Early Childhood Teachers' Approaches to Multicultural Education & Perceived Barriers to Disseminating Anti-Bias Messages

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the United States has become increasingly more diverse. Since 2000, the Hispanic and Asian populations have each grown by 43% (now comprising 16% and 4.8%, respectively, of the total population), the American Indian and Alaska Native population by 18% (now 0.9% of the population), African American population by 12% (now 12.6% of the population), and those identifying as more than one race by 32% (now 2.9% of the population) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

This growth and diversification of society means that our schools are becoming more diverse as well. Students of color now make up 48% of the school population and are projected to reach 55% by 2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Specifically, Hispanic students make up 24% of the school population, and Black students make up 16%. Nonetheless, the majority (84%) of teachers in our schools remain predominantly White (National Center for Education Information, 2011).

Therefore, it is important for these teachers—and teachers of any racial background—to be educated on various multicultural issues in order to better serve a diverse population of students, as well as for them to be capable of guiding their children in proper interactions with children and adults who are of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Before children reach school age, they have already begun to form ideas about race and its attributes, and previous research has found expressions of bias in children as young as ages 3 to 5 (Aboud, 2008; Hirschfeld, 2008; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Therefore, the early years

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are a prime target for properly educating children about the nature of cultural differences, respect for diversity, and tolerance for others.

The main socializing agents of young children are the parents or legal guardians, but for children in early childhood education settings, including pre-K and elementary school, teachers take on an equally important socializing role. Unfortunately, we do not know a lot about teachers' perceptions or approaches to teaching children about the concepts of cultural diversity in general and race in particular. Previous research has shown resistance among White pre-service teachers toward multicultural education courses as well as discomfort surrounding the topic of race (Amos, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Jervis, 1996; Picower, 2009).

Studies with parents have shown a general resistance, particularly among White parents, to openly discuss the topic of race with their children (Katz, 2003; Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012; Vittrup & Holden 2011). For many, this resistance is partly due to a desire to raise their children to be 'colorblind'—to not see race and not act on it—and therefore they take on a 'color-mute' approach (Pahlke et al., 2012). They fear that if they start talking about race, children will start noticing race and thus treat people differently because of their race.

In reality, our society is anything but colorblind, and the silence surrounding the topic of race can leave children without guidelines on how to interpret the stereotypes and examples of inequality to which they are exposed. Research with parents reveals weak correlations between parents' and children's racial attitudes (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Katz, 2003; Vittrup & Holden, 2011), often to the great surprise of the parents. Vittrup and Holden (2011) concluded that without explicit conversations about the topic, children are more susceptible to influences from other sources, such as peers and the media.

A lot of stereotypes and biased representations of minority groups are portrayed by various media outlets (Children Now, 2001, 2004; Graves, 1999). In addition, Blacks and Hispanics are over-represented in low-status jobs and low-income neighborhoods (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), and segregation still persists in some American neighborhoods and schools (Strauss, 2014). Thus, young children are surrounded by racial division and bias and are in need of guidance in order to make sense of this context.

Teachers have a prime opportunity to educate children about diverse issues and help them better understand the complexities of our multicultural society. Literature in the field of multicultural education encourages teacher educators to learn about the populations they serve and become culturally competent (e.g., Howard, 1999). However, the implementation of multicultural education programs has been varied, and evidence of the effectiveness of the programs in terms of turning knowledge into practice is scarce and somewhat inconclusive (Levine, 2006; Lowenstein, 2009).

In his model of multicultural teacher education, Banks (2008) presented four levels of multicultural integration and education: *the contributions approach* (including cultural texts or artifacts in the curriculum and discussing particular individuals, such as historical figures), *the additive approach* (adding content or themes to the existing curriculum, without changing the overall structure or characteristics of the curriculum), *the transformative approach* (changing the structure and content of the curriculum to enable students to view concepts and issues from the perspectives of cultural minority groups), and *the social action approach* (educating and empowering students to engage in social criticism and take action towards social change).

Banks criticized the first two approaches because they do not make substantial changes to the existing curriculum, still

view racial and ethnic history and culture from a Eurocentric perspective, and run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and misconceptions (Chung & Miller, 2011). In order to better educate teachers on how to address multicultural issues, including the issues surrounding the topic of race, we need to understand how the teachers approach the topic and what barriers they may face when doing so.

While there is some research on parental perceptions and practices in regards to discussions about race and ethnicity, there is very little information about early childhood and elementary school teachers' perceptions and actual practices. The purpose of the present study was to further probe teachers on their perceptions and practices related to race based discussions. One goal was to find out if early childhood and elementary school teachers think it is important to openly discuss the topic of race and whether they do so in their classrooms.

The study also sought to explore why teachers choose, or choose not, to discuss race, which particular topics related to race they are willing to discuss, whether they perceive the children at their school to harbor any racial biases, and whether the teacher's own race influence these choices. Finally, the teachers were asked what advice they have in regards to teaching children tolerance and anti-bias and whether they perceived any barriers to implementing an anti-bias curriculum.

Method

Participants

A total of 77 early childhood and elementary school teachers from a large metropolitan area in the Southwestern United States participated in the study. Twenty-two (29%) taught pre-school, 14 (18%) taught kindergarten, 11 (14%) taught first grade, and 30 (39%) taught second grade. The participating schools were located in a variety of neighborhoods, including urban, suburban, low-income, and high-income areas. About half (47%) were White, 25% were Hispanic, 21% were Black, 4% indicated they were Mixed, and 3% were Asian. All participants had completed at least an associate's degree, with the majority holding either a bachelor's (54%) or master's (42%) degree.

Instruments

Participants completed an online questionnaire titled "Discussing and Experiencing Diversity: Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences." This questionnaire was a modified version of a questionnaire used in a previous study with parents (Vittrup, in press).

The questionnaire had five parts, three of which were used for this particular study. Part I was a demographic questionnaire. Part II consisted of questions related to cultural diversity in general, such as which topics of diversity are addressed in the classroom, examples of a lesson or discussion, who they perceive to be responsible for teaching children tolerance and anti-bias, and perceived barriers to implementing a multicultural curriculum. Part III consisted of questions related specifically to discussions about race.

Teachers were asked if the topic of race is brought up (by them or the children) in the classroom and with what frequency, what specific topics have been discussed, what specific lessons they may have taught, and if they think it important to discuss it. They were also asked whether they have witnessed bias or discrimination related to race at their school, how biased they perceive the children to be, and who and what they believe to have the most influence on children's racial attitudes. All questions encouraged the teachers to explain or further elaborate on their answers.

Procedure

Teachers were recruited via flyers distributed at pre-schools and elementary schools, and emails distributed to teachers via their school principals. Prior to any distribution of flyers or email communication, pre-school directors, the school districts, and school principals approved the recruitment process.

The recruitment flyers and emails contained a link to a secure online survey site where they could access the informed consent form and the survey. After completing the questionnaire, participants were given the option of linking to an external survey site where they could give their mailing address and receive a $10 gift card for participating. They could also enter their classroom into a drawing for a $50 gift card to a teaching materials store.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' Reports of Discussing Race

The majority of teachers (86%) stated that they think it is important to discuss race related issues with children. More Black teachers (93%) said it is important, compared to White (85%) and Hispanic (78%) teachers, but the difference was not statistically significant, $X^2(4, n = 69) = 3.12, p = .55$. Due to the low number of participants indicating they were Asian or mixed, these two groups were excluded from statistical analyses using race as a variable, but they were included in other analyses and descriptive information.

In general, the teachers reported feeling very comfortable discussing the topic of race ($M = 6.10, SD = 1.10$, on a scale of 1-7). While Black teachers reported feeling slightly more comfortable with the topic ($M = 6.37, SD = .72$) than Whites ($M = 5.94, SD = 1.25$) and Hispanics ($M = 6.21, SD = .92$), the difference was not statistically significant, $F(2, 66) = 1.01, p = .37$.

Forty-two percent indicated that discussions of race were part of their regular scheduled classroom curriculum, yet only half of this group could identify a specific discussion, and many mentioned conversations that were not truly about the topic of race, such as vague references to equality and differences, art and literature, or holiday celebrations.

Based on teachers' reports of discussing or not discussing race, and the particular topics discussed, they were coded as either taking a color-conscious approach (those who said they discuss race and mentioned relevant topics, such as racial equity, race relations, bias, or discrimination) or a *color-mute* approach (those who said they do not discuss race or mentioned topics that were not truly about race).

That resulted in only 30% falling in the color-conscious category and 70% in the color-mute category. The chosen approach did not vary significantly based on race, $X^2 (2, n = 69) = 0.03, p = .98$. Among White teachers, 71% were considered color-mute, compared to 69% of Black teachers and 68% of Hispanic teachers.

Color-conscious approaches. Nineteen teachers (25%) indicated that they discuss past history and discrimination:

> During the month of February, I discuss topics related to the success and struggles of African Americans. I also discuss the accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement on a first grader level.

> We discussed how the slaves were brought to America. [My students] had many simple questions: Why? How? What happened then?

> We read a book about Ruby Bridges and discussed the unfairness of the segregation laws.

Although these teachers are discussing race and racial inequality and discrimi-

nation, they seem to be doing it solely from a historical perspective, and therefore it does not extend beyond what Banks (2008) referred to as the *additive approach*, which is the second lowest level of multicultural education.

Only three teachers (two White, one Hispanic) said they addressed current inequality and discrimination, such as modern day race relations and the trials and tribulations faced by some racial groups. However, they did not give specific examples of discussions or activities, and therefore it is not possible to assess whether they truly used either the *transformative* or *social action approach*, which are considered to be the highest levels of multicultural education (Banks, 2008).

Color-mute approaches. Conversations and lessons that would be considered part of a 'colorblind' or 'color-mute' strategy included not talking about race at all, giving vague references to equality, or merely celebrating holidays or historical markers. Several teachers deliberately did not focus on race:

> [I tell my students] that we don't call people based on their skin color or language they speak. That the way someone looks or speaks does not make them better or worse than us. We all need to be kind.

> I have found that my kindergarten students don't even see color, which is a beautiful thing, so I do not want to try to focus on it.

> We just accept everyone for who they are and work with everyone in the same way.

Sixteen teachers (21%) reported that they only talk about race in the context of cultural holidays, such as Martin Luther King Day, Fiesta, Kwanza, and Thanksgiving, and some reported occasionally featuring a particular artist or author of minority status:

> I teach my students that we are all different and need to be treated with respect regardless of our ethnicity.

> We discuss language differences and physical characteristics. We use different words and look a little different, but we are all human beings and have feelings, families, and care for others.

> During February I discuss topics related to the Asian culture. During the months of September and May topics center around the Hispanic culture. Throughout the year, various topics may present a need for discussion.

Yet, this approach tends to present the topics as stories about specific individuals in specific situations rather than relaying messages about race relations, structural inequalities, and respect and tolerance that can be applied to the students' everyday lives. Banks (2008) refers to it as the *contributions approach*, which is considered the lowest level of multicultural education, and it results in only a superficial understanding of race and ethnicity while simultaneously reinforcing stereotypes and misconceptions.

The comment from one teacher may highlight why some choose not to discuss present day race issues:

> We need to teach them about the past but clearly remark that everything is different nowadays and that we cannot hate anyone because of the past.

This comment seems to insinuate that there are no longer any real issues with racial discrimination. This trend is consistent with the color-mute approach many of the teachers ascribed to. However, in order for children to become truly tolerant and empathetic to other cultural groups, they need to understand the concepts of racial inequality and bias and learn that it does in fact still exist in our society and in their schools. Even though some of the teachers in the study taught very young children, there are still developmentally appropriate ways of incorporating lessons about inequality and bias (see e.g., Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

Choosing not to discuss race. Although many indicated that race was never or rarely discussed in their classroom, only 17 teachers mentioned *why* that was the case. Some indicated that it was not part of their specified curriculum, and therefore they perceived it to either be irrelevant or impermissible. A few mentioned that they did not feel it was relevant or important to discuss because they perceive the children to be colorblind. It is also possible that they are simply uncomfortable with the topic and do not know how to approach it, as this statement by one of the teachers indicates:

> I really don't feel confident to use the words race, ethnicity. I prefer talking about cultural differences.

The lack of confidence and comfort with the topic could be a reason why there may be a gap between knowledge and practice when it comes to multicultural education. Teachers may understand the importance of it, yet feel unprepared to implement it. It is curious that so many teachers chose not to answer the question of why they do not discuss race. It could be another indicator of their discomfort with the topic.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Children's Racial Biases

The teachers who opt for a color-mute approach may perceive it to be working. In fact, when asked about children's racial biases, most teachers perceived the children to harbor no, or only very little, racial bias. On a scale of 1-4, with 1 meaning 'not biased at all' and 4 meaning 'very biased,' the average was 1.71 ($SD = .76$). Most selected 'not biased at all' (46%) or 'only a little biased' (39%). There was very little variation based on the race of the teacher.

These findings are interesting, because many did report having witnessed racially biased behavior or statements by students at their school. When asked about biased statements and discriminatory behaviors, 37 (48%) had witnessed either or both. However, there was also some uncertainty about what constitutes discriminatory behavior and biased statements, revealed by 13% of participants indicating they were unsure if they had seen or heard children engage in biased acts. Of the teachers who had witnessed bias or discrimination, the majority still perceived their children to be only a little bit biased (54%) or completely bias free (27%).

Hispanic teachers were more likely to report having witnessed racial discrimination or heard biased statements from the children (53%), followed by Black teachers (50%) and White teachers (41%). However, the difference was not statistically significant, $X^2(4, n = 69) = 3.92, p > .05$. The examples given showed evidence of bias and discrimination by and towards Black, White, and Hispanic students. Group exclusion was the most common form of discrimination by the children:

> An African American student in a predominately Hispanic school was excluded from joining in the games played by the Hispanic students. When [she] was persistent in trying to join in the games, she was called racially unacceptable names.

> Our school is predominately Hispanic, and the few White children we get are sometimes excluded from social groups.

Examples of biased statements heard included derogatory slurs and perpetuation of stereotypes:

> [I have heard] Blacks are thugs, Hispanics are gang members, Hispanics only eat Mexican food, all Black people are from Africa.

A student told me that he was called a 'graham cracker' because of his ethnicity.

My students were telling me about a robbery in the neighborhood and they blamed Black people when nobody knew who perpetrated. I asked them if police had caught the [person] who did it and they said 'NO.' So I asked them how they knew that the person was that race and discussed that in all races are good and bad people.

It is interesting that, despite these incidents, teachers still reported the children to be fairly unbiased. It is possible that they distinguish between the behavior or comments and the actual child, such that they do not want to label children as biased individuals based on a few comments or actions.

Alternately, it may also be because their perception of what it means to be biased falls in the category of more extreme racist behaviors and ideology, such as those prescribed by the Ku Klux Klan and other overtly racist individuals and organizations—something Picower (2009) referred to as the 'ideological tool' of 'It's personal not political' (p. 206). In that situation, the incidences witnessed by the teachers would not fall in the category of racism or racial bias. Nonetheless, biased behavior—however small or infrequent—has the potential to continue and 'spill over' to those who witness it if it is not actively prevented.

Teachers' Opinions and Advice on Teaching Tolerance and Anti-Bias

Teachers' reluctance to discuss race and racial bias could also be their perception that this is a job for the children's parents. Almost three quarters (72%) named parents as having the main responsibility. However, when asked whether they thought parents were doing a good job, only 25% said yes, whereas 26% said no, and 49% said they were not sure. Some blamed it on the parents' own biases:

Our children learn about hate early in life. Are the parents promoting hate? Parents often share negative feelings with their children.

Others blamed it on a general lack of involvement:

Parent involvement has decreased and parents are increasingly depending on the teacher to teach their children life lessons.

Parents do not understand the importance of learning about other cultures.

However, the real reason why many teachers do not engage in race related conversations may lie in a perceived lack of agency to do so. When asked about barriers to implementing a multicultural anti-bias curriculum, half of the teachers perceived no barriers:

No, I don't perceive any barriers. We as teachers need to create learning opportunities in which the development of responsible citizenship is a primary goal.

No. We have the books and other resources that we can use to explain and discuss about different cultures.

No I do not. Here at my campus we have a welcoming atmosphere, and we house a student body rich in diversity.

However, even though many indicated they did not perceive any barriers, several indicated a lack of time to include multicultural elements:

There aren't any major barriers to implementing it into the curriculum. I just haven't had the time to add it.

Unfortunately, we have so much other stuff to teach! Some days I can't even get through my entire reading lesson.

In order to reach higher levels of Banks' (2008) multicultural education approaches, additional content needs to be added or existing content needs to be restructured. This takes a considerable amount of time which teachers may not have. The comments from these teachers indicate that higher levels of multicultural education are unlikely to be implemented at the level of the individual teacher unless they are afforded more time and resources.

About a quarter (23%) of teachers listed parent objections and curriculum restrictions as barriers. Some of those who listed parent restrictions had received negative objections from some parents in the past, and coupled with their own discomfort with the topic, these teachers may feel inadequate to address it and may fear complaints.

We have had some parents mention that they didn't like their child learning about certain things we have been teaching about. We do our best to explain why we feel it is crucial for the students to learn about different cultures.

[They] are afraid of what they don't know or understand (preconceived ideas) and may not be willing to allow their child to be exposed to something different than them.

Some teachers also blamed the school system in general:

Teachers are overwhelmed with teaching academic content. Their main concern is preparing students for tests. Higher order cognitive skills are a priority in our academic system, but cultural diversity does not necessarily fall under this category. Cultural diversity requires thinking about our purpose in life, our relationship to others, and our perceptions of existence. This type of philosophical inquiry is completely absent from our educational system.

In addition, some indicated that their curriculum does not include specific lessons on the topic of race, and without district approval they cannot implement multicultural lessons:

We are not given the tools in order to accomplish this task and I don't think that our school system feels it is important.

My school district's curriculum is very structured and unless the district adopts a multicultural curriculum, it will not be implemented.

Thus, there seems to be a perception among some teachers that there is a systemic reluctance to engage in these types of lessons, which is similar to findings from Colón-Muñiz, Brady, and SooHoo (2010). This may in part stem from what Picower (2009) referred to as the 'ideological tool' titled 'out of my control' (p. 207).

Since individual teachers do not have the agency to change school and district policies, they may perceive it as a futile endeavor to try to change anything at all. Teachers do have the ability to select specific lessons and content within the curriculum guidelines, as well as specific activities and discussions, and thus there are many opportunities to incorporate messages about race, diversity, and anti-bias. However, they may need further guidance, either in the teacher education program or through continuing education workshops, on how to properly apply and implement such messages.

Finally, teachers were asked what advice they would give parents or teachers who want to ensure their children do not become biased against people of other racial or ethnic groups. The advice mentioned by most was to 'treat everybody the same' (31%). Only 22% encouraged open discussions about race and diversity:

I would advise parents or teachers to discuss racial issues with students at a level that is age appropriate and use terminology that is culturally acceptable. Teach children how to embrace the cultural differences of others and that we are all the same in some aspects.

Talk about other races and how people are different instead of ignoring. Answer questions from your children.

Previous research with parents shows that some avoid conversations about race because they feel their children are too young (Hughes & Chen, 1999; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). Not many teachers in this study mentioned the children's age as a reason for not engaging in such conversations, but it is possible that it still played a role in their reluctance.

Nonetheless, even young children are aware of race and start absorbing messages from their environment regarding racial attributes, values, and stereotypes. Therefore, teachers of young children should forego the assumption that the children are unable to understand race and racism and instead engage them in developmentally appropriate conversations on the topic.

Ignoring children's comments or questions only encourages stereotypes and biases to remain unchanged. In contrast, having open dialogue about race has been associated with lower levels of bias in children (Katz, 2003; Vittrup & Holden, 2011).

Conclusion

Teachers hold the important role of educating children about the world around them and giving them the tools needed to be successful, contributing members of society. Children look to them for guidance, and if teachers are silent about topics related to race and diversity, children not only lose out on important lessons, but they may inadvertently assume that these are topics that do not need to be addressed and that present day racial tensions, bias, and inequality are normal and acceptable.

Such silence also trivializes the voices of marginalized groups and may contribute to minority students feeling devalued. So while well intended, the refusal to 'see race' and the resistance to having unpleasant conversations with children actually end up perpetuating the systemic bias and inequalities in our society.

As stated by Williams (2004): 'Race is a pervasive and powerful force that organizes culture and society, and we do our students no favors by pretending it doesn't affect our lives' (p. 164). Nonetheless, it is also clear from this study that in order for teachers to implement higher level multicultural education approaches, such as the *transformative* or *social action approach* (Banks, 2008), teachers need additional guidance and training, as well as support from their school administration and district.

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