

Cultural Diversity: Implications for Minority Early Childhood Education Population

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Abstract

Early childhood education experiences provide a solid foundation for children as they transition to formal schooling. Children develop superior communicative skills, physical ability, social unity, and an increased cognitive and effective educational balance. A lack of a quality early childhood education may lead to emotional, social, intellectual, and physical difficulties. Despite its benefits, inequalities continue to prevent its practice. The face of education of minorities may have changed the power relations but European intentions that shape it remains constant. This paper reports on the struggles faced by minority and immigrant children in early childhood education as majority of the teachers lack cultural knowledge and sensitivity necessary for teaching diverse student populations. With a 95% of Caucasian elementary teachers in the schools' system and one-third of all students in public schools as minority, it is no wonder education scholars have identified bias in teacher perceptions; understanding cultural differences to mean deficiencies.

Keywords: early childhood, multicultural education, relevant instruction, teachers

1. Introduction

Immigration of people continues to alter the composition of populations in schools across America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. To many immigrants, the immigrant experience is a journey of hope, with the belief that the future cannot be worse than the past (Etta, 2005; Obeng, 2006). Immigrants that possess relevant and appropriate skills are able to integrate socially, economically, culturally, and politically into their new communities. For most, migration is to seek better educational opportunities for their children (Amayo, 2009; Suarez-Orozco (2001) as well as political, economic, and religious needs (Banks, 2004; Morrison, 2004).

Research has shown that there is an increase in the size and share of the United States' (U.S.) young-child population and the demographic changes are prompting states to expand early childhood services and improve quality. With one in four young children in the U.S. living in an immigrant family, efforts to build trust and establish meaningful two-way communication with the families and to enhance children's school success, become urgent priority (migrationpolicy.org). While the U.S. population is increasingly becoming diverse, an estimate of 38.2% minority children in public schools in the year 2010 (Amayo, 2009), research reveals that immigrant children and their families continue to face significant barriers as they try to engage in early childhood education experiences, mainly as a result of limited English Language proficiency and functional literacy (Allvin, 2015; migrationpolicy.org). Another reason immigrant children struggle in schools is that teachers have habitually tried to incorporate culture into the education, instead of incorporating education into the culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The goal of education in the U. S. is described as a multicultural experiment that is unique in the history of the world, a democratic society trying to create peaceful and productive communities with shared interests, while at the same time honoring particular ethnic, racial, and cultural characteristics, traditions, histories, and languages (Hill, Carjuzaa, Arambura, & Baca, 1993). Sadly, achieving this goal continues to be a challenge and unattainable due mainly to teacher education's lack of knowledge and skills to engage and promote a multicultural classroom environment, which would promote academic excellence among their children.

Hook (2002) suggest that pre-teachers' perceived barriers such as their knowledge-based and prior experiences, influence their attitudes, beliefs, experience, and skills which ultimately hinder them from implementing a multicultural and anti-bias curriculum in their classrooms. Teacher education/training programs have an obligation to ensure pre-service teachers are appropriately trained to work with diverse population and implement an effective multicultural curriculum

2. Early Childhood Education

One part of Early Childhood Education (ECE) began in the United States in 1965 as the Head Start Program, which was part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty and its aim was to provide high-quality educational intervention for children in poverty (Barnett, 1995; Adams & Brown, 2000). The focus of the program was changed in 1994 from providing voluntary and comprehensive education, social, emotional development, physical and mental health services for three year olds to include services for children from birth to age three and family strengthening.

High-quality ECE improves the lives of children, their families, and society (Essa, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Early Childhood Education provides the foundation for all-round development and enables the child to understand various issues (Qadiri & Manhas, 2009; Osakwe, 2009). The 2000 Chicago Longitudinal multi-decade study in the United States, on the impact of ECE for minority children revealed children who attended ECE from age three, were less likely to be incarcerated or be involved in substance abuse and attain higher educational and social developments than those who did not participate (Adam & Brown, 2000). The study also found that 9% more children completed high school, 20% more achieved moderate to high level of social economic status, 28% less abused drugs and alcohol, 22% less had a felony arrest, 45 percent less school dropouts, and 28% less experienced incarceration. Furthermore, 18% more than those that did not attend, achieved a moderate to a higher level of social economic status, 55% achieved more on-time high school graduation, and 36% fewer were arrested for violent crimes compared to those who did not attend preschool programs.

The early childhood years are important for children to develop cognitive skills and strategies necessary for successful school transitions and later academic functioning (Osakwe, 2009; Florez, 2011). Notable differences in these skills show prior to children's formal schooling and these differences are associated to variability in early child care and preschool environments (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2001).). However, regardless of the differences that may exist among children, the requirement for success in school and life is the same for all children and improved learning and behavior can be fostered through quality education and classroom instruction (2011; Willis, Dinehart, & Bliss, 2014).

ECE provides a solid foundation for school success and prepares individuals for quality adult life. The study further revealed that ECE is underfunded despite its many benefits for low-income and at-risk children, including immigrant children. As a result, about 45% of minority students are not ready for school by the time they enter kindergarten (Adam & Brown, 2000). Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a crucial component of a child's school success and provides the foundation for all-round development (Willis et al., 2014). Children in quality early childhood education learn to develop positive attitude towards nature, peers, and adults (Harkness & Super, 1991). Research reveals ECE enhances early literacy skills, communication skills, social skills, and classroom behaviors, leading to success in school and later years (McClelland, Cameron, Connor, Farris, Jewkes, Morrison, 2007). Furthermore, Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, (2001) stressed that ECE increases cognitive abilities, school achievement, as well as decrease grade repetition among children. Barnett (2004) further reports that high quality preschool education produces substantial long-term educational, social, and economic benefits.

A descriptive research design study conducted by Osakwe (2009) on the impact of early childhood education on the cognitive, social and motor skills between students who were enrolled in early childhood education and those that were not revealed that early childhood education has a significant impact on the academic performance of children, similar to the findings of Adam and Brown (2000). The study included a total of 500 students drawn from public elementary schools across a school district in Nigeria. Selection of the students was based on multistage stratified sampling technique. Data used were obtained from the students' school assessment records that showed their cognitive ability, social, and motor skills.

Data from the study suggest children who received early childhood education did better in written and spoken English, mathematics, social studies, and other subjects as shown in their assessment records.

Osakwe (2009), also Bethlesen and Karuppiah (2011) reported that early childhood experiences can affect the values, norms, and beliefs of a child and can also form the foundation for success in school and adult life.

Early childhood education has the potential to develop students' communication skills, physical abilities, and social unity required for an effective educational balance and life as a member of the society (Kochanska, Aksan, Prisco, & Adams, 2008). Additionally, several other researchers (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993; Osakwe, 2009; Adams & Brown, 2013) also validate the many benefits provided by attending early childhood education programs. They agree children who attend early childhood programs have more potential to succeed in later years in schools as well as develop better communication and interpersonal skills.

A research study conducted by Qadiri and Manhas (2009) suggested that parents believe early childhood education (preschool) provided to children between the ages of 3 and 6 lays the foundation for successful completion of at least a primary education. It also enhances the growth and all-round development of children as well as promotes early literacy, communication, and social skills of children who attend, similar to assertion by Kochanska, Aksan, Prisco, & Adams, (2008; Phoon, Abdullah, & Abdullah, 2012). Qadiri and Manhas (2009) study conducted in the Kashmir Valley region, in India involved 200 parents (fathers and mothers) who had at least one child between the ages of 3 and 6. Half of the parents (100) had children who enrolled in the Anganwadi preschool program, which is under the management of the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS) and the other half had children in other private preschool programs. All participants were middle socioeconomic families and the snowball sampling technique was used. The researchers used self-created open- and closed-ended questionnaire that had two parts: The first required parents' demographics such as name and age, and the second part required information about the preschool programs, aspects, and parents' choice of programs for their children.

According to Qadiri and Manhas (2009), 40.5% of parents regard preschool as a place where children learn multiple concepts; and a place that provides the initial preparatory step towards formal primary schooling. As far as the choice of a preschool for their children was concerned, many parents indicated they would rather send their children to other preschools than the ICDS. Proponents of other preschools argued the ICDS centers lacked trained teachers, appropriate learning materials, and are more interested in providing nutrition for the children. Such parents regarded the Anganwadi (managed by ICDS) center as a "bread center" (Qadiri & Manhas, 2009, p. 22). An overwhelming 70.5% of parents argued against the center's emphasis on developing pre-literacy and motor skills, as well as activeness, instead of placing more emphasis on developing children's communication and social skills, eating habits and building confidence.

In the area of whether to use the play-way method (which allows the children to explore and discover things in their environment as well as develop different concepts) or formal method of teaching (i.e., teacher-centered), 52% of the parents adopted the play way method of teaching, which they felt helps the overall development of the child. Their argument was that the play way method enables children learn and retain information longer. Forty-eight percent of parents however, supported the use of both the play-way and the formal method of teaching. This group believed the play-way method by itself is likely to encourage children to see learning as just playing and will therefore not take it seriously, thereby defeating the purpose of learning (Qadiri & Manhas, 2009).

Although perceptions of the parents differed depending on their preferred preschool, they all agreed that children who receive preschool education have experiences that would aid them in primary school and later years. It is the parents' beliefs that preschool education provides multiple benefits such as development of intellectual abilities, acquisition of social skills, interpersonal and qualities of strong character (Qadiri & Manhas, 2009),

Adams and Brown (2000) presented in their study the role early childhood education plays in combating the undesired effects of violence, school dropout rates, and incarceration, particularly among the African American male communities in the United States. They reported that dropouts, incarceration, and high unemployment plague young people of African American descent, particularly those who did not have the opportunity to attend an early childhood education program. They asserted that when the unemployment rate for youths without a high school diploma was at 12%, the national average was at 8.1%. For those with at least a college degree, it was 4.1%. Poverty rate was 30.8% for dropouts and 13.5% for college graduates. They further stated that incarceration rate was 63% higher than among college graduates.

In their opinion, the lack of adequate ECE is the cause of the difficulties experienced by majority of the black youths. The Renaissance 2010 plan was to improve the failing schools by transforming them into charter schools. Instead, the plan succeeded in “re-gentrification” of some areas and a hike in property values, within the reach of the middle class. This caused the low-income families to relocate to even poorer areas and their children continuing in poor and underachieving public schools.

While Adams and Brown (2009) believed ECE provides children the foundation to cultivate long term skills to help prepare them for future education careers and productive adult lives, they however also agreed that families and communities also play crucial roles in shaping core values aimed at helping children succeed. Furthermore, low expectations from teachers and schools and the dynamics of single parent families are also some factors the authors (Adams & Brown, 2009) disclosed can limit the impact of ECE on children’s future aspirations. They suggest schools should do more for minority students and all those from low-income families.

3. Multicultural Education

Early Childhood Education contributes to the healthy development and future well-being of children who are economically and socially disadvantaged (Barnett, 1995; Essa, 2007). The public school has an obligation to ensure all students are equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and racial attitudes to live and work with people from diverse groups. Traditional method of teaching will need to be replaced with a multicultural teaching so students from all backgrounds can be included in the learning process. Multicultural education brings about “a pedagogy of liberation,” a way for teachers and students to learn together (Banks & Banks, 2003).

Multicultural education and global education share similar goals - to enable students gain cross-cultured competence and understandings of global culture (Phoon, Abdullah, & Abdullah, 2012). Students with an understanding of and empathy for their own culture are more likely to function effectively within other cultures outside their national borders (Berthelsen & Karupiah, 2011). Multicultural education helps children learn to treat others’ with respect, regardless of their differences. It also helps children learn to appreciate similarities between them and others through healthy socializations. For multicultural education to be effective, it must be taught in the early years and reinforced in later years so children learn early in life how not to be prejudiced and biased against people that they perceive to be different from them (Salman & Walker, 2012).

Families and communities were the primary sources where children learned moral behaviors, manners, views, beliefs, and ideas but this has changed due to migration and/or increase in families joining or returning to the workforce. The role of child care is increasingly being undertaken by early childhood programs which have become powerful influential socialization forces (Obeng, 2006; Berthelsen & Karupiah, 2011). Early childhood teachers have the responsibility to model positive attitudes and tolerance towards their cultures and challenge children's biasness so the children can learn to be accepting youths and adults (Derman-Sparks, Ramsey, Olsen-Edwards & Day, 2006). According to Berthelsen and Karupiah (2011), early childhood teachers should not adopt a tourist curriculum that teaches about cultures through celebrations and artifacts of culture, such as food and clothing, which they term as “patronizing and trivializing” and does not provide a real understanding of other cultures (p. 39). But admonish teachers to adopt a multicultural pedagogy.

An exploratory research by Berthelsen and Karupiah (2011) examined in-service teachers’ understandings of multicultural education and their perceptions of its importance in early childhood education. The study also explored teachers’ ideas about their personal and professional experiences with multiculturalism, and the nature of the knowledge and skills required to implement multicultural education programs with young children. Fifty-eight female preschool teachers in both private and public kindergartens and childcare programs were included in the study. All were teachers completing an in-service diploma in early childhood education in Singapore, with a minimum teaching qualification for early childhood education and were in the process of upgrading to a diploma level. Data were collected through questionnaires designed to identify preschool teachers’ understanding of multicultural education and their views on appropriate professional education for early childhood teachers. The data collected were analyzed by using grounded theory design.

The results showed that most of the teachers (55%) had a limited understanding of multiculturalism. Their understanding was based only on their views on race and in the context of their country, Singapore. A total of 40% of the respondents believed multicultural education meant having knowledge of one's culture as well as others, and that the knowledge was enough to unite people of different cultures.

Twenty percent indicated that children learn prejudices, attitudes, and values from adults and that the schools have a responsibility to educate children about other cultures. The above group also agreed that a multicultural curriculum should include different cultures in terms of their food, clothing, festivals, and customs (Berthelsen & Karupiah, 2011; Phoon et al., 2012). Although majority of the teachers were in support of multicultural education in the classrooms, they had limited understanding of the challenges involved in the actual practice.

The study further reiterated that multicultural education is not about adopting the tourist approach but rather it involves a holistic/anti-bias approach to teaching and learning about different cultures. The authors added that it was also important to teach the similarities among diverse cultures to enhance and build unity among the people. Additionally, the research disclosed the need for teachers to self-reflect about their own prejudices in order to help educate children in their care.

Hook, (2012) and Phoon, Abdullah, & Abdullah, (2012) further concur that teacher training programs should provide teachers the tools to critically evaluate themselves through trainings. Many of the teachers reported having multicultural experiences growing up but only as far as race. An effective multicultural education takes more than knowing the race of a child. It requires an understanding of the cultural characteristics of one's self and that of the students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers' reluctance in discussing race supports the necessity for more knowledge and skills devoted to helping teachers come to terms with their personal bias and prejudices so they can promote multicultural learning environment for young children.

4. Early Childhood Education Curriculum

Early childhood education curriculum exist as a guide to aid educators in what children should know in order to gain knowledge and skills necessary for a democratic society. There is no single way of defining curriculum. Definitions may vary depending on the emphasis of the school, district, and/or state. Whatever the definition, curriculum encompasses all the learning experiences children receive in school as well as the home (II-Rang, 2006). Early childhood student populations are increasingly becoming more diverse and it is no longer enough to have materials that reflect the various backgrounds as a way to qualify a high quality program. Traditional curriculum focuses on subject matter, an indication that what students need to know is external. Instead early childhood programs should provide a broad curriculum to include the diverse communities by providing meaningful relationships and programs (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Multicultural early childhood education curriculum employs the constructivist model which allows children to become involved in their own learning process (Essa, 2012). The curriculum therefore is every aspect of the early childhood programs such as the activities children are involved in, indoors and outdoors, as well as the teaching methods, materials, concepts designed to promote the children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs (Herr, 2000). Quality multicultural preschool education increases cognitive abilities, school achievement, improves classroom behavior, and decrease grade repetition among children (Qadiri & Manhas, 2009).

A study conducted by Ladson-Billings (1995), revealed that a culturally relevant curriculum allows all students to have high academic expectations and that teachers do all that is necessary to help students achieve success. The study conducted over a three-year period, examined the teaching practices of 8 teachers of African America students in different grades. The teachers were selected by recommendations from their principals and parents who regarded the teachers as exceptional in providing culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. The study involved in-depth ethnographic interviews, unannounced classroom visits, and videotaping of their teachings. Ladson-Billings (1995) proposes the need for teachers to discontinue their search for the "right" teaching strategy but focus instead on a "humanizing pedagogy that respects and uses the reality, history, and perspectives of students as integral part of educational practice" (p. 160).

The author categorized culturally relevant pedagogy into: 1) academic success which is the need for all students to achieve success, 2) cultural competence which takes students' culture into account and teach what is relevant to the students, and 3) critical consciousness. Students have the freedom to critically analyze issues such as cultural norms, values, and societal inequalities. A combination of all three, prepare students for active citizenship (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Furthermore, the study revealed how a 6th grade teacher incorporated culture into her curriculum by allowing her students to use their home language in both speaking and writing, and translating into the standard English language. This enabled the students to become better in both their home and the English languages.

In addition, the study detailed how a fifth grade teacher who had taught for over 40 years created an “artist or craftsperson-in-residence program with the aim of broadening her students’ cultural knowledge about parents of diverse backgrounds. For an hour or two, and three times a week, different parents/family members visited the classroom and shared activities from their home culture. The teacher then builds on the experiences based on the lesson objectives, and in line with district and/state curriculum guidelines.

Ladson-Billings (1995) research also included a 2nd grade teacher who taught her students poetry through rap music. These extra-ordinary teachers, according to the author, practiced good teaching. They became members of the community as both teachers and learners, able to use students’ interest to meet their academic needs. They welcomed parents as partners in the educational journey. Ladson-Billings (2005) called for further replication of the study to know more about the practices of teachers who create successful classroom culture that enhances learning experiences for all students.

5. Culture in the Early Childhood Classroom

Humans create culture. Culture is a main element in the formation of self-concept and the understanding of one’s first culture occurs in the early years. As children grow, they learn to treat others through a socialization process based on certain characteristics such as gender, race, religion, ability (Phoon et al., 2012). Culture integrates the scope of human diversity and ways of being (i.e., gender, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, age and sexuality). Having various cultures in the classroom should be a trigger for acquiring great knowledge. The celebration of children’s culture enhances their learning and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Cultural competence supports a secure, respectful, and reciprocal relationship; partnerships, high expectations and equity; and respect for diversity. It is necessary to teach children values and respect for people that may differ from them in one way or another. Cultural awareness is being able to communicate and interact with others, develop positive attitudes towards diverse cultures, as well as the ability and willingness to gain knowledge about other cultures and world view (Allvin, 2015).

In an early childhood education classroom with children from diverse cultures, the teachers are responsible for becoming culturally competent themselves in order for them to help children gain appreciation for different cultures. There is the need for teachers to engage in ongoing learning and reflective practices so they can be role models for children (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Berthelsen & Karuppiah, 2011). Been culturally-aware helps to check bias towards others. Culturally-aware people have understanding, appreciation, and respect differences and similarities, identify and challenge bias, build identities and acquire skills to work for social justice in classrooms and communities. Teachers with such qualities encourage children to correct their biasness and stereotypical beliefs so they grow up knowledgeable and accepting of others. Children need adults to interrupt their acts of unfairness and model effective methods to counter injustice before the children can understand and know how to do it themselves (Berthelsen & Karuppiah, 2011).

A culturally-minded teacher allows children to express their cultural views in class without their behaviors being interpreted as inappropriate, by the “White” standard (Derman-Sparks, Ramsey, Olsen-Edwards, Day, 2008). A strong cultural identity is important to children’s healthy sense of who they are and where they belong (Allvin, 2015). As mentioned above, teachers who incorporate culture into their classrooms make learning meaningful to the diverse student population in the class. Some gestures such as teaching poetry through hip hop music leaves lasting learning experiences that children will remember for a long time. Creating classroom multicultural lessons as part of the curriculum not only makes an anti-bias practice part of everyday thinking, it also acts as a mirror in which children see themselves reflected (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Vicars & Senior, 2013).

A multicultural education serves to prepare students to be culturally-aware and accepting of other cultures besides their own. Research has shown that a multicultural awareness should start from the early years when children absorb knowledge about moral values and ethical standards of the society (Phoon et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers have the responsibility to introduce and implement multicultural curriculum in their classes. Teacher education programs are responsible for preparing pre-service teachers to understand how to include all students by way of an anti-bias inclusive teaching practice.

A study by Hook (2002) which included 68 sophomore students from one of the universities on the North-central part of the U. S. identified what the early childhood pre-service teachers regarded as hindering the implementation of a diverse curriculum, under the following themes: 1) Difficulty discussing sensitive topics, 2) Policies and practices detriment to diversity, 3) Difficulty implementing diversity curriculum, and 4) Inability to recognize and accept diversity.

Participants identified as barriers under the “Difficulty Discussing Sensitive topics” category, *religion and controversy*. Seventy-nine percent of them expressed concerns about including religion in the curriculum, realizing that “there is a very thin line between church and state and in the public schools and this line should not be crossed” (Hook, 2002, p. 258). Twenty-seven percent identified *controversy* as a barrier. They expressed it was better to avoid issues that would create controversy. They were of the opinion that multicultural curriculum would create controversies, so it was best not to have it in the school.

Forty-five percent identified *schools’ policies and practices* as barriers. This group believed the type of school and the policies and practices promoted may influence the level of acceptance of a diverse curriculum. So in order to avoid hostilities by going against the school’s policies, principals and teachers may choose to continue the traditional curriculum already in place. The demographic of the teachers in the nation’s public elementary school systems is about 95% Caucasian females with limited exposure to diverse communities.

Teachers who have spent their entire lives in a mono-culture will most likely not see the need to deviate from a mono-curriculum. This could mean biases against other cultures are already formed and may be difficult to change unless teachers consciously and intentionally decide to reflect and work on their individual beliefs. This could also foster educating children to be open to other views other than their own. The respondents perceived this as a potential problem because they believe their beliefs and values will have a tremendous impact on what they are willing to teach in the classrooms. The communities, they agreed, will also hinder a multicultural learning environment.

Seventy-nine percent indicated anti-bias curriculum should be inclusive of what is taught daily in the classroom and not in isolation. Declaring a month or day to the celebration of a culture is not teaching an inclusive education. They indicated educators should focus on “implementing diversity into everyday curriculum and not on certain times such as Black history month or women’s rights’ month” (p. 260).

On the issue of the inability to recognize and accept diversity, 18.3% identified the inability of the society to recognize and accept diversity. They decided it is difficult to maintain a diverse culture when people are set in their ways and unwilling to change their prejudices to accommodate people with different lifestyles. Further, they expressed concerns about teachers’ preconceived bias which may interfere with their ability to encourage culture-rich classroom environments.

Hook (2002) identified the parents as the major barriers to creating and implementing a world-view curriculum. Parents are the main sources of the children’s bias and opinions which they bring to the classroom. Respondents believed it is difficult to change the values and beliefs learned from home. They expressed concern that parents or family members are likely to oppose any effort by teachers to teach students other cultures besides their own. Again, for fear of offending parents and to avoid conflicts, teachers may prefer to continue the traditional way of teaching regardless of the diversity in the classrooms.

6. The Role of the Multicultural Early Childhood Education Teacher

Culture is dynamic. In the classroom it changes from year to year as the population of students and the cultures in which they are raised change (Salman & Walker, 2012). Effective teachers intentionally and purposefully utilize an anti-bias approach as a natural extension of their role in the classroom. Good teaching is not to expect to use the same teaching practices and materials from year to year. The groups of children change, so curriculum needs to also change, even if the demographics of the children appear to be the same. The reality is they are not the same children and the same practices may be ineffective.

Salman and Walker (2012) provided examples of strategies teachers can use in the classroom based on the dynamics of the children and their families. They include: 1) Self-exploration, 2) Increase knowledge, 3) Assess materials and activities, and 4) Work in progress. With self-exploration, teachers are encouraged to examine themselves, their beliefs and values and how they can interfere with their teaching. Salman and Walker (2012) believed it is only when teachers become aware of their own prejudices that they can move towards teaching without preconceived notions about certain children and their cultures. Berthelsen and Karuppiah (2011) and Ladson-Billings (2005) call on teachers to be knowledgeable about the diverse cultures that exist in their classrooms through research and participation in community activities.

An anti-bias teacher provides meaningful learning experiences for all students and this can only be achieved by an understanding and sensitivity to the students' cultures. A culturally-sensitive teacher ensures all classroom materials and activities depict a multicultural environment that represents the different cultures, values, and beliefs. It is important for all children to feel they belong and families should be invited to share their rich cultures. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), teachers should understand and see the anti-bias curriculum as ongoing and suggest they continue to research and reach out to colleagues and communities.

Berthelsen and Karuppiah (2011) agree that although there is no one successful anti-bias curriculum in existence that would cater for the many differences among children and their families, the above strategies they believe, can be effectively used to create a curriculum that will be sensitive to the needs of all concerned – children and their families, as well as promote lasting tolerance of differences. The teacher's role therefore does not end at three o'clock when the children go home for the day.

A lack of familiarity with the cultural norms of the diverse students in the classroom can create a cultural gap between students, parents/families, and teachers. This gap can widen due to real and perceived bias parents (particularly immigrant parents) receive based on their socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic group status (Calzada, Huang, Hernandez, Soriano, Acra, Dawson-McClure, Kamboukos, & Brotman, 2014). Parental involvement is increased when parents perceive positive attitudes from teachers toward them. Teachers have personal opinions that may not change by virtue of their profession but those opinions should not become barriers to educating children and forming cordial working relationships with parents.

Multicultural education can be incorporated into early childhood education because children at the preschool age internalize knowledge about moral values and ethical standards of their society (Osakwe, 2009; Kochanska et al., 2008). An effective multicultural education depends largely on the teacher's effort to support children in their learning of multicultural values (Berthelsen & Karuppiah, 2011). A multicultural teacher provides for children, a cross-cultural understanding and tolerance of other people regardless of their culture.

Hook (2002) opined that every teacher has the ability to engage children in multicultural learning experiences without his or her personal bias or prejudice getting in the way. Besides their responsibilities to their children, teachers also need to be aware of their own beliefs and values about other cultures besides theirs in order to model and implement multicultural education to their students (Berthelsen & Karuppiah, 2011) as well as engage in continuous self-reflection (Salman & Walker, 2012).

Phoon et al. (2012) carried out a study to identify preschool teachers' understanding and importance of multicultural education in early childhood programs, and teachers' attitudes and current practices of multicultural education. The research was conducted in the Northern region of Malaysia and consisted of 854 preschool teachers from both public and private early childhood settings. It included 33 males and 814 females, all representing different ethnic groups in Malaysia. About 78% of the teachers had either a certificate or diploma in early childhood education and their preschool teaching experiences ranged between less than 5 years and more than 25 years.

The study utilized a self-report teacher questionnaire with three open-ended questions aimed at understanding the teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards multicultural early childhood education. The data were analyzed using the descriptive and thematic analyses designs. Results on the issue of teachers' understanding of multicultural education revealed that majority of the participants understood multicultural education to mean learning about the cultures of different ethnic groups. A few of the participants understood it to mean an education that provides equal opportunity for all people to learn, and a total of 3.5% viewed it as a way to unite the nation and the people (Phoon et al., 2012).

Majority of the teachers in the survey agreed multicultural education should be introduced at the preschool level when the young minds are involved in adopting knowledge about moral values, similar to the findings by Berthelsen & Karuppiah (2011). A minority of the respondents agreed it was important but should be introduced with caution. A few others however, thought it was not important and should not be part of the preschool program. Those that indicated multicultural education should be taught in preschool believed it would "improve students' knowledge about other cultures, enhance individual development, boost the nation's unity as well as help children's socialization" (p. 432).

Those against a multicultural education in early childhood classrooms expressed concerns that multicultural education materials would create conflicts with children's religious beliefs and increase the burden on students. In their opinion, the whole concept of multicultural education does not belong in schools. Some of the respondents were in favor of teaching multicultural education and were willing to learn other languages and cultures as part of their teaching obligations. There were others who felt multicultural education was a burden, and a few others were undecided.

7. Discussion

The increasing numbers of working parents, hence the shift in child-care role from family members, have resulted in the need for more children to be cared for in early childhood programs. Years ago the child's family used to be responsible solely for his or her acquiring knowledge, values, beliefs, and ideas specific to their culture. Thus, it has become very crucial that teachers provide ways for effective integration of diversity in the classrooms to enhance children's learning experiences. Parents expect teachers to help continue the job of teaching their children to develop appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function in a democratic society.

Teachers, like everyone else, have personal views and opinions, and values which may interfere with their ability to create anti-bias curriculum. A narrow minded teacher will most likely not produce an effective multicultural environment but for the sake of educating young children to view the world as one while celebrating the differences and similarities among cultures, lifestyles, races, religions, and other aspects of people's lives, personal bias should be set aside so children can benefit from the richness of a diverse society. Teachers and schools should also endeavor to reach out to parents who they may perceive as "different" as parents can serve as significant resources to helping children become successful.

Many teachers would support multicultural education but lack understanding of what it means. There is therefore a call to teacher training programs to provide necessary trainings so teachers can understand cultural diversity and the importance of introducing it at the preschool level.

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