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Bringing culture into the school

Summary

It is the teacher's responsibility to make the classroom culturally responsive. Children bring their own culture to the classroom with them. The teacher needs to make sure these influences are nurtured in a positive way. The current literature indicates that language, social interactions, and play are all influenced by a child's culture. The author used the Kendell multicultural checklist to highlight key areas of the classroom that needed to be addressed in order to make the classroom more culturally responsive. A plan was developed and put into practice to better understand family cultures and to better teach the children about different cultures. A culturally responsive classroom is critical for families and children to feel safe and welcome in a positive learning environment away from home. In the United States, 25% of children are immigrants or come from immigrant families (Souto-Manning 2013). This makes it crucial for educators to learn how to have a positive and welcoming multicultural classroom environment. With over 75% of early childhood teachers being white and speaking only English, it makes it that much more important for them to learn about different cultures and set up a classroom ready to nurture a variety of cultures (Souto-Manning 2013).

Keywords: culturally responsive classroom, diversity practices, multicultural checklist

Literature review

Every individual brings influences from their home culture to school with them. These influences can positively and/or negatively influence the classroom and the students. There are many things educators can do to make their classroom more culturally accepting and positively influenced by different cultures. I reviewed five articles that can help educators better understand how a classroom can be affected, and which provide ideas on how to run a classroom that embraces families of different cultures.

There are many ways that children of different cultures can affect the classroom; one way is through their language. Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva (2011) discussed personal narratives, which are "descriptions or retellings of actual events experienced by the child or someone the child knows" (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva 2011). Studies show that children's narrative skills are positively related to literacy skills. Teachers expect children to use classic narratives; however different cultures may develop different styles, which are not necessarily incorrect, only different. When children do not use a classic narrative style, they are sometimes viewed as needing special education services. This may lead to

unfair educational outcomes and inappropriate referrals for a special education evaluation (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva 2011).

Culture can also affect social interactions between children. Park (2011) observed children who were segregated from other children in the classroom because of the color of their skin. Park (2011) also participated in dialogs with children using puppets. These dialogs were regarding diversity. Park (2011) observed the children while they made personal portraits with multicultural markers. This activity showed how the students viewed themselves. The author found, during the observations, that the children attempted to create meaning, enact identities, and achieve social goals throughout their day in the classroom. These children were participating in diversity practices with or without adult involvement.

Children bring culture into the classroom through their musical play. Musical play is crucial in the development of a child's musical capabilities. Spontaneous singing, playing on instruments, and movement are all considered musical play. When children from different cultures come together with their music, they influence each other and create new meaningful experiences (Soccio 2013). When this happens, the musical development of the child is positively influenced.

Halim, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda, & Shrout (2013) reported that children can express their gender and culture through multiple behaviors. These behaviors include what they wear and how and who they play with. One major finding the author reported was that girls dress more gender-stereotypically than boys. They also reported that girls from some cultures dress more gender-stereotypically than others. They found that Dominican American girls were more gender-stereotypical than African or Mexican American girls. This could be important for educators to note when setting up a culturally and gender diverse dress-up area in the classroom.

Knowing that culture can play a key part in how a classroom functions, there are things educators can do to encourage a culturally appropriate classroom. According to Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva (2011), educators need to be aware of cultural differences. They can provide children with opportunities to tell stories using their culturally based narrative styles. They can explicitly teach children how to tell "classic narratives" and be clear when children are expected to perform them. Souto-Manning (2013) recommended that educators do home-visits and have parent and child interviews. These may give the educator a great insight into the culture of the family. Souto-Manning (2013) also recommended cultural circles to be done with the children in the classroom. Reading literature and examining your own cultural experiences can also be a great benefit to learning about families.

The home cultures of individuals can play a key part in the cultural makeup of a classroom. The authors of the five articles emphasized language, social interactions, and different types of play as all being affected by a child's home culture. The articles help to give educators an insight into what to look for in order to promote a culturally rich classroom.

Methodology¹

In order to see what areas of my early childhood classroom needed to be addressed, I used the Kendell Multicultural Classroom Environment Checklist. After completing the checklist, I discovered areas in my classroom that needed more multicultural components. I found the areas that were in need included: the book area, pictures and posters on the walls, games, block area, dress-up, dolls, music, and a curriculum to increase understanding and acceptance of attitudes, values and lifestyles that are unfamiliar to them. These areas can easily fit into the areas of Creative Curriculum®. Creative Curriculum is what is being used in the classroom.

The classroom is located in a town with a population of about 41,000 people. There are several different nationalities of families that reside there. The graph below shows the population for 2013–2014 based on the website: <https://suburbanstats.org>.

Population by Races And Gender

	Male	Female	Total
Total Population	20,130	21,733	41,863
White	18,395	20,113	38,508
Asian	665	703	1,368
Hispanic or Latino	522	493	1,015
Black or African American	495	351	846
Two or More Races	361	373	734
Some Other Race	120	97	217
American Indian	73	73	146

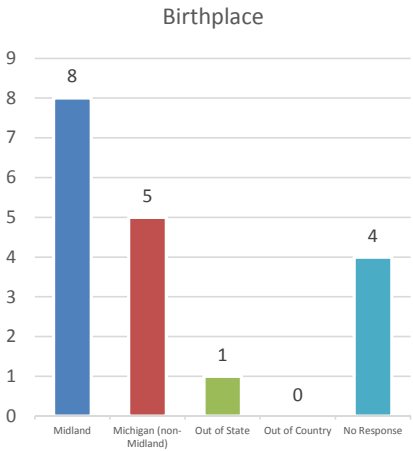
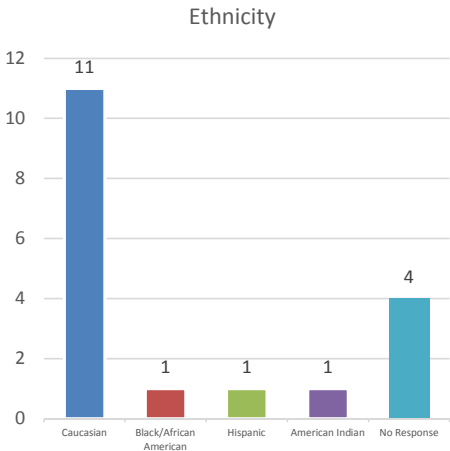
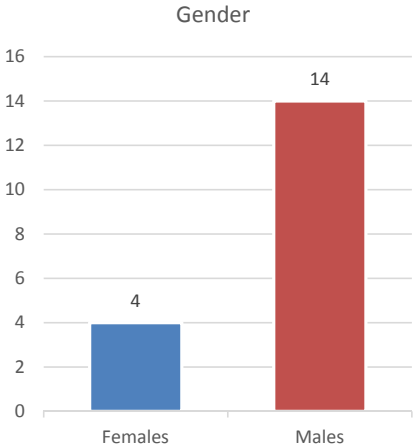
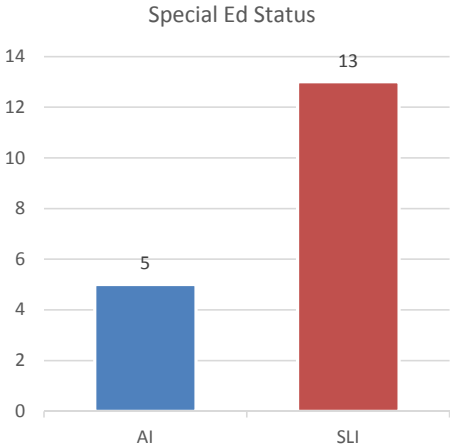
Churches

	Total
Baptist	11
Catholic	3
Episcopal	4
Lutheran	9
Methodist	6
Presbyterian	3
Spirit-Filled	7
Other Christian	27

There are a total of 41,863 people who live in the city. 38,508 are considered white. 1,368 Asian. 1,015 Hispanic, 846 African American, 146 American Indian, and 734 are considered to belong to more than one race. There are also a variety of religions although mostly Christian. The churches include 11 Baptist, 6 Methodist, 3 Presbyterian, 4 Episcopal, 3 Catholic, 9 Lutheran, 7 Spirit-Filled, and 27 other Christian churches. The population for my classroom is as follows.

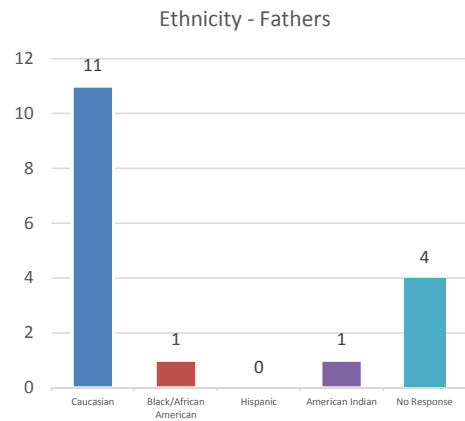
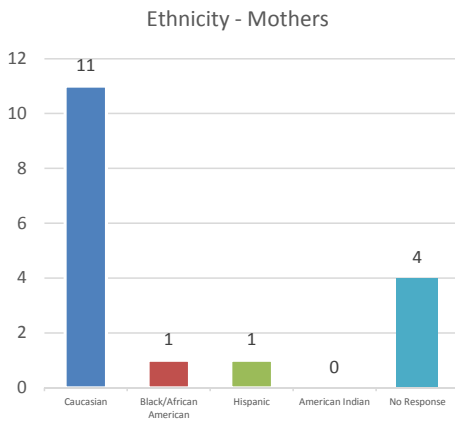
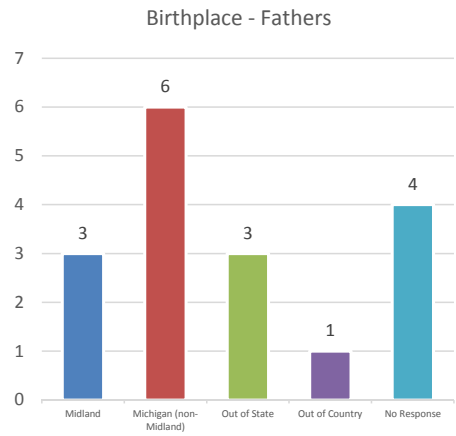
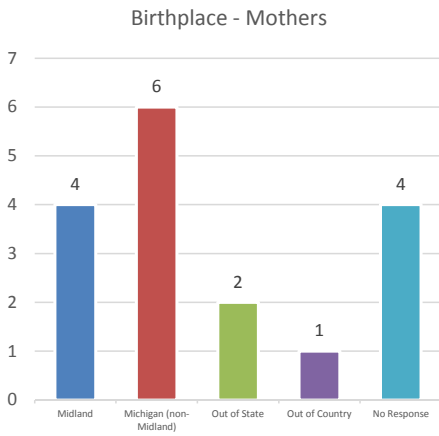
¹ The author's study is of preliminary character.

Children



There are a total of 18 children currently in my class. There are 9 in the morning session and 9 in the afternoon. Four children did not return data regarding their heritage. There are 4 females and 14 males, all of whom are special education students. Five have a label of Autism Impairment and 13 have a label of Speech and Language Impairment. Out of the 14 that turned in data, 11 are Caucasian, 1 is Hispanic, 1 is African American, and 1 is American Indian. Eight children were born in Midland, 5 were born in another city of Michigan, 1 was born out of state, and none was born out of the country.

Parents



There are a total of 17 sets of parents in my class. I have a set of twins; this is why it is not 18 sets. One set of parents are foster parents. Four sets of parents did not return a questionnaire. This makes a total of 26 parents who responded. Four mothers reported being born in Midland, 6 born in another city of Michigan, 2 out of state, and 1 out of country. Three fathers reported being born in Midland, 6 born in another city of Michigan, 3 out of state, and 1 out of country. Eleven mothers reported being Caucasian, 1 African American, and 1 Hispanic. Eleven fathers reported being Caucasian, 1 African American, and 1 American Indian.

Based on the Multicultural Checklist I found several areas of need in my classroom. I wanted to address each of these areas that I found I was lacking. Souto-Manning (2013) stated the importance of understanding the families and the cultures our children come from. The author suggested that educators examine their own cultural experiences, beliefs,

and values, and acknowledge the ways that those experiences shape their teaching. One way to do this is by home-visits and interviews with the families. I wanted to meet families and talk to them about their cultural background. Other ways I thought I could get information were by having the families fill out questionnaires and the Badge of Pride, where they would fill out information regarding themselves and their heritage.

Another area from the checklist that needed to be addressed was the book area. I wanted to go to the library and add books that showed a variety of types of families. I wanted to add books that included pictures of children of different races as well as different types of family makeups. I also wanted to add books showing males and females in non-typical roles.

The walls in my classroom were very bare. I wanted to add pictures or posters of a variety of races and cultures. I thought adding pictures of the children's families would be a good idea as well as asking parents to send in a poster that describes their family or an "All About Me" box highlighting key traits about them.

I wanted to add many multicultural objects into my classroom such as games, multicultural people in the block area, multicultural clothing in the dress up area, as well as dolls from different races. I also wanted to add multicultural crayons into the art area and ask children to make personal portraits of themselves as Park (2011) wrote about in her article.

Adding multicultural music into my classroom was also something I wanted to achieve. Socio (2013) discussed the importance of children's bringing parts of their culture into the classroom through music. I wanted to add musical instruments from different cultures as well as playing music in the classroom which is from different areas around the world.

I planned to make my classroom more culturally responsive in many different ways in the hope of making the families I work with feel more comfortable about bringing their children to my class. I also wanted the children to feel at home in my classroom and feel as though I value them. I thought this would also benefit the other children as well by teaching them about a variety of different cultures.²

Results³

I decided that in order to make my classroom more culturally responsive I would go to our open house to meet parents and to interview them on their culture. I asked them to fill out a child and parent questionnaire as well as a "Badge of Pride". I suggested that families send in a family photo to display on our classroom wall. I also suggested they make a poster about their family or an "All About Me" box where they could add items to describe themselves and their background. I put together an "All About Me" box myself, I took a picture of it and explained all of my items. This way families could see an example of something they could do, as well as get to know a little about me.

² A model of the program is currently being prepared by the author.

³ Because the study is of a preliminary character, the data analysis is based on a limited number of research facts.

During the open house I talked with a parent about the multicultural class I was taking and the objectives behind it. He mentioned his interest in volunteering in the classroom on a regular basis next semester. He is a history teacher at Central Michigan University and has a passion for culture. He mentioned having items and books from around the world that he would like to share with the children. We agreed that he would volunteer in the classroom next semester, bringing items and books about different cultures, and he could share them with the children and I would implement them into my lesson plans.

I received several family pictures that were added to the classroom wall for the children and staff to see. I received four “Badge of Pride” sheets back, each one describing the special meanings behind the child’s name. Two were names from their ancestors. One family had names that started with the same letter and one child’s name meant “sea” in Hawaiian, although he was not Hawaiian. The parents stated that it was a fitting name because his mother had a condition that caused amniotic fluid to accumulate while she was pregnant with him. This gave him a whole “sea” to swim in while he was in his mom’s tummy.

I asked my students to do a self-portrait. The first day I asked them to draw a picture of themselves with many colors of crayons laid in front of them including multicultural crayons. The second day I asked them to do a self-portrait again, but asked them to look in mirrors and pointed out the different colors in the box of multicultural crayons. Some children were able to match up their skin tones accurately and draw a picture of themselves. I have a class of mostly 2 and 3 year olds, so most of them are still unable to draw body parts.

I added more Little People® toys of different nationalities to my block area. I had a little boy with autism who was African American, who took a Caucasian Little People toy out of a toy Ferris wheel and replaced it with one that looked African American.

I also added music from different cultures into the lesson plans. This was done by adding songs of different languages into the music time as well as adding instruments into the music area that were from different places around the world. Books were also added that were borrowed from the library. These books displayed males and females in non-typical roles as well as different family structures. Books that represented people from different cultural backgrounds were also added to the book area.

The budget is limited in my classroom so I was not yet able to buy everything I wanted to make my classroom more multiculturally responsive. In the future, I plan to add more clothes to the dress-up area that are from different cultures as well as add more baby dolls with racial and gender differences.

Summary of results

Discussion

I did many activities that requested information from parents such as questionnaires, pictures, posters, and “All About Me” boxes, to help me understand the different cultures of families. I got one parent to volunteer in the classroom and (s)he is going to share multicultural items. I developed lesson plans that incorporated multicultural music as well as

adding multicultural crayons. I also added books and Little People toys that represented different cultures and genders. I still plan to add dress-up clothes to represent other cultures as well as adding baby dolls to represent different cultures and genders.

Limitations

Despite many requests, I had very limited family involvement in returning information and projects that helped to understand the cultures of the families of the children in my class. The children in my classroom all have a disability of some kind and are very young, and this made it more difficult for them to do projects on their own, even the self-portraits. Being on maternity leave, I was not in the classroom everyday with my students. This made it more difficult to involve parents and change the culture of the classroom.

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