

Providing Early Childhood Teachers With Opportunities To Understand Diversity And The Achievement Gap

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High quality teaching – providing children with support, feedback, and positive communication – is associated with closing the achievement gap between minority and majority children. It is important for students in teacher preparation programs to understand changes in curricular approaches to diversity - from the color-blind approach, to multiculturalism, to anti-bias curriculum – to help them better understand factors related to the current achievement gap. Strategies are suggested for acknowledging differences between children from different cultural groups without developing a “pedagogy of poverty,” that may result in lowered expectations of children from minority and low-income families.

The beginning of the 2009 school year marks the 45th year of school since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that state laws allowing for separate public schools for black and white children denied black children equal access to educational opportunities. Despite the years since this ruling, we continue to see an “achievement gap” between white and African American children in the U.S., as observed through several measures, including standardized test scores, high-school dropout rates, college enrollment and completion rates, and grade point averages (e.g., Bankston & Cladus, 2002; Bauman & Graf, 2003, Flynn, 2007). Current evidence suggests that school quality may be critical in understanding the achievement gap between African American and white students (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Therefore, the manner in which prospective teachers are prepared to address the achievement gap may have a profound impact upon the next generation of children’s educational

outcomes. This is a particularly crucial topic for early childhood teachers, because children are forming attitudes and beliefs about racial and ethnic identity during these years. The current manuscript examines changes in curricular orientations towards classroom diversity that have occurred since desegregation, and examines how to communicate these approaches to students in teacher preparation programs.

Historically, in many areas of the country *de facto* desegregation did not quickly follow the 1954 Supreme Court decision. On the contrary, actual desegregation lagged for many years throughout the country, particularly due to inequality in access to housing and segregation of neighborhoods. Because white and black children often lived in different neighborhoods and different areas of towns many schools remained factually segregated along racial lines, although this was not an official policy. This led to the 1971 U.S. Supreme Court Ruling of *Swann v.*

Charlotte-Mecklenburg, which held that bussing children to less geographically proximal schools was an appropriate strategy to address racial imbalance in schools. The concept of bussing proved to be unpopular with many families, both white and black, who argued that the longer travel times to more distal schools were difficult when closer neighborhood schools existed nearby. Many white families moved further away from urban centers (called “white flight”) so that their children might attend more suburban schools, or enrolled children in private schools (Bankston & Caldas, 2002). The desegregation of African American students increased from the 1950s to the late 1980s. Following a peak in 1988, schools have become more segregated (Orfield, 2009). According to Kozol (2006), the proportion of black students at majority white schools in 2005 was at a level lower than in any year since 1968. Additionally, the meaning of “diversity” in schools has changed with the dramatic increase in the number of children who are English language learners, the growth of the Hispanic/Latino population, and immigration of other groups.

Many of the children who attended public schools in the south during the 1970’s and 1980’s never experienced life in a segregated school. However, many of their teachers – both black and white - did attend and teach at segregated schools, whether segregated by policy or by pragmatics. Moreover, very few of those teachers who were employed in the public schools during the years of increasing desegregation had any formal training or experiences during their college preparation to prepare them for the integration of schools or for working with racially diverse classrooms. Instead this “first wave” of teachers was left to figure out what to do as they went along, and the approach of many good, compassionate teachers at this time was to focus on fairness, equality, and justice.

The Color-Blind Approach

What has since been labeled the “color-blind” approach was the attempt to pretend that

racial differences did not matter, that children were all equal and should be treated fairly and impartially. This approach can be summed up in the statement “kids are kids.” At the time, this was probably the most positive approach to diversity that most teachers had access to. The attempt was to communicate to children that we are all equal by treating everyone the same and acting as if differences do not exist. The problem with this approach was that children continued to live in a society beyond the classroom that was not color blind. Even today, children can be exposed to racial stereotypes in some homes and public settings, racial jokes can be overheard in public playgrounds, zoos, and so on, and institutional barriers to educational resources continue to exist. Consider this recent statement from an African American man living in a mid-sized southern city:

I took my kids out of that school because of the principal. They were called the ‘n-word,’ and when they told the principal, she said ‘oh, that’s just a word, they didn’t mean anything by it and words won’t hurt you.’ But it isn’t just a word, words have meaning.

The actions of the principal reflected a “color-blind” philosophy. Although perhaps well-intentioned, denying that differences exist in the way society treats individuals of different races does not help to prepare children to live in a world where those differences do exist. Possibly in an attempt to instill the victimized children with a bounce-back, resilient attitude, this principal missed a teaching opportunity to discuss with all of the children how racial slurs are not to be accepted.

Multicultural Curriculum

Throughout the 1980’s an emphasis on multicultural educational approaches began to take hold, and this approach remains perhaps the most common approach taught at teacher preparation programs at many universities. The

initial purpose of the multicultural approach was to move beyond the limitations of a color-blind curriculum, by recognizing that differences do exist between individuals of different backgrounds and races. The intent of the multicultural approach is to introduce children to cultures other than their own, with the hope that they will learn to respect each other and therefore not develop prejudice towards other cultures. Multicultural approaches often focus on bringing visitors, pictures, foods, or artifacts from other cultures to expose children to. Studies among college students indicate that multiculturalism is associated with lower levels of racial bias than color-blindness (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004).

The good intentions of multicultural education have sometimes led to unintended results. Ramsey (1982) described some potential problems with multicultural curriculum. First, it frequently focuses on other countries (e.g., China or Mexico) rather than learning about the cultural diversity of Chinese-Americans or Mexican-Americans. Second, multicultural curricula may be standardized, rather than taking in to account the background and experiences of a unique group of children. Third, teachers may assume that children only need multicultural curriculum if there is diversity in the classroom. Thus, a teacher in an all-white classroom might feel that a multicultural approach is not needed. Also, based on the view that young children are concrete learners, exposing young children to cultures that they do not have direct contact with has sometimes been discouraged. Perhaps the most serious pitfall of multicultural approaches is slipping in to a “tourist curriculum” (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989). This occurs when a well-meaning teacher attempts to teach about a culture exclusively through celebrations and “artifacts” of culture (e.g., special foods, traditional clothing, and household implements or decorations). In this way, members of the culture become objectified, and multicultural activities become “visits” that are separate from the ongoing daily curriculum: “It is Chinese New Year today, let’s eat fortune

cookies!” “Today is Cinco de Mayo – let’s eat tacos and wear sombreros!” In this way, the well-intentioned teacher is simply passing on his own stereotypes to the children, rather than teaching the children about other cultures. Additionally, white American culture is not treated as a culture in this approach, but rather as the starting point. For example, Christmas is treated as a universal holiday rather than a cultural one, or - just as wrongly - ignored completely because “we can’t talk about religious holidays.” Consider this example from a suburban Tennessee early education program this past November:

Parents were invited to a “Thanksgiving Feast.” Children were able to choose if they would like to be a pilgrim or an Indian. The boy “pilgrims” received materials to make hats from brown construction paper by gluing on pre-cut yellow construction paper “buckles.” The girl “pilgrims” were helped to make “bonnets” from white paper. The “Indians” could make head dresses from paper of a variety of colors, and these were decorated by gluing on multi-colored diamond shaped construction paper and feathers of various colors.

These activities did not help the children to learn any factual information about Native Americans or how Native Americans live today. Instead, these activities merely passed on the oversimplified stereotypes the adults had formed about the holiday.

Anti-Bias Curriculum

In identifying the pitfalls of the multicultural approach, Louise Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force (1989) sought to keep what they viewed as the positive intentions of multicultural curriculum – to teach children about others’ cultures so that they might learn to value other cultures – while avoiding the pitfalls of the tourist approach. The goal of Anti-bias curriculum is

to empower children with the tools needed to inoculate them against racism. Thus, the anti-bias approach is a more active approach to challenge prejudice, stereotyping, and bias. According to Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force (1989, pp. 7-8):

Anti-bias curriculum incorporate the positive intent of multicultural curriculum and uses similar activities, while seeking to avoid the dangers of a tourist approach. At the same time, anti-bias curriculum provides a more inclusive education: (a) it addresses more than cultural diversity by including gender and differences in physical abilities; (b) it is based on children's developmental tasks as they construct identity and attitudes; and (c) it directly addresses the impact of stereotyping, bias, and discriminatory behavior in young children's development and interactions.

The introduction of Anti-bias curriculum represented the second paradigmatic shift in the approach to diversity in schools. As with earlier multi-cultural approaches, there may be some unintended consequences resulting from how we frame this approach to students in our teacher preparation programs. One of the challenges has been helping students to recognize that, although statistical differences do exist in the achievement of black and white children, we must not lower our expectations for children based on a child's race or socioeconomic status. The pitfall to avoid is developing a "pedagogy of poverty." This is a form of "soft" racism, often brought about by good intentions. It results when the student develops the notion that, since children living in poverty (who are disproportionately African American) perform more poorly on outcomes, teachers should lower their expectations and make work easier for those children.

Through the pedagogy of poverty, lowered expectations are subtly (and sometimes not

so subtly) passed on to children. The children recognize those lowered expectations, and internalize the belief that they are expected to perform poorly. This can be expressed in several ways. For example, the kind teacher communicating that he does not expect a child to be able to complete a task by saying "oh, sweetie, I'll do that for you." Also, most teachers make a middle class income, live in a middle class home and are surrounded by middle class individuals. Sometimes those teachers may see a child whose clothes look obviously poor and make the assumption "uh, oh, here comes a child who will be trouble" or "can't give that child an inch or they'll take a mile." Experienced teachers may pass these beliefs on to new teachers by using terms such as "these children" and "those children" (i.e., "that strategy might work with those children but it won't work with these children"). Finally, the pedagogy of poverty leads to the institutionalized soft racism of placing a higher percentage of African American children in remedial tracks than white children.

A second unintended consequence of the anti-bias approach may inadvertently arise from the attempt to describe to students a curriculum that provides a more inclusive education. Often, the topic of "diversity" is a dedicated chapter in a text book, and becomes compartmentalized into a dedicated class session or week's topic. The intention of Anti-bias curriculum has been to provide a more inclusive definition of "diversity" by including not only race and ethnicity but also sex and differences in ability. Consider this example:

As the professor turned on the power point for the day's lecture, the screen listed the day's agenda: 'Diversity – supporting children's differences in race, sex, and ability.' Two African American students in the front of the class looked at each other, one rolling her eyes and the other saying "here it goes again."

In this example, the professor is falling in to the same sort of “tourist curriculum” pitfall that students are warned of: in an effort to communicate to students the need to provide more inclusive educational environments, the professor has unintentionally suggested to students that race, sex, and ethnicity are somehow equivalent to disabilities. Sometimes students will encounter this sort of framework several times through various courses in their teaching preparation programs. In this way, issues of diversity are treated as an “extra,” tacked on (typically at the end of the semester) to many courses. A truly pervasive framing of diversity issues does not mean that the topic gets a devoted class session in several courses in a program. Instead it means that diversity issues permeate the topics of many courses – from the first day of class throughout the semester.

Teacher Preparation

The college students enrolled today in our teacher preparation courses come to us with a wide variety of prior experiences. Some of them have attended culturally diverse schools. Many others – both white and African American students – have spent their school years in an educational setting that is racially homogenous. Many of the college students enrolled today in teacher preparation courses were taught in school by teachers who themselves were trained in multicultural approaches, and so the activities employed in a multicultural approach are familiar to them. Of those, many experience this approach through what has been called a “tourist curriculum.” Many others have had no experience at all with these sorts of activities. How then do we share these approaches with students in ways that will enable them to understand and use them effectively?

One initial step that may be important is to begin by sharing with them the same information that has been included here – describing to them the transition from segregated schools, to

the color-blind approach, to the multicultural approach, to anti-bias curriculum. It is likely that college students have not reflected on their own experiences concerning how their teachers framed diversity issues. Once these approaches are identified, students often can relate aspects of some of these approaches to examples in their own lives. Consider these examples from some students:

I had never gone to school with a black person until I got here (College). At first I was really scared when things about race would come up in a class, but I am more used to it now.

Diversity has never been something I've really had to think about, it just sort of is that way.

I was never in a class with white people before college, now I sometimes feel singled out. I hate it when everyone looks over to you whenever a question about being a minority comes up.

How can we help teacher preparation students recognize ecological impacts on children without passing along to those students the pedagogy of poverty? One step has been to introduce students to the seemingly contradictory views of a “color-blind” approach and the child ecology perspective. Whereas the color blind approach suggests that “kids are kids,” the study of child ecology points out the importance of understanding how contextual factors, like family, neighborhood, culture, can influence children’s behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Many students can produce examples that fit well with both views during class discussions.

Ironically, the terms “these” and “those” children, often used to pass along the pedagogy of poverty, are grounded in the understanding that meaningful differences do exist between children. In this way, those statements are consistent with

both an ecological and a multicultural approach. One way to help students recognize the value of keeping “what is good” about the color-blind approach (that we treat every one fairly and hold stable expectations) while understanding that contextual and ecological factors impact children’s development is to help them reconcile these two seemingly contradictory points. One framework that can be used to bring the two together is the concept of Developmentally Appropriate Practice.

Developmentally appropriate practice is a framework for curriculum and child guidance that stresses individual differences through both age-appropriate expectations as well as contextual influences (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This requires knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for the participating children and their families (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whirin, 2007). This can be represented to students through a diagram of concentric circles. In the inner most circle include age-related expectations for children. For example, we know that most five-year-olds can say the alphabet, we know how most four-year-olds will handle scissors, and we know that most second graders will participate predominantly in sex-segregated peer groups. The circle making up the next layer represents the individual differences that make each child unique. For example, not all five-year-olds arrive at kindergarten able to say the alphabet, not every four-year-old will hold scissors the same way, and some second-graders will spend most of their time in mixed-sex groups. The outermost ring reflects culture, and is used to communicate to students that those attributes that make each child unique are embedded in that child’s cultural experience. For example, the same behavior may have different meanings in different cultural groups. The goal here is for the student to see that all children share commonalities, all children have unique qualities, and culture impacts how both are expressed and interpreted.

One benefit of the anti-bias curriculum is that the approach makes overt, proactive attempts to help children acquire the skills to identify and combat racism. This sort of activist approach can also benefit teacher preparation students in the college classroom. One way to begin is by putting it “on the table” not only in terms of describing the achievement gap, but also in making the pedagogy of poverty explicit to students. Another active approach is to give students examples of individuals and schools that perform highly despite the national achievement gap. For example, the Education Trust organization maintains profiles of schools that have had success countering the achievement gap at <http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/product+catalog/main>. These example schools provide excellent case studies for examining with students the qualities of schools that run counter to the national trends.

It also is important to discuss with students achievement research. For example, findings suggest that when teacher-student relationships are supportive and warm, children learn basic skills at a more rapid pace (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004), and low-income children who experience teachers who are provide support, feedback, and conversation show improvement in academic performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). In fact, with high-quality teaching, the achievement levels of low-income children matched those of children from more advantaged homes (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). It may be particularly important for students to learn to stress resilience as teachers, in order to help children adopt bounce back attitudes when confronted with difficulties. Research shows that African American students tend to maintain positive perceptions of their abilities, even when they are not doing as well as other students (Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990), and continue to have high expectations for succeeding at tasks at which they have previously failed (Graham, 1994). An examination of his type of research provides an avenue to open a discussion with prospective teachers about broad meanings of “respect” – not just respect of differences but

also respect of children's abilities, and beliefs that all children can and will learn.

Finally it is important to expose prospective teachers to as many "real world" teaching situations as possible. As noted previously, our students arrive in college with a wide variety of past educational experiences. Some have experienced a great deal of diversity during their school years, others have not. It is important for all students to have experiences in a wide array of schools: inner city, suburban, rural. One approach is to begin very early in the teaching preparation program, by providing beginning students with real world observation experiences in a variety of settings. Professional development schools, in which teaching students participate in classrooms prior to their capstone student teaching experiences Opportunities to reflect on these experiences – whether through written reports, class discussions, preparing visual displays, and so on – provide students with opportunities not only to process their experiences themselves but to get feedback from others.

Ultimately, it is important that our teacher preparation students understand that there is no single "right" way to work with all children, and no "recipe" or "guide map" to follow. Likewise, there is no single formula for preparing the next generation of teachers to work with the variety of cultures that they may come in to contact with during their career. If current trends continue, diversity will increase in the United States, but at the same time, some schools will continue to grow less diverse. High quality teaching and high quality schools seem to be the key to closing the achievement gap; the next generation of teachers must understand this, and they must be empowered to believe not only in the abilities of all children, but in their own ability as teachers as well.

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