

Title: Multicultural educational experiences in rural education programs. Lessons from Early Childhood programs

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Biographies

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Multicultural educational experiences in rural education programs. Lessons from Early Childhood programs

Abstract

Background

Public schools in the United States are still segregated along cultural and racial lines 50 years after the 1954 Supreme Court's ruling. For example, Orfield and Lee, 2004; and Orfield, 2001) indicated that White student in the United States attended schools that were 80 percent White. Ethnic minority children (children of color), Latino students especially, attended schools that were 50-100 percent ethnic. In addition, a third (37.4%) of African American children attended schools that were 90-100 percent children of color (Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield, 2003). Rural schools are equally segregated along racial and cultural lines. According to the Rural School and Community Trust (2000), children of color in rural America attended schools that were 76 percent culturally and racially segregated. Additionally, educators in rural schools were predominantly monocultural and monoracial (Nganga, 2005). School segregation based on culture and race is potentially harmful to learning. Data show that cultural and racial integration has the potential to increase academic success for all learners (Dilworth, 1990; Irvine, 1989 and Smith, 2004). In the current climate of the federal mandate, No Child Left Behind Act, it is critical to employ teaching practices and curricula that increase the likelihood of academic success for all learners including children from cultures other than the dominant one.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate multicultural curriculum issues in early childhood programs (licensed and exempt) in rural communities in the Rocky mountain region. In previous studies, there was little effort directed at investigating the nature of multicultural education in rural schools. Of particular interest was ways in which existing instructional strategies and curricula was addressing diverse learning needs, including those pertaining to culture and race. The researchers intended to also provide a rather a comprehensive review of the available critical literature in support of instructional strategies and curriculum approaches that maximize learning for all.

Research design

A survey instrument was mailed to 200 program administrators with a 50 percent return rate. In-depth interviews with five purposively selected early childhood educators provided space for data triangulation. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods were used. A One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) determined the relationships between variables.

Findings

Data showed that participating programs served children between 0-12 years old. Responding administrators were overwhelmingly monocultural, monoracial and female (98%) educating a predominantly monoracial and monocultural student population. There was a positive correlation ($r = .446$, $p < .01$) between national accreditation and the availability of multicultural curricula. Federal funding was, however, negatively correlated ($r = -.108$, $p = .368$) with encouraging teachers to teach to diversity.

Concerning curriculum implementation, 42 percent of the programs had written multicultural policies/guidelines but only 33 percent required teachers to follow these guidelines. An examination of curricula issues indicated that 33 percent of the programs always introduced learners to other cultures using multicultural books, posters and pictures, dolls, drama and musical items. However, cultures represented in the community did not appear to influence the process of preparing instructional curricula. Community resources expose monocultural and monoracial learners to cultures other than

their own. A total of 41 percent of the programs provided a variety of professional development activities and teaching materials to help teachers teach to human diversity.

Because data showed evidence of continuing segregation in rural America, a stronger and detailed approach to multicultural education is warranted. Such an approach entails providing written multicultural curriculum policies/guidelines, recruiting multicultural and multiracial teachers and learners, providing the necessary professional development activities and learning resources, and bringing communities into the school as well as taking programs into the community. In addition, community resources should influence instructional materials. This approach to multicultural education could easily alleviate the cultural and racial isolation experienced in overwhelmingly monocultural and monoracial rural schools.

Multicultural educational experiences in rural education programs. Lessons from Early Childhood programs

Public schools are still highly segregated along culture (monocultural) and race (monoracial) 50 years after school segregation was outlawed in the 1954 *Brown v Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court's decision. Data from a comprehensive study by Orfield (2001); Orfield and Lee (2004) showed that a typical White student in the United States attended schools that were 80 percent White. Ethnic minority children (children of color), Latino students especially, attended schools that were 50-100 percent ethnic. In addition, a third (37.4%) of African American children attended schools that were 90-100 percent children of color (Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield, 2003). Rural schools are not exempt from cultural and racial segregation either.

The Rural School and Community Trust (2000) estimated that children of color in rural America attended schools that were 76 percent culturally and racially segregated. The report further indicated that children of color in rural America did not only attend schools that were segregated in respect to learner population but educators as well. Nganga (2005) reported that the majority of educators in rural schools were monoracial females teaching in predominantly monocultural schools. School segregation based on culture and race is

potentially harmful to learning. Data show that cultural and racial integration has the potential to increase academic success for all learners.

Dilworth (1990), for example, reported that the presence of ethnic minority teachers increased the academic success of children of color because they serve as role models. Irvine (1989) added that educators of color act as cultural intermediaries and are more able to use culturally responsive communication. Ladson-Billings (1992) reported that ethnic minority educators are more likely to employ teaching practices and curricula that are compatible with diverse student populations thus increasing the likelihood of success. A study by Meier, Wrinkle, and Polinard (1999) found academic increase for White students as well when they had teachers of color. In the current climate of the federal mandate, *No Child Left Behind Act*, it is probable that diversifying our teaching force in respect to culture and ethnicity is essential because the traditional teaching force that is “85 percent monoracial and monocultural, teaching multiracial and multicultural P-12 pupils,” tends to lack the necessary “cross-cultural, and inter-cultural knowledge, skills, and disposition to become competent culturally responsive teachers” (Smith, 2004, pg. 12).

Competent culturally responsive teachers are different from traditional educators. While traditional educators possess technical competence in knowledge and pedagogical skills, culturally competent responsive educators are able to fully appreciate the link between culture and the manner in which people interact with others (Nieto, 2005). As a result, competent culturally responsive educators teach from the heart. These educators make a conscious effort to create a learning environment that is empowering to all learners. Obiakor (2001) defined competent culturally responsive teachers as educators

who teach in “multidimensional and un-prejudicial ways” (pg.1). These educators develop teaching resources and instructional strategies that naturally support every learner socially, emotionally, and cognitively (Gay, 2000). Gay added that competent culturally responsive educators fully understand the effect of their own values, beliefs, choices, and biases on learning. They, therefore, utilize information and methodologies appropriate for inclusive and nurturing learning environments.

Smith (1998) highlighted the benefits of considering culture because there is a strong intersection between culture and how learners learn as well as how educators teach. According to Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, and Terrell (2002), culture determines how teachers teach and interact with learners. A culturally competent responsive educator, therefore, appreciates the fact that, “culture is a predominant force and what works for you may work against members of other cultural groups” (Robins, et al. 2002, pg. 61). Educators who are unable to acknowledge the significance of their culture in the teaching and learning process might find it difficult to teach children in a multicultural manner (Garcia, Shernaz and Malkin 1995/96). This reality haunts many isolated monocultural and monoracial rural communities.

Children in rural communities

Children of color attending monocultural and monoracial rural schools are less likely to experience learning in culturally sensitive classrooms. Teachers from the dominant culture not only tend to teach from their cultures, but also teach the way they were taught. For example, a teacher who was schooled in an environment that supported the notion that “one size fits all” might unconsciously teach to that philosophy. This approach to teaching is a disadvantage to all children. Children from the dominant

culture, for example, might develop a false impression that everyone is culturally alike. Children in monocultural and monoracial communities might grow up not knowing about other cultures and without developing the necessary sensitivity to life experiences of children from multicultural backgrounds. The inability to understand and appreciate human differences and similarities could result in biased attitudes and behaviors that are detrimental to children's development in a multicultural society (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 1989). This reality plays out vividly in Early Childhood programs.

During a recent visit to an exclusively monocultural and monoracial pre-school, a monocultural and monoracial child indicated that the ethnic doll she was playing with had a brown skin because "somebody put it in the oven and left it in there for too long" (field notes April 22, 2005). While visiting a similar monocultural and monoracial kindergarten, a little boy recognized and inquired why the researcher's skin color was different from his. A first grader in the same school commented about additional obvious physical differences she had noticed. The statements and questions voiced by these young children are identical in many ways to others that children in monocultural and monoracial communities ask in an attempt to seek credible and objective information about the human differences they observe. Yet, many educators who are perhaps culturally incompetent tend to deny them the opportunity to learn by providing incoherent responses such as, "I don't see human differences because we are all equal."

While statements and responses of cultural blindness might be honestly designed to teach children to see people as "people," they might contrarily have unintended effects. Diverting children's ability to notice human differences could easily facilitate the invisibility of some cultures while promoting others (Paley, 2000). Indeed, it might

encourage some children to develop a perception that some cultures are not acceptable or worth noticing. Evidence exist, for example, that shows children with darker skins become sensitive to the attitudes other children have toward their skin before joining kindergarten (Derman-Sparks 1995/96). Thus, responses of color blindness might, by and large, confuse many children. In addition, because colors and coloring is a major source of activities in all early childhood programs, it is ironic for society not to expect children to have some elementary understanding about differences in color. Evidently, young children are able to transfer this knowledge, yet many potentially culturally incompetent educators express disapproval or quickly change the subject, perhaps conveying a subtle message that it is not okay to notice human differences (Stern-LaRosa & Bettmann 2000). The inconsistencies between what educators teach and the expectations they have for children might cause behavior dissonance.

Children, like everyone else, are able to notice human differences (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 1989). According to Derman-Sparks, et al., this notion was clearly supported by Donald (3.5 years old) who while engaged in a coloring task using a brown crayon was overheard in a self-talk saying, "I'm brown too. I'm as brown as this crayon," (pg. 32). Other studies have consistently shown that children recognize human differences (skin color, hair texture, and facial features) as early as six months of age. Many children will ask questions about differences in gender, physical abilities, and food at two years. Many more are capable of forming a sense of self-identity along group or ethnic lines by age five (Stern-LaRosa & Bettmann, 2000). Thus, it is critical for all adults to be prepared and skilled enough to clearly explain to children the human differences they see using language and vocabularies within children's reach. To

facilitate this process, educators must be culturally competent and pedagogically prepared to provide scientific explanations for existing human differences. Young children are capable of understanding such explanations. A six-year old girl attending an overwhelmingly monocultural and monoracial rural school, for example, understood that melanin is the chemical responsible for her brown skin color.

Melanin is a brown “chemical” that regulates the amount of ultraviolet light (UV) entering the body and hence the production of vitamin D (Kirchweger, 2001). Human bodies need a certain amount of UV light to make vitamin D that is crucial for bone formation. However, because excess vitamin D is toxic, the body uses melanin to block excess UV light. Melanin is the chemical behind the existing differences in human skin color. Indeed, inhabitants of warmer climates in the tropical regions of Africa and Asia tend to have more melanin on the skin surface to block excess UV light. Excess melanin results in a dark brown skin that is common in Africa especially, and other tropical countries. In temperate climates (North America and Europe) where daylight is weak, people have less melanin on the skin surface to help absorb more UV light. Less melanin on the skin surface has resulted in fair skin (Kirchweger, 2001). Young children are perfectly capable of understanding the above scientific explanation.

Piaget and Vygotsky on Human Development

Children are naturally inclined to nourish their young and developing minds with objective information about the world in which they live (Piaget, 1970). They are, therefore, definitively and innately inquisitive in an attempt to make sense of the diverse elements they encounter daily as they mature. Piaget’s theory of human development identified social experiences as one of the forces behind children’s maturation process.

He theorized that children's cognitive development is heavily influenced by social transmission or learning from others. In this process, young children tend to learn most by watching, listening, and mimicking parents and the community around them, including teachers.

Building on Piaget's theory, Vygotsky emphasized the significance of cultural experiences in children's intellectual development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed children's maturation is shaped by cultural symbols. Cultural symbols inform children about what is acceptable or unacceptable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, clean or dirty, right or wrong, kind or cruel, just or unjust, appropriate or inappropriate. Cultural symbols tend to play a critical role in shaping children's thinking, communication, and problem solving skills. Meanwhile, Vygotsky also considered the zone of proximal development as a force that informs the role of social-cultural influences in shaping children's decision-making process.

The zone of proximal development is based on the theory that, although children naturally have the necessary intellectual abilities, there are tasks they cannot perform without the help of competent adults. The teacher's role, therefore, is to provide support (scaffolding) necessary for children's learning. Vygotsky (1978) suggested further that children's complex mental processes are usually shaped in conversations or collaborations with others and especially the adult world. Because what children see or hear influences their maturation process, it is critical to rethink the meaning of cultural and racial segregation in public schools in a country that is increasingly multicultural and multiracial. Educators must therefore, teach young children essential skills and knowledge in a multicultural and multiracial society. When we socialize young children

to understand cultural and racial differences, we help them acquire skills and knowledge that will most likely influence the rest of their lives. To that end, the researchers designed a study to explore multicultural curricula in early childhood programs in rural America.

Multicultural Programs in Early Childhood programs

Study design

This study examined multicultural curriculum issues in early childhood programs (licensed and exempt) in small rural communities in the Rocky mountain region that were highly monocultural and monoracial. In previous studies, there was little effort directed at investigating the nature of multicultural education in monocultural and monoracial rural schools. A survey instrument was mailed to 200 program administrators with a 50 percent return rate. In-depth interviews with five purposively selected early childhood educators provided space for data triangulation. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods were used. A One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), for example, determined the relationships between variables.

Findings

Data showed that participating programs served children between 0-12 years old. Responding administrators were overwhelmingly monocultural, monoracial and female (98%). While 49 percent of the programs received some type of federal funding, 28 percent were also nationally accredited. A positive correlation was found between national accreditation and the availability of multicultural curricula ($r = .446$, $p < .01$). There also was a positive correlation between federal funding and national accreditation ($r = .360$, $p < .01$). This finding indicated a possible direct link between federal funding

and accreditation. Federal funding was, however, negatively correlated ($r = -.108$, $p = .368$) with encouraging teachers to teach to diversity.

Concerning curriculum implementation, 42 percent of the programs had written multicultural policies/guidelines but only 33 percent required teachers to follow these guidelines. Having clearly defined multicultural education policies and guidelines is essential to curriculum implementation (Klein & Chen, 2001). Written guidelines provide direction on how to deal with cultural issues (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). An examination of curricula issues indicated that 33 percent of the programs always introduced learners to other cultures using multicultural books, posters and pictures, dolls, drama and musical items. However, cultures represented in the community did not appear to influence the process of preparing instructional curricula. Dora and Gonzalez-Mena (2004) recommended the use of community resources.

Community resources expose monocultural and monoracial learners to cultures other than their own. They also provide the opportunity to interact with people of different cultures. Such opportunities not only help monocultural and monoracial learners to develop positive relationships with people from different cultures but also allow them to value differences. Lack of exposure to cultural and racial differences could easily lead to biased behavior. Programs were apparently cognizant of this fact. As a result, 41 percent of the programs provided a variety of professional development activities and teaching materials to help teachers teach to human diversity. Lack of professional development activities that addressed multicultural curriculum was, however, also identified as a persistent problem as is evident in the following quotes, “to be honest we have not had much training. At various times one of us attended at least one session on

multicultural or anti-bias training over the past year.” The importance of professional development activities and materials is well documented (Banks, 1994).

According to Banks, ongoing professional development activities allow educators to acquire the newest skills and knowledge in the craft. Meanwhile, when participants were requested to identify additional measures to enhance multiculturalism, increased active forms of parental involvement were considered crucial. The following responses show ways in which parents could actively participate:

- active involvement in all aspects of programs
- active involvement in problem solving
- active involvement in curriculum development
- opportunities to share parenting styles and home culture
- opportunities to share feelings about experiences of their children
- meeting regularly with teachers.

Conclusion

Data from this study indicated that educators in participating Early Childhood programs were overwhelmingly monocultural and monoracial teaching in overwhelmingly monocultural and monoracial communities. We believe that in order for rural monocultural and monoracial Early Childhood programs to cause the desired social changes, a stronger and detailed approach to diversity is warranted. Such an approach entails providing written multicultural curriculum policies/guidelines, recruiting multicultural and multiracial teachers and learners, providing the necessary professional development activities and learning resources, and bringing communities into the school as well as taking programs into the community. In addition, community resources should influence instructional materials. This approach to multicultural education could easily alleviate the cultural and racial isolation experienced in overwhelmingly monocultural and monoracial rural Early Childhood programs thus giving children the opportunity to

acquire credible and objective information about the human differences they see. Indeed, it is our (educators) responsibility to provide children in monocultural and monoracial schools with the necessary cultural skills and knowledge to function productively in an increasingly multicultural and multiracial society.

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