Becoming a Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Educator: A Tool to Support Reflection by Teachers Embarking on the Anti-Bias Journey

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As children begin to construct an understanding of human differences and similarities during their earliest years, early childhood teachers are challenged to be culturally responsive to the diversity of the children and families. Based on our review of the literature and other existing tools, this article discusses a framework for thinking about this work and proposes critical elements for teachers to re-examine their practice. The article describes a reflective tool structured to provoke thinking about attitudes, assumptions, and knowledge base regarding culturally responsive teaching.

Introduction

Children begin to construct an understanding of human differences and similarities during their earliest years. With this recognition, the imperative to ensure equity in the care and education of young children has finally entered the institutional discourse of teacher education and early childhood programs. In the classroom, teachers can accomplish this goal through the implementation of a culturally relevant and responsive anti-bias curriculum and pedagogy. In this approach, educators actively seek to counter patterns of institutional bias based on social differences and are proactive in creating classroom environments that reflect the diverse histories and cultures of all learners (Cronin, Derman-Sparks, Henry, Olatunji, & York, 1998; Derman-Sparks & ABC Task Force, 1989; Gay, 2000). Banks (2002) advocated a *Transformation Approach,* emphasizing structural changes in the curriculum to enable students to consider concepts, events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, and

especially a *Social Action Approach* in which the goal was cultural democracy and empowerment. Four anti-bias goals have been proposed to guide early childhood educators' efforts: (1) to nurture the construction of a knowledgeable, confident identity as an individual and as a member of multiple cultural groups; (2) to promote comfortable, empathetic interactions with people from diverse backgrounds; (3) to foster each child's ability to critically think about bias and injustice; and (4) to cultivate each child's ability to stand up for herself or himself, and for others, in the face of bias and injustice (e.g., Copple, 2003; Wolpert, 2005; York, 2003).

Yet, many teachers continue to struggle with the question of how to make this happen in the classroom. While this struggle can be seen as an important indicator of practitioners' intentional efforts toward acting on their value of diversity, it can also be an indicator for the need to revisit the existing resources available to teachers, particularly for pre-service and beginning teachers. The purpose of this article is to examine the frameworks for responding to diversity in early education and to propose a tool for self-study that focuses on the particular needs of teachers who are beginning their journey of transforming classroom practice.

Becoming Culturally Responsive Teachers

Raising Self-Awareness

Culturally responsive environments are important for children from the dominant group in order to feel secure about who they are without the need to feel superior to others (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). For nondominant group members, the goal is to be able to participate fully in both their home culture and society. With a confident identity, children of the nondominant culture can negotiate issues that may arise from the differences between their home culture and the dominant

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culture (Gonzalez-Mena, 2007) and learn to stand up for themselves in the face of injustice.

Such learning environments require teachers who feel empowered to act themselves—teachers who must first and foremost develop a strong understanding of their own biases, identity, and cultural beliefs (Barrera & Corso, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sanchez, 1995). Because beliefs and biases influence what we choose to ignore or act on, it is important for teachers to reflect on their family values, how they were raised, and what behaviors they view as acceptable or not acceptable (Marshall, 2001).

Our analysis of frameworks for thinking about diversity in early childhood education has led us to explore the process of self-study as an initial strategy for provoking greater self-awareness and reflectivity by beginning teachers.

Facing who we are involves being in tune with our own strengths and limitations. This requires awareness and the construction of a knowledgeable confident identity as an individual and as a member of multiple cultural groups. This process of reclaiming a positive cultural identity may look very different for children and adults dealing with oppressive social attitudes toward their identity compared with those in the mainstream who may not yet recognize that they even have a culture (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006).

Gaining and Using Culturally Relevant Knowledge and Skills

Developing such confidence also involves gaining knowledge about cultural diversity and developing the skills for applying the knowledge gained, especially when our own backgrounds are different from those of the students we teach (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lynch, 2004). This means being able to apply this knowledge to everyday classroom practices. The teacher is patient, curious, and eager to learn about the students, and sees them as individuals as well as part of the group (Nieto, 1999).

Teachers must know how to draw on students' culture as a basis for learning, capitalizing on students' prior knowledge, and seeing their culture not as an impediment to learning but rather as the means through which students can learn "the official knowledge and skills of the school community" (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 99). As a basis for this expanded understanding of learners, teachers begin

by developing a complex and flexible understanding of differing social and family dynamics, "along with a comprehension of the critical sociopolitical, historical, and economic contexts in which people from diverse multicultural groups are embedded" (Sanchez, 1995, p. 2). On a practical level, Ladson-Billings (1994) found that effective culturally relevant practices are based, in part, on a teacher's knowledge of and participation in the local community. Embedded in these proposals is the idea that teachers must also have the dispositions that will enable them to apply the cultural knowledge and implementation skills they have acquired.

Self-Study as the Vehicle

Our analysis of frameworks for thinking about diversity in early childhood education has led us to explore the process of self-study as an initial strategy for provoking greater self-awareness and reflectivity by beginning teachers. Self-study provides opportunities for in-depth evaluation of programmatic strengths and weaknesses and for developing plans for needed improvement. At an individual level, self-study is an intentional and systematic inquiry of one's own practice (Dinkelman, 2003), involving the distancing of oneself from the immediacy of the classroom, coupled with intentional seeking of understanding through a systematic process (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). This process facilitates both reflections *on action* (self-evaluation of practice) and *for action* (planning for the future), enabling teachers to think more deeply about their teaching in relation to the students they teach (Dinkelman, 2003).

Existing Resources for Self-Study

Our search of the literature revealed a number of checklists and curriculum resources that can be used as self-study tools when teachers reflect on their own implementation of an anti-biased, culturally responsive curriculum (see Anti-Defamation League, 2005; Eisenhower National Clearing House, 2001; Rhomberg, 2004). These guides vary greatly in format, focus, and age level, ranging from short checklists focusing on the cultural relevancy of the visual images and materials in the physical environment, to those that focus on the nature of the curriculum implementation and the social environment, including considerations for working with families, language use, behavior management, and academic evaluation considerations for K–12 classrooms. Publications in book, video, and website forms offer basic but comprehensive guidelines for assessing anti-bias environments and for working with diverse families, addressing each area of bias (e.g.,

Gonzalez-Mena, 2007; WestEd, 1993; Wolpert, 2005; York, 2003).

Because each of these resources focuses with varying detail on particular aspects of diversity, teachers must draw from more than one source in their efforts to look closely at their own practice. In our work with young, pre-service and beginning teachers in early childhood education, we see Wolpert's (2005) checklist as a most useful resource, as it not only addresses all four anti-bias curriculum goals, but also includes examples for classroom practice. In addition, it recognized that it is the *internal* inventory of attitudes, assumptions, and history that lead to deeper levels of transformational practice. Thus, we have accepted the author's invitation to adapt this work for use, formatting it as a worksheet to facilitate reflections *on action* and *for action*. This tool is described in the next section.

A Tool to Support Self-Study for *Beginning* Teachers

The Focus

Examining one's diversity practices can be, and probably should be, a challenging and at times uncomfortable process, particularly for beginning teachers or those experienced teachers uncertain about the process of change (Jacobson, 2003). The self-study tool provides an accessible entry point for these teachers as they begin the process of transformation. Our goal was to create a tool that invites introspective reflection, educate the user, and encourage incremental changes in practice over time. Our assumption is that any transformation in practice will eventually require a willingness to collaborate with colleagues and families and to critically confront beliefs and action. The engagement in any self-study process has the greatest potential to influence programmatic change when it is done collaboratively (Dinkelman, 2003). Thus, teachers who are more experienced with diversity work will use it in collaboration with others and with a greater willingness to reflect critically and take professional risks. However, beginning teachers may need a less threatening starting place in this process by using it to guide critical self-reflection at an individual level.

The Design

In constructing and piloting this tool, we sought feedback on clarity, content, and user friendliness from several expert reviewers in the diversity field, from a group of seven early childhood teachers who had been dialoguing critically together as the Diversity, Equity, and Bias Taskforce (DEBT) for the past three years at our university laboratory school, and from an undergraduate class of 33 pre-service teachers.

With a primary focus on self-study, this tool is formatted in terms of questions for consideration. To underscore the main purpose of its use as a self-study tool, we have taken a developmental approach using five formative evaluative categories ranging from *Not yet: This is new territory for me*, through to *Consistently: I do this with ease now* (see Figure 1). The questions in each category are worded to also account for the psychological environment (and sense of safety for students) that result from teachers' choice and use of materials, their choice and delivery of the curriculum, and the nature of their relationship with families and the community. In addition, we integrated the developmental spirit of the four anti-bias curriculum goals into the questions, reflecting the progression from the *personal* (at the initial level of becoming comfortable with the self in relation to others, especially those who are viewed as different) to the *public* (reaching outwards and taking on an increasingly active approach to ensuring equity and justice for all).

The Sections

There are four sections in this self-study tool (see Appendix). The first focuses on taking a look within to raise *self-awareness* about the beliefs and biases that influence our practice (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). Questions address the level of awareness and comfort about self-identity, personal views about difference, and readiness to respond to bias. The *physical environment* focuses on the selection and use of materials in the classroom, including considerations for the issues surrounding equal, accurate, non-stereotypical, and relevant representation, as well as access for diverse students. In developing these questions, we were cognizant of the limitations of checklists that focus on potentially surface aspects of anti-bias work such as changes in the physical environment (e.g., addition of multicultural books) and placed this section in the context of the tool as a whole.

The third section concerns the *pedagogical environment* with a focus on the intended and unintended messages that are conveyed to the learners through the choice and use of language, the curriculum, and teachers' conscious and unconscious teaching strategies and expectations. Through their attitude about equity as conveyed through language use, choice of teaching and assessment strategies, as well as overall expectations, teachers can model and support a caring and respectful learning community. Moreover, by using students' home language in the classroom, students (and parents) learn to value their own language and feel respected and valued (Garcia, 2003).

The final section focuses on the *relationship with families and community*, a critical area in early childhood

A. Raising self-awareness—taking a look within:	Not yet: This is new territory for me/Not applicable to my age group	Sometimes: I have a beginning awareness	Usually: But still require conscious effort	Consistently: I do this with ease	The next steps for me: My goal is . . .
1. Am I aware of my own cultural identity and history? How comfortable am I about who I am?					
2. Am I aware of biases I may hold?					
3. Do I view diversity and exceptionality as strengths and that ALL children can succeed?					

Note. For a copy of the complete Self-Study Guide, please contact dora.chen@unh.edu.

Figure 1. Sample layout of the Self-Study Guide.

settings. Teachers should be attentive to their communications with families and be respectful of parents' views. Basic care-giving routines, such as eating and toileting, are the sites of significant early cultural socialization and must be negotiated sensitively by teachers (Gonzalez-Mena, 1996). Thus, it is critical for teachers to take steps to find out about these unique perspectives, view families as significant sources of information about their children, encourage them to actively participate in the curriculum (Swick, 1995), and negotiate disagreements with honesty and authenticity (York, 2003).

This section includes questions that ask teachers to consider their knowledge of the neighborhoods of their families (Ladson-Billings, 1994). If teachers live, shop, eat, play, and attend events in the vicinity of their school, they will likely have access to important insider information regarding the context of family life. When teachers live outside the local area, they have a responsibility to be intentional about getting to know the community through taking the time to go walking outside the doors of their center and even participating in local initiatives (Quint, 1994).

Conclusion

The field of early childhood education has been impacted by a clearer understanding of the ways in which very young children begin to construct ideas about human similarity and difference. Unlike the elementary school field, where the focus of multiculturalism has historically been on geographical/ethnic differences or on issues of equity in achievement, early childhood teachers have been faced with the daily reality that their children are trying to make sense of a diverse world in which societal messages often reinforce and promote bias. In this article, we have taken a developmental and constructivist view of teacher transformation toward anti-biased, culturally responsive beliefs and practices. In looking at this process, we have focused our attention on the challenges for beginning and experienced teachers seeking to make changes. Self-reflection is one important point of departure for these teachers. It can help to shift the focus of attention from viewing diversity as something that exists in *others*, to seeing diversity as a critical element of the relationship that exists *between* oneself and those we encounter. As Copple (2003) proposed, truly culturally responsive teachers need to continually challenge themselves to reevaluate their practice. Our goal was to create a tool that invited a personal and introspective level of reflection, educated the user, and encouraged incremental changes in practice over time. Using the tool is a necessarily *subjective* process in which one's responses will undoubtedly be impacted by what one knows about oneself (self-awareness), how honest one is prepared to be, and one's internalized values

regarding diversity. The proposed self-study tool provides new teachers with a structure for an introspective process that can lead directly to changes in practice, focusing not on evaluation, but on acknowledging that transformation is a gradual and intentional journey. It is one of many tools that teachers might access as they move toward greater efficacy in anti-biased, culturally relevant practice, including, but not limited to, collaborative discussion, critical reading, and teacher research. As such, it is not intended as a refuge from the more critical and potentially uncomfortable aspects of change, but rather as one entry point in this process.

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Appendix: A Self-Study Guide for Reflecting on Anti-Bias Curriculum Planning and Implementation

A. Raising self-awareness—taking a look within:
1. Am I aware of my own cultural identity and history? How comfortable am I about who I am?
2. Am I aware of biases I may hold?
3. Do I view diversity and exceptionalities as strengths and that *ALL* children can succeed?
4. a. Am I able to give accurate, honest answers to children's questions about differences?
   b. Am I comfortable admitting when I do not know the answer to a question?
5. a. Am I able to intervene with ease when I hear comments that exclude someone, show bias, or are discriminatory?
   b. Do I model ways for responding to bias?
6. Do I have access to a colleague who can act as a trusted ally in my diversity and anti-bias work, offering support and challenges to my thinking and actions?

B. The physical environment:
1. Are the materials and equipment in my classroom easily accessible to ALL?
2. Do ALL children have equal opportunity to participate in activities?
3. Does my classroom display pictures of the children, their families, and include materials that relate to their background and experience (i.e., pictures of familiar places)?
4. Does my classroom provide equal representation of images and materials reflecting:

a. different cultures and ethnicities?

b. different family styles and compositions?

c. different age groups across different lifestyles?

d. different genders in non-stereotypical roles?

5. Are there dolls and clothing that represent male/female and different ethnicities/skin color?

6. Is there a wide variety of art media that students can use to accurately represent their physical characteristics?

C. The pedagogical environment

1. Are my verbal and non-verbal messages free of stereotypes and hidden biases?

   a. Do I effectively provide opportunities for students to value and explore diversity in themselves and others?

   b. Are the colors black and brown equally valued as other colors in my classroom?

   c. Do I actively encourage critical thinking about differences, stereotypes, and biases?

   d. Do I teach about minority *and* non-minority groups who have devoted their lives to ending injustice?

2. Do I equally respect and acknowledge ALL children on their efforts and accomplishments?

3. Do I hold and convey high expectations for learning for ALL children?

4. Do I *see* and *treat* EACH child both as an individual and as a member of different social and cultural groups?

5. In my communications and curriculum, do I recognize that children may be cared for by various family members and/or have differing family compositions?

6. Do I recognize and respect children's individual and culturally based learning styles:

   a. Do I effectively differentiate instruction to reach diverse learning styles?

b. Do I integrate multiple methods of communication to support children's learning (visual, auditory, . . .)?

c. Do I use a variety of methods to evaluate children's learning?

7. Do I promote cooperation between and among children from diverse groups through the curriculum and classroom routines?

8. Do I help children critically think about and problem solve fairness issues in daily classroom activities and routines?

D. Relationships with families and community:

1. Do I initiate conversations in a culturally responsive way with all families?

2. Do I provide the option for providing translations of newsletters and at meetings for families who do not speak English?

3. When food is provided at classroom functions, is it food that is reflective of the community/families?

4. Do I support different transitions and care-giving routines while being aware of school/center policies, responding to families' requests respectfully and fairly, and genuinely work to negotiate an agreement when there is a conflict about childcare beliefs and goals?

5. Do I truly welcome family participation in my classroom? If they are unable to come in, do I encourage it in other ways?

6. Do I include families in creating the learning environment for children?

7. Do I know enough about the local community to extend children's learning beyond the classroom walls?

8. Am I able to effectively use resources and other adults in the community to enhance children's learning about diversity and bias?