Planning for equity can be a difficult task for early childhood educators across Australia. According to Sims (2009), equity in early childhood education refers to fairness and is based on a balance of two different sets of rights: every child’s right to an opportunity to attend an early childhood environment and every child’s right to participate and be represented equally within that environment.

Children have diverse needs and belong to different cultures and social groups which results in children participating in early childhood environments differently. Children’s access to quality early childhood programmes which address issues of equity and social justice are crucial in maximising children’s participation in the learning experiences (Robinson & Diaz, 2006).
Equal Opportunity in Early Childhood Education

Under the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education, states and territories have committed to achieving universal access to early childhood education for all children by 2013 (Council of Australian Governments, 2008). The Agreement targets a child’s right to have an opportunity to attend an early childhood environment, by stating that by 2013 children will have access to quality programmes organised by four year university trained early childhood teachers (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). However throughout Australia there is currently a shortage of teachers, so will these goals be achievable?

While this is a positive agreement addressing each child’s right to the opportunity to attend an early childhood environment, it neglects the need to address each child’s right to equal participation. Opportunity alone will not improve the quality of early learning experiences provided to children.

Every Child’s Right to Participate

Equality of participation is an issue in early childhood education that is concerned with early childhood educators, together with children, creating a diverse range of cultural and social learning activities and experiences for all children to access in the early childhood environment (Elliot, 2006). Images of the child as less competent or developed than adults can lead to a misconception that children do not have the emotional or cognitive capability to make rational choices. This thinking may lead to the voices of children being left out of decisions that affect them, denying children their right to participate equally in their early childhood environment. More importantly, this does not align with pedagogical practices fitting the United Nations’ Conventions of the Rights of the Child (The Convention) (1989).

How Can Educators Ensure Equal Participation in the Early Childhood Environment?

According to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), through their practices educators should reinforce the principles laid out in The Convention (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). The Convention states that all children have the right to participation. This includes educators involving children in decisions that directly affect them (United Nations, 1989). The issue of equal participation involves educators collaborating with children about all matters affecting their lives and respecting children’s family, culture, language and other identities by representing these diversities in everyday activities and learning experiences.

Including children’s cultural and social backgrounds into the programming and planning enables children to successfully participate equally in the early childhood environment. In today’s early childhood environments, a vast array of spaces will be available and they may change depending on the children’s interests. This can include spaces that allow children to express their knowledge and understanding of the world, by providing a range of activities within different spaces.

Activities supported by spaces include but are not limited to:

- art
- reading
- imaginative play
- problem solving

Catering for diversity through inclusive practices acknowledges that all children have different life experiences. The early childhood environment then becomes a place for collaborative learning supporting diversity and difference through respecting each child’s equal right to participation. Embedding practices of diversity and inclusion in early childhood environments is a difficult task for educators. Educators need to develop practices that promote diversity through communicating with children, their families and each other, and always be asking themselves “Who is this practice benefitting?”
Catering for Diversity in the Early Childhood Environment

Representing each child in the early childhood environment involves more than simply adding a range of diverse resources. This is one small aspect of inclusion and diversity. Resources need to be discussed and explored with children and educators need to listen and observe how children are interacting with them.

Recently, I added a large felt world map to the preschool environment. This resource included felt animals and people from around the world. The children had been exploring animals and the relationship that humans have with them. My intention was for the children to explore the differences between land and sea animals. However the children had a different interpretation and as a group they decided to place the felt people onto the country in which they believed they were born. Not wanting to interrupt the children’s engagement with this resource, I watched on as the children’s interests changed from animals to people and places of origin. Shortly after this experience, I noticed some children kindly explaining to another child that because her skin was brown, she was not from Australia. Adding this resource to the environment inspired a conversation about diversity, but it did not encourage children to explore inclusion and equity.

This resource needed to be supported with a sustained shared thinking conversation that involved educators and children in discussions about respect, diversity and inclusion within the Australian context.
Sustained Shared Thinking

Iram Siraj-Blatchford (2005) defines sustained shared thinking as two or more individuals working together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative. Both parties must contribute to the thinking, and the ideas must develop and extend through the discussion. Addressing each child’s right to participation through the practice of sustained shared thinking involves early childhood educators engaging with families and children to effectively work together in order to negotiate, develop and implement learning agendas, outcomes and assessments for their own children. Family involvement is critical to the success of young children in early learning environments, as each family comes from a diverse culture with different traditions, values, and belief systems. In order to effectively address the issue of equity, educators need to create mutual respectful relationships, where parents and children are heard and their ideas are included in the environment.

As recognised in the EYLF (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), an image of a child that is based on children being capable and knowledgeable, requires educators to respect each child’s capabilities, culture, and unique qualities. Planning for equity in the early childhood environment is important for children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Each child and family bring with them a collection of diversities to the child’s own learning, resulting in children experiencing a sense of belonging, being and becoming differently.

With each environment being different in terms of philosophies, children, families and community involvement, how you include families in your unique environment will vary. Sustained shared thinking practices are one way educators can improve the issue of equity in early childhood education. Being able to include the voices of children and their families by catering for each child’s diversities and encouraging a sense of wellbeing should be seen as a positive attribute of the early childhood education sector.

Something to think about …

✓ equity in early childhood is broad
✓ it is important that children have access to early childhood environments that represent who they are
✓ early childhood educators need to represent all children equally to address their right to participation
✓ differences need to be acknowledged to address equity in early childhood
✓ the ability to program and plan for children, with children, families and communities is a strength of the early childhood sector
✓ helping children uncover difference and diversity in a supportive environment has the potential to transform future societies and will increase acceptance and respect for others.

Resources and References:

Further information about sustained shared thinking practices can be found at: