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Start with Us! Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the Preschool Classroom

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Abstract

Using an ethnographic case study approach, we examined how teachers and parents within an ethnically diverse early childhood program conceptualized and implemented culturally relevant pedagogy and how these primary caregivers were encouraging children’s sociocultural development and awareness. Data sources included questionnaires, interview transcripts, and observational field notes (classroom and community). Findings suggest there were multiple strategies and resources teachers used to facilitate the sociocultural growth of young children indicative of culturally relevant practices. However, we discovered there were mediating factors that impacted how and whether teachers were able to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in the early childhood classroom.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy, teacher development, culturally and linguistically diverse children, early childhood education

Introduction

For more than 30 years, there have been a vast number of inquiries and scholarly conversations on how to improve the educational experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students. These conversations were sparked by the increase in diverse students and the discontinuity between the experiences of the teaching force and the students they teach (Carter 2008). Approximately 49% of children entering kindergarten in the United States are from culturally and/or linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, and this percentage

is expected to continue to increase rapidly within the next 15 years, propelling CLD children as the majority student population in US public schools (National Center for Educational Statistics 2013). There is much rhetoric on preparing teachers to teach within a globally connected society, but we argue that many classrooms and communities today are global and international. Despite evidence of teachers becoming more aware of ethnic diversity in our society (Castro 2010), challenges still exist in developing and supporting teachers who are equipped with the professional competences and skills to provide high-quality, responsive educational experiences for CLD children (Carter 2008). This study takes a deeper look at teachers' developing conceptions of a culturally relevant education by asking how children's sociocultural development is encouraged in the early childhood classroom.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Social cultural theory views learning as socially and culturally mediated (Wink and Putney 2002). Therefore, looking through the lens of the child requires teachers to implement curriculum and instructional practices that are culturally sensitive and relative to the child's experience. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), culturally relevant teaching is a "pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (pp. 17–18). Also pedagogy—specifically cultural relevant pedagogy—entails relational, curricular and ideological dimensions. To effectively implement a culturally relevant and sustainable pedagogy, teachers must first believe that all students can succeed, maintain an affirming student–teacher relationship, and see excellence as a complex standard that takes student diversity and individual difference into account (Paris 2012). The pedagogical practices must not be relevant only to children's lives and experiences but also be sustainable over time and withstand changes in early childhood policy, educational reform, and curricular and/or assessment trends.

Furthermore, Hilliard (2006) argues that schools should abandon labels for diverse students such as "at risk" and "disadvantaged" and instead adopt beliefs that speak to the brilliance and cultural tools children from diverse backgrounds bring to the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is rooted in the belief that learning is a socially mediated process explicitly connecting to students' cultural and linguistic experiences (Groulx and Silva 2010). Gay (2000) and Howard (2003) contend CRP involves teachers connecting classroom experiences and learning to children's home experiences and native language. However, CRP is more than making connections. It requires teachers to intentionally and effectively use and support the languages, literacies, and cultural tools of students who represent the dominant and marginalized sectors of our society (Beauboeuf-LaFontant 1999). CRP requires teachers not only to be able to effectively implement best practices but also have the belief that such practices are essential to quality teaching and learning of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings 2014).

As representative of the early work of James Banks, who identified five dimensions of multicultural educational reform in order for teachers to reach beyond content integration (dimension one) to empowering and influencing school and social structure (dimension

five), it is important not to trivialize CRP as a practice of learning cultures. Instead, culturally relevant pedagogy also involves a teacher's deep understanding of how teaching is a sociopolitical act and how the classroom can serve as a place for equity, justice, and opportunity (Banks 1993a). As Ladson- Billings (2014) recently charged:

Many practitioners, and those who claim to translate research to practice, seem stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture. Thus, the fluidity and variety within cultural groups has regularly been lost in discussions and implementations of culturally relevant pedagogy. Even when people have demonstrated a more expansive knowledge of culture, few have taken up the sociopolitical dimensions of the work, instead dulling its critical edge or omitting it altogether (p. 77).

To "take up" the sociopolitical dimensions of one's work requires teachers to engage in two critically consciousness processes. The first requires teachers to examine how social identities children bring with them to the classroom (i.e., race, native language, etc.) predisposes them and/or their families to -isms or privileges within the larger society. Secondly, the teacher must engage in critical reflective practice to examine her own ideological stance toward the children in her classroom (What are my beliefs about bilingual education in the American classroom? What racial stereotypes do I have?). Without such critical and intentionally reflective practice, teachers run the risk of perpetuating and justifying personal actions and beliefs that could be culturally and educationally harmful to students (Gay and Kirkland 2003). We therefore argue that culturally relevant teaching requires critically reflective and intentional teachers. Epstein (2007) tells us how intentional teachers are those who "use their knowledge, judgment, and expertise to organize learning experiences for children; when an unexpected situation arises (as it always does), they can recognize a teaching opportunity and are able to take advantage of it, too" (p. 1).

In teacher education, it is critical to develop and prepare a cadre teachers who bring with them such knowledge, intentionality, and commitment in supporting the cultural awareness and sociocultural development of the children in their classrooms.

The term itself—culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP)—was first coined as a result of a series of research studies examining best practices of "master teachers" within urban, elementary, and secondary public schools in the United States (Ladson-Billings 1995, 1999). It is a very popular term among multicultural researchers examining school-age classroom practices. We argue, however, that starting young in applying such intentional, culturally relevant teaching is crucial for the early sociocultural development and future educational success of young children.

Methods

Using an ethnographic case study approach, we examined how teachers, parents, and children within a quality, ethnically diverse early childhood program conceptualized and implemented culturally relevant pedagogy. We asked:

- What are teachers' and parents' beliefs about and experiences with culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) within an ethnically diverse early childhood program?
- How are children's sociocultural development and awareness encouraged in a quality early childhood program?

Sampling and Case Study Participants

This study took place within an ethnically diverse early childhood program in the Midwest, USA, for 1 year. Hereafter called Kids Play, this program is nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and offers full-day childcare services for children 18 months through 5 years of age. As a teacher training facility, university students assist in planning, implementing, and evaluating activities with children under the supervision of the master and lead teachers in the classrooms. In this study, the duration of the internship experiences ranged from 2 months to the entire year, with an average of 5 months as the normative stay for preservice teachers and graduate assistants. Furthermore, Kids Play exceeds state licensing requirements and NAEYC recommendations for the adult-to-child ratio in the classrooms with the goal of providing each child individualized attention. Kids Play is also a primary site for local, national, and international research initiatives and experiential learning experiences for early childhood scholars, faculty, and researchers.

Participants

Under the auspices of an institutional review board (IRB), the researchers collected data from two preschool classrooms (2–5-year-olds) over the course of five semester sessions. Participants included 28 children, 9 parents, 51 teachers (center director, master, lead, graduate students, and preservice teachers), and 1 program director with a total sample of 88 participants. The children and families at Kids Play represented more than eight different nationalities and spoke languages including English, Spanish, Turkish, Korean, Greek, Polish, Russian, and Chinese. The children and families also are diverse in socioeconomic and religious affiliation. Similar to most university laboratory schools, a majority of the children have one or more parents who are employed by or studying at the University. Ninety-eight percent of the teachers and the director self-identified as White with a middle- or upper-class socioeconomic status. There was one male teacher participant. Eighty-five percent of teachers were also born either in the state in which the study took place and/or the Midwest, USA. Two percent of the teacher population represented ethnic groups of African American, Chinese, and biracial, in which Mandarin was the only language other than English represented.

Data Sources: Survey, Interviews, and Observations

Data sources included 29 descriptive survey memos (Derman-Sparks and Edwards 2010; Love and Kruger 2005); 16 individual teacher interview transcripts; 7 group interview transcripts (teacher and parent); and 13 observational field notes (classroom and community). The purpose of the surveys was to descriptively identify the teachers' attitudes toward and

efficacy in implementing CRP in the classroom and their exposure to and experience with diverse cultural groups. Individual semistructured interviews (approximately an hour per teacher participant) were then conducted providing an opportunity for each teacher to expand and clarify responses from the survey and provide insights on his or her beliefs and experiences facilitating CRP.

The classroom observations identified how the physical classroom environment, teacher-child interactions, and nonverbal communication represented (or not) culturally relevant teaching and learning. The researchers used the Anti-Bias Checklist to examine the physical environment (Derman-Sparks and Edwards 2010) and principles of CRP to examine the teacher-child and peer-peer interactions (Ladson-Billings 1994). The community observations included monthly “family nights” sponsored by the early childhood program and community cultural events. They provided insights on how teachers interacted and engaged with children and their families within a more informal social and cultural context. Lastly, parent group interviews were conducted (two mid year and one end of the year). These interviews allowed an opportunity for parents of the children in the study to share their beliefs and experiences about facilitating the sociocultural development of their young child both within the home and in collaboration with the classroom teacher. To ensure that authentic voices of participants were captured, we engaged in follow-up member-checking sessions with a sample of participants during each phase of the data collection from each subgroup (preservice teachers, lead/master teachers, director, and parents).

Data Analysis

A two-tiered coding system was used to analyze the interview transcripts, observational field notes, and descriptive memos of survey data. Data were divided into meaningful units consisting of phrases in interview transcripts or written records anywhere from one sentence to a page and a half. These data units were indicative of the participants’ experiences and beliefs in supporting children’s sociocultural development. After units were identified, we conducted a topical analysis. The first level of analysis identified practices or beliefs (spoken and/or observed) in which participants reflected on culturally responsive pedagogy, personal beliefs, and/or teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students.

The second level of analysis involved open coding (Miles and Huberman 1994) in which we developed patterns to describe each participant’s understandings and beliefs about culturally relevant pedagogy while simultaneously connecting these beliefs to ways in which children’s sociocultural development was being encouraged. Descriptive memos were written throughout the analysis process to track emergent findings and themes and were not analyzed themselves.

Results

Study participants included children, teachers, and parents within an ethnically diverse early childhood program. However, in this article we will focus on presenting the experiences and beliefs of the teacher sample as they engaged in teaching and learning from the children and families at Kids Play. There were multiple ways in which the teachers helped

to facilitate the sociocultural growth of the young children in their care. Our findings are presented in the “what” and the “how.” The what represents the teacher tools or resources used to help facilitate CRP in the preschool classroom whereas the how represents the process from which these tools were used to implement CRP and support children’s sociocultural development. The three primary categories to represent which strategies teachers used to facilitate children’s social and cultural development include curriculum resources, classroom environmental supports, and instructional approaches.

Furthermore, we discovered mediating factors had an impact on the experiences and opportunities for teachers to actually implement CRP in the early childhood classroom. In particular, we categorize this finding as the how or the process from which teachers were developing a culturally relevant teacher identity.

Curriculum Resources

Reggio Emilia Curriculum

To fully capture the unique experiences and voices of teachers at various levels in their professional and educational careers, we collected and analyzed data in three teacher “sets” that included preservice teachers and graduate students; inservice teachers (master and lead teachers), and a center director. Across teacher developmental spectrum, all teacher participants reflected during the interviews and member-checking sessions how the emergent, child-centered foci of the curriculum allowed them more flexibility to engage in children’s curiosity concerning their social and cultural differences and similarities. The curricular approach promoted at Kids Play was the Reggio Emilia approach. Reggio Emilia is an educational philosophy developed by Loris Malaguzzi and parents in Reggio Emilia, Italy, in the 1940s. According to this philosophy of teaching and learning, children are given opportunities to engage in developing problem-solving skills by participating in open dialogs and debates within the preschool classroom (Edwards and Forman 2011). Families and children are encouraged to participate in “democratic meetings” in which they discuss and express ideas and are encouraged to become active and contributing members of the learning community within the early childhood program. From a curriculum perspective, the role of the teacher in this democratic process is to support children as they explore and investigate the world around them by providing intentional, child-centered interactions and instructional opportunities.

The Reggio Emilia approach was instrumental in setting the foundational framework for teachers to espouse a culturally relevant ethos. Take for example the following reflection by the program director during an individual interview session in which she explains how the program helps young children value the diversity of self and others:

I think it [curriculum] facilitates easily to be open to all components of diversity. We are asking the teacher to be planning experiences that are child centered and so that takes us knowing who the child is and how do we best support the child.

In another example one of the master teachers said the following concerning how children's culture and diversity is valued in the classroom and represented in learning experiences:

within our curriculum . . . we are asking the teachers to be planning experiences that are child-centered, and so what that takes the student teacher and us knowing who the child is and how do we best support the child . . . that includes how was the family impacting the child . . . maybe is a disability . . . and even just different hair colors sometimes may have impact on the experiences they are having. So for me, I am seeing diversity as a teacher being intentional, and their approaches and strategies of what they are choosing provide the best experiences for children.

As articulated in these two quotes and further expressed by multiple teacher participants throughout the study, the Reggio Emilia curricular approach used at Kids Play was identified as the key mechanism or strategy for supporting children's social and cultural development. According to the observational data, the Reggio Emilia approach prompted teachers to implement developmentally appropriate practice that was socially constructivist, intentional, and child centered (individual and collective learning and play experiences). As we explored further how the curriculum and instructional tools represented elements of CRP, we noticed that the instructional activities were situated within a local cultural context. For example, one of the primary topics children were interested in exploring was nature and weather. Teachers facilitated children's exploration of this topic by using books, finger plays, small group activities, and outdoor and dramatic play experiences. Parents were invited during a "family night" to take a nature walk with their child and engage in activities focused on observing insects and plants in Kids Play outdoor play area and garden.

While the teachers intentionally created social spaces for children to explore this collective topic of interest, there were no documented observations of ways in which these materials, interactions, and scaffolding of children's learning were culturally relevant. For example, none of the books or resources used were bilingual or represented any of the languages children and their families spoke. Also, only local weather patterns and explorations of nature were presented. Exploring the natural habitats and weather conditions in Korea, Greece, or the other countries children and their families emigrated from were not observed. Therefore, while we observed culturally relevant practices such as teachers building upon children's interests, opportunities for social engagement and critical examination of the topic (What would happen if all the butterflies went away?), and implementing activities focused on children's immediate cultural environment, there were missed opportunities to expand this instructional cultural context to be inclusive of the international diversity in culture, geography, and language the children and families represented.

Classroom Environmental Supports

As we explored how the teachers supported children's social and cultural development, we found several classroom environmental resources that were "rich" with cultural and

linguistic diversity. For example, more than 50 books in the classroom libraries and resource center focused explicitly on multiple elements of diversity, such as language, gender diversity, and children with special needs. The classroom library also included books children brought from home. One preservice teacher reflected:

I think [Kids Play] does a great job showing diverse backgrounds. We're constantly rotating our books and I notice that our children chose books that show like different ethnicities or represent their own ethnicity. One child brought a book home from her home language and was really excited to share with us even though we can't read it.

Also, pictures of children and their families were displayed in the classroom and around the building. Particularly in each classroom there were photos of the families and a message written by the family and a display wall depicting cultures represented in the classroom. Some of these messages were in both English and the family's native language, communicating the international and linguistic diversity that exists (past and present) at Kids Play. There were also puzzles, toys, dolls, and dramatic play items representing age, racial, and gender diversity. See figure 1 for examples of ways Kids Play represented cultural diversity in the physical environment.



Figure 1. Classroom environmental supports

However, based on observational and interview data, very little teacher-child interaction with these environmental tools was observed throughout the study. Take below the reflection of one of the lead teachers when asked during an individual interview on ways in which the classroom environment included images of diverse people and also how teaching at Kids Play was intentional about discouraging stereotypes:

I don't feel that we do an adequate enough job in our environment that representing those qualities [cultural diversity]. However we do know that we have materials such as puzzles that might have a woman doctor, or might have a Chinese family. . . . Materials are available, but they are not always accessible and used in the classroom.

Survey and interview data suggest that intentional and consistent use of these resources was not because of a lack of interest or pedagogical priority for the teachers but rather a question of the level of efficacy in actually using these resources appropriately and effectively with children to create and respond to teachable moments around topics of diversity.

Instructional Approaches

Instructional approaches can be defined as specific teaching strategies directly implemented by the teacher with his or her students. Such culturally relevant teaching builds upon children's cultural knowledge while also increasing their awareness of the cultural experiences of others (Espinosa 2005). However, culturally relevant educational practices within a diverse cultural context like Kids Play necessitates teachers to seek additional professional support systems. For example, a partnership was formed with the local Confucius Institute to have a Chinese teacher come 1 day a week to teach children Chinese language and culture for 20 minutes. This was an intentional opportunity by teachers to introduce children to a language and culture represented in the center (18% of child/family population). This community partnership also provides an example of the challenge many teachers in the study faced in implementing developmentally and culturally appropriate practices around topics of culture and language. A master teacher reflects on such instructional challenge:

We have a Chinese student that comes in every week and she has been teaching the students her language from China. It's been really hard for her to get it down to the preschool level but we could say not to do it but it's been good to have that exposure and she's been so good with talking about her culture and have immersed them in it. This is where I'm from, you do this, I do that, and not the differences but the similarities of how we do things, but come at it in different ways.

When asked by the lead researcher how children responded to the Chinese lessons, the teacher reflected "They love it, even our [kids with special needs], even if they can't understand since it's so different, they like that difference." Here we see how the teachers have expressed an interest in not only building upon a language and culture represented by some of the children and families in their program, but demonstrating the value in exposing other children to different cultures as well; a great example of supporting children's social and cultural development and awareness.

As teachers attempted to affirm the linguistic tools of the children in their classrooms, they did, however, experience pedagogical challenges with assessment and instruction. As one preservice teacher reflected, "groups of kids talk Chinese to each other, which is great.

We love that. But it is hard for us, you know, we can't necessarily do that [speak Chinese]." When asked to identify ways their teaching was culturally responsive, 80% of the teachers identified the instructional approach of encouraging and in some cases "allowing" children to speak their native language during portions of the small group activities each day. We observed clusters of children dialoging in their native language both during small group and free play activities and in some cases the entire instructional period. This is a practice recognized as being culturally relevant and helps to honor and value children's home language (Gonzalez-Mena 2009). However, while the teachers encouraged children's use of their native language in the classroom, a more sustainable and inclusive practice would have been to intentionally learn phrases from students in order to build upon their linguistic skills during assessment and instruction. Also, there were multiple opportunities for teachers to encourage children to teach each other their native languages, but instead "language silos" emerged and very few attempts by the teachers to learn the languages of the children in their care were observed. We know that teachers who can ask and answer basic questions in a second language can often make the classroom a psychologically safe and welcoming environment for speakers of that language (Ladson-Billings 1995, 1999; Souto-Manning 2013). As is the case at Kids Play, how would a teacher effectively implement this best practice with a classroom of children representing more than five languages if such practice may be outside of the zone of proximal development for this teacher—pedagogically and culturally? Therefore, a critical question for us as researchers became What is the process from which teachers develop a culturally relevant identity?

Culturally Relevant Teacher Identity Development

Scholars suggest that in order for teachers to maintain a culturally relevant early childhood program, they must have a conscious awareness of their own multiple identities—ethnic, linguistic, cultural, gender, and socioeconomic—in relation to the identities of the children they teach (Cochran-Smith 2004; Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2005). As we explored teachers' perceptions and experiences with culturally relevant education, we found there were mediating factors that influenced how and whether they implemented CRP. For example, we found that by engaging in this research study, they became more aware and observant of children's culture and language. As teachers began to talk and reflect explicitly on the role of culture and language in their teaching practices with the researchers, over the course of the year we were able to observe a transformative process between many of the participants in the study. Such transformative and observational opportunity was made possible, however, by the diverse context of the early childhood program, another critical mediating and influential factor in teachers' understanding and implementation of CRP.

Therefore, our findings suggest that the diverse context of the early childhood program inevitably impacted teachers' personal and professional growth. Ninety percent of the teacher sample was White, middle-class females, whereas 70% of their student and family populations were ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse. For many of the teacher participants, this was their first experience as the "minority," culturally and linguistically.

Also, in most cases the research study was the first time teachers actually reflected explicitly on this cultural dissonance. Therefore, throughout the study we observed how teachers were becoming more conscious of the cultural duality of “how I see myself culturally” and “how I see my students culturally.” As teachers reflected on this cultural mismatch and differences, they were prompted to also share ways in which they did (or didn’t) implement best practices that were inclusive of the child’s cultural experience. Prior to the study, they were already reflecting upon the cultural and linguistic differences and their impact on the teaching and learning of the young children in their care by engaging in weekly reflection meetings. However, throughout the study, we intentionally prompted teachers to consider the role of their own cultural identity and whether they were imposing their cultural lens onto the students in their care—a more critically reflective practice (Gay and Kirkland 2003). As teachers reflected upon their challenges of being responsive and relevant to the diverse students in their classroom, we begin to see some teachers attempting to see through the cultural lens of the children in their classroom in order to improve cultural connectivity.

Processes of Culturally Relevant Teaching

Based on survey, interview, and observational data analysis, the teachers identified as being more culturally relevant in the classroom had two shared characteristics. Teachers with previous interactions with and exposure to diverse populations reflected more critically during interview sessions about their role in supporting the social and cultural development of the children in their care. These teachers also intentionally and consistently connected with families on how best to integrate children’s language, culture, and home experiences into the classroom. Also, teachers committed to creating a cultural relevant environment were eager and expected to learn from children and their families. They were often named specifically by parent participants as intentionally seeking resources and information about the family’s culture and home life.

Lastly, these teachers reflected on the importance of becoming a cultural learner of children in which their reflections represented what Paris (2012) and Banks (1993b) would contend as uncovering the sociopolitical lens and experiences of the learner—a much more complex and macrosystemic view of children and their positionality in this society due to their race, language, and/or ethnicity.

Figure 2 represents the process we observed as teachers attempted to implement CRP. As identified in the figure, there were three noted steps in this process. First (step 1), teachers planned instruction and assessment based on the philosophy of the curriculum and culturally relevant practices (i.e., building upon children’s native language in literacy instruction). However, dissonance (step 2) usually occurred between their own cultural identity and that of their students, impacting the successful implementation of the culturally relevant practice (i.e., teachers do not speak child’s native language and are unable or unsure of how to implement bilingual educational practices). Lastly (step 3), a heightened awareness of self and child occurs (i.e., teachers reflect on difficulties and opportunities in instructing and assessing culturally and linguistically diverse children). Teachers who were more culturally relevant in their beliefs and practices did not stop at step 3 but con-

tinued the cycle of critical reflection by seeking and exploring best practices that were effective and culturally relevant. In other words, the process was continuous, an ongoing cycle of inquiry and a reciprocal learning experience between child and teacher.



Figure 2. Processes of constructing and understanding culturally relevant pedagogy

Desensitization of Classroom Culture

One of the primary principles of CRP is a belief that children's culture and language is essential to educational planning, instruction, and assessment (Ladson-Billings 1999). We intentionally selected Kids Play because of the diversity in language, culture, and exceptionality represented by children and families in the program. We were equally excited to learn how the teachers were influenced professionally and personally by such rich diversity. While such exposure to internationally diverse children and their families provided optimal opportunities to develop and grow as culturally relevant teachers, we found that in some cases the diverse child population actually desensitized some of the teachers. For these teachers, instead of being an opportunity for professional growth, children's cultural tools and identities were perceived as a barrier to delivering instruction, making assessments, and developing as a teacher. Therefore, unlike the current rhetoric in multicultural education concerning how a majority of White preservice and inservice teachers adopt a color-blind stance in the classroom (Sleeter 2008; Ullucci and Battey 2011), teachers at Kids Play were very much conscious of color and culture. However, for some teachers, this consciousness coupled with learning to teach became too much of a complex cognitive and socially constructive process.

Take again the process of understanding CRP observed in the study and illustrated in figure 2. Teachers who were able to use pedagogical knowledge to make instruction more responsive followed a reciprocal (circular) pattern of teaching. For example, when implementing best practices as cultural dissonance occurred a heightened awareness of self and child developed, which triggered for these teachers continued exploration and implementation of more culturally relevant best practices. However, teachers who were just beginning to reflect on their own cultural identity and had less developed pedagogical skills,

seemed to struggle and get “stuck” at the heightened awareness stage. These teachers became desensitized by the diversity represented in their classrooms. Therefore, instead of implementing culturally relevant instructional practices that would lead to a culturally and linguistically rich and integrated classroom culture, the teacher’s language and culture became the foundational lens and framework for classroom instructional practices.

Discussion

Our findings suggest teachers at Kids Play had the foundational structures in place to promote children’s sociocultural development and easily integrate culturally relevant practices. They had a teaching staff that recognized the value of children’s language and culture in the classroom. Also the Reggio Emilia curriculum prompted teachers to begin all instructional activities and interactions with children’s interest. We also found that teachers actively sought cultural agents in the community to teach children about a different culture and language, and teachers used books, puzzles, family pictures, and children’s artwork to create a physical classroom environment rich in diversity (language, ethnicity, gender, etc.). Teachers seemed to value encouraging and promoting the linguistic diversity within the classroom. As we consider the importance of exposing children to our global society, it is equally important to infuse the languages and cultures not represented in the classroom. Such practice has been shown to contribute to enhancing the cultural awareness and prejudice reduction of children in both ethnically heterogeneous and homogenous classrooms (Banks 1993a, 1993b; Derman-Sparks and Edwards 2010). Furthermore being intentional in introducing children to multiple perspectives, cultures, and beliefs in early childhood is not just applicable in American classrooms but one that can be easily replicated in other countries as well. Culturally relevant pedagogy includes increasing children’s cultural and global awareness. Therefore, CRP provides an opportunity for reciprocal cultural exchanges between early childhood programs around the world. We contend and our research supports the belief that culturally relevant pedagogy is a universal language that unites us all in early childhood.

Having a foundational framework and philosophy that explicitly identifies a child’s culture and language is integral to all learning experiences. Equally important are teachers intentionally using environmental resources such as books and family photos to engage children in conversations and learning experiences about multiple elements of diversity. Accordingly, Epstein reminds us that “intentional teaching means teachers act with specific outcomes or goals in mind for children’s development and learning. . . . Teachers must have a repertoire of instructional practices and know when to use a given strategy to accommodate the different ways that individual children learn and the specific content they are learning” (Epstein 2007, p. 1). Therefore, our research suggests a need to further explore how we are supporting our future and current teachers in their understanding of and efficacy in becoming culturally relevant pedagogues who explore with children environmental resources and tools that address topics of diversity.

Furthermore, we were able to observe how students’ diversity helped facilitate teachers understanding and implementation of CRP. For some teachers they become cultural learners of the children and families in their classrooms and sought ways to adapt and modify

their teaching to meet the diverse and unique needs of the children in their care. For others, culturally relevant teaching became a desensitization process in which English and the local cultural context became the classroom language and culture.

Therefore, congruent with current multicultural and teacher education research (Gunn et al. 2013; Sleeter 2008), we suggest a need for continued emphasis on and collective responsibility for supporting teachers across the developmental spectrum in critically reflecting on their own cultural beliefs and values when learning about teaching culturally and linguistically diverse children. Odom et al. (2012) reported that the training and support available to early childhood providers is often inadequate or unavailable and called for improved professional development that helps providers understand developmentally and culturally appropriate practices. Similarly, Kids Play had the infrastructure necessary to successfully implement this strategy (regularly scheduled teacher reflection meetings and diverse student population) but needed additional and ongoing professional supports on how to successfully implement CRP and engage in critically reflective practice on the sociopolitical aspects of their work (Ladson-Billings 2014). Therefore, we ask, what is the role of multicultural researchers in providing professional development and instructional coaching to support the professional growth and development of teachers? How can researchers and teacher education programs effectively translate theory to practice for teachers who have a diverse range of skills and knowledge about CRP?

Based on our findings, several questions can be explored in future research. We used qualitative methods to examine the research questions. Therefore, future research can use a mixed-methods approach to explore the predictive factors associated with the development of culturally relevant pedagogues. Such research can further explore how a particular curriculum adopted in the program or classroom promotes and encourages CRP. Research can also explore how teachers and cultural experts within the community can work together to effectively introduce and teach young children about diverse cultures within the local community and beyond. Research questions can also be examined across diverse educational settings (i.e., afterschool programs, family childcare, community educational programs, private schools, charter schools, etc.). Lastly, the children and families in this study represented cultures from around the world; therefore, future research can explore how other countries implement culturally relevant pedagogy across diverse early childhood program settings (i.e., majority native and majority refugee/immigrant) and explore best practices in preparing teachers to become culturally relevant pedagogues.

In closing we ask What is our role in ensuring that our future and current early childhood teacher workforce has the professional competencies and skills to provide quality experiences for culturally and linguistically diverse children? A quality early childhood program that encourages young children's sociocultural development and awareness is critical in our emerging global society and essential to maximizing children's learning experiences and future success. It is our collective responsibility as educators, teachers, parents, researchers, early childhood advocates, program directors, and community leaders to support the successful implementation of pedagogies in early childhood education that is responsive to the social and cultural needs of young children and their families. Without a doubt, as our classrooms continue to represent the diversity of our global society, culture

matters—and therefore we must start with our youngest global citizens in implementing culturally relevant and sustainable early educational practices.

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