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UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

In a classroom we come across children from different backgrounds, of varying abilities, interests, attitudes and aptitudes. Despite the apparent similarities and the fact that they behave like a group, each child is unique and has an individual learning style and learning needs. The classroom is home to children from different regions, cultures, religions, languages, socio-economic backgrounds and traditions. It is vital for all the players in an ECCE programme to make themselves familiar with varying learning needs and understanding their implications for planning and implementing day-to-day teaching learning activities.

In this lesson, you will study the basic aspects of diversity and various factors leading to diversity. You will also study the impact and significance of diversity on educational needs and its implications on making an ECCE programme accessible to and equitable for all children.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- define diversity;

- explain different factors leading to diversity and their implications;

- discuss differences in home language and the medium of instruction in school;

- describe influences of gender and caste stereotypes on children's development; and

- discuss ways to promote equitable participation of all in learning and play.

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20.1 UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

Let us begin with a classroom where the teacher is linking classroom teaching learning with food eaten by families during different festivals.

Classroom Scene

Seema is excited today and is not able to concentrate on the classwork given to her by her teacher. She is eagerly waiting for the lunch break as today, it is her turn to share her favorite festival food and the details related to the festival with the entire class. This is how her teacher has linked the lesson on food with daily lives of students. She has also attempted to sensitize students that different people of different regions serve and eat different foods on festivals and special occasions.

Let us reflect on the classroom scene:

- Are all children of the class being involved in this activity?

- Has the teacher been able to sensitise the children about the diversity in the class?

20.1.1 Defining Diversity

The term diversity originated from the Latin word *diversus* which indicates differences. Diverse means 'differing from each other' and 'made up of distinct characteristics, qualities, or elements'. Being a large country with a large population, India presents endless varieties of physical features and cultural patterns. It is a land of diversity in race, religion, caste, language, and so on. Within school also we see various identities of race, gender, age and social status. Hence, we need to be equipped to address it in the classroom. The case discussed in the beginning of this lesson, where Seema's teacher has initiated a festival food sharing exercise to highlight cultural and regional differences is a simple initiative the teacher has taken to make children aware of existing diversity among their peers besides linking the curriculum with daily life.

Diversity, therefore, consists of visible and invisible factors, which include personal characteristics such as socio-economic background, culture, personality and workstyle.

In short, the term diversity indicates uniqueness or differences without any judgment attached to the differences or unique characteristics. Diversity gives recognition, acceptance and respect to individual differences, irrespective of the origin.

Presence of diverse groups in a school provide opportunities for mutual learning, exploration and celebrations in safe, positive and nurturing environments. Diversity might also be understood as the collection of characteristics and uniqueness of members of diverse group. Understanding diversity is important for engaging with the individuals who may think, act or work differently from us.

20.2 FACTORS LEADING TO DIVERSITY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS IN LEARNING

The large number of different cultures knitted together in such a close and perfect manner make India's diversity one of the wonders of the world. Usually, when people discuss diversity, the conversation focuses on religion and caste. However, to accurately talk about diversity, especially in the classroom, we need to consider more factors like:

- Race
- Multilingualism
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Socio-economic status
- Age
- Level of physical activities
- Religious beliefs
- Learning style

The list above is not exhaustive. Many more factors may be added to it. Let us now understand how each of these factors generates diversity and also how it affects the teaching-learning environment in our schools and classrooms.

Race: Race is division of human kind on the basis of physical features like height, weight, colour of eye, skin etc. as well as also on the basis of social behaviors, norms, customs and practices. It is a classification system which is used to categorise humans into distinct populations or groups by anatomical features related to body structure or physique. These are mostly hereditary, passed on from parents to their children. These variations are due to geographical, historical, linguistic, or religious belongingness.

ACTIVITY 20.1

Can you recall having met children of different race from yours? Did you observe any similarities/differences between them and you?

Children with different physical features may not affect the classroom processes directly but may have implications for classroom dynamics. Like, tall children are often selected for sports, children with a fair complexion may generate more appreciative comments whereas a particular colour or shape of eyes may not be easily accepted by others. A child with fair complexion may be the first choice of the teacher for the role of king/queen/fairy, making other children think that kings/queens/fairies are only fair skinned. This creates stereotypes that are avoidable. Diversity in physical traits associated with race, is a natural phenomenon and needs to be accepted.

Caste: In India, caste is a system of classification determined by birth. Caste can be defined as a system of rigid social categories characterized by hereditary status and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law, or religion. In the Indian context, caste refers to a social group to which membership is decided by birth. Members of a caste group are usually endogamous in that they tend to marry among themselves. Castes are broadly divided into:

o   Scheduled Castes

o   Scheduled Tribes

o   Other Backward Classes

o   Forward Classes

Socially, the caste system involves division of people into social groups (castes) where duties and rights are determined by birth with hardly any flexibility. The basic rights and duties among various castes is both unequal and hierarchical.

The school, a place of education, should propagate equality and equity and promote no discrimination based on caste. Some issues faced by schools pertaining to discrimination are during distribution of mid-day meal, seating arrangement, and involvement of children in learning activities. Another not avoidable a practice observed is related to the school site. If the place where the school is to be setup is near the residence of lower caste people, people from upper castes may not be willing to send their children. In a reverse situation, children from lower castes may feel shy, discouraged and hesitant to study in schools located close to the residence of upper caste people.

Multi-lingualism: In India, each state has its own language. It is not just the accent, but the dialect that also changes from region to region. Multi-lingualism is the act of using, or promoting the use of, multiple languages, either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers. The ability to speak in more than one language is appreciated and respected globally.

With increased mobility of people in search of work and food, children from different geographical regions speaking different languages end up studying together. With the Right to Education, all children are expected to be in school.

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Many a times, it has been observed that children struggle to follow the teaching taking place in the class due to the divide between home and school language. Only when the medium of instruction in the school is the same as the one used at home, can learning become effective. That is when the drop out rate will fall. The divide between the medium of instruction and home language must be overcome by teachers gradually by respecting and accepting the home language and building upon the strength in one language to facilitate the learning of the second and third language.

We all use language to communicate with each other, but persons who cannot hear properly use sign language to communicate. Similarly, persons with vision difficulties use Braille script to write and take notes. Thus, we can say that another dimension of multilingualism is recognizing and valuing sign language and Braille as a medium of communication just like any other language of the country.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity refers to belonging to a social group with common regional and cultural traditions. This factor greatly impacts textbooks, curriculum, pedagogy as well as the school's day-to-day functioning. Each ethnic group has its own customs, art and artefacts, clothing style etc. The child belonging to these groups brings diverse and rich experiences to the classroom which can enrich the peers as well. These local customs and traditions have direct bearing on the education system. The textbook, curriculum, school working days, scheduling of holidays, school timings, medium of instruction etc are all affected by ethnicity. It is also important to integrate the wide range of cultural arts and artefacts in the curriculum and the everyday routines of the classroom.

The school administration and the teacher need to find ways and means to facilitate the learning experience of all children enrolled and acknowledge their ethnicity.

The teacher can organize special festivals, food day, dress day, story day, invite parents and give out activity sheets, to sensitise children about the different ethnic groups in the class.

Gender: The layman understands gender as male and female. Gender needs to be understood in terms of social and cultural identity associated with being a boy or a girl. 'Sex' is a term closely related and often used interchangeably with gender. Sex is a biological characteristic whereas gender is a social characteristic. Biological characteristic of sex is determined by genes, hormones and male-female reproductive organs.

Understanding gender in terms of social cultural identity involves realizing the expected social characteristics and behaviors expected from a boy or a girl. Children's toy preferences are significantly related to parental sex-typing, such as girls playing with dolls and boys participating in sports. In the Indian context,

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both the father and the mother encourage traditional gender roles in their children. Core gender identity is usually formed by the age of three years. After that, it is extremely difficult to change, and attempts to change it can be difficult. Both biological and social factors influence its formation.

Differences in treatment between girls and boys make them sensitive towards their expected roles in the society. These roles may not always promote equality of opportunities among gender. Presence or absence of girls in the classroom not only affect the teaching learning process but also places a demand on the administration to create facilities for girls in terms of physical infrastructure. One major manifestation of this is the provision separate toilets for them and special training of the human resource of the centre in gender-sensitive issues.

The desired modification in the teaching learning process includes creating learning situations which allows equal participation of both genders. Similarly, while encouraging children to be physically active in the ECCE centre, the teacher should take care that the girls equally participate in the activities like running, climbing, playing with a bat and ball, football etc. and involving boys in playing with dolls, kitchen set and doll houses.

The dropout rates of girls, specially from the marginalized sections of society and the rural areas continues to be grim. Schools must ensure the girl child feels welcome and secure. In case the girl is disabled or challenged or belongs to disadvantaged or weaker section of the society, she faces double or triple discrimination. Firstly because she is a girl, secondly due to her disability or challenge and lastly of being born in the disadvantaged or weaker community thus aggravating the situation.

Socio-economic status

This is one of the major factors responsible for diversity in the classroom. Those belonging to lower or higher socio-economic groups need to be given due space in the textbooks, curriculum and classroom activities. All children should be treated as equal irrespective of their socio-economic background. Uniforms for school children were perhaps initiated with the same philosophical assumption.

The diversity due to socio-economic status is more apparent in those ECCE centres where children are not expected to wear a uniform, leaving them free to dress in casuals or home wear or home clothes. The diversity in the clothes worn by the children indicates a lot about the financial and social status of the family. The same is also true about their school bags and the school stationery (geometry box, lunch box, pencil, crayons etc).Diversity due to socio-economic status can be utilised as teaching learning resource as each child brings with them their own experiences to the classroom which can be shared and used for teaching learning.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 20.1

Explain the following in one sentence only:

(a) Caste

(b) Race

(c) Multi-linguism

(d) Ethnicity

(e) Gender

Physical disabilities: Physical disabilities are related to impairments leading to some restrictions of the physical activities. These should not be used as an excuse for not involving the children with disabilities in teaching-learning activities along with the rest of the group. Presence of children with disability in the classroom provides an opportunity to the teachers as well as school administration to grow professionally.

Children with physical disabilities can be easily included in classroom activities, by slight modification in the pedagogy. For example, during rhyme time, children with hearing impairment can be included if the teacher incorporates sign language. This will give them a sense of rhythm and promote belongingness. The child with visual impairment may be easily involved in colouring activities by giving them a colouring sheet with tactile boundaries made using sticks, or thread or simply pasting an article of the same shape (example bangle for a circle) on the sheet.

The teacher can also learn from parents the signs used at home for common words like no, yes, I want, I like, I need, etc. In the classroom, these signs can be accompanied by flash cards or pictures which the child can use while communicating with teachers and peers. A sign language expert or special educator may also be consulted to facilitate communication.

While dealing with children with disabilities, our words, or how we address them matter a great deal. It is always advisable to use the word 'child' first followed by the type of disability. For example, instead of saying 'autistic child' say, 'child with autism.' Some suggestions are listed below:

Use Child with disability **Instead of** Disabled child

Use Child with an intellectual disability **Instead of** mentally retarded, retarded, idiot,moron etc.

Use Child using wheel chair **Instead of** wheel-chair bound, confined to wheel chair

Use Child with visual impairment **Instead of** visually impaired child

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➤ **Religious Belief:** These refer to beliefs related to God, creation of humanity, rituals, festivals etc. All religions have equal rights. India is probably the only country in the world which is home to so many religions like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoraastrianism etc. For many people, religion is an important part of daily life. Religious values, beliefs and customs are shaped by the family of the child.

Children carry their experiences of religious practices from home and community to the classrooms. Children should be encouraged not only to recognize these differences but also to appreciate the differences. Each religion has its own set of festivals which can be identified with their special rituals and decorations. The diversity that exists in religious beliefs provides an opportunity to teachers to promote the ideas of secularism and teaching children that all religions are equal and deserve to be treated with respect. They need to be provided with an opportunity to express themselves either through drawings, poems or stories or verbally etc. The main festival of various religions could be discussed in the classroom with regard to:

- when celebrated

- how celebrated

- special food prepared

- what is their role in celebrations

- how they feel during the celebrations

ACTIVITY 20.2

Create a diversity profile of your neighborhood. The following format may be useful in creating it.

Factors of diversity	Number of families
Race	
Ethnicity	
Gender	
Religion	

Cognitive style: This refers to the difference in the way children respond to the educational interventions and assimilate learning. Each child has a particular style of learning depending on individual personality and exposure as well as

access to learning resources. Variation in cognitive style adds vareaty to the classroom and has direct implications for the educational administrators as well as the teachers. The class teacher must adopt teaching methods to cater to all the children in the class. Teaching a concept to cater to different learning styles benefits the whole class. This may require using different methods for teaching the same thing, resulting reinforcement and promoting better learning. For example, while narrating a story, the teacher can use a story book with the narration. This will cater to both the auditory learner and the visual learner. Auditory learners enjoy listening to the story while visual learners enjoy the words and pictures in the book with the narration.

The benefits of classroom diversity are both academic and socio-emotional. Teachers must give importance to creating diverse learning opportunities for children thereby exposing them to diverse experiences. This will make a positive impact on their development and immensely impact society.

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INTEXT QUESTIONS 20.2

State whether the following statements are true or false:

(a) Children should be discouraged from expressing or sharing their religious beliefs with their peers.

(b) Each child has her/his own style of learning.

(c) Auditory learner enjoys listening to stories.

(d) Children learn through discussions and debates in a group.

(e) Children carry their experiences of religious practices from school to home.

20.3 DIVIDE BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL LANGUAGES

India is a multilingual country and the Constitution is committed to protect the multilingual nature of India. In terms of linguistic diversity, it has a variety of languages and dialects. The home and school language divide indicates the situation where medium of instruction at school is different from the language used at home. For example, the school may use English as a medium of instruction while at home, Tamil is used by the child and her/his family to communicate with each other and with neighbours.

The divide between the home and school can occur due to :

*   Family moving from one part of country to another
*   Lack of availability of a school using mother tongue as medium of instruction in the area

- Local dialect not given its due importance in the school

- Being first generation learners

- Teachers coming from different language background

20.3.1 Effects of home and school language divide on children

- Not able to make friends with peers

- Not able to score/achieve/perform well in academics

- Repeated failure or poor performance in school leads to low self-esteem and higher dropout rate

- Low self-confidence

- Lack of belongingness to the school and academics

- Not able to read, write and express

- Children are less likely to enrol and succeed in school

- Parents are less likely to participate in their children's learning

- Children do not take pride in their identity and heritage

NCF, 2005 respects the multilingual character of Indian society and suggests it should be seen as a resource to promote multilingual proficiency in a child. All languages including tribal as well as English should be valued equally. All mother tongues are appreciated as an important link between the young child and the school. In case of first generation learner, teaching in the initial years should be in mother tongue and less stress on the learning of second and third language as support may not be available to the child at home to learn these languages.

The absence of such divide implies:

- Schooling becomes fun and a joyful experience

- Self-confidence of children will improve

- Children will be able to relate with the school experiences, hence develop a feeling of belongingness of "my school"

- Makes friends with peers, leading to social inclusion and interaction

- Children communicate effectively with teachers and others

- More retention in school

- Children are be able to create linkage with the outside world

- Expands the reach of education

- Improved learning outcomes during primary school

- Helps protect and preserve local languages

The home-school language divide can be overcome to a large extent by adopting the mother tongue as medium of instruction in primary schools and gradually weaning off from mother tongue and initiating learning of second and third language. Local communities also have rich cultural resources: local stories, songs, jokes and riddles, and art, all of which can be used to enrich language and knowledge.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 20.3

Choose the correct option and fill in the blanks:

a) Using the mother tongue in pre school and primary schools will promote less _____ (retention/dropouts).

b) The use of mother tongue in preschool is important in helping promote a feeling of _____(pride/belongingness).

c) If medium of instruction is Bhojpuri but the parents speak English at home, this is a case of home and school _____ (language divide/language unity).

d) Mother tongue is the language spoken at _____(home/school).

e) Medium of instruction is the language used in _____ (home/school)

20.4 INFLUENCE OF GENDER AND CASTE STEREOTYPES ON CHILDREN

20.4.1 Stereotypes

Stereotypes exist in all societies. Stereotypes are fixed ideas or assumptions about a group of people. These fixed ideas or stereotypes or assumptions may not be necessarily true or universally accepted. Most of the time how we perceive each other can be determined through oversimplified assumptions about people based on particular traits, such as race, sex, age, caste, religion etc. An individual belonging to that group about which stereotype exists is expected to have the characteristic of that stereotype. For example, if we meet and interact with few individual belonging to a particular caste and exhibiting certain traits and habits, we develop a belief that the members of this caste will

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possess the same traits whereas this may not be true of every member. Stereotypical beliefs can be rigid, but they do and have changed over time.

Stereotypes are not always inherently negative, but because they are assumptions that disregard a person's individual and inherent abilities, opportunities and environment, they tend to be prejudicial. Negative stereotypes hinder peoples' ability to fulfill their potential by limiting choices and opportunities. They are at the root of overt and covert, direct and indirect, and recurrent discrimination.

20.4.2 Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotyping is related to behavior associated with girls and boys and creating beliefs about qualities possessed by a man and a woman. Stereotypical roles of men and women or about people belonging to a particular caste are further strengthened through media in the form of songs, movies, advertisements etc.The table below provides examples of qualities expected in woman and man by the society.

Woman	Man
Dependent	Independent
Weak	Powerful/strong
Less important	More important
Emotional	Logical
Implementers	Decision makers
House keepers	Bread winners
Supporters	Leaders
Fearful	Brave

Teachers should be conscious of not promoting any stereotypes or reaffirming the existing ones.

20.5   PROMOTING GENDER EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION OF ALL IN LEARNING AND PLAY

Schools have the responsibility of promoting gender equality. They can adopt various methods and techniques to achieve this. All activities of learning and play planned in the centre should aim at achieving this goal.

Some of the methods that can be adopted are:

20.5.1 Choosing the Right Toy/TLM

The ECCE centre usually relies heavily on play and toys. These toys can play a significant role in building a gender-friendly centre. The ECCE teacher should

be concerned about the skills being taught by the toy/play material. Say, for example, a ball may be used to develop motor skills and teaching about sphere. A doll will aid in teaching about the body parts. A gender-sensitive teacher would choose a doll, a car, or building blocks for a child to play with on the basis of the skills each toy develops and not according to the sex of the child. Teacher can choose gender-neutral toys like puzzles, blocks, clay etc. to encourage both the genders to use and play with them.

20.5.2 Telling Stories

Children enjoy listening to stories and narrating them. Stories provide an opportunity for language development and present the curricular content in an interesting manner. Carefully chosen stories will also help in building gender equitable and sensitive classrooms. While deciding the stories, pay attention to the characters in the tales and how the different sexes are portrayed in the story and the characteristics assigned to boys and girls. Are all males working outside house, in farm or factories or in office in the story? Are the women always depicted as fair and beautiful? Are fairies always girls? Are villains always men of huge size? Are girls depicted as working in the kitchen, doing household chores?

After telling the story, engage children in a discussion by asking questions related to role reversals of characters. Tell a story where the mother instead of the father goes to office and the father prepares food. The mother goes to the market to buy equipment and the father cleans the house. The parent of mother live with the family, etc.

20.5.3 Encourage Fair Play

Instead of encouraging girls to play with kitchen set, arrange all the toys within easy reach of all children and allow choices without telling children of a particular gender what to play with or what not to play with. Let children decide what they want to play with. Offer structured time to play with kitchen set, ball, swings etc. to all children. Provide opportunity for all children to play outdoor games like cricket, hockey, kho- kho, kabaddi, football etc.

20.5.4 Encourage Friendships

Encourage children to be friends with both genders. If adults relate to a girl and a boy playing together as "a cute pair", it may bring unnecessary tension, polarity and confusion to the friendship. Encourage team play with each team having boys and girls instead of always selecting the easiest way to create two teams based on the sex.

20.5.5 Avoide Gender-Based Work Distribution

When looking for volunteers to help you with the distribution of food at lunch time or while arranging toys, allow children to volunteer for the work. Boys might show interest in distributing the food and plates while girls might like to arrange toys. If you see gender divide, then encourage gender parity with the request like, "Rohit, would you like to help me in distributing food/ plates/ spoon etc?" or "Tinni, would you like to help me tidy up the toys please?

INTEXT QUESTIONS 20.4

List one way a teacher can promote gender equitable participation in each of the situation listed below:

(a) Choosing toys

(b) Telling stories

(c) Fair play

(d) Friendship

(e) Work distribution

WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- Diversity: Meaning and significance
- Recognizing and celebrating differences.
- Factors leading to diversity and their implication to learning
- Race
- Multilingualism
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Socio-economic status
- Age
- Religious beliefs
- Learning style
- Home and school language divide
- Influence of gender and caste stereotypes on children
- Promoting gender-equitable participation of all children in learning and play
  - ➢ Choosing toys

> ➤ Telling stories
> ➤ Encouraging fair play
> ➤ Encouraging friendships
> ➤ Avoiding gender-based work distribution

TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. What do you understand by the term diversity? What types of diversity have you observed in children in your neighbourhood? What are the main factors leading to diversity?

2. What steps will you take to ensure gender equitable participation of children in a preschool?

3. How do childhood experiences get affected by cultural and gender issues?

4. What are the implications of multilingualism for an ECCE centre? List ways of accepting and respecting diversity due to multilingualism.

5. What steps will you take to overcome the home-school language divide while working with tribal children?

ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

20.1

(a) **Caste:** It is a system of classification determined by birth.

(b) **Race:** Race is division of human being on the basis of physical features

(c) **Multilingualism**: The act of using, or promoting the use of, multiple languages, either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers.

(d) **Ethnicity**: Belonging to a social group with common national and cultural traditions.

(e) **Gender:** Refers to social, cultural identity associated with being a boy or a girl/male/female.

20.2

a) False
b) True
c) True
d) True
e) False

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20.3

(a) dropouts

(b) belongingness

(c) language divide

(d) home

(e) school

20.4

(a) Choosing toys: Choose toys for the skill they will promote and not according to the sex of the child.

(b) Telling stories: Pay attention to the characteristics attributed to the gender of the character in the story.

(c) Fair play: Allow choices and encourage children to participate in all activities with no reference to their sex.

(d) Friendship: Avoid polarity and encourage friendship between both the sexes.

(e) Work distribution: Do not ask children of one particular gender to do a particular work. Let children choose and volunteer.

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