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Multicultural and Nonsexist Prop Boxes

Gloria S. Boutte, Irma Van Scoy, and Susan Hendley

There has been a resurgence of interest in prop boxes, as evidenced by articles appearing in early childhood journals (Soundy & Gallagher 1992; Myhre 1993), yet little emphasis has been placed on multicultural and nonsexist possibilities of prop boxes. Although multicultural education extends far beyond activities and materials alone (Boutte & McCormick 1992), teachers must plan for multicultural dimensions in all activities and set up the environment to represent diversity (Brewer 1995). Materials and props facilitate the process. As children play with props and interact among themselves, teachers have many opportunities to dis-

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All photographs in this article courtesy Keith McGraw.



cuss diversity issues and model acceptance of differences.

When teachers fail to include a wide variety of multicultural and nonsexist props in their dramatic play areas, they unconsciously reinforce monocultural ideas about how a business or home setting is "supposed" to look. The absence or infrequent use of multicultural props often reflects teachers' attitudes toward diversity.

Rationale for prop boxes

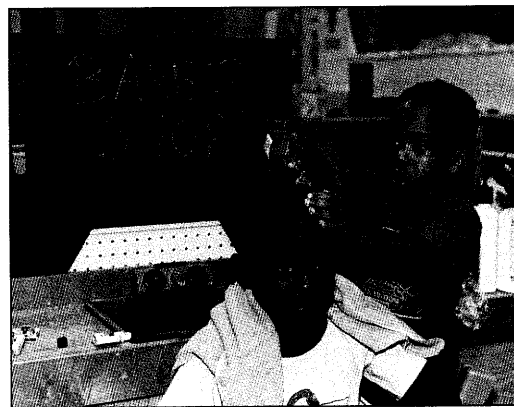
Play, including prop boxes, encourage children's holistic development (social, emotional, language, cognitive, and physical) and easily lends itself to integration across the curriculum. Although prop boxes are most commonly found in preschools and kindergartens,

they also provide wonderful learning opportunities for children in the primary grades. Prop boxes with multicultural themes can be developed in a complex and detailed manner to expose children to diversity issues. When multicultural concepts are integrated into regular play routines, the experiences are more authentic (Boutte & McCormick 1992) than when taught in isolated lessons or units.

From a Piagetian (constructivist) perspective, prop boxes are excellent for fostering children's construction of knowledge and providing them with an "active" education (DeVries & Kohlberg 1987). A particular strength of prop boxes is that they allow children to build on spontaneous activities. Children begin to note commonalities among genders, ethnicities, and cultures while playing with nonsexist and multicultural props.

They find common elements in how people from different cultures cook, eat, dress, live in families, and carry out daily activities (Brewer 1995).

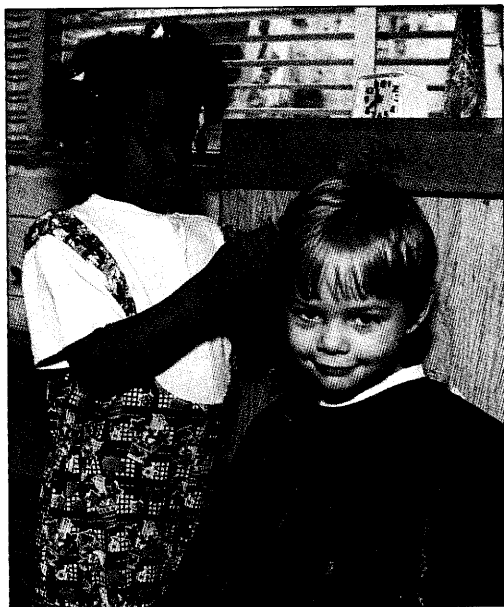
DeVries and Kohlberg (1987) suggest four methods that actively engage children's minds and appeal to children's spontaneous activities: interest, play, genuine exploration, and cooperation. Each method is briefly discussed to illustrate why the



dramatic play area is an ideal and natural area to focus on diversity.

Interest

DeVries and Kohlberg (1987) emphasize that unless children are interested, they will never make the constructive effort to make sense out of their experiences. Passive approaches such as drills and lectures do not typically gain or sustain children's interest. Most children begrudgingly engage in repetitive tasks, such as completing worksheets, primarily to oblige the teacher.



On the other hand, prop boxes and other active methods elicit children's interest naturally. Children gravitate toward prop boxes on their own volition, without prodding from the teacher.

Since play is inherently interesting to most children, prop boxes place learning within a relevant context. For example, children are more compelled to learn their telephone numbers when the numbers are used during play routines (written down on message pads, listed in appointment books, or filed in a Rolodex) to "call" classmates about business issues. The con-

cept of time is emphasized when children use a clock and calendar to set "appointment" times. Children are motivated to count money if they pretend to pay a bill. They will add, subtract, multiply, divide, or use a calculator when there is a clear purpose for doing these activities. Other concepts naturally emerge as children classify items by attributes, measure objects, put things in order, and so forth. Since young children also are very interested in differences and similarities among people, teachers can use multicultural props to extend understanding of diversity issues.

Play

DeVries and Kohlberg (1987) point out that play is usually neglected by traditional schools because it appears to be devoid of functional significance. By contrast, constructivist educational methods, and the progressive education philosophy that preceded it, include a large component of play. However, teachers must be adept at observing children's play to determine how to facilitate learning (including knowledge of and attitudes about other cultures).

Experimentation

Genuine experimentation and authentic work are salient characteristics of education. Experimentation should be embedded in natural contexts. Prop boxes, less threatening than formal methods, encourage experimentation. Experimentation provides time and opportunities for children to make errors, rediscover, or reconstruct their knowledge.

Unlike approaches that focus on correct answers, prop boxes are open-ended and allow children a chance to derive *horizontal* (deeper) understandings.

Since the process of knowledge construction is ongoing, each time children engage in dramatic play activities, the possibilities of deepening their understandings increase. Learning is not a series of facts that children accumulate (*vertical* learning). Rather, the emphasis is on enhancing children's reasoning processes and understandings. Multicultural and nonsexist prop boxes provide children with opportunities to experiment with different cultural artifacts.

Cooperation

Cooperation does not mean "submissive compliance or superficial good-naturedness" (DeVries & Kohlberg 1987, 30). Rather, it implies interactions (including conflict) between teachers and children. DeVries and Kohlberg note that social interaction is necessary for the development of logic. The social context offers possibilities for children to become aware of differences in perspectives. Through social interactions, children can be led out of egocentrism or subjectivity in thought to reciprocity and objectivity. For example, children learn that certain cultural habits that are familiar to and preferred by them may be foreign and distasteful to others. As children play with props, they inevitably face disagreements with and intellectual challenges by their peers and/or teachers. Such conflicts encourage accommodation (learning) and discourage ethnocentrism (believing that people like you are the best people).

When children use stereotypes, teachers can discuss misconceptions and dispel myths. Teachers may purposely select props that stimulate children's multicultural and nonsexist awareness. It is not uncommon to observe children debating different play schemas such as what foods to serve (for example, tacos or hamburgers).

Culturally loaded judgments and terminology can be discouraged by encouraging children to use terms such as "different" instead. After extended periods of play and cooperation, children will undoubtedly leave dramatic play areas with increased levels of multicultural awareness. Children also learn that many foods, clothing, and so forth are shared across a number of cultures.

Multicultural and nonsexist prop boxes

Authentic multicultural experiences should be thoroughly integrated in curricula and activities rather than being presented through formal units or lessons (Boutte & McCormick 1992). Many teachers, in an effort to avoid a "tourist" approach to multiculturalism, have difficulty conceiving relevant ways of emphasizing similarities and differences among people. While they want to avoid promoting stereotypes by presenting cultural artifacts to represent cultures, teachers have to find ways of exposing children to the wide variety of cultural possibilities and beliefs.

Prop boxes should encourage all children to try out various roles. A hair salon, for example, should include men's products as well as women's. Girls and boys can be doctors, nurses, mail carriers, flight attendants, firefighters—whatever. Numerous ethnic groups and cultures should be represented through pictures, magazines, and the like.

At first glance, it may appear that the prop items are simply add-ons that contribute to the tourist approach of multiculturalism. However, closer examination will reveal that children are exposed to cultural artifacts that normally may not be included in regular classroom or only included as part of special units. Hence, children learn

very little about cultural information and artifacts that are very important to various cultures.

Teachers do not need to explicitly point out multicultural and nonsexist items. Rather, they need to observe and listen to children's comments and follow up with rich discussions. Otherwise, children will not get the full benefit of the multicultural and nonsexist props.

For example, children may ask questions about various hair products—after encountering the hair "grease" [oil] used by many Blacks,

a White child may ask, "What's this sticky stuff?" Without teacher clarification, such comments could lead Black children who use these products to feel embarrassed or White children to view hair grease as "weird" or "gross."

Children grow multiculturally when they learn that there are numerous, varied techniques and products for hair care. Teachers can extend children's knowledge by making comments that show appreciation for different hair care methods, visiting hair salons that cater to different ethnic

Listen to These Children Learn

Ebony (Black female): (Talking to self while styling a doll's hair.)
"Hold still, girl, so I can grease your scalp."

Elizabeth (White female): (Frowning) "What's that stuff?"

Ebony: "Hair grease."

Elizabeth: "Hair what?"

Ebony: "Girl, don't you know what hair grease is? Don't your mama put it on your hair?"

Elizabeth: "No."

Ebony: "What do you use then?"

Elizabeth: "This one." (Points to an empty container of shampoo that her mother donated to the collection.)

Ebony: "Oh, I don't use that."

On the surface, hair may seem to be a trivial subject, but it is closely related to the development of children's self-esteem and how they feel about themselves. This scenario lends itself to subsequent discussion about many issues dealing with hair care. The two girls are confronted with the fact that they each use different types of hair products.

Teachers can share books like *Cornrows* (Yarborough 1979) to reopen the discussion. (Often Black products and hairstyles are not seen on advertisements, and children and adults assume that the process of taking care of hair is universal.) The teacher may find ways to discuss differences in hair textures and frequency of shampooing. Many Black females wash their hair only once every two or three weeks, as compared to daily (or every other day) shampooing by many White females. Discussions about straightening hair could be stimulated by including a straightening comb in the collection.

Informal follow-up by the teacher is important in order to curb ethnocentrism. Too often Black females are not taught to feel proud of their hair. The important message for children to learn is that we all have hair, but there are vast differences in hair care techniques. Although we have focused on Black and White females here, other ethnic groups, as well as males, also have different hair care needs and customs.

groups, or inviting children and their parents to discuss various hair products and methods they use. The box on page 36 includes a dialogue that was observed while two children played with multicultural hair products.

Children also may voice objection to different types of music and artwork. Such reactions and comments may point out voids in the curriculum, unresolved questions that children have, and issues that are confusing to them. The addition of listening to a diverse collection of music and artwork on a regular basis has the potential for broadening children's multicultural horizons. By continuous exposure to cultural variations, children learn to appreciate and accept these musical variations as the norm rather than as a deviation from "mainstream" culture. Teachers can invite discussion of multicultural issues that arise in children's play.

The following section highlights some of the multicultural possibilities of prop boxes. Content areas that naturally emerge through interaction with prop box activities are emphasized. We assume that the reader will be able to think of *typical* props to go with each theme (refer to Myhre 1993 or Soundy & Gallagher 1992); therefore, we will focus only on multicultural and nonsexist items and activities.

Generic multicultural possibilities

The multicultural possibilities provided in this section are not intended to be exhaustive. They are elements designed to enhance prop boxes and dramatic play and to stimulate other extensions.

We reiterate that if items are used only once or twice to accompany isolated units, they simply reinforce stereotypes. Although the items listed for specific prop

Art

Multicultural artwork can be displayed to accompany most prop boxes. Artwork should cover a variety of periods and styles (impressionist, cubist, and so on). Museums often sell calendars with reproductions of such work. Sculptures, vases, baskets, masks, pottery, mobiles, and other forms of art also provide a cultural flavor to the dramatic play area. Photos and magazine pictures can be used to decorate the prop boxes and to create posters for display in the dramatic play center. Choose pictures that portray men and women of different races, ages, and abilities engaged in a variety of roles.

A number of books with artwork can be placed in language centers—for example, *Picasso (Venezia 1988)*, written on a child's level with pictures of the Spanish artist's painting; *Linnea in Monet's Garden* (Bjork 1987), a collection of the French impressionist's work; and *Father and Son* (Lauture 1992) or *Noah* (Gauch & Green 1994), both featuring illustrations by African-American artist Jonathan Green of South Carolina.

Cultural Artifacts

A wide variety of cultural artifacts can be included with any prop box (for example, kimonos, saris, kilts, grass skirts, wooden shoes, sombreros, African kufis, quilts, baskets).

Literature

Integrate literature with prop boxes whenever possible. Many books can be used to reinforce themes.

Music

Most businesses play background music. In the same way, music can be played softly in the background during dramatic play activities.

A wide variety of musical styles (for example, country, classical, soul, reggae, appropriate rap, Native American, Asian, Latino) should be recorded. Most public libraries have a wide assortment of music. To avoid repeated trips to the library, we have found it useful to record the music on a cassette player. Children learn to appreciate different music styles and to critique them as well. Additionally, when children hear music that is similar to the type that they hear at home, the school-home transition/link is strengthened.

Foods

Cultural dishes often should be served as snacks to help children develop a tolerance for—perhaps even an appreciation of—other foods. Parents often are willing to cook a traditional dish to share at school. Possibilities include sushi (a vegetable and rice version), red beans and rice, and the like. These should not be presented as unique and exotic snacks; rather, they should be a regular part of the menu. Children will begin to understand that some people do not eat pork or other meats. But they also will realize how much people have in common—for example, that rice is an important staple in many cultures even though it may be prepared differently.

Items for Special Needs

Include objects that are used by people with special needs (for example, portable wheelchair, child-size crutches, walking cane, sign language alphabet posters, braille cards, and so on).

Children become more tolerant because multicultural activities are integrated daily rather than in the isolated units that are few and far between in many classrooms.

boxes will be unique to some children, they are part of ordinary cultural orientation for others. As children play with a wide range of multicultural props, they become familiar with the myriad of ways that humanity manifests itself. Teachers may first need to research some of the items to determine their cultural significance and appropriate use.

Specific multicultural possibilities

This section provides examples of multicultural items and extensions that can be used with six specific prop boxes: beauty/barber shop, shoe store, bakery, restaurant, grocery store, and department store. Curriculum areas can be included in each prop box. For example, for math extensions, children can create price lists, total bills, and pay for services.



Shoe Store

Include a selection of shoes (for example, moccasins, Chinese slippers, sandals, boots) for males and females of many different cultures. Supply knee highs that represent many different skin tones. Read books about various types of shoes—for example, *Try on a Shoe* (Moncure 1973) or *A Pair of Red Clogs* (Matsuno 1960).

Bakery

Create simulations of baked goods representing many different cultures (baklava, pitas, tortillas, challah, and the like.) Simulations may be made with homemade or commercial playdough. When possible, provide the real thing for snacks. Many parents are willing to bake goods. Children also enjoy baking in the classroom.

Cookbooks featuring baked goods from many different cultures can be created by children and their families. Scrapbook pictures can be cut out of food magazines or other magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Ebony*. Books such as *Bread, Bread, Bread* (Morris 1989) can be shared.

Beauty Shop/Barber Shop (Hair Salon)

Wherever children congregate, we sometimes have problems with the spread of head lice, ringworm, and the like. If you are having this type of problem, we suggest that children style doll's hair instead of their own. Provide a multicultural collection of male and female dolls that authentically represent many cultures. If wig heads are used, they also should be multicultural.

Collect an abundance of hair care materials that focus on differences: rollers of various sizes; wigs of many textures, lengths, and colors; a collection of empty containers representing male and female hair products from many cultures (for example, curl moisturizer, oil sheen, hair "grease," perms for Black and White hair, men's hair cream); beads for braids, hair for weaves, barrettes, ribbons, and the like; male-oriented materials such as razors (remove blades, of course), hair clippers (with cord and plug cut off), and empty aftershave containers; different types and sizes of combs (feather, afro, straightening); and various headdresses such as turbans and yarmulkes. While we recommend using empty containers, we suggest that teachers ask children and/or parents to share one hair product during show-and-tell. The teacher may also bring extra products (for example, hair grease) for the children to explore and experiment with.

Provide manicure materials that appeal to both boys and girls and include cotton balls, cardboard emery boards, empty bottles of nail polish, and so on.

Children can cut out pictures of various hairstyles from magazines, make collages, and learn to attend to and appreciate diverse hair styles. Also collect hair salon books that feature hairstyles for males and females of all cultures. Teachers can help children classify hairstyles by color, texture, length, etc. Children's literature about hairstyles can be included or read, such as *Cornrows* (Yarborough 1979), *Straight Hair, Curly Hair* (Goldin 1965), *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (King-Mitchell 1993), *Afrotina and the Three Bears* (Crump 1991), or *Rapunzel* (both the classic and African-American edition [Crump 1992]).

Include a wide variety of magazines that appeal to many cultures and both genders. For example, *Sports Illustrated*, *Ebony Man*, or *Sport* may appeal to boys, *Ebony* or *Essence* to Blacks, or *Scoop Today* to Asians. (Screen all magazines for appropriateness. We remove suggestive pictures prior to placing any magazine in the dramatic play area.) Often parents have such magazines at home and would willingly contribute them to the classroom.

Department Store

This prop box has unlimited possibilities since department stores sell a variety of products. Be sure to include departments for both males and females. Offer clothing that represents many different cultures (kimonos, dashikis, saris, and so on). Children and teachers can create cardboard male and female mannequins that feature characteristics of various ethnic groups. In the accessory department, provide a collection of multicultural and nonsexist hats and scarves (yarmulkes, turbans, and so on). Read Ann Morris's book *Hats, Hats, Hats*, (1989).

The jewelry department could feature a variety of costume jewelry including Native American and African beads, shell necklaces, simulated pearls and gems, and silver- and gold-tone chains. The cosmetic department can include empty foundation bottles representing many skin tones, simulated lipstick and eye shadow colors in a range of colors, and a wide variety of small bottles featuring exotic perfumes and aromas (put a drop of cologne or oil in a cotton ball and stuff the ball into the bottle). A wide variety of knee highs representing many skin tones should be included in the hosiery department. The home interior department could include African sculptures, Asian vases, a variety of dishes and baskets, and so forth.

Restaurants

Several types of restaurants (soul food, Chinese, Indian, Jamaican, Mexican, etc.) with accompanying cooking utensils, dishes, and props can be set up. Try to obtain menus as well as empty food containers and boxes from ethnic restaurants.

Many children have not tasted ethnic foods and are hesitant to try new foods. Ideally, field trips to restaurants could be taken. Parents and teachers also may cook some of these dishes for snacks. In a related extension activity, children could taste herbal teas from all over the world.

Cookbooks complement this prop box. Children's literature such as *Everybody Cooks Rice* (Dooley 1992), *Latkes and Applesauce* (Manushkin 1990), *The Perfect Present* (Thomson & Thomson 1988), *Too Many Tamales* (Soto & Martinez 1993), and *Strega Nona* (dePaola 1975) also can be read.

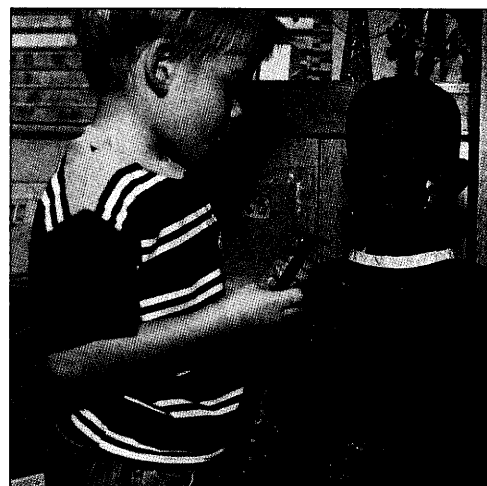
Grocery Store

Ask parents to save containers and boxes from the grocery store. Include a variety of products that appeal to many cultures and both genders (for example, taco or rice boxes, men's aftershave containers). Create simulated bagels, burritos, and other foods with playdough and other media. Many children are unfamiliar with foods such as these. Teachers can discuss how many foods are eaten by people from different cultures. Empty spice bottles and containers can expose children to the wide variety of seasonings used in various cultures (for example, curry, anise, ginger, cayenne pepper).

Multicultural children's books and magazines can be "sold" in the magazine section of the grocery store.

Teachers' attitudes and actions are important: Teachers should not merely be providers of props

We urge teachers to remember the integral role they play in reinforcing attitudinal multicultural competencies. The simple provision of materials without teacher guidance does little for developing multicultural awareness. Children become more tolerant because multicultural activities are integrated daily rather than in the isolated units that are few and far between in many classrooms.



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