

Perceptions of Head Start Teachers about Culturally Relevant Practice

Margaret Gichuru, Jeanetta G. Riley, Jo Robertson, & Mi-Hwa Park

Introduction

Children bring a variety of cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds into the preschool classroom. When teachers consider these backgrounds, they are better able to create environments that reflect children's cultures and to design learning experiences that build on children's prior experiences. Through these environments and experiences, bridges are created between home and school to more fully meet children's needs (Hyland, 2010) and allow them to "participate fully and meaningfully in the construction of knowledge" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 104).

Teachers' abilities to implement culturally relevant practices in their classrooms can enhance children's school success, help to develop and maintain children's self-identities, and foster cultural awareness among the children (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The definitions of culturally relevant practice are varied. Gay (2000) uses the term culturally responsive teaching and explains it as the teacher's use of students' cultural backgrounds and understandings to create more effective instructional experiences that were more likely to engage students in the learning and increase academic achievement.

Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) defines

Margaret Gichuru is an assistant professor in the School of Teacher Education at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Jeanetta G. Riley is an associate professor, Jo Robertson is a professor, and Mi-Hwa Park is an assistant professor all in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education of the College of Education at Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky.

culturally relevant teaching as empowering students by helping them to succeed academically, to develop deeper understandings of the significance of the values and traditions of their own cultures, and to critically analyze societal beliefs and perspectives about cultural issues. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), when teachers help students make connections between what they learn in school and their everyday lives, students are more likely to see the worth in the learning and in themselves.

Each of these definitions has in common the need to create a bridge between the school and the students' everyday lived experiences within their home and community. This requires that teachers learn about the general cultural values, expectations, and language of their students' cultural groups (Gay, 2002; Hyland, 2010).

However, to effectively implement culturally relevant practices involves more than the teacher's awareness of diversity within the classroom (Gay, 2000). Teachers must fully understand the "cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups" (Brown, 2007, p. 59) and, according to Gay (2000), have "the courage to dismantle the status quo" (p. 13) regarding educational policies and procedures that perpetuate differences in educational opportunities for diverse students.

According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), early childhood teachers must learn about the family and community specific to the individual child to be effective. However, to enact culturally relevant practice involves moving beyond learning about family and community and toward a more complete understanding of each child's ethnic and cultural identity (Gay 2000).

Thus, early childhood teachers need general knowledge about the various cultures of children in their classrooms and specific knowledge about individual children's specific cultural identities to

create relevant learning experiences that reflect children's cultures and to tap into the "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) children bring with them into the classroom. Culturally relevant practices help children celebrate and respect their linguistic and cultural backgrounds thus increasing opportunities for positive learning experiences.

When teachers incorporate knowledge of children's family and community cultures into the classroom, they can create a bridge between the children's home and school (Gilliard, Moore, & Lemieux, 2007). Recently, Head Start programs have enrolled higher numbers of children from diverse cultural backgrounds with 42% of the programs indicating that diversity of their communities had increased in the past five years (Cheri, et, al., 2011). Kentucky has developed Migrant Head Start programs to meet the needs of that growing population (Kentucky Head Start Association, n.d.). This trend requires teachers to understand culturally relevant practices and how to implement them in their classrooms.

While studies about how teachers create and implement culturally relevant practices have increased over the past decade, few include teachers of preschool age children. Morrison, Robbins, and Rose (2008) searched six databases for research studies since 1995 that investigated culturally relevant practice and found 45 studies. Of these 45, only two specifically addressed preschool teachers. With this paucity of studies involving preschool teachers, more research into culturally relevant practice in preschool environments is needed.

A previous investigation by three of the current authors about culturally diverse families of Head Start children and their perspectives of their children's school experiences (Riley, Gichuru, & Robertson, 2012) led to the current study. The results of the first study indicated that the families

were very satisfied with their children's experiences in Head Start; however, the families voiced few particulars about experiences of their children that were specific to their cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the current study was designed with the purpose of investigating how children's cultural backgrounds are reflected in Head Start classrooms based on the perceptions of seven Head Start teachers.

Methodology

This qualitative study examined how children's cultural backgrounds are reflected in Head Start classrooms from teachers' perspectives. The study was an extension of the researchers' previous investigation examining how families of diverse cultural backgrounds viewed their children's experiences in Head Start.

Investigators for this study were from diverse backgrounds. One of the investigators is a native of South Korea, one is originally from Kenya, and two are of Caucasian background from the United States. The diverse backgrounds of the investigators and their interest in qualitative research have been the catalyst for the research.

A purposeful sample of seven participants was recruited (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 1996). Directors of the three Head Start grantees in which the families from the previous study had children enrolled were contacted and asked to identify preschool teachers who had children in their classrooms from culturally diverse backgrounds. The participants were chosen and asked to provide in-depth descriptions of their experiences from their own perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Data Collection

The investigators contacted the teachers to explain the observation and interview process; each teacher agreed to participate in the study. All teachers were female. One teacher was Hispanic, two were African American, and four were Caucasian. The teachers' educational backgrounds ranged from associate degree to master's degree in education. The demographics of the classrooms included African-American, Latino, and Caucasian children.

Investigators developed an observation and an interview protocol for the systematic gathering of data. Each teacher was observed in her classroom or center setting for two to three hours using the observation protocol (see Appendix A).

Additionally, a semi-structured interview using an interview protocol (see Appendix B) was conducted for approximately one hour after each observation. Interviews were audio taped.

Before interviewing each participant, the investigators explained the purpose of the interview to the participant. During each interview, the investigators used open-ended questions to generate qualitative data and provide in-depth information. Additionally, the investigators used prompts for clarification and elaboration of information collected from the participants' perspective. Follow up questions were also asked to clarify the teacher's answers and what was observed in the teacher's classroom. After each observation and interview, observation notes were typed, and the audio tapes were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred after all observations and interviews were conducted. Data were analyzed through coding and recoding observation notes and interview transcriptions (Creswell, 2007). Using the questions from the protocol, categories of meaningful words and phrases were established. Words and phrases were identified as meaningful when the ideas the words conveyed were used by several participants at different Head Start sites.

Meaningful words and phrases for each of the protocol questions were examined to determine initial patterns, categories, and themes for each question. Upon rereading of the notes and transcripts, data were recategorized when investigators determined new categories were needed or data needed to be rearranged.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how Head Start Program teachers reflect children's cultural backgrounds in the classrooms. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: influence of children's interest and development on curriculum, reflection of diversity within the physical environment, and communication between teacher and families.

Children's Interest and Development Influence Curriculum

There is increased global recognition of the importance of including children's ethnic and cultural knowledge in their curriculum (Fuller, 2007; Nsamenang, 2008).

In this study, teachers perceived that children's interests, needs, and development influenced their curriculum choices. Teachers were observed in their classrooms talking with children about their home life and various family activities in the home or community.

The interviews indicated that the teachers used home visits to gather information and understand the children's interests and needs. One participant elaborated on what they discussed during the visits:

We [the teachers] ask the parents what are their goals in all those developmental areas. Like language. What do we want them to learn about language? What do we want them to learn about society? What do we want them to learn about physical development? We look at their goal sheet, and if there are areas that their parents may have had concerns about or questions about, we work with the child, and then we address it. We have the parent visits with the family advocate. If they have any questions or concerns they can address those with her. We ask them... whenever they're in we try to ask them, hey, you know what's going on with you? What's going on at home? How do you feel about things that are going on in the classroom?

When asked about professional development on the topic of cultural diversity, the teachers did talk about trainings. In spite of the teachers' indications of experiencing training about cultural diversity, most of the training involved surface level issues, generally about the use of the child's home language. Embedding the children's cultures into the daily curriculum to enhance children's understanding of their own cultural identity and that of their peers was not mentioned in any depth by most of the teachers. For example, one participant stated,

They sent us on trainings, and they talk about how it's important to be culturally diverse, and you know, make sure that we use the language of the children mostly when they're young.

Another participant indicated,

Every year we have an ELL (English Language Learners) training. And in some of those trainings we've talked about different cultures.

In contrast to most of the participants, one participant had trained others about diversity. She believed that diversity went beyond race,

Diversity can lend itself to somebody's

parents being in jail and somebody's not... A single parent home vs. a mom and dad in the home...All of those things add to diversity.

However, when asked how she had gained knowledge about diversity to be able to train others, she chuckled as she talked about finding information on the internet,

I sought it out for myself. And then the more that I did with it, my supervisor was like, hey we need to have more stuff with it. So then we wound up having like a training for us.

Her trainings focused on books with characters of various ethnicities and on helping her audiences develop a different understanding of diversity as they thought about their curriculum:

I did several trainings on diversity. I did language and literacy training about just bringing in multicultural books and just things about diversity to try to get them to think out of the boxes more than just a black face and a white face and an Asian face in the room. If you're going to meet your children's needs you've got to understand that they have much more in common than they do different. And because of that, you can meet the diverse needs... And with me, with the diversity training with the books, that really impacted my participants heavily. Because they didn't know there were a lot of books about black children or by black authors.

The Reflection of Diversity within the Physical Environment

The classroom environment created by the teachers reflected the diversity of the children. Observations indicated that the teachers displayed posters with pictures of culturally diverse children and families, labeled shelves in English and Spanish, and included items such as books, dolls, music CDs, and figures of people representing various cultures in their classrooms.

The materials were sensitive to the children's cultural backgrounds. In her interview, one teacher mentioned the families' reactions when they saw labels in both English and Spanish, "Parents are pleased with labeling classroom materials in English and Spanish." Another teacher mentioned that at the beginning of the semester families of the children in her class were requested to bring family pictures that she framed and placed around the room. She said, "They want to come in because they want to see their pictures and feel connected to it."

Although some of the teachers who had children from a Hispanic background

in their classes spoke primarily English, they made an effort to use simple Spanish words and phrases while speaking to children who spoke English as a second language. In one observation, a teacher who was English speaking attempted to use words and phrases in Spanish language when interacting with children during center time and outdoor play.

Additionally, the teachers used both English and Spanish in classroom activities and displays. In one observation, the calendar activities, counting, and a song about the days of the week were conducted in both English and Spanish. Teaching immigrant children and English language learners works best if children are not forced to abandon their native language (California Department of Education, 2007). In addition, classroom learning for preschoolers is enriched when teachers encourage the use of home language while children acquire English (California Department of Education).

Communication between Teacher and Families

It is important for early childhood professionals to have effective communication skills and the ability to establish relationship with families of young children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Through interactions, the families are able to share about their culture, ethnicity, and language with the professionals and receive culturally and linguistically appropriate services (Hains, Lynch, & Winton, 2000).

In this study, communication methods reflected the teachers' efforts to include family priorities and interests. In addition to the home visits, the teachers held parent-teacher conferences, sent newsletters and parent-child activity ideas to families, and had translators available, if needed, to communicate with the families. An example of how teachers collected information during the initial home visit was explained by one participant:

We talk about the traditional things, allergies in food, and we actually have a family conference form that talks about what they want as a parent for their child to learn about the world, about themselves, about communication.

Participants offered various ways in which they stayed in communication with families to acknowledge and include families in the children's learning experiences. One participant noted that she maintained an open door policy and invited families to

visit and share their cultures. The teachers also discussed parent-teacher conferences and what the conversations were about during the conferences:

...during parent conference, let them (parents) know, you know, how the children are progressing. I have some of their work in their folders, you know, for them to look at. You know, then if they have any questions or comments, they let me know.

Furthermore, one of the teachers explained that the family advocate who spoke Spanish, held parents meetings during the year. During the first meeting, the advocate asked the parents what activities they wanted to do during the year with their children at the school. The parents decided that they wanted to repeat the Mexican independence celebration they had carried out in the school the previous year:

...they again wanted to do the celebration that we had last September, but they wanted to add some more things into it. So, it was really the parents that came together from both classrooms and said that that was something they wanted to do.

One participant explained how the families were directly involved in sharing items about their culture and how she used them in the classroom,

They send... sometimes I get books, sometimes I get fingerplays...They want us to know about their cultures.

Another participant said that many families' priority is to have their children acquire academic skills and learn to speak English,

I think the big thing to the family is that they can write their name and then I guess the family really wants them to speak English.

Another participant mentioned what parents were concerned about during their parents' conferences,

They just want to know how is my child doing? You know can my child count?

In contrast, another teacher noted how the families rarely asked questions of her other than whether their child would be fed while at school. Additionally, she noted how she tried to encourage family member to feel welcome in her classroom:

...your Latino culture, they really think highly of teachers. They think I guess more like a priest, you know. So it's hard to get them to come into the classroom. So like last year, we had a sign out sheet in here [a room just outside the classroom door], sign in and out sheet, but they

would never step into the classroom. So I've moved it inside cause I want them to feel a part of it.

Conclusion and Implications

This study provides initial insight into the scope of how culturally relevant practices are implemented in seven Head Start classrooms. Moreover, it raises awareness about Head Start teachers' understandings of culturally relevant practice and examines the importance of teachers developing knowledge and skills that will facilitate effective implementation of culturally relevant practices in the classrooms.

Although the teachers in this study made efforts to communicate with all families, most of the communication tended to be one-way, from the teacher to the family. According to Graham-Clay (2005), one-way communication between families and the school setting is typical. Limited communication with families who are learning English or do not speak English is exacerbated when written notes and newsletters are incorrectly interpreted or when children take the primary responsibility of interpreting messages to their parents (Gou, 2006).

Matthews and Jang (2007) reported on an extensive study conducted by the Center for Law and Social Policy concerning immigrant families and their experiences in relation to child care. Families in the study consistently brought up language as a barrier in building connection with their children's teachers. In an effort to reduce language as a barrier, a language access plan was developed to expand communication beyond typical translation of documents and use of interpreters to reaching out to leaders within community organizations, such as the church.

More open two-way communication between teachers and families allows families to share their desires for their children, in turn providing teachers with better understandings of the children's cultures and how to design and implement culturally relevant teaching. To assist Head Start teachers' efforts to develop more effective two-way communication, administrators can encourage teachers to make continuing efforts to develop on-going relationships with families, thus encouraging families to engage in open, two-way communication.

Furthermore, an understanding by administrators and others who make policy that teachers need support in developing respectful and responsive methods for two-way communication may be an initial

step in providing necessary personnel to assist in reducing language as a barrier for family involvement.

The teachers in the current study indicated they had participated in training about cultural diversity. The training focused on including materials in the classroom depicting people of diverse cultures and the importance of children continuing to use their home language when it is different from English. There was limited training about how to embed the children's cultures into the daily curriculum and of how to help children understand their own cultural identity and that of their peers.

Additionally, although the classroom environments that the teachers created included materials of various cultures; they were not necessarily individualized to the children in the classroom nor did the teachers make explicit connections between materials and children's understandings about various cultures.

Training that provides exposure to issues of cultural diversity is a starting point; however, on-going professional development that allows participants opportunities to build understandings of diversity are needed. McDermott and Varenne (1995) emphasized the importance for educators understanding the value of making the connections between children's cultural practices to their academic growth and not to consider their cultural backgrounds as a distraction to their school learning.

Additionally, Vesely and Ginsburg (2011) discussed a study in which administrators provided early childhood professionals with professional development opportunities to enhance their practices for working with diverse immigrant families. In the study, sustained professional learning was essential for professionals to deepen their understanding of different cultures through home visits and supporting the diverse families' access to available social services. Continued professional development is essential for teachers to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to effectively work with culturally diverse children and their families.

This study examined seven Head Start teachers' perceptions of how they implemented culturally relevant practice in their Head Start classrooms. Even though teachers expressed limited training about integrating the children's cultures into their everyday curriculum and supporting children's comprehension about their cultural identity, they made an effort to create a culturally relevant environment. The teachers used materials that reflected di-

versity, created a curriculum that focused on children's interests and developmental needs, and ensured communication was maintained between themselves and the children's families.

While the findings of this qualitative study are not meant to be generalized to the larger population, they do suggest a need for increased opportunities for more in-depth learning about culturally relevant practices for early childhood educators. Furthermore, examination of how these learning opportunities help teachers to incorporate children's culture into the daily curriculum at a deeper, more meaningful level and to bridge communication barriers between home and school are needed.

References

- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Brown, M. (2007). Educating all students: Creating culturally responsive teachers, classrooms, and schools. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 43*(1), 57-62.
- California Department of Education Child Development Division. (2007). *Preschool English learners: Principles and practices to promote language, literacy, and learning—A resource guide*. Sacramento: California Department of Education Press.
- Cheri, V. A., Boller, K., Xue, Y., Blair, R., Aikens, N., Burwick, A., Shrago, Y., Carlton, B. L., Kalb, L., Mendenko, L., Cannon, J., Harrington, S., & Stein, J. (2011). *Learning as we go: A first snapshot of early head start programs, staff, families, and children*. OPRE Report #2011-7, Washington, DC., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Compton-Lilly, C. (2006). Identity, childhood culture, and literacy learning: A case study. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 6*(1), 57-76.
- Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children birth through age 8* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for Education of Young Children.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Research design: Quantitative and qualitative approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fuller, B. (2007). *Standardized childhood: The political and cultural struggle over early education*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(2), 106-116.
- Gilliard, J. L., Moore, R. A., & Lemieux, J. J. (2007). In Hispanic culture, the children are the jewels of the family: An investigation of home and community culture in a bilingual

- early care and education center serving migrant and seasonal farm worker families. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 9(2). Retrieved from <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v9n2/gilliard.html>
- Gou, Y. (2006). Why didn't they show up? Re-thinking ESP parent involvement in K-12 education. *TSEL Canada Journal*, 24(1), 80-95. Retrieved from <http://www.tselcanadajournal.ca/index.php/%20tesl/article/viewFile/29/29>
- Gregg, K., Rugg, M. E., & Souto-Manning, M. (2011). Fostering family-centered practices through a family-created portfolio. *The School Community Journal*, 21(1), 53-70. Retrieved from <http://www.adi.org/journal/2011ss/GreggRuggSouto-Manning-Spring2011.pdf>
- Hains, A. H., Lynch, E. W., & Winton, P. J. (2000). *Moving towards cross-cultural competence in lifelong personnel development: A review of the literature* (CLAS Technical Report No. 3). Champaign: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Early Childhood Research Institute on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services.
- Hyland, N. E. (2010). Social justice in early childhood classrooms: What the research tells us. *Young Children* 65(1), 82-87.
- Kentucky Head Start Association. (n.d.). *Scope of services provided*. Retrieved September, 4, 2013, from http://www.khsa.org/wp/?page_id=115
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching: The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3), 159-165.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dream-keepers: Successful teachers of African-American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Matthews, H., & Jang, D. (2007). *The challenges of change: Learning from the child care and early education experiences of immigrant families*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved from <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0356.pdf>
- Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McDermont, R., & Varenne, H. (1995). Culture as disability. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 26(3), 324-348.
- Moll, L.C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Morrison, K. A., Robbins, H. H., & Rose, D. G. (2008). Operationalizing culturally relevant pedagogy: A synthesis of classroom-based research. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 41(4), 433-452.
- Nsamenang, A. B. (2008). (Mis)understanding ECD in Africa: The force of local and imposed motives. In M. Garcia, A. Pence, & J. Evans (Eds.), *Africa's future, Africa's challenge: Early childhood care and development in Sub-Saharan Africa* (pp. 135-149). Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Riley, J. G., Gichuru, M. & Robertson, J. (2012). Perceptions of culturally diverse head start families: A focus group study. *Multicultural Education*, 20(1), 33-37.
- Vesely, C. K., & Ginsberg, M. R. (2011). Strategies and practices for working with immigrant families in early education programs. *Young Children*, 60(1), 84-89.

Appendix A

Observation Protocol for Observing in Teachers' Classrooms

Classroom Environment:

1. Environment and classroom materials represent cultural and ethnic background of children and families. (e.g., books, dolls, puppets, photos, posters, words in various languages, puzzles, dress up clothes, musical instruments, etc.)
2. Participation of all children is encouraged and facilitated by teacher.

Communication:

1. Children's primary language used by adults in the classroom (use of child's home language if different than English).
2. Newsletters and other communications sent home to families are translated for families, if needed.
3. Teachers talk with children about their personal interests and family.

Curriculum:

1. Children are being taught about their own culture.
2. Children are introduced to other cultures through positive experiences (exploring similarities/differences in the cultures of people).

Appendix B

Interview Protocol Questions for Teachers in Study

1. Demographic information:
 - a. educational background.
 - b. experience in teaching/working with children & families.
 - c. professional development training about culture and/or cultural experience for young children.
2. In your initial contact when you meet with families, what do you talk about?
Throughout the year, how do you communicate what the children are learning to their families?
3. Please tell me any challenges that you have in communicating with families.
4. How do you let the families know why you emphasize what the children are learning?
If reading is part of the answer: What about families who do not read? What about the families who do not read English?
5. What are some examples of activities that you provide that reflect the child's/family's interests and priorities?
6. What are some things you consider as you plan and implement your curriculum?
Are there other things that you consider?
7. How are the families involved in the children's education?
8. What have you done to help all children feel accepted in your classroom?