Cultural Diversity in Education Matters

Karen Ethridge¹* and Linda J. M. Holloway²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Psychology and Counseling, Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, Alabama, United States of America

² Associate Professor, Social Work, Department of Psychology and Counseling, Alabama A & M University, USA

*Corresponding Author: Karen Ethridge, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Psychology and Counseling, Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, Alabama, United States of America.

Abstract

Children learn the context of their relationships, personalities, and social environments in which they were reared in and continue to live. Given the variety of relationships in which people live and participate, there is considerable diversity in the characteristics that are necessary to describe and account for them in the educational system. Students and teachers come from diverse cultural, socio-economic, and relational backgrounds, and thus our approach to education must reflect and shift to this diversity seen in America's school systems in today's society This paper discusses how effective and non-effective this shift in educational diversity is in educational functions, guidance counseling, and the design of teaching systems, and strategies.

Keywords: *Cultural Diversity and the Classroom; Educational Diversity*

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, diversity and individual differences are critical points in any scientific field of study, especially in the field of Psychology. There are as many ways to describe diversity in our educational learning as there are internet sites to discuss each of those views. As Americans have seen with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, so has diversity and change in education affected every aspect of society and learning. It has impacted economics to the view of motivational efforts to styles of learning. When a society changes due to technology advances, language differences or food production, the style of education is always affected by these changes as well. Some educational psychologists propose that there needs to be a shift in the very paradigms upon which the educational and developmental theories have been based upon for many years.

In recent years, research has shown that some models of development are 'deficit' when it comes to including different aspects of race, ethnicity, gender, and cultural differences among minority children. Teaching and learning have taken drastic changes due to societal shifts as evidenced by a move toward creating methods, instruments and theories that are more culturally, ethnically, and racially sensitive. With each new zeitgeist, there is also a shift in the way society is educated. Hence, this is not a bad thing but one in which we as a society must be cognitive of in order to ensure each child receives appropriate and adequate education.

The historical roots of teaching and learning from the Socratic method of instructional dialogue, to the computer-based programs have been further evidence that educational methods and learning styles have encountered a paradigm shift [1].

Diversity in History

In the early 1800's when William Torrie Harris became the superintendent of the St. Louis school system, he was bombarded with the task of meeting the needs of an influx of immigrants whose primary language was not English alone with Black students who were

entering school systems, many of them, for the first time. In his endeavor he created an evaluation program that assessed promotion for students, administrators and teachers every ten weeks. He introduced evening classes, an special alphabet and kindergarten for the first time [2]. All of these programs reflected the zeitgeist of this era: the onset of the Industrial Revolution, parents working longer hours, English now a second language and Blacks who were on the brink and just coming through an era of Emancipation. All of these diverse issues were a reflection of a pluralistic society, which was shifting from a predominantly agricultural society to a highly industrialized society. The educational system had to shift in order to meet the needs of these students.

On the psychological front, William James introduces his book, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students of Some of Life's Ideals*, in 1912. He explored issues such as memory, instincts, and habits [2]. He was able to create an extraordinary invisible bond between education and psychology, which also help to foster a better understanding of diverse cultures. William James stated, "Education is for behavior and habits are the stuff of which behavior consists" [3]. On the contrary, during early the twentieth century, many women were not allowed to receive an education, Blacks and other minorities were still disadvantaged and residing in rural areas; where schools were dissipated to one-room buildings with no electricity or running water. Even thou, there were advancements in society, the educational system still lacking behind in diversity in education.

After this era, there were advancements in research, social policy and the educational system in were also several other hallmarks that reflect diversity in education and psychology. An among them Kenneth and Mamie Clark's doll studies helped institute desegregation in school systems, and in 1994, there is Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve*, which demanded that psychologists and educators look at the way IQ testing, was viewed in a broad sense. Early childhood educators were in a prime position for making a positive difference in the lives of many children and families. There was and still is a road to travel when it comes to educational diversity and the everyday practice in the classrooms.

Even to this day, educators engage in Socratic dialogue and hold it in high regards. Students and teachers across the globe are using instructional dialogue to cover subjects such as mathematics, science, English and a host of others. But how effective is the dialogue between teacher and student? Are teachers informed about the nature of diverse teaching or multicultural enhancement? According to Kerry Robinson [4], there is an "embracing of pluralism" that upholds Western education. He states from Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force of 1989, there was an anti-bias curriculum that emerged from the United States. This curriculum enhanced and fostered inclusion and pluralism into the daily practice of early childhood institutions [4]. However, as Robinson subtly states, there is limited research on how educators' perspectives of diversity are really measured. The policies and practices of pluralism and inclusion either perpetuate their pedagogy or disrupt social and educational inequalities. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there have been social inequalities that have ciphoned into the educational system.

Another poignant issue that must be given attention is that of the anti-bias curriculum which often since as an "add-on" package, as Robinson and Diaz [4] states, to an already fixed social system. Differences were hidden in words such as "tolerated" and "celebrated" and research indicates that in schools when intervention methods are used, it is when there are "visible differences" in children with problems as opposed to less obvious physical differences. Robinson and Jones Díaz [4], conducted a surveyed consisting of 49 practitioners who attended to children from highly diverse language and cultural groups and found that there was a greater focus on visible differences rather than less obvious differences, for example, children from gay and lesbian couples were not as "tolerated" as children appearing 'white' from a racially blended family (Robinson and Diaz, 2000). It is difficult to separate education from broader societal realities because they are embedded within them. Simple "diversity" issues are not enough to analyze and to understand the larger constructs and paradigms of diversity in society. Family values are seen in society as an underpinning to how educational system should flow, however, there are sometimes forgotten perceptions, values, religious beliefs, and traditions of families that will directly impact students' motivation, teacher pedagogy and the institutions that train them [4].

Early childhood institutions are a microcosm of the macro system in which individuals live. Dahlberg., *et al*. 1999, stated that early childhood institutions are "civil forums-"spaces where 'children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance…" [4]. They can perpetuate many social inequalities through educator programmes, pedagogies and as Robinson states, "hidden curricula of everyday interactions and practices" [4]. He calls this the "hierarchy of comforts." There are varying degrees of comfort or difference to which individuals and institutions are committed to explore and provide. Contradictory practices are often based upon non normative assumptions about race, people, behaviors and experiences of similarity and there is an assumption that it is true for individuals as large. Research by Robinson and Díaz, (2000), indicate that early childhood educators can have commitments to equity issues such as ethnicity, gender or (dis)ability and yet in everyday practices and interactions, uphold homophobic or heterosexist ideas. Apple, (1999), as cited in Robinson [4], states "education is precisely the social field where possibilities of critique and interrogation of social inequality are more likely to be explored." Research also indicates that there is a limited connection between structural inequalities, discrimination, and critical thinking. This is evidenced by respondents' agreement that it is critical to raise children with an awareness of cultural differences and power differences, yet few acknowledged adults and children with different racial or ethnic backgrounds experience with racial inequality, stereotyping and discrimination. Also, respondents ranked children's' experience at the lower end of the scale, perhaps indicating practitioners are less aware of their experience with inequality and discrimination [4].

Perceptions of Educational Diversity

Children view racial, ethnic, gender and class stereotypes as a reflection of the social context in which they were reared. They bring with them a set of assumptions, expectations and values from peers, media, family and other social sources. Glover (1991) as cited in Robinson and Diaz [4], states that 2 and 3 year olds develop positive and negative feelings about differences they observe. Racial awareness particularly skin color, foster friendship selections and social relationships. This is evident by children refusing to hold the hand of someone different, never picking "dolls" from different races and choosing same 'race' pictures" (Abound, 1988; Bigler, 1997). Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1991) indicate that two year olds are already developing "theories" about differences and similarities that are congruent with their cognitive stage of development and life experiences [4]. This leads researchers to speculate why individual differences are important to grasp as it relates to diversity.

Educational systems have a common goal that all students will be brought to minimally acceptable levels of commonly valued achievements in reading, writing, mathematics, and citizenship. There are also individual goals that students will come to and develop his or her maximum potential and contribute to society [5]. There are some educational systems that have individualized instruction geared towards ability differences such as noted by Snow [5], the Adaptive Learning Environment Models, and the Individually Guided Education and Program for Learning in Accordance with needs. In guidance counseling, one new way we see diversity in education is through computerized tests and inventories which provide counselors and students with on –the- spot scoring and interpretation [5].

Diversity in the classroom

In the fast-paced, immediate response society, this is one way teachers and students can economize and receive effect, efficient ability profiles. Secondly, systems adaptation models is another way to assess and meet the needs of students who may be low in crystallized intelligence, high in anxiety or low in independence, by providing several alternative instructional systems. A third attempt to diversify assessment in education is through new forms that provide a broader sense of test interpretation. The new system would account for not only the test score, but include the students' health and maturity, family situation, socio-economic status, and urban acculturation [5]. This way instructors and educational systems could account for "estimated learning potential" (p.767). Most opponents of the traditional "box" system of learning have expressed these concerns for decades. Lastly, individual teacher adaptations are another way to reflect our shifting, diverse society. As noted earlier, diversity in the classroom is a direct reflection of the larger paradigm of the diversity in society and teachers must adapt to the shift. Snow [5], noted several ways teachers can accommodate students.

1. Careful observation inside and outside the classroom.

2. Elicit permissive versus directing monitoring.

3. Use styles of discourse such as reading activities similar to children in their cultural community to bridge the gap.

4. Establish participation rules similar to the rules that are sensitive to some cultural groups.

5. Use a second language to teach reading in English in activity groups.

As the researchers noted, there are varying degrees of individual differences within groups (ethnic, racial and cultural) as there are out of group differences. Continued efforts in identifying ways and strategies to embrace diversity are needed. Also, the notion of 'childhood' varies across different social, cultural and ethnic contexts. In Western culture, the notion of childhood denotes a biologically determined universalism, such as those made by Piaget which generalized these universals from small groups of children to all children without taking into account historical contexts, socio-cultural factors and other issues such as gender and ethnicity [5]. As noted earlier by Robinson and Diaz [4], children's understandings of cultural identities have been limited to obvious physical and language differences with regard to the "internal" aspects of diversity. A notable problem with designing such educational systems and test measurements that reflect diversity is that the entire developmental theory is embodied with certain assumptions of class and social settings [6]. Karkouti [7] also suggests that diversity issues that are ignored and not developed at the educational leadership level can derogate the macro environment with a new generation of under-prepared individuals that will eventually impact the global market.

Researchers have used methods and instruments that were assumed provided for objective investigation of universal patterns of development. However; instruments that were developed for white, middle-class, American and British children such as the Gessell School Readiness Test, is one example of such assumptions. Gessell (1928) conducted studies at the Yale Clinic and drew his subjects from "American" homes and babies from middle-class home [8]. He provided "normative" summaries for guiding the interpretation of well known psychological tests, even used today. Bernhard [6] relates to that note by stating, "one cannot simply assume that all ethno cultural groups have the same psychosocial needs and characteristics" (p. 422). Thus, this assumption robs children of the lived experiences in families and communities which, in turn, lend to further social and racial inequalities [6].

Sen and Blatchford [9], found in a study with Indian students who were taught reading in a second language, progressed better when factors such as home background, exposure to English, gender and age, teacher ratings and measures of general ability were accounted for instead of traditional test scores alone.

Changes in diversity in the classroom

Culturally sensitive research, as noted by Tucker and Herman [10] suggests that "cultural issues" need to be addressed at every stage of the research process, including conceptualization, design, implementation, analysis, interpretation and dissemination" (p. 770). They concluded that over 72% of articles that included African-Americans were race-comparative studies. This is where the previous assumptions as described, are realized in universalistic principles. To make comparative research less discriminatory, (which all is not discriminatory). Tucker and Herman [10] suggests: (a) study racial categories as lived experiences and social progresses rather than as self-evident realities, (b) sample a wide range of settings and experiences, (c) choose appropriate control or comparison groups that have been living under "like environmental and cultural conditions" and finally, (d) describe within-group differences. The continued discussion of needed sensitivity to cultural and individual differences leads us to the implications of most current research trends on diversity-where do we go from here?

There are several way researchers suggest, that can bridge the gap between diversity and learning. Nasir and Hand [8] suggests: (1) explore the diversity of day-to-day encounters experienced in public schools by African-American, Latino, Asian, Native American, or White. Research has found when students behave contrary to school norms, both achievement and learning suffers, (2) create classroom interventions to support the learning for students of color. In this area, educators must learn cultural responsiveness and culturally rel-

evant pedagogy. As a society shifts in larger society to a broader recognition of individual differences, the educational systems must reflect the same shift. The historical contexts under which educators and educational institutions have operated for many centuries, have many deficits with regard to racial differences, economic differences, linguistic differences and intervention and practice. There has been a great effort made to reverse the historically white, middle-class universalism under which many institutions practice and continued efforts for a global realization of diversity. The Socratic dialogue is still useful, just in a variety of new ways such as computer-based instruction, using a second language to teach English or group discussions on race relations. They all "dialogue" about a broader sense of social justice and equity in education, whether good or bad. A final example of how diversity affects all aspects of our children's social and relational development. Below, the following conversation between a 9 year old and his mother offer a glimpse into the child's recognition of racial identity in response to real social triggers [4].

> Martin: Mummy, I don't want to be brown anymore.
> Mother: Uhh, why not?
> Martin: I'm sick of being brown, it's not working. I can't attract Rubie's attention, and anyway she likes Joseph more than me.
> Mother: Joseph? But isn't that because they are friends outside of school?
> Martin: Yeah, but he's white and Rubie's white and she talks to him a lot.
> Mother: (a long pause of silence and hesitation) But, but... oh maybe, you know that, you have beautiful brown skin and oh,
>   Martin, when you say that you don't want to be brown anymore that really upsets me. I get really sad.
> Martin: But it's true.
> Mother: Yeah but there are lots of black and brown kids in your class and you are not the only one.
> Martin: Yeah, but Joseph isn't black and Rubie is starting to like him more than Me.
> Later Mother: Martin, can I ask you a question about the Joseph thing and sitting next to Rubie?
> Martin: What?
> Mother: If Joseph was black or brown, would it still worry you that he gets to sit next to Rubie?
> Martin: No.

This conversation illustrates this child's ability to articulate an uncomfortable encounter, which has left him questioning his identity as defined through the lens of skin color. As a remedy, this child seeks to solve the problem to rejecting that part of his identity rooted in the simple color of his skin. Additionally, Martin is responding to other unknown social interactions that occurred in the classroom. His mother tries to comfort her son, based on the information he provides. Unfortunately, she is at disadvantage since she did not witness what may have been a series of encounters over a period of days or weeks. While this encounter may appear harmless on the surface to the untrained professional, as a diversity case study it offers a number of opportunities for educators and parents to intervene and bridge the gap between diversity and learning [11].

Conflict of Interest

It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the authors.

Bibliography

1. Walker JT. "The Psychology of Learning". *Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall* (1996).

2. Zimmerman BJ. "Educational Psychology: A Century of Contributions". *Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates* (2003).

3. James W. "Talks to teachers on psychology: And to students on some of life's ideals". *Cambridge, A: Harvard University Press* (1912).

4. Robinson K and Jones DC. "Diversity and difference in early childhood education: Issues for theory and practice". *Berkshire: McGraw Hill Education* (2005).

5. Snow RE. "Individual Differences and the Design of Educational Programs". *American Psychologist* 41.10 (1986): 1029-1039.

6. Bernhard JK. "Child development, cultural diversity, and the professional   training of early childhood educators". *Canadian Journal of Education* 20.4 (1995): 415-436.

7. Karkouti Mohamad I. "Professional leadership practices and diversity issues in the U.S. higher education system: A research synthesis". *Education* 136.4 (2016): 405-412.

8. Nasir NS and Hand VM. "Exploring sociocultural perspectives on race, culture, and learning". *Review of Educational Research* 76.4 (2006): 449-475.

9. Sen R and Blatchford P. "Reading in a Second Language: factors associated with progress in young children". *Educational Psychology* 21.2 (2001): 189-202.

10. Tucker CM and Herman KC. "Using culturally sensitive theories and research to meet the academic needs of low-income African American children". *American Psychologist* 57.10 (2002): 762-773.

11. Schunk DH. "Learning Theories: An Educational Perspective (3rd ed)". *Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall* (2000).