

Developing anti-racist futures through anti-bias multicultural early childhood education

Karen Hawkins
The University of Southern Queensland

Abstract

This paper draws on a doctoral study nearing completion to suggest that anti-bias multicultural education is essential for developing anti-racist futures and visioning an alternative world that reflects an inclusive and respectful multicultural society. The paper argues that, to lay solid foundations for the development of anti-racist futures based on respect and mutual accord, it is imperative that anti-bias multicultural education begin in the early years. However, at the time of this study teachers were struggling to find appropriate pedagogical strategies that would promote and support anti-bias multicultural education in their classrooms. This paper discusses how the study utilised children's literature to assist teachers with strategies that would enhance an anti-bias multicultural curriculum and teaching for social justice in preschool settings with a culturally homogeneous group of preschool children. The study's collaborative research methodology (Participatory Action Research) is highlighted in this paper as a socially just mode of inquiry that upheld respectful relationships and partnerships that produced the co-construction of change in two preschool settings.

Introduction

'Multiculturalism, both as policy and as principles, supports the ideals of a democratic society in which every person is free and equal in dignity and rights' (Calma 2007b, p.2). It has been argued that multicultural education is a key factor in developing anti-racist futures and visioning an alternative world for a productive multicultural society (Denman-Sparks & Ramsey 2006; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke 2000; Siraj-Blatchford 1995). This paper suggests that an anti-bias multicultural curriculum is needed to sow the seeds of change for a productive, inclusive multicultural humanity and a society that values difference and diversity. The term *anti-bias multicultural* was used by Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2006) to describe their work and similarly is employed throughout this paper. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2006, p.3) explain that 'multicultural education has broadened its scope and has shifted from a focus on cultural pluralism to critical thinking'. The focus has moved from "appreciating diversity" to working toward social justice. This paper uses the term *anti-bias multicultural education* to 'embrace the 30-year history [of multicultural education] and to

emphasise the struggle towards social, economic and cultural equity' (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2006, p.3). It puts forward the imperative for anti-bias multicultural education to begin in the early years to lay solid foundations for lifelong learning based on respect and mutual accord, where all individuals may contribute to social, economic, cultural and political life 'irrespective of race, religion, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin' (Calma 2007b, p.2). This necessity underpins the importance of specifically investing research energy into early childhood education to assist educators with strategies to implement anti-bias multicultural programs and teach for social justice. The paper outlines how this was addressed by investigating the use of children's literature during storytime sessions in two Australian preschool settings over a six month period. The employment of the collaborative design of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a socially just mode of inquiry is also highlighted in this paper.

The Importance of Anti-bias Multicultural Education

There is no such thing as a *neutral* education process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom", the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Shaul, cited in Freire 1996, p.16; *emphasis in original*)

In *Global Perspectives: A statement on global education for Australian schools* (Global Education Project 2002) social justice is inextricably linked to issues of global poverty and development, human rights, peace and conflict. It suggests a curriculum that is focused on the future must stress an approach that acknowledges these interconnections and promotes knowledge, skills and values that prepare young people to become involved in constructing solutions. Similarly, Apple (2004) urges educators and policy makers to design an education that opposes social inequalities and helps students to examine their world critically to bring about substantive changes.

Owing to improved telecommunications and transport the planet is becoming increasingly "smaller". Hence the need increases to appreciate diversity, difference and human dignity through inclusion, understanding, compassion and the valuing of human rights. Indeed 21st century Australian students are members of a global community (Swiniarski & Breitborde 2003). Classrooms are shared among Indigenous Australian, Anglo Australian, European Australian and Asian Australian classmates from varying religious, political, cultural and economic backgrounds. An optimist may claim that these classrooms are a rich source of cultural exchange. Yet this "melting pot" often breeds severe discontent. Siraj-Blatchford (1995) gives the example of 13 year old Ahmed Ullah who was stabbed to death in an English school playground because he had dark coloured skin. Siraj-Blatchford (1995, p.10) states that in all such abhorrent

tragedies 'there are two victims: the victim of racism and the dehumanised racist as a victim of a racist society'. Numerous academics, researchers, liberationists and educationalists (Mandela, cited in Collopy 2000; Freire 1996; Greene 1995; Siraj-Blatchford 1995; Klein 1990) highlight the dehumanising effect that prejudice has, not only on the victims, but also on the perpetrators. As Klein (1990, p.17) states 'racism ... hinders both sides from a fully human experience. The victims, dominant or dominated, cannot have a normal relationship with themselves or with others. Racism destroys both parties; it dehumanises.'

Racism, sexism and prejudice are rife in today's society (Sachs 2002). Omeima Sukkarieh (2004), community liaison officer for the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), reported on findings of research conducted nationally by the HREOC: 'since 11 September 2001 in particular, Muslims and Arabs around Australia have reported increased levels of prejudice, discrimination and vilification and community leaders say these attitudes have caused fear, isolation and uncertainty within their communities.' The research reports stories of harassment and abuse. It also found that discrimination against other minorities - including Sikhs, Jews, Christians, Arabs and non-Arab Muslims - was prevalent. Tom Calma (2007a; 2007b), Australian Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner, attests that race and racism are still burning issues in Australian society.

These concerns highlight the need to educate children against racism, prejudice and violence. Both Sukkarieh (2004) and Calma (2007a; 2007b) see education as a priority to combat these social ills: 'One of [the HREOC's] goals is to help people to understand their rights as well as their obligation to respect the rights of others' (Sukkarieh 2004, p.3). Educators need to uphold human rights and dignity with compassion, respect and understanding in their classrooms. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, cited in Siraj-Blatchford 1995, p.100) states the aim of educators should be 'to prepare the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.'

An Imperative: Anti-bias Multicultural Education in Early Childhood

Current theorists, based on research on the affective and cognitive development of the young child, place an emphasis on the importance of beginning the study of global education during the earliest years of childhood... To resolve world issues, protect the environment, seek viable means of employment, and ensure peace and tranquility within and between nations, tomorrow's citizen will need to be comfortable working cooperatively in settings with a diverse membership. (Swiniarski & Breitborde 2003, p. 18)

Today's preschoolers are tomorrow's parents, citizens, leaders and decision makers (Connolly 2003; Swiniarski & Breitborde 2003). There is no doubt that throughout the preschool years children are not only becoming more conscious of their world and how to act in it but also developing their moral structures by absorbing the attitudes and values of their family, culture and society (Nixon & Aldwinkle 1997). The preschool years are crucial in shaping cultural and racial understandings and are critical in forming attitudes toward diversity and difference (Mac Naughton, 2003a). However, prejudices form very early in life (MacNaughton 2003; Swiniarski & Breitborde 2003; Siraj-Blatchford 1995; Derman-Sparks 1989; Ramsey 1987). The most common form of prejudice young children experience is through name-calling and/or through negative references to their gender, dress, appearance, skin colour, language or culture (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke 2000). Gandhi (cited in Collopy 2000, p.39) considers name-calling, insulting, teasing and disrespectful behaviour forms of passive violence and believes they must not be tolerated, yet these injustices are happening in schools every day.

Research has demonstrated that by the time children reach preschool age they have already become socially proficient in the ways they appropriate and manipulate racist discourses (Mundine & Giugni 2006; Connolly 2003; Van Ausdale & Feagin 2002; Siraj-Blatchford 1995). Numerous investigations initially pioneered in the early 1900s and repeated in a multiplicity of forms since then have revealed that children have the capability to distinguish racial differences and to develop negative attitudes and prejudices towards particular groups from the age of three (Connolly 2003). An Australian study by Harper and Bonanno (1993, cited in Nixon & Aldwinkle 1997, p.64) clearly shows that Anglo-Australian preschoolers can verbalise their negative bias against Indigenous Australian children. Observers documented comments such as 'You're the colour of poo' and 'Rack off, wog; we don't want to play with you'. Thus, early childhood educators share a major responsibility for fostering an anti-bias multicultural curriculum that challenges racism and prejudice and upholds equity, justice and human dignity. These educators must be encouraged to advocate a curriculum that 'becomes a practice of freedom' (Shaul cited in Freire 1996, p. 16) where children are guided towards an appreciation of difference and diversity while honouring peaceful and just practices. Such a curriculum will prepare future global citizens to participate in an inclusive and respectful multicultural society and will go far towards creating a peaceful and just world.

The Early Childhood Education Research Project

Education, because of its crucial role in the production and reproduction of particular identities and social positionings, is a particularly fruitful site in which to consider the playing out, or the performance, of social justice and identity issues. (Vincent 2003, p. 2)

Early childhood education sets the foundation for lifelong learning and participating productively in a multicultural society (Swiniarski & Breitborde 2003). However, a number of researchers discovered that educators struggle to find appropriate pedagogical strategies to support and promote an anti-bias multicultural curriculum in their classrooms (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2006; Lingard, Mills & Hayes 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke 2000). Moreover, Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2006, p.1) suggest that early childhood educators find anti-bias multicultural education problematic in classrooms 'if all the kids are white'. Scholars, critical thinkers and research philosophers have called for research into new pedagogies that will inform policy and teacher development regarding anti-bias multicultural education (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2006; Connolly 2003; Mac Naughton 2003b; Elenes 2002; Lingard et al. 2000; Noddings 1995). Therefore, it is imperative that research initiatives are developed with the aim of exploring pedagogical strategies to assist early childhood educators in implementing an anti-bias multicultural curriculum that will guide young children to value difference and diversity for the sake of a productive, inclusive and respectful multicultural society.

The current study embraced this imperative by examining how storytime sessions could assist with strategies to support and promote an anti-bias multicultural curriculum and teaching for social justice. It is well documented (Whitmore et al. 2005; Hansen 2004; Snipe 2000; Rosenhouse 1997; Short 1995; Eeds & Wells 1989) that discussion following storytime gives children the opportunity to extend their experiences vicariously, also allowing them to engage actively in rethinking how they view their world. Wolk (2004) suggests that picture books have undergone a profound transformation over the past few years, with authors exploring social justice issues such as cultural appreciation and peace, ethnicity and race, empathy and compassion and social responsibility. Books that sympathetically treat other cultures and beliefs and portray life from different perspectives demonstrate to the reader that other realities, apart from one's own, exist and have the right to do so (Nodelman 1988). This is particularly beneficial in classrooms where "all the kids are white".

This study adopted the collaborative research design of Participatory Action Research (PAR). It is a socially just mode of inquiry for all participants, allowing each a "voice" and honouring and respecting individual history, knowledge, expertise and understandings (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). PAR values and invests in those who will benefit from the findings and has been demonstrated to be influential to the social justice movement through its participative nature and transformative action (Fine et al. 2004; Torres 2004). The application of PAR was appropriate for this study because it is a means that produces knowledge and improves practice through its collaborative nature: the direct involvement of participants in setting the schedule, data collection and analysis, and use of findings (Greenwood & Levin 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart 2005; MacNaughton 2001; Carr & Kemmis 1986). Through active research participation teachers and children were driven to critically scrutinise their understandings of, and

appreciation for, difference and diversity. By actively and collectively shaping and reshaping these understandings through storytime sessions children became more sensitive to and aware of social justice issues and teachers developed strategies for implementing an anti-bias multicultural education.

The study involved two preschool groups (Preschool A and Preschool B) from the same Australian regional centre. Both groups were mostly homogeneous, coming from middle class families of Anglo backgrounds. The research team, comprising two preschool directors, two preschool assistants, a preschool teacher and myself (a doctoral researcher), wished to explore how this action research could positively impact on the two groups to value difference and diversity. All team members had a declared interest in exploring strategies that would promote and support an anti-bias multicultural curriculum and teaching for social justice in their classrooms. They also wanted to investigate children's literature to discover which texts worked best to enhance young children's interest, reflection and understanding of social justice issues. These educators had also noticed gender stereotyping and exclusion occurring during play and wanted to explore strategies that would encourage acceptance and inclusion. They believed that anti-bias multicultural education and teaching for social justice were not only theorising on the concepts but must inspire positive action (Leistyna 2005; Greene 1995).

Crucial to this research were two sets of semi-structured interviews with each preschool child regarding a critical text (picture books that celebrated difference and diversity and addressed such issues as racism, stereotyping, prejudice, (dis)ability, suppression, gender and culture). One set of interviews was conducted at the end of the orientation phase. These are referred to as "initial" interviews. The second set of interviews was conducted at the end of the action research and data gathering phase. These are referred to as "concluding" interviews. Consistency was maintained by a set of questions asked of each child (Breakwell 1995); however, for the most part each interview was child-directed, allowing the child freedom to discuss what interested him/her. The text read to Preschool A for both sets of interviews was *Bunyips Don't* (Odgers 1996), which addresses bullying, suppression, stereotyping and freedom of speech. The text read to Preschool B for both interviews was *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch 2006), which also addresses bullying, gender stereotyping and prejudice. Before both sets of interviews each text was read to the preschool group by the preschool teacher (a member of the research team) with no group discussion because the initial interviews required individual responses that were not influenced by the group. These responses set the scene for the research and gave it direction. Individual responses were also required of the concluding interviews to ascertain any individual disparity between these and initial interview responses.

Children's responses during the initial interviews highlighted the need to investigate what strategies would best facilitate an understanding of suppression,

stereotyping, bullying and prejudice and challenge these social ills. From both groups only two children identified a character acting unjustly. Many children could not articulate their thoughts and answered with “I don’t know”. From Preschool A, 21 children were interviewed, with most children contending that the *status quo* of the story should be upheld even though the authority figure acted in a bullying and unjust way. From Preschool B 14 children were interviewed, with all (articulate) children concentrating, in a negative way, on the Paper Bag Princess’ appearance and lack of cleanliness. No child identified her bravery or resourcefulness and no child identified Prince Ronald’s lack of grace and unjust behaviour. Six children contended that the Paper Bag Princess should marry Prince Ronald “only when she gets cleaned up” and three children said emphatically that “Prince Ronald should never marry her because she’s dirty!” Four children declared the issue of a girl rescuing a boy as problematic. Davies (1994) discovered similar responses to this picture book in her preschool study, which highlights the fact that little has improved in over 13 years regarding the stereotyping of roles by preschoolers.

Intense data gathering and collaborative weekly meetings with the research team followed the orientation phase. During our weekly meetings the team critically studied two videotaped storytime sessions and post discussions from each preschool (i.e., four storytime sessions).

Through observation on, and reflection and analysis of, what the teachers and children were saying and doing regarding issues of race, gender, culture, ethnicity, (dis)ability etc., picture books for the next week were chosen and a plan of action outlined. Initially, the study began comparing children’s responses to critical texts with their reactions to non-critical texts (picture books that attended to mundane issues). It was found that critical texts did encourage deeper reflective discussion within the preschool groups. However, the research team quickly realised that indeed all texts (including what were considered non-critical) had the potential for critical examination, thus becoming “critical texts”. Often the children’s responses to what the team considered a non-critical text produced such reflective discussion that both the children and teachers were driven to explore underlying social justice issues. As the action research progressed discussions following storytime became longer, more reflective, more articulate and more in depth (on the part of both teachers and children). Teachers utilised higher order and open-ended questions that encouraged insightful responses by the children. However, most importantly, the teachers found that carefully and purposefully **listening** to children’s responses during storytime and clarifying, without judgment, what was being said drove the post storytime discussion. Children “bounced off one another” during discussions to examine their world and the social justice issues that the stories highlighted. These post storytime discussions assisted the research team to critical plan for following sessions. Reflective planning of storytime produced a superior learning experience for both teachers and children.

Strategies that were successfully tried and implemented during the action research included elevating storytime status from a transition activity to an important session of the day, allowing ample time for discussion and response (for example beginning the preschool day); reading and discussing critical texts that celebrated difference and diversity of race, ability, culture, gender, ethnicity, colour and religion; reading and discussing texts that challenged the *status quo*; utilising open-ended and higher order questioning techniques; listening to children's responses and reflectively choosing (and allowing children to choose) texts that would consolidate the social justice issues that had been highlighted in previously read texts; revisiting whole texts or parts of texts for clarification; placing the social justice issues covered in the texts into the preschool context; responding to social justice issues through action (for example encouraging the sharing of what the children have – clothes, toys – with those who go without; supporting inclusion in play situations at preschool); inviting people of other cultures to the preschool; encouraging artistic response to the texts read (for example re-enactment, drawing, construction, dramatic play, singing and dancing); reinforcing and consolidating social justice issues read in texts by displaying related posters and making available relevant jigsaws, dolls and games; involving and informing parents.

During the final week of the research project concluding interviews were conducted. These interviews employed the same books, the same technique and the same interview schedule as were used for the initial research interviews. Contrary to the initial interviews all children who were involved in the first interview and subsequent action research could articulate their thoughts, feelings and ideas. For Preschool A, in opposition to the initial interviews where no child made the parallel between bunyips and people, 20 children made the link and commented that it is "okay" and right for people to be different. 19 children showed concern towards injustice and used such terms as "not fair" and a "bully" (terms not used in the initial interviews). For Preschool B where 20 children were interviewed, only five children concentrated on the importance of appearance. Most of the children could identify the bravery of the Paper Bag Princess and the ungraciousness and bullying behaviour of Prince Ronald. In opposition to the initial interviews 12 children felt that the Paper Bag Princess should not marry Prince Ronald owing to his unkind behaviour. The gender issue of girls rescuing boys was not raised.

These findings are very encouraging as to the use of children's literature when implementing an anti-bias multicultural curriculum in early childhood settings. The children's responses during the concluding interviews display a heightened awareness of and sensitivities to the social justice issues of bullying, stereotyping, suppression, prejudice and freedom of speech. These interviews reveal that the preschoolers now recognise characters acting unjustly, something not noticed by the children in the initial interviews.

The research team believes that the intervening pedagogical strategy of examining social justice issues through children's literature and employing the strategies mentioned above have been successful. The study has impacted positively on the development of preschoolers' understanding of and sensitivities to social justice issues and has assisted the educators in implementing an anti-bias multicultural curriculum. At the end of the school year, and one term after the action research had completed, teachers documented that the preschool groups involved in the study were more cohesive, harmonious and inclusive than they were before the study began.

This study will provide some answers for early childhood educators who are struggling to find strategies to support an anti-bias multicultural curriculum and teaching for social justice. Social justice - care of self, others and the planet - should be of paramount importance in education. Many years ago Maxine Greene (1995) wrote the following which is still pertinent today:

We can bring warmth into places where young persons come together ... we can bring in the dialogues and laughter that threaten monologues and rigidity. And surely we can affirm and reaffirm the principles that centre around belief in justice and freedom and respect for human rights... (Greene 1995, p. 43).

Anti-bias multicultural education and teaching for social justice matter. It is the responsibility of researchers to help educators discover strategies that will support and promote an anti-bias multicultural curriculum in their classrooms.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that anti-bias multicultural education is a major factor in developing anti-racist futures and visioning an alternative world. However, it has stressed the imperative that anti-bias multicultural education must begin in the early years to ensure a multicultural society that values difference and diversity with the view to a dynamic, inclusive, respectful humanity. With considerable concern this paper has articulated that educators struggle to find appropriate pedagogical strategies to implement an anti-bias multicultural curriculum. The paper then offered solutions to this problem by outlining current research that has investigated strategies that were successfully implemented in preschool classrooms to promote an anti-bias multicultural curriculum. The research design was discussed and highlighted as a socially just mode of inquiry whereby respectful relationships with all participants were upheld. The current study may contribute to the development of theories that inform anti-bias curricula with a view to raising preschool children's positive recognition of difference and sensitivity to social justice issues. This in turn could inform policy relating to early childhood multicultural education and future teacher development to equip educators with strategies to implement an anti-bias multicultural curriculum.

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