informative tools for studying identity production in multicultural education. Holland et al. (1998) explains the four concepts in identity development: figured worlds, positionality, space of authoring, and making new worlds.

The first context of identity is figured worlds. Every individual has their own figured worlds which are socially and culturally constructed "imagined communities" where particular actors are acknowledged and certain acts and outcomes are valued over others. In the figured worlds, people develop identities by participating in social and cultural activities. They constantly (re)produce the world through appropriation, objectification, and communication. Also, artifacts (e.g., toys, dolls, books, or pictures) are important mediators since they evoke figured worlds and maintain the existence of figured worlds. At the same time, artifacts call up relevant social and cultural contexts, positioning individuals in regard to those contexts. A multicultural classroom can be considered a figured world because teachers and children place value on certain act(s)

such as respecting diversity, jointly participating in multicultural activities, and building one's sense of self (identity). In the figured world of multicultural classrooms, teachers can potentially develop their identities by organizing multicultural activities and interacting with LCSD children and families. Boaler and Greeno (2000) for example used the concept of figured world by introducing two different figured worlds of a mathematics classroom setting. In one school setting, teachers taught math using didactic teaching. The students in this school setting passively received knowledge by memorizing formulas. In another setting, teachers used discussion-based teaching to explain math. The students in this setting were encouraged to construct their mathematical knowledge through active discussion. The teachers who incorporated these different practices had a significant impact on student's identity as learners. The study of Boaler and Greeno (2000) implies that the way a teacher view oneself as an educator can influence their way of teaching, the contents of education, and eventually children's identity. In terms of multicultural education, unless early childhood educators intentionally try to create a new figured world of authentic multicultural classroom, they are likely to accept the dominant culture and use artifacts to maintain a classroom where the dominant culture is mostly represented and considered the norm.

The second context of identity is positionality which means the positions "offered to people in different figured worlds" (Holland et al., 1998, p.111). People accept, reject, or negotiate the identities offered to them when they are given certain positions such as bad student or successful student (Urrieta, 2007). Positionality is related to one's social standing in a lived world so it is linked to the day-to-day relations of power structures.

This implies that educators have a power to position and label both children and parents. LCSD children and parents are often placed in marginalized positions that lack worthwhile knowledge or language skills by teachers. However, one can have multiple positional identities along with several figured worlds since they are given different positions in those worlds. For instance, a LCSD child might be positioned as a student who has behavior issues in school(figured world) but might be positioned as a smart child who has an in-depth knowledge in transportations at one's home (figured world). By taking multiple positional identities of LCSD students into consideration, teachers can have a broader understanding about LCSD students. Since teachers have the power to position children, it is important for them to be aware of their own position as well.

The third context of identity is the space of authoring. People author their figured world by orchestrating social discourses, making choices and taking actions. By incorporating culturally responsive teaching, including the perspectives of LCSD children and parents in the classroom, and questioning inequity issues, early childhood educators are constantly authoring their teacher identities as listeners, learners, and supporters of children. Also, teachers always make choices by accepting, rejecting, or negotiating educational contents, pedagogy, or communication style which are considered as actions to author and create their figured world of multicultural classroom.

Lastly, the fourth context of identity is making new worlds. New figured worlds can be created through "serious play" and this concept is closely related to the theory of Vygotsky. Similar to young children who acquire symbolic competency through play, adult actors "experiment with the force of acting otherwise" through social play and gain

new social competencies which allow space for the advent of a new identity and a new figured world (Holland et al, 1998, p.236). This means that teachers can experiment and shift their views to create authentic multicultural classrooms by incorporating culturally responsive practices, understanding LCSD families, and pursuing social justice which are the practices enable teachers to (re)position themselves and children and to take actions.

In the figured world of multicultural classroom, teachers develop their professional identities in relation to children, families, and communities. Positioning themselves as well as LCSD families, intentionally making choices, and taking actions in order to reflect perspectives of LCSD children and families can be seen as a process which will eventually construct a new figured world of authentic multicultural classroom.



#### **IV. Essential Practices for Multicultural Education**

Early childhood educators who want to integrate multicultural perspectives to their classrooms need to include content that is relevant to a culturally diverse group of children and families. Incorporating culturally relevant knowledge and experiences to the lives of diverse children is also necessary to develop children's cultural competence. Advocating social justice is another way of valuing cultural diversity. Many early childhood classrooms assumed to be without prejudice or discrimination are actually not free from injustice and inequality because both teachers and children bring their own perceptions and prejudices into the classroom. Through social justice practices, children will be able to solve real life problems in their classrooms which could raise their sociopolitical consciousness.

In order to incorporate multicultural education in the classrooms, teachers need to be aware of three practices: integrating culturally relevant pedagogy/culturally responsive teaching, understanding multicultural families and pursuing social justice. By incorporating these three practices which promote multicultural perspectives into their teaching, early childhood educators can start the journey of making an authentic multicultural classroom.

##### **1. Integrating Culturally Relevant Pedagogy/Culturally Responsive Teaching**

In order to provide authentic multicultural education, early childhood educators should make education pertinent to children's lives by incorporating culturally relevant

pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching. Culturally relevant pedagogy links the experience of students to school practices so that it makes learning culturally related to students. Culturally relevant pedagogy pursues communal empowerment and has objectives: attaining academic success of students, developing cultural competence of students, and forming critical consciousness among students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Also, culturally relevant teaching encourages native language instruction and students' cultural strength (Araujo, 2009). Culturally responsive teaching employs cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as mediums for teaching and it has five components: developing a cultural diversity knowledge base, including culturally relevant curriculum, showing caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction (Gay, 2002). Early childhood educators who want to provide culturally relevant education using culturally responsive teaching should first reform curriculum contents and classroom environments in order to make education meaningful to children.

### **Curriculum Relevant to Children's Lives**

In order to make education significant for children, curriculum should be culturally relevant to the lives of all children. Whenever many early childhood educators plan to "do" multicultural education, however, the first thing they consider is introducing diverse holidays and festivals across countries as one of the themes in the curriculum (Nieto, 1994). This approach is called tourist, token, or cafeteria approach which is

adding exotic features of various cultures to the standard curriculum. This approach which focuses on overt or visible features of culture such as food, dress, art, music, games, literature, holidays, and rituals is often criticized due to their lack of authenticity. As a diagram of the cultural iceberg indicates, the visible features are indeed components of the larger culture; however, nine-tenths of the cultural iceberg which includes “values, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions” (p.8) are invisible and hidden (Hutchins et al., 2012). Merely addressing visible features of certain culture such as diverse foods or holidays takes children away from focusing on educational contents which are more relevant to daily life experiences of LCSD children. Also, the cafeteria or tourist approach in multicultural curriculum generates a problem of inclusion/exclusion (Boutte, 1999). Depending on teachers’ decision of which culture is being included and excluded in the curriculum and how it is represented in the classroom, children receive different messages. They might think that other cultures which are not dealt with in the classroom are less valuable than the dominant culture. It is likely that children might internalize cultural stereotypes if the curriculum touches only the surface level of a culture and reflects only one side of the story. Since curriculums convey important information, values, and actions about ethnic and cultural diversity (Gay, 2002), teachers need to be aware of the fact that curricular decisions are closely related to political and powerful acts. Tourist curriculum lacks real understanding of different culture since it only highlights exotic features of cultures and trivializes real-life experiences of diverse people (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Souto-Manning and Mitchell’s (2009) study of a four-year-old preschool classroom demonstrates a number of ways that the teacher

incorporated culturally responsive practices over time. The teacher used cafeteria-like approach to introduce holidays across cultures at first. However, the activities did not help children build respect for different cultures. So the teacher altered the approach and included specific experiences of children by incorporating home literacy and funds of knowledge. Consequently, children stopped judging differences, began to understand holidays in the contexts of various cultures and countries, and appreciated diverse perspectives. Nelson and Rogers (2003) studied culturally appropriate practices in a preschool classroom. After interviewing teachers, parents, administrators about culturally appropriate practices and doing personal researches about the practices, the teacher planned a spring unit investigating about beans and seeds from various cultures. The children brought beans from home and explained about it with pride to peers. Also, the teacher invited parents as a resource and used multicultural children's books to introduce diverse cultures while meeting the assessment objectives.

When it comes to addressing multicultural issues, focusing on similarities among diverse people and stressing that everyone has similar traits and needs seems to be a simpler and more peaceful method for teachers. Nonetheless, talking about differences is important since children have to know that there are different ways to fulfill people's needs and their way of living is not the only one. Appreciating both similarities and differences in cultures is important to children as it can broaden their perspectives. Recognizing cultural similarities and differences requires deconstruction of polarized categories and introduces countless possibilities and perspectives that exist beyond binary division of culture (Ang, 2010).

## **Culturally Relevant Classroom Environments**

Setting physical classroom environments to reflect diverse culture of children is also necessary in multicultural education (Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney, 2008; Nelson & Rogers 2003). For children, omissions in the environment informs what their teachers consider important or not important (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Eventually, students begin to value the existing and devalue what is missing in the classroom (Gay, 2002). Hence, preparing classrooms with culturally relevant instructional materials and literature can expand the narrow notion of culture and encourage children to value different perspectives (Nelson & Rogers 2003). Instructional materials such as visual images, toys, play prop, dolls, or puzzles and storybooks can be seen as signs or tools which are created within cultures and mediate interaction between children and people around them (Vygotsky, 1978). During these interactions, children use cultural signs and tools to make meaning out of the world and internalize social and cultural concepts. Children may receive and internalize social and cultural messages through classroom materials and books. Also, classroom materials and literature work as artifacts which evoke figured worlds where certain actors and acts are acknowledged and valued over others (Holland et al., 1998). Providing various materials and books (artifacts) which present diverse perspectives of culture is important in order to create a multicultural classroom (figured world) where ALL children (actors) are acknowledged and valued. Teachers need to consciously put efforts into providing instructional classroom materials which represent various backgrounds of families because the majority of materials usually reflect White culture (Derman-Sparks, 1989). The classroom materials should reflect children and

adults from various racial/ethnic groups, occupations, and lingual backgrounds. Teachers also have to be careful when it comes to choosing books since they reflect social values and attitudes of one's society (Lee et al., 2008). Multicultural literature should represent the stories of diverse racial, ethnic, religious, socioeconomic groups which include both similarities and differences between cultures.

The classroom environment has to represent cultures of diverse children and families because children make meaning through signs and artifacts around them. Providing a multicultural classroom environment consists of culturally relevant instructional materials and literature is important for the development of cultural competence and identity for children.

### **Teacher's Role**

It is important for teachers to become a role model for students by valuing and respecting diversity, cultural differences, and multiple perspectives (Boutte, 1999; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009). Since teachers play significant roles in children's learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978), children will also learn the attitude of teachers. Souto-Manning and Mitchell (2009) introduce a preschool classroom where the teacher integrated culturally responsive practices. The teacher maintained a humble stance by honoring the cultures and stories of students, becoming learners of students' cultural values and backgrounds, and fostering dialogues while confronting assumptions made by children and teachers. Similarly, in a study of successful teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings(1995) found that teachers shared common characteristics. The

teachers were enthusiastic about children's learning, understood the need of students, had high expectations for students, functioned as learners, and consistently showed respect to parents. Ladson-Billings (1998) also provides actual stories of culturally relevant teachers who encouraged students' academic progress, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. To encourage academic progress, the teachers urged the classes to do their very best and consistently pushed and coached all students. They knew when to present relevant examples from their students' backgrounds and experiences to make learning more significant and to foster cultural competence. Culturally relevant teachers also incorporated real life problems into a classroom lesson which could raise sociopolitical consciousness of students.

In order for educators to understand and respect all children in their classrooms, acquiring knowledge about cultural diversity is necessary. Knowledge in cultural diversity includes cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, relational patterns, and detailed, accurate information of different ethnic groups (Gay, 2002). When teachers are fully equipped with knowledge in cultural diversity, they will be able to meet the educational needs of various students and utilize culture to increase students' intellectual scope and academic achievement. It is important to remember that children will not reach their fullest potential unless teachers are sensitive to their issues (Boutte, 1999). Then what should teachers do to attain knowledge about cultural diversity? In order to increase knowledge in diversity and fully understand LCSD students, educators must become listeners and learners of their students and families. If teachers show honesty and desire in learning different cultures, LCSD

families can open up and share their stories. This will naturally create a room for dialogues between teachers and families, which can ultimately foster understanding.

## **2. Understanding Multicultural Families**

LCSD parents and families are often misunderstood by teachers who lack proper information and knowledge about them. More often than not, they are accused of being indifferent to education of their children and they are viewed as lacking worthwhile knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 1995). In order to truly understand LCSD parents and families, it is important to carefully listen to their voices and value the knowledge that they have. Once teachers start to communicate and listen to LCSD parents and families, teachers will be able to widen their narrow definition of culture and realize cultural similarities and differences between them and LCSD families. Acquiring authentic information and knowledge directly from LCSD families regarding their history and culture will help early childhood educators have better understanding toward the families and have collaborative relationship with them.

### **Listening to Parents' Voices**

Students who are from linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse (LCSD) families are making classrooms more dynamic than ever. This means that understanding LCSD students is not an easy task for teachers if they do not share common backgrounds with their students. Teachers who are coming from the dominant



culture might have a hard time understanding the cultural values of LCSD families and their day-to-day struggles. Early childhood educators from the dominant culture should recognize the political and economic consequences of their social positions and listen to the members of non-dominant cultures who can offer a wide range of perspectives (Moya, 2002).

Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichacha (2001) studied high-performing migrant-impacted schools and found out that these schools successfully supported migrant families by meeting multiple parental needs in social, economic, and physical areas. Through home visits and continuous interaction, school personnel could be aware of a “life story” (Lopez et al, 2001, p.262) of each family on personal level which informs their needs and hardships. In addition, many personnel who were former migrants or had migrant family members could build deeper connections with families since they were more sympathetic and were able to understand the situation from an insider’s perspective. At the same time, the school staffs tried their best to meet the needs of migrant families by providing daily necessities and educational services. High expectations toward parents from the schools empowered parents and helped them be more aware of their rights and responsibilities. In this regard, the schools could promote migrant students’ academic success since the schools were committed and held themselves accountable to fulfilling the needs of families. The study of Lopez et al. (2001) reveals the impact school staffs who share the same cultural backgrounds with migrant families can have. However, this does not necessarily mean that any school staff sharing similar backgrounds of students will perfectly understand them and supporting them successfully (Adair, Tobin, &

Arzubiaga, 2012). Perhaps more importantly, teachers and administrators need to be willing to listen to the “life stories” of families from various cultures so as to better understand them and to be responsive to their needs.

Each ethnic group has goals and values of education that need to be considered in school settings. In the study of Suizzo (2007), four U.S. ethnic groups of parents (Mexican American, Chinese American, African American, and European American) showed that all four groups valued both independence and interdependence, but the degree to which one is more important than the other varied across groups. Although Mexican American, Chinese American, and African American parents valued independence and agency, the ethnic minority parents put more importance on family and cultural roots compared to European American parents. Taking into account cultural similarities and differences among LSCD families seems necessary in planning and implementing multicultural education. Wright (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with low-income mothers to explore how they self-assess their lives. The findings suggest that the low-income mothers addressed “making it” as a criteria for how well they are doing in their lives since they were able to meet the basic needs of their children. Also, satisfaction and the independent ability to offer more than the basic needs to their children were other criteria related to one’s perception of success. Some mothers who have low self-expectations were accepting and learning to be comfortable with their circumstances since change seemed less likely to happen in their current lives. Both studies of Suizzo (2007) and Wright (2013) suggest that LCSD families have varying degrees of emphasis on educational goals and cultural values. More often than not,

however, teachers ignore and disrespect this fact and do not take the cultural differences into account when they are interacting with LCSD families. It is crucial for teachers to communicate with LCSD families and listen to their voices in order to understand these families better and to be more responsive to their needs.

Unfortunately, LCSD children and families are commonly viewed as lacking worthwhile knowledge and experiences (Gonzalez et al., 1995). Also, many teachers and schools tend to assume that most LCSD parents do not care about their children's education (Doucet, 2011; Lightfoot, 2004). More often than not, parental involvement becomes the criterion to evaluate parents' values on education and their expectation on their children. However, many studies provide counter examples to prove that LCSD parents do value their children's education (Doucet, 2011; Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2008; Lareau, 1987). According to the study of Suizzo et al. (2008), middle-class African American mothers valued educational achievement but at the same time worried about their children being labeled as deficient due to race. In order to assist their children in overcoming potential barrier of racism, many mothers tried to support their children's learning and stressed the importance of education. Doucet's (2011) study with Haitian immigrant parents also revealed the parents' interest in education. Haitian parents in her study believed that it is unnecessary to monitor the teacher's performance since they respected and had faith in them. To Haitian parents in the study, educating children was teacher's responsibility since they were the experts so the parents' way of approaching school may seem passive compared to mainstream parents who are actively involved in schools. However, it does not imply that Haitian parents who participated in the study

had little value on their children's education. Lareau (1987) investigated family-school relationships between white working-class and middle-class communities. The results indicated that both working-class and middle-class families valued educational success but the ways they supported educational success were different. Working-class parents largely depended on teachers when it came to their children's education, whereas middle-class parents believed that they are equal partners in education and actively tried to get involved in their children's educational process. Common types of parental involvement were doing volunteer work in the classrooms, attending parent-teacher conferences or open house, reading books to children, and helping with homework. All of these types of participations require a significant amount of time and resources from the parents. Even though LCSD parents value education more than anything else for the sake of their children's future, various obstacles such as work shifts, time constraints, or day care problems prevent them from participating in school affairs. Therefore, listening to LCSD parents' stories will help teachers better understand children's lives outside of school as well as parental views of education and efforts to support children's education (Lareau, 1987; Tobin, Arzubiaga & Adair, 2013). Immigrant parents in the research of Tobin et al. (2013) shared their thoughts about the U.S. curriculum, language learning, and their children's identities. Although many immigrant parents acknowledged the significance of play in U.S. preschool curriculum, a majority of them desired more academic emphasis since they did not want their children to experience difficulties upon entering kindergarten. Since the immigrant parents believed schools should be in charge of education rather than themselves, they preferred direct academic instruction. Even though

most of the immigrant parents remained silent and did not speak out about their preference in direct academic instruction in front of teachers, it did not mean that they agreed with play-oriented curriculum. Immigrant parents also shared their thoughts about language learning. They wanted their children to keep their home language but at the same time, stressed the importance of learning English because to them it was linked to future academic success in schools. Many parents thought that they were responsible for teaching their home language to their children but they also worried about their children losing first language fluency. In terms of identity, the immigrant parents expressed that becoming American is a necessary process for their children but at the same time, they appreciated when their culture was reflected in the preschool setting because they wanted their children to maintain their cultural heritage as well.

By listening to the voices of LCS D parents, early childhood educators can redefine the positions of parents from diverse cultures. In an early childhood classroom, many teachers constantly deem LCS D parents deficient. They label them as ignorant or inconsiderate parents who do not care about their children's education based on their involvement in school. However, when these teachers start to listen to the stories of these parents, they will be surprised by the high expectations of LCS D parents toward their children and how much effort they put into the education of their children while sacrificing themselves. Also, facilitating dialogue will aid in building a collaborative relationship between parents and teachers (Tobin et al., 2013). The LCS D parents and families will be respected, be re-positioned as important figures in children's lives and as equal partners in children's education. At the same time, it creates a sharing of

knowledge which can ultimately be used as a powerful resource in producing a culturally relevant curriculum.

### **Valuing Funds of Knowledge**

Prevailing perceptions of minority children and families as socially disorganized and intellectually deficient are easily accepted and hardly defied in the educational field (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Hatt, 2011). Bringing funds of knowledge into curriculum helps teachers break their narrow definition of culture and counter deficit perspectives (Gonzalez et al., 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Funds of knowledge are defined as historically accumulated and culturally developed knowledge and skills which are crucial in households (Moll et al., 1992). As mentioned earlier, the cafeteria or tourist approach to culture usually focuses on observable surface indicators of culture such as dance, food, special events, and traditional artifacts. On the contrary, practices using funds of knowledge acknowledge dynamic and numerous characteristics of culture and bring real life experiences of multicultural children and families into the classroom. Teachers can discard negative perspectives against working-class families because children's families are considered as valuable assets holding ample educational resources and as equal contributors to children's education (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Hutchins et al., 2012; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009).

In the research of Moll et al. (1992), Mexican and Yaqui families were interviewed and observed during the home visits by a teacher-researcher team. Through the interviews, teachers studied funds of knowledge in households and discovered ample

cultural and cognitive resources which can be used in the classroom to improve academic development. As the teacher collected information about family histories or activities, she could make connections between funds of knowledge and instructional activities. For instance, many Mexican students already had international traveling experiences since they traveled back and forth from Mexico to the U.S. during school break. These experiences made students interested in economic issues and immigration law. Yet, these experiences were not discovered or valued in the classroom before the interview. By using the funds of knowledge about Mexican candy, the teacher and her students organized a project which covered the curriculum of “math, science, health, consumer education, cross-cultural practices, advertising, and food production” and successfully connected children’s family lives to their school lives (Moll et al., 1992, p.138). The study of Gonzalez et al. (1995) provides honest reflections of teachers after their visit to the homes of working-class Latino students. The research gives examples of funds of knowledge which include farming and animal husbandry, households’ rural origins, knowledge about construction and building, urban occupations, knowledge about trade, business, and finance on the U.S. and Mexico borders. These diverse funds of knowledge made teachers redefine their limited definition of culture which previously only focused on traditional and visual aspects. They could gain deeper understanding of each child’s history and household situation which made them more emotionally linked to their students. Also, the Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant parents’ funds of knowledge about *Remedios caseros* (folk medicine) was incorporated in the Family Institute for Early Literacy (FIELD) activity (Huerta & Riojas-Cortez 2011). The parents

discussed and wrote about their knowledge of folk medicine which helped them understand the connections between home and school literacy. They also shared their knowledge as literacy guides with their children by participating in literacy activities together.

Since school practices are part of daily lives of children, inviting parents as educators and leaders into the classroom is likely to spark confidence and pride in children. This inclusion of parents in the child' learning at school could help children engage more in their learning process (Araujo, 2009). Funds of knowledge can not only contribute to children's academic success but also facilitate cultural competence as students feel encouraged to value their individual culture and utilize it as a vehicle of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Listening to the voices of parents and incorporating their funds of knowledge into the classroom will provide an opportunity for teachers to reconceptualize their deficit view and to create a new figured world where teachers become the learners and the parents become the capable and knowledgeable educators.

### **Teacher's Role**

Teachers need to be communication facilitators who can create an atmosphere in which LCSD parents feel free to have a conversation with teachers and tell their stories (Tobin et al., 2013). At the same time, however, both educators and parents need to be willing to negotiate different cultural values in order to reach a consensus. Even immigrant teachers who share the same backgrounds as the immigrant children and families in their classroom experience difficulty in providing culturally responsive



education (Adair et al., 2012). They struggle between progressive pedagogical practices and cultural values of parents when these two are contradicting. Hence, it is necessary for educators to converse with parents so that they can exchange their values and cultural beliefs which will not only create a stronger curriculum but also facilitate the parents' involvement.

Teachers benefit from positioning themselves as learners as well as reflective practitioners in order to understand various families and encourage their involvement (Gonzalez et al, 1995). Like the teachers who went through home visits and ethnographic interviews with multicultural parents in the study of Lin and Bates (2010), early childhood educators can learn about the life histories of households and then jointly construct household knowledge with families. Moreover, teachers can use field notes, personal field journals, and questionnaires in order to document the knowledge of households and to promote reflexive thinking which all can later be used as resources in incorporating funds of knowledge into the curriculum.

### **3. Pursuing Social Justice**

From very early ages, children internalize messages about power and privilege regarding gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and language (Hyland, 2010). Most early childhood classrooms are not free from injustice and inequality, as both teachers and children bring their own perceptions and prejudices into the classroom (Ang, 2010). In that sense, addressing injustice in early childhood education is important since

children develop concepts of fairness during early years (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Thus, multicultural education should move beyond education in diversity and toward education in social justice. Advocating social justice is an act of valuing cultural diversity and is about critiquing the normalizing discourses through the curriculum and the pedagogies that teachers employ (Ang, 2010).

### **Issues of Fairness**

Children constantly internalize messages about people from different cultures. They also form bias and prejudice while making meaning which can be reinforced and perpetuated in classrooms if teachers do not overtly address it. (Boutte, 2008; Derman-Sparks, 1989). Also, educators themselves are powerful figures who can (un)consciously position children from different cultures which affects their identity development (Hollan et al., 1998). Anti-bias Education is fundamental since it provides tools to constructively identify, resist, and respond to unfair issues (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Derman-Sparks, 1989; Husband, 2012; Kuby, 2012).

Husband (2011) stresses the significance of integrating anti-racist education in early childhood social studies classroom. Given that children continuously construct meaning and understanding about race as they interact with their peers and adults, racially biased information can be transmitted to children and can be accepted as truth if it is not contested and challenged. Prompting young children to counter racial injustice can equip them with tools to identify, oppose, and take action against racism later in life. An example of the second graders in the study of Boutte et al., (2011) illustrates how

children became aware of and understood race and racism through weekly literature discussions. JLR, the classroom teacher in this study, sent fiction and non-fiction books containing social issues such as racism home with the children in order to encourage them to have discussion with their families. JLR also read the books in the classroom and prompted discussions among children by posing questions from time to time to connect children's experience to the stories. Children's drawings and responses after reading the books also contributed as a tool to start small or whole group conversations. What is noteworthy in this example is that it addresses the problem of colorblindness and provides practical guidance for teachers who want to engage in conversations about race and racism with children. Bently (2012) also offers an example of social justice practice in the early childhood classroom where children participated in discussions of justice and fairness. At first, the children did not understand the meaning of justice which limited the depth of conversation among children. However, the teacher quickly changed the word 'justice' into 'fair' which holds greater meaning for children and successfully sparked the discussion. It can be interpreted that the teacher provided scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) by introducing the word 'fair' which is more understandable to children and helped them better connect the concepts of fairness to the story of Martin Luther King Jr. This enabled the students to gain deeper understanding of social justice which later resulted in them solving more advanced problems.

Having honest conversations about issues with fairness with children makes them feel that their opinions are worth hearing and helps them make sense of concepts in ways that are meaningful to them (Bentley, 2012; Boutte, 2008). At the same time, social

justice practices can not only promote children's learning and cultural competence but also develop critical consciousness among children because social justice practices enable children to recognize social inequities and help them critique the cultural norms (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, the critiques should move beyond classrooms and be connected to real life problems so that children can be able to critically evaluate the information, literature, and media which they encounter in real world (Boutte, 2008).

### **Teacher's Role**

Before teachers try to address the issue of social justice, they first need to be critically aware of their own bias, attitudes, and identities since education is not a neutral process which can constantly marginalize non-mainstream groups (Ang, 2010; Nieto, 2000; Schoorman, 2011). Nieto (2000) explains the reasons why accepting one's own identity is necessary for teachers in multicultural education. Due to the fact that most teachers in the U.S. are White, monolingual, middle-class females, they rarely probe their racial, native language, or social class privilege. This means that teachers too often equate the cultures and identities of LCSD children to problems. Reflecting on one's identity and privilege before educating children from diverse backgrounds is necessary for teachers. Schoorman (2011) argues that teachers need to become critically conscious and justice-oriented practitioners. Through the assignment called "A Cultural Profile," the author offered opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers to critically explore one's bias, attitudes, and cultural influences. A cultural profile makes pre-service and in-service teachers to think about multiple aspects of their identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, social class,

gender, sexual orientation, national origin, language backgrounds, and etc.), the way they were socialized into these identities, and the consequences of these positions in diverse contexts. This process eventually enabled participants to acknowledge their roles “in perpetuating or challenging privilege, stereotypes, and institutional practice” (Schoorman, 2011, p.342). Ang (2010) also asserts that early childhood educators have to develop a critical consciousness since one’s own cultural and individual values can influence their behavior, care giving routines, and curriculum plans. For instance, educators who come from a dominant culture and speak only one dominant language must be aware of their cultural and linguistic positioning and be open to making changes in their practices. It becomes crucial for educators to contemplate on potential conflict situations which will empower them and encourage them to discover various ways of dealing with complex issues. Also, it is important to create a “safe” space where children feel comfortable to openly express their opinions and have a conversation about inequality issues (Nieto, 2000). Culture circles (Souto-Manning, 2013) that utilize multicultural literature illustrates one option for addressing fairness in early childhood classrooms. Culture circles create a space for the teacher to become the facilitator to ask questions to children in order to problematize specific situations involving injustice. Dana who was the preschool teacher in the study began asking questions to further promote discussion which naturally occurred as students began questioning the assumptions about stereotypes of gender and color. Then she introduced a book which was related to the topic of conversation and facilitated deeper discussion about fairness and rights. The

story of Dana's classroom implies that teachers who are pursuing social justice need to carefully listen to children and continually provoke discussions about inequitable issues.

By integrating the theme of social justice in early childhood education, teachers can create a new figured world in which opinions of all children are recognized, accepted, and respected. Also, children will be able to question cultural norms and social inequities through the participation in social justice practices, which will eventually develop children's sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is possible for children to question inequities in their lives when they are given positions and places to discuss about them from teachers. Early childhood educators should position the children as social agents who are capable of dealing with social justice issues and reposition themselves as learners and supporters.

## V. Discussion

### **Connecting the Two Theoretical Frameworks with Multicultural Practices**

The theory of Vygotsky(1978) suggests teachers to consider educational environment and interaction when implementing multicultural practices. Since children internalize social messages through interaction using language and cultural tools, it is necessary to provide the tools which represent diverse culture in the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy/Culturally relevant teaching stresses the importance of reforming the tools by transforming curriculum and classroom environment to reflect diverse culture. Young children also learn from the interaction with teachers who play significant role in their learning. Teachers can show modeling by respecting multiple voices and perspectives through practices of listening to LCSD families and of bring funds of knowledge into the classroom in order to help children internalize respectful attitude. Also, early childhood educators are responsible for providing practices that are above children's actual development level so that it can stimulate their learning and development. Social justice practice enables children to critically view and problematize unfair situations or biases that they did not notice or took it for granted. By providing social justice practices that are placed in children's ZPD, early childhood teachers can stimulate children to endlessly question about the concept of social justice and equity.

Early childhood educators are significant figures who greatly influence children's learning and development. The theory of Holland et al. (1998) is helpful in explaining about teachers who are positioning children and families while constructing their

identities through multicultural practices. The assumptions and expectation of teachers toward people around them especially toward LCSD children and families impact their pedagogy. In order not to misrepresent LCSD children and families in their classroom, integrating culturally relevant pedagogy is useful for recreating teachers' figured world where all perspectives of children are represented. Changing pedagogy requires teachers' deliberate action. By organizing culturally relevant curriculum and environments which include multicultural perspectives and culturally relevant artifacts, teachers can provide meaningful learning experiences to children. By listening to multicultural families and incorporating their funds of knowledge, teachers can attain genuine information and knowledge from them which will reposition them as valuable assets in educational settings. These multicultural practices can help teachers author their identities as humble learners not as authoritarian teachers. Also, it is the role of teachers to position children as active agents so that they can have opportunities to question cultural norms and seek social equities.

### **Multicultural Education in Early Childhood Classroom**

Multicultural education offers the potential for equal educational opportunities for LCSD children, increased value and understanding of cultural differences, and development of children's competencies to operate successfully in different cultures (Gay, 1994; Gibson, 1984; Moya, 2002). As an early childhood educator, it is important to create an authentic multicultural classroom and to value diverse perspectives by integrating multicultural educational practices. Through multicultural practices, children not only from diverse culture but also from dominant backgrounds benefit from it. By



participating in multicultural practices which represent diverse perspectives of people, White children can extend their understanding of similarities and differences between people, learn that their way of life is not universal, challenge the dominant culture, and empathize with other's perspectives (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011).

Three essential practices for multicultural education - culturally relevant pedagogy/culturally responsive teaching, understanding multicultural families, and social justice - are discussed in this paper enable teachers to organize a classroom where each child's interest, potentiality, and culture are valued. Culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching emphasize the importance of providing culturally relevant educational experiences to LCSD children (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Riojas-Cortez, 2001). Because children are social beings who receive influences from classroom environments and teachers, their interactions and classroom experiences help them make meaning and from ideas about others. Language, curriculum, and physical environments utilized by teachers affect how young children internalize prevailing social and cultural messages. For instance, providing activities or images illustrating Native-Americans in stereotypical ways will deliver distorted messages about contemporary Native-Americans. When teachers plan to provide culturally relevant practices, it should reflect diverse children's daily experiences and cultures that will lead them to gain pride and confidence in their own cultures and of those around them. The act of planning and providing culturally responsive practices can be considered as an authoring action by teachers to make an authentic multicultural classroom (new figured world).

Teachers who come from the dominant culture may not be familiar with different cultures their students are from. In order to learn and understand their cultures, communication with the parents and families of children is important. Communication can be started with listening to the voices of the parents and this experience can help teachers gain further cultural knowledge and understanding (Lopez et al., 2001). Educators can also discover funds of knowledge as they continue to have meaningful conversations with various parents. In the figured world of multicultural classroom, teachers might put themselves in a higher position than parents from various cultural backgrounds. Also, their lack of knowledge about various parents might make them assume those parents as uncaring and ignorant. Yet, by starting to take actions such as listening to the stories of diverse families and using funds of knowledge as a classroom practice, teachers can reposition themselves by stepping down from where they were. Simultaneously, teachers can reposition LCSD parents as collaborators and valuable knowledge holders (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009). These actions and repositioning processes also contribute to the formation of a new figured world of authentic multicultural classroom.

Ultimately, multicultural education should go beyond celebrating diversity and pursue social justice. Prevailing prejudice and inequality in one's society should be discussed in early childhood classrooms in order for a true multicultural education to take place (Bently, 2012; Boutte et al., 2011). Otherwise, children from all backgrounds will continuously participate in the perpetuation of social inequality. Early childhood educators position not only parents but also children and often limit their participation by

saying that they are too young to be taught about sensitive issues. In order to make a new figured world of an authentic multicultural classroom, however, teachers have to position children as social agents who can handle social justice issues and author their identities as more of supporters not necessarily as teachers.

Overall, three essential practices for multicultural education which include culturally relevant pedagogy/culturally responsive teaching, understanding multicultural families, social justice are closely intertwined. Incorporating culturally relevant/responsive teaching cannot be achieved without learning about different cultures where diverse children are coming from. Also, using diverse funds of knowledge in the classroom not only makes education relevant to children's lives but encourages greater understanding of LCSD families. All these practices continuously stress the role of the teacher as both the listener and the learner. Gaining authentic cultural knowledge and understanding can only be accomplished through direct experience. It is crucial to actually listen and learn from LCSD children and families. This requires a role shift for teachers. They need to shift their positions into listeners as well as learners. And this can open various opportunities to investigate and appreciate diverse cultures and perspectives.

## **VI. Implications for Early Childhood Educators**

Early childhood educators have to be aware of power dynamics in a classroom since they are placed in a position where they can empower and depower children. They need step down from the position where they have all the answers to the position where they instead learn from LCSD children and their families. Creating a space where authentic voices of LCSD children and families can be heard is a duty for teachers. In addition, teachers have to constantly problematize their own practices and get used to the feeling of discomfort. Feeling discomfort is a natural reaction for teachers when their opinions or beliefs are different from LCSD children and families and when they are engaging in social justice practices. Yet, discomfort can function as a catalyst for transformation and provide a chance to question previous assumptions about certain groups of people or what is fair/unfair (Madird, Baldwin, & Frye, 2013).

Constructing an authentic multicultural classroom means providing culturally relevant educational experiences, including genuine voices and knowledge of diverse families, and learning how to question inequity and resolve conflicts. Since there are numerous ways to implement multicultural education, the practices which have been introduced in this paper are only a part of it. While teachers need to strive to provide multicultural education, they have to constantly question themselves: to whom are the curriculum and the classroom practices truly culturally relevant to? And the answer should always be not some, but *all* children.

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