Implementing Multicultural Practices in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Preparing teachers to use multicultural education principles is a dilemma facing many early childhood programs. While many have well intended behaviors, many lack the knowledge base of multicultural education. This article will: a) discuss the need for multicultural education in early childhood programs; and b) share strategies based on Bank's five dimensions that can be used to assist early childhood teachers in implementing multicultural education practices into their respective programs.

As the early childhood population becomes more diverse, there is a need to incorporate programs and practices that are reflective of multicultural education principles. These young children will benefit greatly from early childhood programs that embrace their culture during their early years. Preparing teachers to use multicultural education principles is a dilemma facing many programs and early childhood programs in particular. While many have well intended behaviors, many lack the knowledge base of multicultural education. As such the purpose of this article is two-fold: to discuss the need for multicultural education in early childhood programs and to share how Bank's five dimensions can be used to assist teachers in implementing multicultural education in to their programs.

The Need for Multicultural Education in Early Childhood Programs

The American population is changing. The 2000 Census when compared to the 1990 Census showed that the African American population grew by 15.6%, the Native American and Alaska Native population grew by 26.4%, the Asian population grew by

48.3, the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander population grew by 9.3%, and the Hispanic or Latino population grew by 57.9% according to US Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). As the overall demographics change so are the demographics of children in early childhood education programs.

There are over twenty million children between the ages 0 to 4 in the United States and almost 120,000 child care facilities (NACCRA, 2009). These child care facilities are regulated by the state government. Therefore, the training requirements depend on the state in which the center resides. There is no national regulating body that has the power to implement national requirements. However, the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) provides a national accreditation program for child care centers. Their accreditation process sets a standard for all the programs in their accreditation system. Several of the standards for accreditation require culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse teaching materials and methods or multicultural education (NAEYC, 2008).

NAEYC is also well known for the advancement of developmentally appropriate practices. The first version occurred in 1987. The second version states that NAEYC has a commitment to respect "the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague" (NAEYC, 1997, p.7). Also one of the principles of the NAEYC position statement is that "development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts (NAEYC, 1997 p.12). NAEYC gone further by starting a program called "Engaging Diverse Families." The goal of this project is to assist early childhood program in effectively connecting with diverse families. With the implementation of this program, NAEYC still acknowledges that early childhood programs are struggling to engage diverse families (Gonzalez-Mena, 2008; Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009). Lee and Johnson suggest (2007) that the three top child developmental theories (Piaget, psychoanalysis, and learning theories) are linear, universal, and individualistic. Therefore, they do not match with ideals of multicultural education or engaging diverse families. As such, early childhood educators need to evaluate the child development theories that have undergirded early childhood teaching techniques and strategies. Lee and Johnson (2007) also suggest using a systems perspective where learning takes place within contexts.

Multicultural Education and Bank's Five Dimensions of Multicultural Education

Banks' (2004) research support that a child's racial attitudes can change but education must start early. Many early childhood theorists believe that developing kindness and compassion are a vital part of a child's early development (Moore, 2004). Research has shown that by the age of three or four, construction of gender and racial identity has already started in a child (Araufo & Strasser, 2003; Ramsey, 2008). Moreover, early childhood programs are the perfect place to start multicultural education.

Multicultural education is defined by many scholars. For the purpose of this paper, we will use Johnnie Mills' (1984) definition and Christine Bennett's definition (1990). According to Mills, multicultural education means a:

...philosophy and a process by which schools and other institutions/workplaces demonstrate - in staffing patterns, curricula, instructional practices and school - community relations acceptance and respect for human diversity as a means of providing all children an equitable quality education in preparation for living in a culturally pluralistic society. Education systems must be cognizant of more than the skin colors, backgrounds and religious beliefs of people. Rather, they must educate to eliminate classism, racism, sexism, ageism, handicappism--and the more recently recognized ill, uglyism. (p.44)

Bennett defines multicultural education as an approach to teaching and learning that is based on the democratic values and beliefs and that multicultural education seeks to foster cultural pluralism within culturally diverse societies at national and international levels. According to Bennett, multicultural education has four dimensions. They are a) movement which means to achieve equality and equity; b) curriculum- knowledge that helps to develop one history, knowledge and understanding of others; c) process that includes the way a person becomes multicultural; and d) commitment an obligation to combat discrimination with the development of appropriate skills and attitudes.

It is within these two definitions that we proposed to address how to implement multicultural education into early childhood programs. We will further explain in the next section how parts of the definitions can be implemented through Bank's five dimensions of multicultural education.

Bank's Five Dimensions and Strategies for Early Childhood Programs

Banks developed five dimensions of multicultural education to describe how programs/ schools can implement components of multicultural education (2004). Banks five dimensions are content integration, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction, and empowering school culture and social structure. Each of these dimensions will be defined with strategies that can be implemented in early childhood program and we propose that each of the dimensions builds on each other.

Content Integration

Many believe that content integration is the only dimension of multicultural education because it involves the content in curriculum. Content integration focuses on how the teacher uses examples, data, and information from diverse cultures to support key concepts, principles, generalization, and theories. It occurs when the curriculum has material from diverse groups. The goal of this dimension is to create an awareness of different cultures.

The first step and one of the seemingly easiest dimensions for an early childhood center to implement is content integration. An early childhood center would need to include dolls or puppets of different colors, multicultural crayons, multicultural books, multicultural photographs and books. The issue for most centers may be the cost of

buying these items. These items can be purchased from companies that specify in multicultural materials such as Creative Diversity.

Knowledge Construction

In knowledge construction the teacher assists the student in comprehending how knowledge is produced and influenced by the racial, ethnic, and social culture. The student is encouraged to understand how knowledge construction can be biased by implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, and perspectives (Banks, 2004). Banks' gives four levels to approach curriculum reform in knowledge construction.

The first level is the contribution approach. This focuses on the "heroes, holiday, and discrete cultural elements" (p.15). The next level is the additive approach. This is when "concepts, themes, and perspectives are added to the curriculum without changing its structure" (p. 15).   The third level is the transformation level. This occurs when changes are made to the curriculum so that students are able to "view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups" (p. 15). The final level is social action approach. This level requires that the students implement what they have learned in the previous levels and "make decisions on important social issues and take action to help solve them" (p. 15).

Early childhood education would be able to implement Banks' levels of knowledge construction.   The contribution level in an early child program would acknowledge the different heroes and holiday in different cultures. Examples of this would be Kwanza, Chinese New Year or Cinco de Mayo Day. An example of the additive level in early childhood education would be if a teacher was talking about transportation and added pictures of transportation from diverse cultures.

The transformational level may become an issue in early childhood education because one needs to make sure the information he or she is sharing is developmentally appropriate for the child. Derman-Sparks (1989) and Crary (1992) both believe that this can be done by responding to a young child in context of the situation. One way of doing this is by allowing children to share their stories.   Miller and Mehler (1994) and Kidd, Sanchez, and Thorp (2004a; 2004b; 2005) state how important is for children to tell stories about their home and family lives and for teachers to listen. Stories not only come from the children but from the teacher and the students' families. These stories allow teachers to become more culturally aware and provide insight into the child and family. If these stories are shared with all the families in the classroom it can create a sense of community (Araujo & Stresser, 2003).   Also teachers can create stories that have anti bias themes. However, they should be based on concerns that come from the child's daily life, current events, information that the teacher wants the student to know, and history (Derman-Sparks, 1989). All of these stories from students and families can also be integrated into the curriculum or used by teachers to develop curriculum therefore creating transformation.

This level of social action may be difficult but students can begin early to develop critical thinking skills. Social action is very hard to view in an early childhood program because it requires solutions and action. However, it may be evaluated in the future after

a child has left the early childhood educational setting; thus providing the need for longitudinal studies in this area.

Prejudice Reduction

Prejudice reduction focuses on how the administration and teachers work together to decrease racial stereotypes and prejudices in the school and increase democratic attitudes, values, and behavior. The staff work together to understand students' racial attitudes and how their racial attitudes can be altered (Banks, 2004). Research in this area focuses on the nature and modification of racial attitudes.

The prejudice reduction dimension is a relevant to an early childhood setting. Young children may even develop "pre-prejudice." Derman-Sparks (1989) defines this as

> beginning ideas and feeling in very young children that may develop into real prejudice through reinforcement by prevailing societal biases. Pre-prejudice may be misconceptions based on young children's limited experience and developmental level, or it may consist of imitations of adult behavior. More serious forms are behaviors that indication discomfort, fear, or rejections of differences. (p.3)

When this occurs a teacher can assist students in developing social-thinking strategies that can assist them in becoming more assertive and effective in resolving peer related issues (Araujo & Strasser, 2003).

In an early childhood setting prejudice and stereotypes can be handled in many different ways. One is having the teacher take immediate action when he or she hears or sees a stereotype or prejudice. Crary (1992) stated several guidelines for teachers to use to help children understand differences and begin to feel comfortable with people different from them. They are: respond promptly, give simple answers, model respectful behavior both verbally and nonverbally, acknowledge children's fears, clarify misconceptions, introduce differences via books, and offer children experiences with real people.

Another strategy focuses on contact. One way the teacher can use this in early childhood programs by how he or she groups the students or seating arrangements. Research has found that preschool and kindergarten children especially White children tend to play more with children of their own race (Ramsey, 2008). Teachers can divide children into more culturally diverse groups at tables and centers. They also go further by implementing the contact hypothesis. Contact hypothesis consists of three sections. They are equal status, support of authority, cooperative independence and support of authorities (Zirkel, 2008; Schofield, 2004). In a preschool setting, equal status would be making sure that each group represented equal. An example of this would be having diversity in dolls, pictures, and any item where culture is reflected. This includes the staff in the early childhood program. The staff should be reflective of the children in the center. Early childhood centers can implement cooperative interdependence by focusing

on activities that encourage cooperation among students instead of competiveness. These games can include relays or any activities where students have the same shared goals.

Early childhood centers must have the support of the director, owner and the board. Schofield (2004) discusses the roles of the principal these roles can also be used to discuss what a director/owner of an early childhood education program should do. The first role is enabling. The director/owner needs to make sure the decisions that he or she makes assist in promoting positive contact amongst diverse students. The next the director/owner should serve as model for staff and students to follow. The director/owner should also defend, support, and introduce how important it is to have positive relationship among diverse students. Lastly the director/owner should reward positive and punish negative behaviors.

Equity Pedagogy

The fourth dimension is equity pedagogy. These are teaching techniques and strategies that designed to improve the academic achievement of diverse students. This is often done by understanding learning styles, teaching styles, and language. One of the major ideas on learning styles is field dependent and field sensitive. One issue with using these are that they are fluid and not static and children can show a few characteristics of each. Purnell, Ali, Begum, and Carter (2007) discuss how literacy and the arts can be used to build culturally responsive classrooms. They believe that teachers need to be inventive to do this. Their strategies include storytelling, drawing, moving, singing, and creative play. Examples of this include using clay to enhance the alphabetic principle, exploring differences with people portraits and recipes for celebrating our heritage.

There are other pedagogical areas that need to be discussed by early childhood educators. Perkins and Mebert (2005) suggest that teaching children to become experts in multicultural education would allow them to have more domain-specific knowledge. When children have more domain specific knowledge they are able to make inferences and think on higher levels in this domain then their age group normally does.

Empowering School Culture and Social Structure

The last dimension is empowering school culture and social structure. The school was a part of each of the earlier dimension but Banks' also sees the school as its' own cultural structure. There are many components that go into the school culture and structure. They include sports participation, interactions among the staff and students, and disproportionality of achievement. This holistic approach allows educators look at the overall system variables and how they are interrelated (Banks, 2004).

Banks and Banks (2004) discuss the characteristics of effective (improving) schools that can empower the school culture and social structure. One is that the staff stresses the importance of basic skills and trust that the students are able to do them and that the staff is accountable for what they do. Another is the principal is an "assertive

instructional leader and disciplinarian and assumes responsibility for evaluating the achievement of basic skills objectives" (p. 21). Lastly, in effective schools parents initiate more contact than non-effective (non-improving schools).

Summary

The demographics of the students in early childhood education are changing. However, most of the early childhood education programs are not prepared for this change. The researchers in multicultural education have done the work that can assist in establishing effective multicultural early childhood education programs. The problem may be in creating dialogue between the two communities and seeking state laws to regulate multicultural education as a requirement for all early childhood education programs.

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