Research Blast  
August 2016:  
Culturally-Sensitive Classrooms

Background

Imagine a child who is taught at home that kids are meant to talk and play and complete tasks together. Few things at home are done alone. Ana is learning to tie her shoes, but her big brother will stick his hand in and hold the bunny ears before she drops them. As Ana learns, he helps less and less. When he has trouble getting a puzzle piece to fit, Ana takes the piece, rotates it, and explains, “Sometimes you have to turn the piece until it fits.” Ana is always praised at home for working well with her brother; she helps him, and he helps her.

But when Ana gets to school, she is always criticized for helping other children. Ana’s teacher asks her to keep her hands to herself when she tries to help another girl build a tower out of blocks. Most of the other kids are working alone and are praised for their independence while Ana feels like she’s always being scolded. Ana becomes withdrawn at school because she doesn’t like to work on things independently; it makes her feel alone and as if her teacher and her classmates don’t like her.

Ana is having trouble adapting between a classroom and a home that have two distinct cultures. She has to figure out all on her own when and how to do things independently and when it is okay to work with other children. And after all that, at the end of the day, she has to “reset” what she knows so that she acts appropriately at home.

New research shows that children perform better when they go to school in a culturally-sensitive classroom. A culturally-sensitive classroom draws a connection between a child’s in-school and out-of-school experiences. This way, it is easier for a child to transition between home and school. A culturally-sensitive classroom doesn’t inadvertently privilege some students’ cultures over others’.

Currently, research shows that young children thrive when they can more easily transfer their knowledge between home and school. However, there are still many questions that research seeks to answer: What does a culturally-sensitive classroom look like? How exactly does this improve students’ learning? How do we measure it?

Do you know of other recent research that may be of interest to the Head Start field? Do you have other questions, comments, or concerns? Email Victoria Jones (vjones@nhsa.org).
Resources

Office of Head Start
Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness
Office of Head Start has training and technical assistance (T/TA) resources for program about cultural and linguistic responsiveness. Find resources about multicultural principles, immigrant and refugee families, and more!

Teaching for Changes
Anti-bias Education Articles
Teaching for Changes provides a variety of resources for using anti-bias curriculum and activities in classrooms. All of the resources are free and aid language and identity development.

New Republic
Racial Inequality Starts in Preschool
Esther Canty-Barnes of New Republic wrote this article on the racial inequity that affects children’s early education. For example, while 18% of preschool children are black, 48% of students who were suspended during the 2011-12 school year were black. Canty-Barnes goes on to write about why children are suspended and the specifics behind K-12 suspensions, too.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders
The Annie E. Casey Foundation published these self-assessment and planning tools for nonprofits and schools to talk about the ways in which they can engage parents and assess their engagement around various topics, such as racial equity and inclusion.

NPR
Want to Address Teachers’ Biases? First, Talk about Race
NPR’s Peter Balonon-Rosen wrote this article to explore the role of race in schools. Beginning in a classroom in Indianapolis, he moves to talk about the conscious and unconscious biases that affect teachers and students.

Research

Early Childhood Research Quarterly
At the Heart of Child Care: Predictors of Teacher Sensitivity and in Center-Based Child Care
Emily Gerber, Marcy Whitebook, Rhona Weinstein

This study demonstrates the importance of teacher and setting characteristics as they are related to the interactions between children and teachers. By studying 41 head teachers in Northern California child care centers, these researchers looked at the characteristics of teachers and the settings in which they taught to predict teacher sensitivity. The researchers looked at a number of factors, including teacher accreditation, the size of the center, and program quality as measured by ECERS-R. They measured the extent to which these factors were associated with teacher sensitivity.
This study is unique in that it evaluates teacher characteristics and parts of teachers’ lives that typically go unreported--their lives beyond the centers. A number of these qualities, including training, ethnic minority status, and depression were predictors of teacher sensitivity. They found that teachers with more experience had lower levels of harsh behavior, but many of the other teacher factors--ethnic minority or economic status, wage, and well-being--did not have a significant impact. For the classroom factors, higher observed program quality was a predictor of less harsh behavior, while accreditation and small center size were predictors of teacher sensitivity.

NHSA Dialog

Effects of a Culturally Responsive Interactive Book-Reading Intervention on the Language Abilities of a Preschool Dual Language Learners: A Pilot Study
Carol Sheffner Hammer and Brook Sawyer

Interactive book-reading is when adults and children talk about what they are reading while they read. This interaction is important in promoting children’s language skills. For children who are dual language learners (DLL), this process is equally important and, yet, very few book-reading interventions exist for DLLs. In this study, researchers wanted to examine the effects of a DLL intervention’s effect on language skills. The intervention, in this case, was a culturally-responsive book-reading exercise. They found that children who received the intervention made great gains in the number of words they produced.

Children who come from low-income homes often lag behind their middle-class peers when it comes to early language skills. Because of this, it is even more important to create early learning opportunities, like those created by DLL reading interventions. The intervention in this study is both simple and beneficial for all parents to do with their children. The study provides this example: “child says ‘dog,’ and parent responds ‘brown, fuzzy dog.’” Through interactions like these, children receive feedback, hear more words, and ultimately further develop their language skills.

Early Childhood Research Quarterly

Child Care Program and Teacher Practices: Associations with Quality and Children’s Experiences
Alison Wishard, Eva Shivers, et al.

For this study, researchers looked at teachers and program practices in child centers serving low-income families of color. The study looked at 260 boys and girls in North Carolina and Los Angeles to examine the effects of program practices, quality, and observed child behaviors. In these programs, the researchers evaluated whether teacher and program practices varied by ethnicity and how these practices relate to both program quality and children’s experiences. While all programs strive to model their program in the most beneficial way for children’s learning, all programs go about this in different ways.

This study specifically notes the difference between program practice and program quality, meaning that while two programs may share the same practice, they may not actually be of the
same quality. They view program quality through a framework that considers the role of practice and quality in the context of ethnic and social class. Their model looks at children’s activities, the emotional and physical quality of the environment, and the goals in these activities. This holistic approach allows the researchers to view program quality in an inclusive way.

Discussion

1. How does your program assure that its classrooms and teachers are culturally sensitive?

2. How does your program ensure that interactions with parents are culturally sensitive?

3. What aspects of your program contribute most to assuring that it is culturally sensitive? The curriculum? The professional development offered to teachers? The physical classroom?