

Expanding Multicultural Education to Include Family Diversity

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Introduction

The composition of families is changing (Huston, 2001) and is readily apparent in the variety of families represented by students in today's classrooms. Advocates from the fields of social work and psychological counseling (Okun, 1996) as well as from adoptive, step, and gay family support networks (Geis-Rockwood, 1990) have come to the fore to call for changes in curriculum and for teacher education programs to recognize and address this often-neglected form of diversity; yet, the multicultural education and diversity issues discussed in today's teacher education courses at our major universities and colleges are often still restricted to their foundational concerns with discussions of race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

Introducing the topic of family diversity provides another dimension of diversity for preservice teachers to consider and explore while they try to construct meanings for the monumental topics under discussion and critique in teacher education classrooms. The very notion of "family" offers most students some degree of ownership in the topic through their personal experiences of family; however, as they are asked to deconstruct narrow societal definitions of what constitutes a family, they begin a journey that often leads to discomfort, resistance, and challenges to what is defined as a normal and valued family in our society.

The contentiousness of this sort of conversation mirrors and buttresses issues surrounding race, class, and gender across their multicultural education curriculum, but the topic of family allows uniquely personal access to powerful stereotypes and biases hidden deep within

each student's conceptions of what constitutes a family.

This article describes a research and teaching project that was designed and implemented to investigate the promise of the integration of family diversity issues into a preservice teacher multicultural education curriculum to better prepare preservice teachers to respond to the needs of all students, regardless of their varied familial backgrounds.

Rationale

The overall purpose of this research project was to investigate the promise of the exploration of family diversity issues through a multicultural education curriculum to heighten the awareness and sensitivity of preservice teachers to needs tied to students' differing family structures as well as to overall issues of diversity in the classroom in order to better prepare these teachers to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Preservice teachers were introduced to family diversity issues as a special unit of instruction placed inside the existing curriculum in the undergraduate multicultural education course at a major Midwestern university's teacher education program. This research continues as part of an ongoing research project investigating how family diversity is addressed in both teacher education programs and multicultural education as a whole, including both theory and practice.

Issues of family diversity are becoming of critical importance as the demographics of families in this country and, indeed, the world, change (Huston, 2001); yet they are often an ignored part of the broader diversity discussions. Through the investigation of this project, participant awareness of family diversity issues was identified and assessed in terms of participant willingness to recognize and address such issues in their own classrooms. In addition, it is believed that providing these preservice

teachers with opportunities to explore issues of diversity through the specific subject area of family structure holds the potential to heighten their overall sensitivity to the broader diversity issues of class, race, ethnicity, and language and to further struggle to avoid generalizations which sometimes accompany such concepts, generalizations that have often either become loaded with preconceived connotations or reduced to complete ambiguity as simply "multicultural" (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

There is little doubt that there exists a broad call for the inclusion of diversity issues throughout teacher education discussions. Much of this discussion takes place under the umbrella of multicultural studies. Scholars writing in the area of multiculturalism today emphasize the need for pervasive antiracist education aimed at social justice (Nieto, 2000), suggest content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and the creation of an empowering school culture (Banks & Banks, 2001), argue for a *cultivation of humanity* (Nussbaum, 1997), call for *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2000), and attempt to define genres of multiculturalism, each with their own definitions and goals (Bennett, 2001; Duarte & Smith, 2000).

In preservice teacher university classrooms all over this country, future educators are engaged in attempts to make meaning of these notions and imagine their application to real students in real classrooms. With areas such as race and ethnicity forming the foundation of these studies, there also exists a need for an examination of other aspects of diversity which represent the varied physical and social worlds within which today's schoolchildren live and learn and family diversity represents a very important one.

Modes of Inquiry

This writing illustrates the work done and insights gained in this ongoing

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research effort. Phase one of this project involved the completion of a literature review of relevant writings in the areas of family diversity and curriculum and educational practices in the classroom. Building upon what was learned in phase one, phase two involved the design and creation of a unit of instruction tailored to both meet the needs of a preservice teacher audience and to also provide for analysis of preservice teachers' attitudes toward non-traditional families and children from those families as well as their abilities and willingness to work collaboratively to identify personal prejudices and how those might translate into the classroom.

The participants were preservice teachers (predominantly White, European-American) within the teacher education program of a prominent Midwestern university which offers a reformed teacher education program redesigned in terms of research findings on best practices. This teacher education program includes a focus on traditional diversity topics such as race, gender, culture, and language issues.

The family diversity curriculum unit was introduced to a total of three sections of the single, required Multicultural Education course within the teacher education curriculum across three semesters. Each section contained an average of twenty-six students. A summated, five-point Likert scale questionnaire provided foundational data on student attitudes toward family diversity and curriculum issues (Miller, 1991) as well as a focal point for reflection when returned to participants during their journal writing activities at the conclusion of the lesson. A less formal survey discussion at the end of the lesson provided formative feedback on the success of the lesson overall (Smith & Ragan, 1993).

In addition, guided discussions where the participants were encouraged to actively encounter and answer questions of their own prejudices and belief systems provided a strong foundation for self-exploration which was also reflected upon and evident during the journaling experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) as well as integrated into the activities. The guided group activities included the construction of a K-5 classroom activity for a lesson on family. Such activities created an opportunity for the participants to bring to life anti-bias activities involving family diversity which could be used in their own future classrooms. All of these activities were also reflected upon in the journal writing activity.

The Family Diversity Curriculum Unit

Syllabus space and time are both very precious within a multicultural education course designed to function as the only class within a reformed teacher education program dedicated to addressing issues of diversity and equity. As such, the addition of this curriculum unit on the topic of family diversity was allotted two hours of class time. During the class session before the Family Diversity Unit, a brief introduction to the upcoming unit was provided, the attitudinal questionnaires were administered and collected (anonymity was maintained), and the short, foundational readings were assigned and provided (*Understanding Diverse Families* and *Anti-bias Curriculum*; see references). The Family Diversity Unit was then taught during the next class period. A description of the curriculum unit is provided in the space that follows.

Laying the Foundation

After spending a few minutes on introductions, the overarching research question for the project was shared with students as a point of orientation: "How can teachers help their classrooms to become more inclusive and accepting environments for children from differing family structures just as we know they should be sensitive to the gender, racial, cultural, and language differences of students?" The opening query uniformly resulted in a majority of students admitting that they had not previously considered that family diversity would be a likely issue in their classrooms or in their curricula.

Following the brief discussion of the introduction of the topic of family diversity, the objectives for the unit were openly shared with students: (1) Develop an awareness and an initial understanding of the issue of family diversity, (2) Discover our own opinions and biases on family diversity, (3) Create/explore some tools for use in the classroom, and (4) Reflect on our views of family diversity through journaling.

Objective 1: Develop Awareness and Initial Understanding of Family Diversity

To accomplish the first objective of developing an initial understanding of the topic, a very brief lecture was given to provide foundational information. The changing demographics of our nation's school population were addressed, including the fact that less than fifty percent of children in schools in America are represented by a two biological, heterosexual parent family

and that the trend away from traditional, nuclear families is increasing. This demonstrates the necessity for teachers to contemplate how they will address and work with issues of family diversity in their classrooms.

A few short narratives, collected from people from non-traditional families, in which they shared some of their personal painful school experiences were read to the students to help to put a human face on the real consequences of teacher ignorance or indifference toward family diversity. Various forms of families were introduced (e.g., foster, adopted, step, grandparent/relative, gay/lesbian, interracial, etc.) to expose students to a wide variety of forms of family with which they might not have been familiar.

To compliment descriptions of difference, a discussion of the unifying themes across families was provided. This notion is based upon how families function with similar goals and purposes such as "providing for basic needs, child rearing, socializing members, establishing and maintaining cultural traditions, and delegating responsibilities and roles."

Objective 2: Discover Student Opinions and Biases on Family Diversity

The second objective was achieved through a guided discussion of the two assigned readings as well as discovery of the students' own biases. The students were asked to write down their responses to this question: "Being honest, what are some of the personal prejudices you hold or have previously held about non-traditional (single-parent, adoptive, gay/lesbian, step-parent, multi-racial, etc.) families?"

Students were then asked to move into pairs to share their responses with a partner and to work together to complete these two questions: "How do you think those prejudices translate into the classroom environment?" and "How, as a teacher, might you create a more positive, accepting environment for children from non-traditional families?"

The class was reconvened as a whole group and answers to the question of biases held about differing forms of family were verbally volunteered, written on the board, and discussed. Responses to the second group of questions answered in pairs were then collected and discussed. Many students were amazed at the extent to which they and their classmates held strong prejudicial beliefs against non-traditional forms of family.

Understanding Family Diversity

Objective 3: Create Activities for Use in the Classroom on Family Diversity

Having laid a foundational understanding of family diversity, followed by guided discovery of existing biases held by students, the third objective provided a positive and practical direction in which to turn by requiring some creative thinking about how to use classroom activities to be inclusive of many forms of family.

The exercise began by first critiquing the traditional family activities where seemingly innocuous assignments were exposed as having a negative impact on many children. Students from non-traditional family structures often feel awkward and excluded when asked to write an autobiography, bring baby photos to class, make a family tree, or doing genealogy studies. If they are being raised by single parents, step-families, grandparents/relatives, gay parents, or in adoptive or foster families, they will likely have some background that is missing, complicated, or even kept secret. Well meaning teachers can be exclusionary by using such familiar activities without realizing it.

An example of an inclusive alternative to the traditional activities, called the ME Poem, was shared with the class. In this activity, students are encouraged to complete each of nine descriptive statements about themselves, their interests, and their lives, including family members:

1. MOLLY (first name)
2. smart, athletic, funny, crazy (4 adjectives)
3. sister of Maureen (family)
4. who loves Mom, Maureen, Dad, and Judy
5. who needs love, good friends, and loyalty
6. who wonders about other cultures, diseases, and other states
7. who would like to see Florida, Paris, and people being nice to everyone else
8. resident of Petaluma, California, on Ellis Street
9. REGIN (last name)

The class was then instructed to break into small groups of three or four students and work with the markers and large sheets of paper provided to create a unique activity which could allow K-5 students to express information about themselves and their families in a free and unrestricted fashion. The excitement in the room surrounding this exercise was always palpable and the ideas generated were enthusiastically

shared in a lively “show and tell” session afterward. Students routinely expressed satisfaction with their ability to ideate a tangible solution to the challenge of using inclusive activities on family. Additional commercially available examples of such activities, materials, and lessons were then provided, such as the film and accompanying instructor’s guide, *That’s a Family!*.

Objective 4: Reflect on Views of Family Diversity through Journaling

Before giving students their reflective journaling assignment to be completed outside of class, the overall class totals for the attitudinal questionnaire were shared (maintaining individual confidentiality). Their individual completed questionnaires were then returned to them by use of a special labeling code. The journaling assignment sheet with the following questions was then given out:

Use your own paper and thoughtfully answer the questions that follow. This should represent approximately 2 to 3 pages of written reflection. Return your assignment to your instructor.

◆ Thinking back over the readings on family diversity, what issue(s) intrigued you most or caused you to think about something you had not considered before?

◆ During the class discussions, many issues concerning family diversity surfaced. What made the biggest impression on you and why?

◆ How do you feel that these issues have impacted your ideas about teaching?

◆ Do you see any of these ideas translating into your own teaching practice? How?

◆ Do you have any personal experiences which you can relate to this discussion?

Revisit the answers you gave on the questionnaire. How would you answer these questions now?

◆ Describe what FAMILY DIVERSITY means to you.

◆ What types of families do you expect to see represented by the students you will teach?

Findings

In the course of participating in this project, participants were exposed to readings on family diversity written from the perspectives of people living these experiences. Bringing these family situations to life was an important part of the experience, overall. Through the attitudinal questionnaire and subsequent

discussions, participants were asked to search into their own histories and to explore their own biases against particular family structures and how they thought those biases might or might not impact upon their teaching.

In addition to discussing the affective elements involved in the teaching of students from non-traditional families, participants were also able to “deconstruct” traditional classroom activities on the topic of family, often thought of nostalgically (such as the “family tree” activity) but shown to be detrimental to children who have hidden histories or simply lack that information altogether. Participants were then able to work together in small groups to create new and innovative activities that would be inclusive of all students.

Tying this all together and mirroring the theory-into-practice notion, participants reflected again upon their original answers to the questionnaire on attitudes toward differing family structures, their experiential readings and discussions, traditional exclusionary activities and improvements upon those, and their new perspectives on family diversity and how to address it in the classroom environment.

Attitudinal Questionnaire

The attitudinal questionnaire consisted of ten Likert-type questions and two open-ended questions. It was designed to provide a baseline for locating the beliefs about families held by each participant and for participant reflection upon their responses after the unit’s completion. The closed-ended questions asked for degrees of agreement or disagreement (5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree) and the results are provided below.

Question 1

As a teacher, you would worry about children in your class whose parents were divorced. (64% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

Question 2

The definition of a family is a group of people in which there are two married, biological parents who are both living at home and caring for their children. (16% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

Question 3

You plan to use a “family tree” exercise to talk about family genealogy and help children to be proud of their “roots.” (68% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

Question 4

Talking openly in the classroom about gay and/or lesbian relationships is a form of supporting those types of relationships. (12% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

Question 5

You plan to hold a "Bring your grandparents to school day." (64% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

Question 6

You feel sorry for the children of single mothers because they do not receive the amount of attention and support they need at home to be successful at school. (36% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

Question 7

Not mentioning types of families other than traditional, two-parent families can cause a student from a non-traditional family to suffer self-esteem troubles. (63% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

Question 8

You plan to practice an anti-bias curriculum. (68% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

Question 9

You often think to yourself, "Why can't we just let children be?" or "Children don't have any prejudices." (16% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

Question 10

Children who were adopted are no different than other children in terms of their development and their needs at school. (60% Agreed or Strongly Agreed)

The open-ended questions produced a variety of responses as participants were asked to consider: (1) *Describe what family diversity means to you*, and (2) *What types of families do you expect to see represented by the students you will teach?* Some students revealed inclusive definitions of families that went beyond the traditional, nuclear family. A larger number demonstrated an understanding that a significant number of the students in their future classrooms would not be from traditional, nuclear family structures. Overall, the results of the attitudinal questionnaire indicated and provided some illumination of the biases that existed prior to the family diversity unit.

Reflective Journals

Since time spent with the students was limited, it was from the reflective journals data that evidence of growth among participants became apparent. Below are

three excerpts from student participant reflective journals:

"Susan"

The biggest impression made on me was what my fellow classmates seemed to think about family diversity. Some of them seemed quick to judge others simply on what choices they had made. I think this attitude may impair them when it comes to teaching kids because it is hard to judge parents and not judge their children as well. My religion tells me not to believe in homosexuality but after discussing these issues in this unit, I also believe that you cannot judge children negatively because you personally disagree with decisions their parents have made. I want to make all of the kids in my class feel like they belong.

"Joy"

Family diversity is a concept that was never previously discussed during my education. Our class discussion really made me think about it. I cannot understand how in one sentence a person can say that a child needs two loving parents in a home and then also go on to say that homosexual parents cannot provide that. This issue has really opened my mind and eyes personally and also in thinking about how to handle such the topic of "different" families when I become a teacher myself.

"Sarah"

What made the biggest impression on me was when we listed our biases on the board. I felt so overwhelmed by these biases. I know that I am guilty of having some of these negative thoughts but I hadn't even realized before that I even held them. I don't know exactly how to remove these biases but the unit on family diversity has gotten my attention and I will take some of these new ideas with me when I teach. I now think it is important for me to remember to be as aware as possible of the backgrounds of all of my students and to also be aware of my own biases toward those backgrounds.

Implications

Overall, this research project indicates that expanding the definition and scope of multicultural education curriculum holds the potential to prepare new teachers to practice diverse family inclusion in several ways: (1) by broadening preservice teacher awareness of diversity to include family structure diversity since the composition of the American family has changed drastically and continues to evolve, (2) by assisting preservice teachers in discovering and examining their own prejudices concerning children from diverse family backgrounds and providing them with ways to address those biases, and (3) by exposing pre-ser-

vice teachers to ways to reflect upon their own thoughts and practices as well as ways to work collaboratively with others to raise awareness and solve problems.

Additionally, as a teacher educator and a mother of three children adopted at older ages from the state foster care system, I find the necessity of empowering teachers to confidently and proactively address family diversity in curriculum and in the classroom to be of critical importance. Curricular conceptual representations of family must be reshaped to accurately reflect and honor the many and varied ways in which people form caring groups that support and honor their members. Curriculum, widely conceived, refers to both formal forms of curriculum such as lessons, textbooks, and activities as well as informal forms of curriculum such as school culture (teacher speech, school functions, and paperwork) and popular culture (movies, television, and books).

Teachers need to be made aware that commercially-prepared lessons and textbook depictions of families and family life remain today still focused upon a traditional, nuclear family with a few ethnic variations of this theme presented in the more progressive versions. These limited depictions of family represent a standard of family against which we are all to measure our own.

Perhaps less obvious are aspects of school culture which contribute to a lack of inclusiveness of varied forms of family. School paperwork forms that are sent home with students to be completed by adults at home are still designed to identify and designate a responsible parent and are usually not flexible enough to allow for the accurate reflection of the complex caretaking networks formed by many current family conditions.

Classroom assistance is still most often sought under the moniker of "Room Mothers." Teacher talk about concerns for children from single parent (read: dysfunctional) homes is rampant and thinly disguised, if at all. Parents are sometimes even directly subjected to teacher prejudice on the psychological soundness of family forms with remarks given such as "I'll be watching for abandonment issues to surface in your child" when the child is identified as adopted. In conservative climates, even in public (as opposed to parochial) schools, students are openly but off-the-record told that a gay, lesbian, and/or transgender lifestyle is immoral (Turner-Vorbeck, 2005).

Mimicking the narrow and limited images of family portrayed through formal

Understanding Family Diversity

curriculum and school culture are those created and perpetuated through mass media and popular culture. Informal curriculum in the form of popular culture has become heavily influential due to the amount of exposure students receive to various forms of media such as movies, television, and books and it serves to buttress what students are learning about families in schools. Most popular, top-selling children's books and related television series and movies such as the *Berenstain Bears* books (Berenstain & Berenstain, 1962), the *Arthur* books (Brown, 1976), the *American Girl* doll stories (Tripp, 1991) and even the *Harry Potter* books (Rowling, 1997) continue to feature portrayals of families in the literary and visual images of American child culture that still consist largely of traditional, two parent households with the mother fulfilling the role of primary nurturer and caregiver (Turner-Vorbeck, 2005).

As discussed here, limited attempts on the part of classroom materials and textbook publishers to broaden conceptions and discussions of family, damaging talk, procedures, policies, and negative biases largely held and commonly practiced in school culture, and the predominance of traditional images and portrayals of exclusively nuclear family forms in curriculum and popular culture should leave teachers and parents alarmed at the chronic incongruence of the curricular representations

of family to the actual, living, everyday families of our students. Yet, there still exists the possibility of representations and discussions of family becoming more inclusive through continued research, education, and dialogue such as that presented in this special edition of *Multicultural Education*.

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