

Social Justice in Early Childhood Classrooms

What the Research Tells Us

Nora E. Hyland

Children from very young ages internalize messages about power and privilege with regard to gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and language, which they perpetuate through their play and talk (Ryan & Grieshaber 2004). While families are a critical piece in shaping children's values on such matters, classroom practices communicate and reinforce strong, subtle, and repeated social messages about what is and is not valued. The consequences of these messages are enormous not only for individual children, but also for a society that strives for equality and justice for all.

The U.S. Population is becoming increasingly diverse ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socially. Children from non-dominant groups or non-traditional homes (children of color, children from immigrant families, children from gay and lesbian families, and others) often suffer educational disadvantages. Statistical analysis predicts that students from minority racial groups will make up over 50 Percent of the U.S. school-age population by the year 2050; yet these students continue to score lower on standardized tests, drop out of school at higher rates, and experience higher rates of suspension, expulsion, and referral for special education services than White students (Ramani et al 2007). Similarly, 86.2 percent of gay and lesbian students experienced harassment at school in the Year 2007, and more than a third reported missing a day of school in the previous month due to fear of verbal or physical harassment (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak 2008).

Given these statistics, it is essential that early childhood educators continue to develop practices and pedagogies that address the educational injustices that plague children from historically marginalized groups and that teachers examine the value laden messages in everyday practices in order to create more just learning environments.

In early childhood programs and in preschool and primary classrooms' it is critical for teachers to address injustice and develop equity-based pedagogies because children form ideas about fairness and their own sense of identity within the larger world during these early years (Boutte 2008). This review looks at the research on early childhood teaching for equity and makes recommendations to teachers for developing such practices.

Equity pedagogy

Equity pedagogy is a broad term that encompasses many overlapping pedagogical models. It assumes that injustice is endemic and is sustained by the generally accepted structures, practices, relationships, and discourses that make up the fabric of daily life and function to privilege some groups and marginalize others (Ryan & Grieshaber 2004). The curriculum in most schools is dominated by a Eurocentric or White frame of reference. Most art, books,

and stories focus on White people' History is taught from a White frame of reference, and even everyday language practices privilege White or Eurocentric forms of expression (see Heath 1982 for an examination of language practices)' While stories and histories of racial groups other than Whites are sporadically presented (for example, Black History Month), the dominant message is that a Eurocentric experience is the most valued and central in education.

Equity pedagogy assumes that if teachers and schools do not consciously attempt to counter injustice, then by default, they support it. Unless teachers go out of their way to examine and change the ways their everyday practices support a power hierarchy that privileges some groups and disadvantages others, they will continue using practices that unwittingly sustain inequity. The everyday nature of injustice is important because it implies that individuals can engage in consciousness-raising to identify their roles in injustice and begin to work against it (Freire 1970).

A focus on creating more just schools has inspired several approaches to addressing the needs of children from historically marginalized communities. Most of these approaches are classified under the umbrella term *multicultural education* (Ramsey 2006); but in this review, I focus on research on the two most effective approaches for addressing inequity, *culturally relevant teaching* and *critical pedagogy*. In the following sections, I define these terms and describe the research that shows how these pedagogies have been used in early childhood classrooms in the areas of race, gender, and sexual orientation. I then offer specific recommendations to teachers who want to develop equity pedagogies in their work.

Equity pedagogies in early childhood classrooms

Most of the research in early childhood education concerning equity consists of accounts examining how implicit messages about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are communicated by and among children (VanAusdale & Feagin 2001; Ryan & Grieshaber 2004). Unfortunately, there are few large-scale empirical studies that evaluate the use of pedagogical strategies in classrooms that work against such limiting messages and almost none in early childhood classrooms. Most of the research about how teachers work against injustice consists of small case studies and teacher self-studies. I examine some of this research first in the area of culturally relevant teaching and then in critical pedagogy, specifically in the areas of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Culturally relevant teaching

Culturally relevant teaching is aimed at educational liberation for particular groups and advocates a pedagogy that is both culturally and politically relevant to the children of that group (Ladson-Billings 1994; ;Beauboeuf-Lafontant 1999). Not only does culturally relevant teaching emphasize curricular transformation, but it also underscores the beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions of teachers. Including engagement with families and communities, high expectations for children, shared political struggle with marginalized communities, and raising critical consciousness among students. In a seminal study,

Ladson-Billings (1994) describes the culturally relevant pedagogical orientations of eight elementary school teachers of African American children in grades 2 through 5. In addition to holding high academic expectations for the children, each teacher worked to integrate and center African American cultural knowledge in the curriculum; adopted a world view similar to that of the African American community; and saw herself as a political ally for social justice for the African American community. One teacher described it this way:

Sometimes my Black students will have information about home remedies or stories and folktales they have heard from their grandparents. We take those stories and write them up, compare notes, see how their knowledge compares with so-called traditional knowledge. I am always amazed when my students tell me things that I don't know. . . My students know things like community politics and police brutality. I can't just feed them a steady diet of cute animal stories and happy middle-class kids. Their experiences have to be part of our curriculum too (Ladson-Billings 1994, 51).

This teacher points out that using children's personal and cultural knowledge as part of the school curriculum is essential to developing a culturally relevant pedagogy. This aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy is well documented by studies focused on improving the education of children from particular cultural groups (Tharp & Gallimore 1988; Ladson-Billings 1994; Moll & Gonzalez 1994; Ioga 1995). Culturally relevant teachers make a concerted effort to learn the cultural norms and values of the ethnic, racial, or language group with whom they work and to use that knowledge to inform their practice and improve educational outcomes and experiences for children.

Ballenger's (1999) research on her own classroom practice serves as an example of developing culturally relevant teaching in early childhood education. She describes how she became a better teacher for Haitian preschool children by reconsidering what counts as knowledge in the classroom and consciously adopting some of the cultural norms of the Haitian preschoolers and their families. Ballenger writes, "I think I was fortunate to be a minority of one, the outsider . . . I was forced to reconsider my beliefs, try to understand what lay behind them, and to work to hear the students and their parents better" (1999, 30).

Ballenger notes that she was having trouble with classroom management as compared to her Haitian colleagues, who had little trouble. She spent considerable time observing her colleagues and the children's parents when they reprimanded the children. She came to realize that in making requests of the children to behave, she was using a White, Eurocentric form of guidance. The Haitian norm was to ask the children a series of rhetorical questions in what Ballenger initially perceived as a harsh tone. Over time, as she adopted this cultural style, her classroom management improved dramatically.

When addressing issues of culture and race, many educators look to the materials in their classroom to ensure that various cultural groups are represented (Aboud & Levy 2000). However, presenting an occasional book about a racial or ethnic group when the majority of the books and images are based on Whites or White norms reinforces the idea that

groups other than Whites are the exception, not the norm, and communicates to children that some groups are seen as more valuable than others. Some early childhood researchers argue that relying on books as the primary source of literacy instruction reinforces a curriculum rooted in White, middle-class values, because children whose home literacy practices are primarily oral or based on popular media are at a disadvantage (Arthur 2001; Dyson 2003).

Compton-Lilly's (2006) case study provides a clear example of how using popular culture and home culture in a Reading Recovery setting with an African American first-grader allowed the child to transform from a reluctant reader to an engaged reader and writer. Compton-Lilly, upon learning that Devon wanted to "go to college to be a superhero" (p. 65), encouraged him to write about his favorite Pokemon characters. She found that "unlike reading and writing activities where I played the expert, Devon's adeptness with media images positioned me as the learner, allowing his expertise to coexist alongside his learning" (p. 67). Popular culture images served both as motivation for Devon and as a touchstone for language skills. Compton-Lilly also used Devon's interest in rap music by encouraging him to rap the lines of repetitious texts to help him develop fluency. Compton-Lilly attributes Devon's markedly improved literacy skills to the connections and overlaps that were allowed to occur between Devon's cultural resources (home culture and popular media culture), classroom experiences, parental support, and the Reading Recovery lessons.

Teacher research like Ballenger's (1999) and Compton-Lilly's (2006) demonstrates clearly how close observation combined with respect for children's home cultures can create opportunities for better learning among children who have been historically marginalized and have experienced educational injustice in schools. Culturally relevant teaching requires teachers to learn about children's home cultures and use that knowledge to make schooling relevant to the children's lives.

Critical pedagogy

In contrast to the focus of culturally relevant teaching on particular groups, critical pedagogy advocates for teaching and curriculum aimed at investigating critical understandings of power among all marginalized groups. That is, critical pedagogy includes investigations of injustice in multiple categories—race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and more—rather than focusing on a local marginalized community. Critical pedagogy examines the ways that everyday school and classroom practices create and sustain both marginalized and privileged identities. It aims to train learners to invent tools for taking social action and to examine the institutional structure of the school and its relationship with the wider community (Sleeter & McLaren 1995). In the following sections, I review research-based examples of critical pedagogy focused on race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Critical pedagogy and race

Many teacher researchers have used the tenets of critical pedagogy to help children think about issues of racial justice and cultural power. This helps learners uncover issues of

injustice and recognize and value people of multiple social, cultural, and racial groups (Goss 2009). The research centers on teachers' careful listening to children and asking pointed questions in order to establish a safe space for children to share multiple perspectives and discuss issues of justice and fairness (Marsh 1992).

For example, Marsh (1992) documents her work in a kindergarten classroom as she implemented the anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks & ABC Task Force 1989). She describes how she used the curriculum to create themes based on social justice issues throughout the year and how the kindergartners became increasingly adept at talking about issues of injustice related to immigration, Native Americans, and cultures around the world. The children even took action on some of the injustices they identified: they held a peace march to show their desire for more peaceful resolution of conflicts in the school and the neighborhood, and they demonstrated to call attention to the need for more African American crossing guards. Much of Marsh's classroom work used children's literature to generate conversation and help draw out children's thoughts on issues of equity and justice (see also Murphy 2009 and Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney 2008).

Critical pedagogy and gender

Gender messages play a critical role in how children construct their identities and how social messages about appropriate behaviors and language for boys and girls limit identity development. Historically, we have thought of gender inequity as a reflection of the ways that men/boys subjugate women/girls. The research base (for example, McNaughton 1997; Ryan & Ochsner 1999) contains several examples of teachers working to reconstruct the messages girls receive about female identity comprising passivity and valuing physical beauty. Wilson-Keenan (Wilson-Keenan, Solsken, & Willett 1999) describes how she made gender the focus of her curriculum and engaged children in writing counter-narratives about gender, like helping girls write a book about a community of princesses who rescue a treasure. Wilson-Keenan, Solsken, and Willett (1999) found that children were more apt to engage in counter-narratives when the teacher was present and more likely to engage in stereotypical gender discourse when in peer groups. and girls limit identity development. Historically, we have thought of gender inequity as a reflection of the ways that men/boys subjugate women/girls. Wilson-Keenan, Solsken, and Willett (1999) found that children were more apt to engage in counter-narratives when the teacher was present and more likely to engage in stereotypical gender discourse when in peer groups.

Traditional constructions of gender identity have damaging consequences for boys as well as girls. For example, boys are more likely than girls to fall behind in literacy, more often disciplined in school, and more likely to be expelled (Skelton 2001). Alloway and Gilbert (1997) assert that school literacy practices in the early years are largely feminized and that as a result, masculine constructions of literacy are marginalized. They state that the "literacy classroom encourages students to express their inner selves, to appreciate the canons of literature, and to observe community standards of morality" (p. 55). At the same time, dominant messages about masculinity focus on physicality and strength as a marker of the masculine. These are postures that do not always mesh well with the compliance and reflectiveness often required in school literacy practices. Compton-Lilly's (2006) case of

Devon, the reluctant reader, is one example of how a teacher incorporated masculine literary forms to engage a boy in literacy practices. Compton-Lilly describes a conversation with Devon about gender in which he asks her, "Do teachers like boys?" (p. 72). During this conversation, he asserts that "girls are smart, that they are always smarter than boys, and that teachers like girls better than boys. He ends the conversation with the question, "What happens when the boys are better than girls?" Compton-Lilly replies that boys could be better, to which Devon responds, "I don't like to be better, but I like to fight!" (p. 73).

Devon's questions about gender raise issues about the cultural messages he has received in school and elsewhere about boys and schooling. He sees girls as better academically and better liked by teachers, and his final statement is loaded with gender implications suggesting that he would rather fight, a typically masculine form of expression, than excel in school. The media resources Devon chose to use in his literacy work were all stereotypically masculine: Hot Wheels, Game Boy, Ninja Turtles, Dino Thunder, and male Pokemon characters. Having masculine media texts form the basis of his literacy work allowed Devon to reconcile his masculine identity with doing well in school, which had been communicated to him as a feminine expression of identity (see also Reid 1999; Wilson-Keenan, Solsken, & Willett 1999).

Critical pedagogy and sexual orientation

Messages about gender are tied to messages about sexual orientation, and they reflect the heterosexual norm (Blaise 2005) inherent in school practices. Teachers often assume that all students and families are heterosexual. For example, my 2-year-old son likes to wear his hair in whatever fashion his sister wears hers: barrettes, ponytail, and pink headbands are common. During drop-off at his child care program one day, a mother of a child in another class said to me, "My husband would never allow our son to leave the house like that. Does it bother you or your husband?" This question is explicitly about gender and implicitly about sexual orientation. The implication seems to be that my 2-year-old's indifference to codes of masculinity is troubling because it may mean that he will be gay. Also implicit is the heterosexist assumption that I am straight and have a husband. Like this parent's comment, messages communicate the norm and the expectation of heterosexuality and can introduce and reinforce homophobia among children. Messages like this can be damaging to children who come from lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) families (Clay 2004). Homophobic and heterosexist discourses between adults take place in early childhood settings on a regular basis (as evidenced by the story about my son) and are also common among children (Boldt 1997; Kroeger 2001; Blaise 2005). Yet even in child care and preschool settings that espouse strong social justice values, teachers rarely challenge homophobic remarks made by children or staff (Robinson 2002; Surtees 2005), and examples of teachers addressing social justice issues around sexual orientation in early childhood are limited.

One of the few examples available is the work of Boldt (1996), who describes how she tried to influence the heterosexist discourse of the children in her third grade classroom and found them resistant to expanding their notions about gender identity and sexuality. For example, the children insisted that only girls wear certain clothes, in spite of Boldt's attempts to disprove the idea. She describes ways teachers can create a classroom wherein

difference, more than merely being talked about, is enacted and represented by individuals and where children have opportunities to try new ways of talking about and 'acting out' nontraditional gender roles. One way she did this was to encourage children to play dress-up and act out stories in ways that challenge traditional gender assumptions. Similarly, Ryan and Ochsner (1999) describe two teachers who prompt the children to rethink gender assumptions by directly challenging them and pointing out the contradictions in their knowledge about gender, such as only boys wear blue. From the research described here, it is clear that some early childhood educators are developing equity pedagogies using both culturally relevant teaching and critical pedagogy. They are learning about the home cultures and popular cultures of children from historically marginalized communities and using that knowledge to create more just and relevant teacher practices. Others are working with young children to investigate, expose, and take action about injustices in the classroom or school community. Still other teachers are using strategies to help children think and talk in new ways about traditional and limiting notions of racial, gender, cultural, and sexual identities. In "Toward More Just Classroom Practices" (pp. 88-89), I offer suggestions teachers can use to adopt equity pedagogies.

In conclusion

It is essential that teachers help children see that gender, race, culture, and sexual orientation can be expressed in multiple ways and that some of these ways have more power than others. In acknowledging the power dynamic and its effects on young children, teachers' first role is to be sure that the children in their class who come from communities that have been historically powerless or underrepresented in schools gain access to power. Teachers can address this imbalance through the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy. By attending to the empowerment needs of children through culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers can engage all children in the class in exploring issues of fairness and justice and thinking about their role in making a more just world for themselves and others. With raised consciousness and a determination to expose injustice, early childhood teachers can begin to create a more equitable society by teaching its youngest members to be advocates for justice.