

# Problems with Christmas Curriculum

School activities surrounding Christmas can have unintentional negative consequences like reinforcing commercialism, focusing on "good" and "bad" behavior and isolating students who don't celebrate the holiday.

*The following article originally appeared in the October 1987 issue of Childhood Education magazine*

Celebration of Christmas is a staple in preschools and elementary education settings. Many school texts provide curriculum ideas for Christmas-related activities, which are then supplemented each year by instructional magazines aimed at teachers, preschool directors and child care workers.

Frequently, teachers organize their December curriculum around the holiday theme. They provide special craft activities that include Christmas trees, decorations, chimneys, stockings, Santa Claus and reindeer.

They may also introduce children to Christmas songs such as "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" or "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," read aloud stories related to the Christmas theme, and sponsor a Christmas party for children and their families.

All of these activities are supported by tradition as well as the popular belief that Christmas is a central celebratory event of childhood, perhaps its highlight. Christmas is seen as symbolic of much that is cherished about children: innocence, family closeness, goodness, wonder and joy.

Most teachers identify strongly with the Christmas holiday through family memories. These ties are reinforced each year in rebroadcasts of classic Hollywood Christmas movies such as "A Christmas Story," in theatrical performances of Christmas plays and the "Nutcracker Suite" ballet and of course, in teachers' own observances of the holiday.

.

I am not arguing for the elimination of Santa Claus (as if such a thing were thinkable) or denying other positive aspects of the tradition, but suggesting that teachers cannot afford to give blanket approval to all Christmas activities. Unfortunately, the second most commonly asked question of children during this season (after "What do you want to get?") is, "Have you been good?"

If teachers suspend their professional judgment in the belief that all things related to Christmas are good for children, they may unintentionally teach that standards of behavior are arbitrary and externally defined.

*The intensity of the Christmas curriculum in non-religiously affiliated schools and centers isolates children of minority faiths, while contributing to the development of ethnocentrism in majority children.*

Why this discrepancy? First, teachers who observe only the secular aspects of Christmas may believe that everyone, regardless of religious background, celebrates Christmas in at least a secular way. They feel that the absence of overly religious content in their planned activities eliminates the possibility of offending anyone.

But the assumption that everyone celebrates the secular aspects of Christmas is not founded in fact. Despite its nonreligious trappings, Christmas remains a religious holiday that is not usually celebrated by those of other faiths.

Most Jews do not hang stockings on the fireplace, decorate a tree or give their children presents on Christmas day—nor do Americans of the Moslem, Hindu or Buddhist faiths.

There is also a Christian group, the Jehovah's Witnesses, that does not observe the holiday. Other deeply observant Christian families are opposed to the commercialism that accompanies the celebration of the holiday and would prefer to have their children exposed only to the holiday's religious significance.

These parents may see classroom projects that center around chimneys, reindeer, stockings, trees and ornaments as offensive because they trivialize the observance of the birth of Jesus.

Aware of the distinctiveness of children from diverse religious backgrounds, many teachers feel they have eliminated the problem by observing a minority holiday that falls during the same time of year. Thus, teachers frequently pay attention to the Jewish holiday of Chanukah which is celebrated in December.

When this is the case, they may ask the minority children for help. Children, especially young ones, may not know what their teachers wish to know; they may feel uncomfortable with being singled out as a source when their teachers are so knowledgeable about the majority holiday (Hollander, Saypol & Eisenberg, 1978).

Second, and more important, is the distorted equation of the two religious holidays, merely because they fall in the same month. Chanukah does not have the same significance to Judaism that Christmas has to Christianity.

More important Jewish holidays are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which are observed in the fall, and Passover, which is observed in the springtime.

Teachers do not display multicultural sensitivity when they treat Chanukah as the most important Jewish Holiday of the year, while ignoring more important Jewish holidays that do not fall in December. These teachers abet the false notion the Chanukah is the "Jewish Christmas."

:

- **Limiting Christmas activities to two or three days, and then making them as close to the holiday as possible.** This policy would remove some of the pressure from minority children. It would also help all children by reducing the over stimulation that frequently occurs when activity after activity build toward Christmas in middle and late December (Taylor, 1985).
- **Emphasizing the giving aspect of the holiday rather than the receiving of presents.** Children can make gifts for parents or each other, or study about people in need and those who work to help them.
- **Giving parents room to communicate their personal beliefs to children by neither encouraging nor discouraging Jesus or Santa Claus** (Taylor, 1985). It is appropriate and expected for teachers in religious schools to endorse a particular religious view. It is intolerable when teachers of diverse children in non-religiously affiliated schools and centers do so. Imposition of religion is not qualitatively different from imposition from imposition of culture. Sending the minority-religion child home with an ornament for a nonexistent tree is akin to calling the Hispanic child "Charles" when his given name is Carlos.
- **Becoming aware of important celebrations in other religions represented by children in the school or center and recognizing these at their appropriate times of year.** If minority festivals are to be celebrated, they need to be understood on their own terms and not fitted into the curriculum merely to justify the intensive Christmas curriculum in December.
- **Maintaining professional judgment in the face of pressures of the holiday season.** Children, not Christmas, should be the number one priority for teachers when they are planning lessons in December. The application of principles of child development and multicultural sensitivity should not be set aside for one month of each school year.

**References:**

- Children's Defense Fund. (1987). A children's defense budget. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Hollander, E.K., Saypol, J.R., and Eisenberg, M. (1978). Religious Holidays in the public schools—No easy answers. *Childhood Education*, 55. 84-88.
- Kamil, C., and DeVries R. (1978). *Physical knowledge in preschool education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Marion, M. (1981). *Guidance of young children*. St. Louis: C.V. Mosby.
- Rosenthal, N.R. (1986). Guests in their own country. *Liberty*, 81, 5, 10-12.
- Schlachter, B. (1986, September 21). Stocking stuffers for the person who has everything. *Las Cruces Sun-News*, p. 1D.
- Taylor, B.J. (1985). *A child goes forth* (6th ed.). Minneapolis: Burgess.

*Reprinted by permission of Steven A. Gelb and the Association for Childhood Education International, 17904, Georgia Avenue, Suite 215, Olney, MD. Copyright ©2002 by the Association.*