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Research Brief

Predicting Acceptance of Diversity in Pre-Kindergarten Classrooms[1]

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Given the increasing ethnic and language diversity within the United States, this study examined practices that acknowledge and promote diversity in pre-Kindergarten classrooms. Findings indicate that acceptance of diversity is a component of positive environments for young children, particularly in classrooms with high poverty levels where there is ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Population estimates project that by 2050 the United States will have completed the shift from a European-American, English-speaking majority to a society in which linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity is predominant. Given the demographic shift, research that can support efforts within early education programs to meet the needs of ethnically and linguistically diverse families is needed. Quality Rating & Improvement Systems (QRIS) are struggling with ways to ensure that cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity is part of their systems but the research to support those efforts is lagging behind the policy efforts to create such systems.

Acceptance of diversity is a comprehensive phrase used to describe curricular practices within Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings that acknowledge and promote tolerance in children toward diverse people and perspectives. Acceptance of diversity can encompass all aspects of difference, including language, gender, ability, age, racial and ethnic/cultural, and socioeconomic. Language is also included as an aspect of cultural diversity since it can be an expression of cultural belonging. This study addresses diversity in ECE by examining classroom and teacher characteristics that contribute to culturally supportive pre-Kindergarten environments.

The Study

Acceptance of diversity may be an essential component of positive climates for young children. The main focus of this study is to describe the classroom contexts which acknowledgin and accepting diversity typically occur. Researchers in this study investigated whether an essential component of effective early childhood classrooms, process quality, predicts an acceptance of diversity construct in these environments when accounting for classroom demographics and teacher characteristics.

Data from 692 classrooms were used in this study. The sample is derived from the National Center for Early Pre-Kindergarten and Leaning's (NCEDL) Multi-State Study of Prekindergarten (Multi-State Study) and the NCEDL-NIEER State-Wide Early Education Programs Study (SWEEP). The Multi-State Study involved six states of 40 pre-Kindergarten sites in 2000-2001, and the SWEEP study (2003-2004) involved 100 state-funded, pre-Kindergarten programs operating in five additional states. Identical assessments were used in classrooms across a total of 11 states that served approximately 80% of U.S. children. The combined original sample contained 2,938 children in 704 classrooms.

To measure acknowledgment and acceptance of diversity within classrooms, this study used the Acceptance of Diversity construct of the ECERS-R which provides a ranking within each classroom. Classrooms that receive a high score on the scale have teachers who work with children in constructive ways to help them understand difference positively.

Researchers used a measure of observational

Acceptance of Diversity Construct
- Assesses how well an environment acknowledges that diversity is a positive rather than a negative aspect of human experience.
- Evaluates how well a program counteracts bias or prejudice and encourages constructive social attitudes in young children.

process quality which was the subscale scores for instructional and emotional climates that are derived from the nine dimensions of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). In addition to process quality, researchers accounted for select classroom and teacher demographic variables, such as percent of children with the same ethnicity as the teacher and percent poverty among the children.

Findings

Results indicate that these pre-Kindergarten classrooms have moderate levels relating to the Acceptance of Diversity construct.

Findings from the main analysis, which examined the association between classroom process quality variables and the construct of Acceptance of Diversity while accounting for teacher characteristics and classroom composition, indicate that classrooms with higher emotional climate tended to acknowledge and accept diversity in the classroom. This pattern did not follow for instructional climate.

Teacher characteristics were not significantly related to the construct of Acceptance of Diversity, although Latino teachers in this sample were typically in classrooms that were more often acknowledged or accepted diversity.

Some classroom composition, such as increased classroom poverty levels, was significantly related to the construct of Acceptance of Diversity; for example, classrooms where children and teachers matched ethnicity tended to show less acknowledement and acceptance of diversity.

Conclusions

While the findings from this study should be interpreted within the context of emotionally supportive pre-Kindergarten environments, specific ethnic and cultural factors also appear to be pertinent to the rela-

tionship between emotional climate and acknowledging diversity in the classroom.

First, it seems that Latino teachers who share the same language of the children they serve while teaching in classrooms with high levels of poverty among children, tend to create emotionally supportive climates that are conducive to acknowledging and accepting diversity. Possibly, a shared experience within the Latino cultural group is relevant to acknowledging and accepting diversity in the classroom.

Second, the negative finding regarding the match of teacher and child ethnicity may indicate that the acknowledgement and acceptance of diversity within these contexts may not be as strong as classrooms where the ethnic composition was more diverse.

Implications

This study suggests that acknowledging and accepting diversity within pre-Kindergarten classrooms may be linked to environments that are emotionally supportive for young children. Unfortunately, it is rare for pre-Kindergarten classrooms to incorporate the highest levels of accepting and acknowledging diversity. Therefore, few children benefit from the full impact of diversity-promoting endeavors.

Caring for the emotional needs of a group of children may also include the authentic support of their cultural histories and traditions. It is possible that ECE programs should create multiple opportunities for teachers to experience cultural and racial dissonance; for example, through training, or by placing pre-service teachers in programs that are culturally diverse or different from their own experiences.

Examples of Acknowledging & Accepting Diversity in the Classroom:
- Racial and cultural diversity of materials portrayed in real and non-stereotypic ways.
- Activities for children that acknowledge diversity in positive ways.
- The ability of a teacher to discuss sensitive topics regarding difference with young children in an inclusive and supportive manner.

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