

Multicultural and Diversity Education through Literary Extension

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Children are aware of differences from a very early age; they need rich experiences and opportunities to discuss and question as they learn about similarities and differences. Whether awareness of difference develops into understanding, respect, and appreciation rather than fear and prejudice is strongly influenced by societal messages. At times, these messages are clear and explicit, but more often they are subtle or subliminal. Young children are busy learning about every aspect of their world and may accept biased cultural constructs as “natural.” Without examination, these beliefs become habit and accepted as “truth.” Educators face an ethical dilemma and must choose to confront bias and to facilitate awareness and critique of the language and cultural context that perpetuate stereotypes and inequity or to perpetuate the dominant curriculum. This paper examines some basic cultural biases, alternative perceptions and values; the effects of societal messages on children’s orientations toward diversity; and educational opportunities to empower children and develop positive dispositions toward diversity and a critical orientation toward the cultural context.

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As American society becomes increasingly diverse it is timely to consider the place of multicultural education in schools (Banks, 2001; Sadker & Sadker, 2000; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Historically, diverse groups have been expected to assimilate by adopting the language, behaviors, and values of the dominant culture (Bloom, 1995; Schlesinger, 1995; Nieto, 2000; Spring, 2004; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Given increasing diversity along with historical and contemporary inequities in educational outcomes for non-dominant groups (Orfield & Chungmei, 2004), knowledge of multicultural education and the effects of bias is essential for

preservice teachers. When considering multicultural education from an ethical perspective, the guiding principle of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment Guidelines for Responsible Behavior* (1998) provides a useful starting point. Principle 1.1 states, "Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, intimidating, emotionally damaging, or physically harmful to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code."

With this principle in mind, consider the negative consequences of bias and unearned privilege, the benefits of multicultural education, and implications for individuals and society. Using personal experiences, the significance of early experiences on identity and attitudes toward differences will be examined. Strategies for using the extension of literature with young children to explore difference and facilitate an awareness of bias are also presented.

Diversity is a fact of living in the modern world for students from kindergarten to college. Even if one happens to teach or reside in a homogeneous school district, the children growing up there need to know that beyond the classroom walls everyone may not look, think, or act like them. Regardless of whether one grows up in a diverse or homogeneous environment, societal stereotyping and bias affect self-concept and attitudes about others (Derman-Sparks, 1988; Katz, 1982). The influence of social interactions on culture and learning (Vygotsky, 1978) is important to consider when designing educational practices that promotes understanding and empowerment of children as they explore and learn to appreciate differences. Because children are vulnerable to societal messages that promote stereotypes and disparity, it is essential for

educators in a democracy to confront issues of bias and guide children as they examine differences and commonalities (Derman-Sparks & ABC Task Force, 1988). In simple terms, appreciation of diversity must be taught (King, Cruz, & Cruz –Jansen, 1993).

Effects of Bias

Students who do not see their own culture or experience reflected in the curriculum and dialogue of schooling may not see the relevance of school knowledge, and they may internalize feelings of inferiority. Furthermore, cultural incongruence impairs learning (Au & Mason, 1991) when students are unable to connect new knowledge to prior experiences. Even with high aspirations, many minority students are unable to succeed in schools with low expectations and little cultural relevance (Nieto, 2000). Less obvious are the negative effects upon dominant group members who may have a false sense of superiority reinforced while opportunities to learn about diverse experiences, values, ways of knowing, and contributions to society are denied.

Education that represents the dominant culture while excluding other perspectives and experiences is inherently discriminatory and prevents equity of access to educational opportunity. Although on the surface this approach may seem to benefit certain groups it can be argued that all are negatively impacted by educational practices that discriminate against certain groups while privileging others (Derman-Sparks, 1988; Freire, 1993). According to Nieto (2000), "...all students are *miseducated* when they receive only a partial and biased education."

Multicultural Education

In contrast, multicultural education and anti-bias teaching embrace inclusive practices to enhance learning opportunities and enable students to develop a cultural

consciousness starting in the first years of life. Education that is multicultural reduces prejudice, promotes respect and understanding for others, and prizes similarities and differences as valuable resources. The challenge for educators is to develop a perspective which includes rather than excludes information about all groups in our schools, community, region, state, nation, and the world. In some cases education may suggest a revision of existing data. Moreover, education should address the ultimate goal of “equity education” demanding that personal attitudes and classroom activities be examined in the light of a diverse student population (Byrnes & Kiger, 1996; Derman-Sparks & Philips, 1997; Nieto, 2000). Educators must be aware that every classroom is crowded because each child brings with them friends, family and community.

Often teachers argue against including multicultural topics in early childhood or primary school curriculum. Nieto (2000) describes multicultural education as “basic education” that is “important for all students.” Multicultural education is not divisive but rather an inclusive practice that promotes understanding of a more balanced curriculum that includes multiple perspectives and experiences. Thus, diversity needs to be addressed at an early age.

Marilyn Lopes (1993) of the University of Massachusetts postulates that teachers should be told what multicultural education is not as well as what it is. Teaching topics that only consider surface culture such as holidays, food, trivializes the true meaning of a culture. Multicultural topics should be woven in the curriculum so that each child can identify with what they are learning. If multicultural activities are scattered throughout the year as gap fillers or are seen as shortcuts to get in some multiculturalism, they can be harmful. Children may not understand how the ideas connect to their lives.

Early Years

Foundations of self-awareness are constructed when children are infants or toddlers. They are sensitive to the feelings of adults around them, and they begin to mimic adult behavior. By age two, children recognize and explore physical differences (Biles, 1994). Lessons should be based on a child's developmental stage, or the moment they perceive differences.

During the early years, as children learn about themselves, others, and the world around them, they also begin to develop ideas and attitudes about race and ethnicity (Katz, 1982). Children learn "what is me" and "what is not me". As experiences allow children to develop schemas or mental maps from which they construct understanding of the world, themselves, and others, they also begin to develop the ability to categorize and become aware of hierarchy (Piaget, 1952, 1971). Social interactions strongly influence the meaning that children apply to the differences that they may encounter (Vygotsky, 1978).

Preschool-aged children are more aware of surrounding differences than given credit for. The following true incidents, mentioned to demonstrate children's early awareness of and response to differences, exemplify some of the situations that should be addressed as they occur.

Four year old Olivia followed her father, a physician, wherever she could and often accompanied him to the hospital. One day she sat in his office to wait while he went on rounds. Tired of sitting alone, she went to the waiting room of the Naval Hospital where she met another little girl about her age. As it often is with all children, no introduction was necessary. Soon they were playing like long lost friends. As they

interacted, the second girl touched Olivia's hand, and rubbed it. "It won't come off," she exclaimed, referring to Olivia's dark complexion. "Tell your mummy to bathe you, ok?" (Olga Salmón, 1965)

The idea that children at a young age cannot discriminate based on color or race is shown to be inaccurate. The following provides insight into children's responses to differences and impact upon self-concept according to Biles (1994):

By age two children are learning the names of colors, and they begin to apply this to skin color...At age 3 and 4 they tend to sort people out based on color and size...They wonder why two people with different skin tones are considered part of the same racial group. Many preschoolers will comment-in words or through actions-on hair texture, eye shape, and other physical characteristics. They want to know how people got their color, hair texture, and eye shape.

This natural curiosity provides ample "teachable moments" for caring adults to guide children's understanding and appreciation of difference. For example, imagine that the mother in the naval hospital had intervened with a discussion of variations in skin color. She could have helped her daughter understand that although her own "white" skin only became darker when dirty, pale skin is not the norm. The daughter could have learned that many people have beautiful skin in various shades of brown. While her daughter would have learned a bit about appreciating "otherness," Olivia would have had the beauty of her own skin appreciated and validated. Building upon Piaget's idea that children build theories and construct understanding from experience, it is reasonable to expect that if Olivia's friend never examined her assumption, she may well have continued to believe that dark skin was "dirty." Unexamined and reinforced by societal

messages, this perception may manifest in a belief that light skin is superior to dark skin.

Like prejudice, stereotypes are learned. Young children learn to stereotype others by the comments or behavior of role models by believing someone else's opinion when they haven't had first-hand experience. This subliminal message did get across to the child who told his mother, "Mummy, I am white now." "Why would you say that?" rejoined his mother. "I just took a bath." Here the child was equating white with clean and black with dirty.

Adults say to a child, "Oh my, your hands are black. Go and wash them." What is known about the color black? What image does it conjure in the minds of people based on the message that has been programmed? In mainstream America, black is equated to darkness, shadows, dirt, and danger. Other terms equated with black include: filth, slavery, inferiority, blackball, black cat, black widow, and black hold.

Ongoing exposure to language that relates darkness to negativity during the early years of concept development poses a threat to understanding and appreciating difference. As they learn, young children tend to over generalize and apply new concepts inappropriately. Without equal exposure to positive images of blackness, and opportunities to explore and critique symbolic language, the associations may become a basis for prejudice.

Prejudice thrives on ignorance, but accurate information can help reduce it. Young children are naturally curious about what they see, and they want information. Derman-Sparks (1988) provides an example of a young child's question and an appropriate response:

"How do people get their color?" asks 3-year-old Heather. "What are your ideas?"

her teacher responds. “Well, I was wondering about pens. You know, the pens you can put red or brown on your skin if you want to.” Teacher: “I’m glad you are trying to figure things out, but that’s not how people get their skin color. We get our skin color from our mommies and daddies. Your skin is the same color as mine. Marizza’s skin color is like her mommy and daddy’s. Denise’s skin is lighter brown because she is a mixture of her mommy’s white skin and her daddy’s black skin.”

During play sessions, children can be guided to explore and celebrate their differences, even as they enjoy each other’s company and recognize important elements of sameness. Experiences that acknowledge and validate physical characteristics as neither inferior nor superior, simply a different shade than playmates, help to form a healthy self-identity. Early exploration of difference builds understandings that enable children to recognize and reject the negative societal messages and stereotypes that they will undoubtedly encounter as they grow older.

But what about aspects of appearance, ethnicity, and the way people are dressed? Do little children notice? Being that at such an early age children’s thinking is limited by experience, ideas about difference may be distorted by childish theories and be inconsistent with reality. Without experiences that enable them to question and learn about difference, it is easy for them to believe stereotypes and form prejudices. Louise Derman-Sparks (1988) states:

The goals are to facilitate children’s awareness that their racial identity does not change, to help them understand that they are part of a large group with similar characteristics (not “different” from everyone else) and so foster their desire to be

exactly who they are.

The examples discussed here support the notion that the ability to discriminate difference is not innately negative but that initial responses and interpretations of difference should be only the beginning step toward deeper understanding

Beth Blue Swander et al., (1994) in *Cultural and Gender Identity in Early*

Childhood give this account of one child's interpretation of gay and lesbian family issues:

One of the boys at our childcare center has an aunt who is in a lesbian-committed relationship and they spend time together. Brian is at the point of trying to understand what that means. One day at the table, I heard Brian yelling at another child at the lunch table. "No, no, two men can't get married and have babies. No, it's not allowed?"...for some children, this is out of their experience, but for Brian, there's his aunt with whom he has spent every summer.

It may be that, even though Brian accepted his aunt and her partner's relationship as a normal part of his experience as two people he loved, he was unable to generalize understanding of gay and lesbian partnerships to the wider world. His own lived experience was overshadowed and his understanding of appropriate family structures was strongly influenced by the norms and biases of society.

Multiculturalism through Literary Extension

The multicultural approach to working with young children is based on appreciating all human differences that are most obvious. Nevertheless, soon thereafter, we must address culture, race, occupation, income level, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and physical abilities and disabilities. To quote Edith King et al., (1993) in *Educating Young Children in a Diverse Society*:

The time has come for teachers, parents, and all those who work with young children to bring world awareness and world mindedness into the young child's classroom. Those of us in early childhood education must champion with renewed emphasis the need to prepare children to live on an interdependent planet and in a worldwide society composed of diverse traditions and cultures.

Not every school has a physically diverse student population, nor are all communities socially and culturally diverse. For many students, therefore, their experience with cultural differences must be attained through books. Thus, multicultural education can be taught through literary extension.

The books mentioned here are intended to increase the child's awareness and appreciation of other people; to show our connection to each other through emotion, need, and desire; and to help children understand (a) what it feels like to be mistreated, (b) what makes people want to dominate others, (c) the extent to which people will go to be acceptable (or superior) in society, and (d) how individuals can either perpetuate or challenge prejudice and discrimination. Clearly, a teacher's understanding of developmental level is critical in determining how best to use these books.

Cathy Pohan (1994), San Diego State University, has suggested strategies that can be adapted to children's books. For example, using *The Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss (1961/1989), teachers can focus on the language arts-reading skills of rhyming and rhythmic patterns while addressing issues of prejudice, discrimination, racism and classicism. In this story, the Star-Belly Sneetches believe they are superior to the Plain-Belly Sneetches. The Star-Belly Sneetches push the Plain-belly Sneetches to the margins

of society.

The True Story of the three little Pigs! by Jon Scieszka (1989), is another appropriate example. This story is the classic tale of the three little pigs told from the point of view of the wolf. According to him, he only wanted to borrow a cup of sugar and was framed as big and bad. Consequently, this story may be used to develop new knowledge and understanding about issues of prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination and institutionalized racism. It can also be used to critique the media and its practices.

Another wonderful book that can be used to stimulate discussion on differences is: *Squares are Not Bad* (Salazar, 1967). In this story, each shape lives apart from the other and believes other shapes are “bad”. When they discover all of the shapes they make when they work together, they change their minds. The discussion leading from this book will open children’s minds to the beauty and usefulness of each individual. This can encourage them to get to know people who are outwardly different and to recognize the strengths and values each person adds to create this beautiful world. Also, at this time in the history of the United States, one can also emphasize the theme of peace versus war and violence.

Little Yellow and Little Blue by Leo Lionni (1959) is a children’s classic, appropriate in addressing the concept of friendship, love and unity between individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. Little Yellow and Little Blue, good friends, hug each other and become one color. As Little Green, they achieve the impossible such as climbing mountains. At the end of the story, their parents change and accept others who are different. The message here is that through love and unity, people are able to accomplish wonderful things.

Conclusion

Multicultural education has implications for society as well as for the individual. Education, particularly the education of citizens in a democratic society, encompasses more than basic skills. Banks & Banks (1997, p. xiv) maintain that multicultural education is essential for citizens in a democracy and “helps students transcend their cultural boundaries and acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to engage in public discourse with people who differ from themselves...”

The hypotheses that develop in childhood are often unchecked and permeate attitudes throughout adulthood (Gardner, 1991). Thus, teachers as well as children benefit from experiences that explore diversity as they reflect critically on their own experiences.

As teacher educators, we find preparing our predominantly white middle class students to work with children of color to be a particular challenge. Before preservice teachers are able to facilitate a caring, equitable classroom, they must first examine their own experiences, beliefs and biases, recognize social inequities, and learn to appreciate the strengths of diverse cultural groups. There are endless possibilities for addressing multicultural issues and content. Teachers should view every teaching situation as a window of opportunity.

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