Teaching and Learning Multiculturally: Stories, Theory, and Practice in an Early Childhood Setting

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Four decades of debate have not quieted the critics nor lessened the urgency for teachers to infuse multicultural education in their classrooms. The debate, however, has shifted from issues of cultural differences, inclusion, and identity to a contemporary examination of how inequality and differential effects result in unequal power relationships (May, 2000, McLaren & Muñoz, 2000; Nieto, 2000a). Intrinsically tied to issues of power are analyses of how educational institutions influence, maintain, and structure inequality and the status quo (Locke, 1997; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). To date, an issue of concern is the lack of research that examines the integration of multicultural education in classroom curriculum and more succinctly, the roles of teachers and school administrators in fostering or restricting social and cultural transformations within their respective educational settings (Calderón & Carreón, 2000).

The conceivable impact of a multicultural knowledge base and associated instructional practices in students' school experiences merits further investigation. Taken a step further, the examination of instructional practices becomes especially vital when considering the increasing demand for minority teachers. The demand for teachers of color, especially during the last decade, has been motivated by an attempt to represent cultural diversity within contemporary classrooms and society (Lewis, 1996; Sleeter, 2001). Along with this is the need to recruit and retain minority teachers who are grounded in their respective cultural and linguistic heritage. In so doing these teachers serve as role models for students and their surrounding communities (Pavel, 1999).

With this in mind, the following article documents a 21-month ethnographic case study in multicultural education research. The study serves as a lens to examine teachers' work with multicultural education in classroom settings and the associated practical issues related to the larger school environment. The research site was an early childhood setting with 60 students, 5 full-time teachers, and 3 para-professionals that was located in a Midwestern college town. In addition to our roles as researchers, we were the new directors of the early childhood program and teachers in the school. In these dual positions we envisioned being a part of the educational institution while working to develop, among the team of teachers, a multicultural perspective of teaching, learning, and community action, contextualized within the daily school activities and responsibilities. The following questions guided our research focus:

- How do minority teachers fit in and negotiate teaching in a culture that is dominated by White middle class female teachers who maintain philosophies of curriculum that reinforce a dominant societal view of education?
- What are the structural implications for developing a curriculum and learning environment that is grounded in and guided by a multicultural stance?
- What response from students and parents do teachers encounter when they infuse a multicultural perspective of teaching in their classrooms?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nieto's (2000b) description of multiculturalism is a useful starting place for articulating and conceptualizing a multicultural stance. She draws from a sociopolitical perspective in her definition:

> Multicultural education permeates the curriculum and instructional strategies used in schools, as well as the interactions among teachers, students and parents, and the very ways that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge,

> reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education furthers the democratic principles of social justice (p. 305).

Research related to issues of language is particularly pertinent to multicultural education because language is an essential component of culture and therefore describes and defines students of many different groups. Gounari (2000) and Graman (1988) concur that language learning is a major element in gaining a critical consciousness, which allows students to encounter and confront linguistic, cognitive and axiological diversity. Graman's (1988) work includes examination of critical pedagogy in ESL teaching and learning:

> Critically learning another language enhances our ability to gain access both outwardly to the data of interrelated societies and inwardly to the society of birth or adoption, thereby giving us an opportunity to "locate ourselves" in a broader economic and sociopolitical contest. It can be a first step in gaining a critical consciousness of the interconnection among the lives of all people. In addition, learning a language that reflects another culture allows people in the acquisition process to encounter and confront linguistic, cognitive, and axiological conflicts (p. 442).

Educational researchers (Nieto, 2000b; Heath, 1993) call attention to strengths that students bring to school, but which are not necessarily acknowledged because they do not fit with mainstream thinking. Knowledge of languages other than Standard English and diverse cultural experiences are commonly discounted in terms of classroom curriculum and subsequently for students' education. Heath's (1993) ethnographic research, spanning ten years in the Piedmont Carolinas during the 1970s, is an illuminating example. She notes that differences in language use and in cultural orientations between the home and classroom environments could either be important sources of success or failure, depending upon the interpretations, perspectives, and practices of classroom teachers. In her seminal research, Heath documents that contrasting ways of using language result in certain tensions between African American students and their White middle-class teachers. The nonstandard English of the African American students is viewed as a deficit and therefore it is inappropriate and devalued (Gounari, 2000). Heath suggests that teachers were able to aid students in bridging the gap between their home and school experiences. Through their use of innovative classroom strategies, teachers affirmed children's use of language. As a result, learning and school success were enhanced. Heath's research offers insightful implications for classroom educators at all levels. Teachers need to incorporate classroom modifications in instruction and curriculum that directly support diversity and enhances the academic success of all students.

Calderón and Carreón (2000) note that there are overwhelming contradictions and conflicts that exert pressures on multicultural curriculum and bilingual classrooms. At the community level, parents and educators rely on national, state, and district standards to support the bilingual-multicultural classroom as an opportunity for children to benefit socially, intellectually, and economically. However, parents and educators with a competing perspective maintain that learning the basics is the first priority; hence adding multicultural and bilingual programs merely detract from students' academic success.

Traditionalists such as Schlesinger (1992) argue that immigrants and ethnic minorities should develop common competencies and experiences that work to diminish differences and assimilate and unite cultures into a single American society. This perspective raises contradictions within contemporary bilingual-multicultural classrooms as attention to cultural differences in the classroom is aligned with endangering the White power structure and disturbing the harmony of society (Macedo & Bartolome, 2000; Katz, 1971). While overt racism, linguicism, and ethnocentrism are not publicly accepted within today's social, economic, and educational contexts, they continue to be maintained via institutional racism and prejudices. In many parts of the United States, for example, immigrants' and refugees' native languages and cultural diversities are deemed inferior and/or associated with low socioeconomic status (Bahruth, 2000). They are viewed as people who have placed burdens on the nation's diminishing

resources. Calderón and Carreón (2000) note that this is especially true with Hispanic immigrants who are oftentimes viewed as intruders and labeled as foreigners that have taken jobs from locals.

Since the early 1970s administrators have provided teachers with in-service education to identify avenues for adding, to their classroom curriculum, selected literature and the celebration of particular holidays that are responsive to race, class, and gender concerns in relationship to multicultural education (Banks, 1975; Gay, 1977). While this focus is admirable, it has been limited to a pedagogy of tolerance that fails to address issues of power and inequality (Mecedo & Bartolome, 1999). Historically teacher in-service requirements devoted to bilingual and multicultural education have consisted of motivational speakers who present "helpful hints and techniques" or workshops that seldom contain collegial learning, problem-solving or follow-up components (Calderon & Carreon, 2000). Presently, multicultural and bilingual education exists outside the realm of the mainstream classrooms; residing principally in foreign language classes, food fairs and culture nights. Attempts at moving beyond this superficial treatment have done little more than to assimilate non-Euro American students into the mainstream classrooms.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

An intent of this study was to demythicise the notion of multicultural education research. This was accomplished with a focus on practical issues related to the daily operations of school. Contextualing multicultural education research as a social phenomenon that has the potential to aid, illuminate, and increase the knowledge base of how power, policies, and practices influence the school experiences of students, parents, and teachers was a key factor. In contrast to scholarship that speaks to concepts about multicultural education, this study represents multicultural education research that is grounded in the philosophical precepts of equity, freedom, and pluralism. These precepts represent a distinct worldview in contrast to the traditional assimulationist philosophy that has been associated with research surrounding issues of multicultural education. As subjective constructs, the investigation of these precepts required an interpretive framework and associated methods (Erickson, 1986) that provided benefits of entering into and observing the lived experiences of teachers and students. Examination of the environment in which they worked served to illuminate and contextualize what was taught and learned in the classroom with respect to cultural diversity and bilingual education. In this respect, an attempt was made to link a qualitative framework to multiculturalism and to issues of research methodology and application.

Consistent with the methods of an interpretive study (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991), data collection and analysis were brought into a reliable yet evolving relationship with the research focus. Analysis of collected data revealed new dimensions and levels of understanding, which, in turn, defined and redefined the research focus. Data was collected from formal and informal interviews with teachers and coded, respectively with the letters FI and II. Regular classroom observations, and observations of interactions between the children, as well as interactions with parents in the school were also components of data collection. This data was coded with the letters CO, CI and PI. Formal interviews with the teachers focused on various themes such as the teacher's role in the classroom, teacher-student relationships, school and society, past experiences, and the role of the community and parents in the education of children. As well, informal interviews probed their attitudes towards diversity and bilingual and multicultural education. Formal interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed while interactions with children and parents, classroom observations and informal interviews were recorded in a field journal as field notes. All names were changed to protect confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In response to our new responsibilities as program directors, we publicized innovative after school enrichment programs. These programs were developed as a vehicle to teach and learn within the realm of multicultural education with young children aged 2 through 8 years. Initially after school Spanish language programs for North

American children and an ESL program for international children were offered. The language pro gram was an attempt to broaden the curriculum with multiple ways to include children of progressive thinking faculty, students, and members of the international community that worked at and or attended the local university. Soon after these programs were initiated, two articles were submitted to the local newspaper regarding the school's philosophy as it related to bilingual and multicultural education.

Despite efforts to promote the school's multicultural and bilingual stance, the only responses received from this publicity were from recently graduated qualified language teachers who were seeking jobs. Furthermore, there were immediate xenophobic responses to the new programs from parents. A few weeks after setting up the Spanish program, for example, an angry parent of a pre-school student made an unplanned visit to the school during the middle of the day to withdraw his daughter. Gathering up all her personal belongings and waking her from a nap he stated:

> You shouldn't be teachin em Spanish; they need to learn em American. You can take your Spanish and shove it up your ass (9-3-PI).

The incident brings attention to the "anti-bilingual years" outlined by Crawford (1993) and of the notion of English Only as a highly political issue. The political debate hedging bilingual education has been perceived as a threat because it surreptitiously questions the core of hegemony and power in American society through its educational system (Bahruth, 2000). Nieto (2000b) contends that successful bilingual education threatens to debunk the myth of getting back to the basics, in which the basics specifically purport an Eurocentric curriculum and the dominant use of Standard English. Yet, in the classroom environment, the use of language other than Standard English is not really the issue, but rather the way in which parents and educators view other languages is often more determinative of student success (Nieto, 2000b). The lack of community response for the language program brought attention to questions of awareness for language diversity and the lack of support for learning in an environment that embraced diversity. While the local community was diverse in terms of its international community, there was a lack of interest and support for the acknowledgment of other cultures and the inclusion of different languages.

In addition to the absence of community support, there was resistance from a majority of the teachers. They appeared to be unwilling and/or unable to conceptualize the school's philosophy of multiculturalism. Some of the teachers viewed their roles as transmitters of knowledge to children who were empty vessels waiting to be filled. They maintained that their job was to prepare children for future responsibilities in the public school system and in the workplace. Ms. Roper, one of the kindergarten teachers, held a leadership role in the school prior to our administration. She was particularly resistant to the philosophical changes in the school's direction. Ms. Roper believed that her job was to prepare the kindergartners for real school (public school). She estimated that the students should be doing approximately 6-10 dittos per day because in first grade they would be expected to do at least twelve. On a routine basis, the morning instructional period consisted of children doing seatwork from 9:00-11:30. Even though Ms. Roper could articulate the nuances of the hidden curriculum (Giroux, 1983) and the role of critical theory in curriculum development, she was unable to conceptualize the respective foundation in her classroom. Her conclusion, to our request for an emphasis on student voice and classroom community was that the administration was cheap because they were unwilling to incur the expense of copying worksheets.

Important to this discussion is an understanding of the power structures and control inherent in education and how this involvement in the distribution of knowledge is used to control the learner. In essence, Ms. Roper was unconsciously reifying the notion that children need to become accustomed to feeling uncomfortable; children need to learn to be obedient in order to prepare for their rightful places as adults in the workforce. Observations in the kindergarten revealed that:

> The required seatwork to complete the worksheets made the children uncomfortable. It was difficult for them to sit and complete their work, without losing interest. Those who couldn't sit still were treated as underprivi-

> leged learners (classroom observations, 10-5-CO).

An emphasis on a Freirean critical pedagogy that explicates an understanding of important factors such as race, class, and gender inequalities and how, through the hegemony of the dominant cul ture, these factors control the content and organization of education became the starting place for developing a school wide curriculum. The intent was to explore rather than limit and empower rather than control students and teachers in the classroom. The new curricular approach supported collaborative teaching, student generated curriculum, and a team approach to the daily operation of the school. The lived reality and conditions of the students and teachers were to be the starting point and connection to a study of reality that had transpired to date (McLaren, 1999). It was important in the reorganization of the school that administrators, teachers, and students were viewed as a shared collective and as a social enterprise in which the voices of all participants would be heard.

Reorganization of the curriculum that subscribed to a critical philosophy was often subtly challenged by the teaching staff in the spirit of maintaining organization and strong classroom management. It is important to note that most of the teachers before and during the transition were successful and experienced in terms of controlling the kids, developing curriculum, and maintaining positive parent relationships. The tendency and focus for a majority, however, was on the development of "a bag of tricks" that kept the children occupied and maintained the status quo. Most were accustomed to developing units from popular teacher magazines or prepackaged curriculums in which the content followed a Eurocentric perspective. One such thematic unit used in the four-year-old room was referred to as "The Cowboy Small Unit." Overall:

> The lessons in this unit portrayed "cowboys" with images of being White clean cut, honest, pure, and individualistic. On the other hand, Native Americans were generally portrayed as uncivilized "savages" who painted their faces in strange ways and wore head bands made from red and brown construction paper (11-4-CO).

While well meaning, the classroom teacher who developed this unit was unassumingly reproducing the dominant Eurocentric curriculum and hence reinforced societal inequalities in which issues of race and discrimination were apparent. Generally, the teachers were not in the habit of thinking in terms of pluralism and therefore tended to negate diversity rather than conceptualize it as an asset. Rarely did the teachers use student diversity as a subject of study. Instead they preferred to teach from a colorblind stance, in which race and diversity were denied or ignored.

Staff turnover enabled us to search for minority teachers and teachers who were willing to challenge the traditional power structures in education and who embraced a pluralistic perspective of curriculum and teaching. Ms. Sledmayer became the new kindergarten and lead teacher after Ms. Roper left for a public school position. Prior to obtaining an elementary teaching certificate in a masters program, she received an undergraduate degree in Spanish and worked as an advocate for the St. Louis district court system. While working on her master's degree in Chicago, Illinois, Ms Sledmayer taught in a 1st-2nd grade multi-age classroom in a bilingual (English-Spanish) elementary school. She was active in a local chapter of Democracy for Education, which purports a progressive philosophy. Ms. Sledmayer freely voiced her concerns regarding curriculum and the dominant instructional materials used in mainstream classrooms:

> I just don't think it's fair that African American children, let alone all Black schools should be forced to use texts that are dominated by White faces and by stories about the old White guys (Ms. Sledmayer, 12-5-FI).

Coming from a Jewish-American ethnic background and married to an African American, Ms. Sledmayer described herself as a member of a minority group who had been marginalized her entire life.

The hiring of Ms. Sledmayer as a new lead teacher who activity expressed and practiced a critical educational philosophy led to regular meetings among the teaching staff as a way of examining what was taught in the classrooms. Clashes between Ms. Sledmayer and a teacher who had been

hired prior to the curriculum changes occurred on a regular basis:

> I never told you this before, but Ms. Christe (a devout Catholic) and I got into a terrible argument. We were talking about what was going on in our classrooms. She told me about an Easter egg hunt she was planning and that she was going to make bunny ears for all the kids. She asked me what I was planning for Easter and I told her I wasn't "doing Easter" but my theme was spring....things like flowersand planting a garden. Well this really set her off and she accused me of "denying" or "neglecting" the children because I wouldn't paint Easter eggs and talk about the bunny. I told her I was sick of people who shoved chocolate Easter bunnies and colored eggs down my throat. For 12 years I went to public school and was expected to passively make my mother Easter cards and hunt eggs...so as not to make waves. Well I'm not doing it anymore...I resented it then and I resent it now (Ms. Sledmayer, 6-6-II).

These discussions of curriculum and teaching practices were encouraged among the staff as a way of interrogating the curricular and administrative structures of the school. It was important that the school did not fall into the trap of becoming politically correct or developing a sanitized curriculum that bypassed highly emotional or politically charged issues that emphasized similarities over differences and tolerance over criticism (Mecedo & Bartolome, 1999). Unfortunately, traditional teachers like Ms. Christen chose to resign rather than compromise their beliefs. Ms. Sledmayer proceeded to develop and teach a Spanish-English bilingual program for children aged 5-7 years.

As the school year progressed, interactions among the students were closely observed and their actions and interactions recorded. On several occasions incidents of racial discrimination among the children in the school were noted. When children were asked to hold hands or choose a partner, the Caucasian boys refused to be paired with the Korean and African American boys. Around the same time the mother of one of the African American students reported an alarming incident. Upon entering the school in late afternoon and walking into a room filled with kids playing, a friendly four-year-old child greeted her:

> You're the only Black in the room? My mommie said Black people aren't good, she doesn't like Black people..White is better (6-7-PI).

Based on these observations, Ms. Sledmayer proposed that the kindergarten curriculum and the focus of the school should be based on global themes. She planned to study each continent, starting with Africa. The school year began with new posters on the classroom walls, maps, books, poems, music, geography, and associated projects, all of which were representative of the African nations.

Changes in the curriculum were also reflected in teaching strategies and classroom dynamics. Typically the children worked collaboratively in small groups and the teacher's role was not that of the authority figure, but that of facilitator who checked on the progress of each group and who was available for help. Worksheets and activities, which focused on the food or clothes of a particular culture, were nonexistent. Issues of race, and of significant people who had shaped history were discussed and studied. Through children's literature the students were exposed to popular minority figures in history such as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. In connecting the focus of the class to her personal life experiences, one five year old remarked:

> You know there was a lady and she didn't want to sit at the back of the bus...she shouldn't have to, it wasn't fair, she was Black, but Black is just as good as White. I mean Cubbie and Javon (African American students) we not throw them out in the street and smash them like pancakes because they Black. We love them and never do that (2-16-CO).

The curriculum Ms. Sledmayer shared with her class spoke to the importance of developing a historical perspective and cultural consciousness in order to increase knowledge and understanding of contrasting worldviews, social values, and personal heritage.

The parents did not always accept Ms. Sledmayer's unsanitized curriculum and they did not always support her direct approach. In one case, a child asked Ms. Sledmayer if girls ever marry girls and if boys ever marry boys. She responded by saying that girls can love other girls in a way that is like being married. The following day, the child's mother voiced her disapproval of the discussion of lesbian relationships with her child and accused the school of teaching the children to be homosexuals. Moreover after the kindergarten graduation the following month, the mother registered her child in a local daycare for the summer, rather than the school's summer program. Ms. Sledmayer was frustrated by the mother's actions and commented:

> I don't get it. I mean I'm used to people giving me grief because Carl (husband) is Black and I'm White, but this is ridiculous. To accuse me of teaching a child to become homosexual because she's curious and I don't lie to her (Ms. Sledmayer, 4-4-II).

Yet, Ms. Sledmayer's inclusive curriculum began to affect other areas of the school in a very positive way. An example of this was the evolving Christmas program, which had always been viewed as an opportunity to celebrate families and teachers coming together at the school. The established traditional holiday program, however, with a Santa Clause distributing candy canes and the singing of Christmas carols conflicted with the school's changing philosophy. With thoughtful planning the holiday program included singing, dance, and story telling representative of Kwanzaa and Hanukah, in addition to the traditional Christian celebration.

Karina, a Spanish-speaking student, was another insightful example of the changes that were occurring. As a five year old, Karina missed the cut-off date for kindergarten. Yet because Karina spoke only Spanish she was placed in the kindergarten program with Ms. Sledmayer who could communicate with her and her non-English speaking mother. Extremely uncomfortable in a strange new environment Karina was withdrawn and overly anxious a majority of the time. Because a majority of the staff were either fluent or spoke some Spanish and were sensitive to her needs and differences in terms of language, Karina soon developed reading strategies in her native language while the other students were learning in English. A small library of Spanish language books was developed to be used by both the Spanish classes and Karina. Gradually Karina gained confidence and began to participate in activities with the other children. By the start of first grade Karina was able to use English as fluently as the other children in the program. As well, she continued to speak in Spanish.

Ms. Sledmayer struggled with what Nieto (2000b) describes as the notion of "equal education," meaning that teachers treat all students in the same way. On one level this treatment seems just, yet in reality treating all students the same implies that there is only one right way of being. In terms of diversity, equal education is not, and should not be defined as the same for all students. Sleeter (1993) claims that teachers, who define all students as equal or the same, are teaching from a colorblind stance.

Teachers who refuse to accept student differences thus subscribe to and reinforce the dominant core culture as the standard. In our setting, the acceptance of differences as a school-wide practice and as a way of teaching had considerable impact on major areas of conflict such as racism, discrimination, language diversity, and structural factors within the school that could have inhibited or limited learning.

While the example of Ms. Sledmayer demonstrates teacher affect on curriculum, the following case study of Ms. Emer calls attention to issues of working within the boundaries of an unfamiliar curriculum and of conflicting social structures. Ms. Emer is originally from Bangkok, Thailand where she worked as a college instructor of language education. She has lived in the United States for twelve years, is married to a North American university administrator, and has two children. As a team, Ms. Emer and her husband taught children in a refugee camp for several years and more recently they returned from a four-year stint in Malaysia where she taught at an international K-12 school.

Ms. Emer's insight into the complex and problematic nature of living, working, and teaching in multilingual and multicultural environments brought a richness to her pre-K classroom responsibilities. Her discussion of the racial harassment that she and her daughter have endured in school

settings is reflective of her thinking about multicultural education. She notes that the emphasis of multicultural education is often on strategies for developing racial harmony instead of addressing issues of power, domination, and racism. Ms. Emer's description of multicultural education in her daughter's school is represented by lessons in different ethnic foods and holiday customs from around the world to the display of multicultural posters in the classroom. The racial discrimination, she believes is embedded within the tendency of classroom teachers to deny differences, instead of using students' ethnic backgrounds as assets in the curriculum. Most salient in Ms. Emer's discussion is the issue of race:

> When I first started teaching at my last school, all the teachers ate in a private lunchroom away from the kids. I remember going down there one day and a teacher I didn't know asked "May I help you, are you looking for someone?" And I just told her no, I'm here to eat my lunch. I was thinking that why did she ask me that, this is a teacher's lunchroom and therefore since I'm in here it must mean I'm a teacher. I guess she never made the connection that I could be a teacher because I think the only people she has seen with my color of skin work in the kitchen. I told my friend about this experience and she told me she had once had a similar experience and so she started eating lunch in her car instead of facing this kind of thing (4-6-FI).

Theories of multiculturalism have become almost clichés; prescriptions of how to recognize cultural differences and live harmoniously in a pluralistic society (Macedo, 2000). On a simplistic level, lists of differences and similarities are developed so that potentially embarrassing or sensitive situations can be avoided. On a more complex level, culture-unique behaviors and idiosyncrasies are isolated so as to predict behaviors and interactions in intercultural encounters. Racism is better understood, according to Weinberg (1990, p. xii-xiii) as a system of privilege and penalty. In Ms. Emer's case, she was either acknowledged or discounted by the uncomplicated fact of her cultural heritage.

Ms. Emer's personal teaching style reflected the traditional Thai system with an emphasis on high achievement, strictness, discipline, and the notion that hard work leads to success. While Ms. Emer's style was admirable, it generally failed her in interactive classroom relationships with students. Her voice, which was otherwise very soft and pleasant, was stern in the classroom and she often relied heavily on time out and a counting down technique for management. A four-year old African American boy was especially difficult for Ms. Emer to work with, she labeled him as a trouble maker She often complained about her classroom and the trouble she experienced maintaining order and keeping the children on task:

> In circle time the kids seem to disregard what she's trying to do. They are noisy and have started to wonder off. A couple of the boys are fighting and another boy is in the bathroom throwing wet paper towels against the wall. Mr. Carlino (another teacher) had to come into the classroom and help get them calmed down; this helped, until he left.... There are a few kids who just refuse to participate. Ms. Emer told me, as she shouted commands across the room to different kids, that she was going to have to talk to their parents (Classroom observation, 4-19-CO).

Ms. Emer realized the stark contrasts between the traditional educational system in Thailand and the more democratic system of our school. Basically she felt that her Thai students were much better behaved and that students' parents took a more active role in teaching them appropriate and respectful classroom behavior. Students in the United States, she concluded, had little respect for their teachers.

In some ways, Ms. Emer was very perceptive, but she continued to have problems adopting new teaching strategies. Sleeter (1993) and Locke (1997) argue that teachers bring professional perspectives about the meaning of teaching to the classroom, which is constructed, mainly from their personal life experiences and vested interests. Regardless of how much or how little experience with racial or cultural diversity teachers have had, they enter the classroom with a rich body of knowledge about the right way to teach, social stratification, social mobility, and human difference. For teachers like Ms. Emer who have not

been trained in the dominant Western orientation, understanding what fits in the classroom becomes notably complex regardless of a bilingual foundation and the ease of living in diverse cultures.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined a multicultural learning environment through the voices of two practicing teachers, students, and parents. A multicultural approach to research has broadened not only who is studied but also how research has been designed and pursued. An attempt has been made to contribute to teachers' openness and knowledge regarding diversity and to gaining an understanding of the institutional cultures in American schooling. The research has served to examine what happens when teachers infuse multiculturalism in their classrooms in terms of the impact it has on curriculum as well as on students and parents. To better define what multicultural research is and how to do it, emphasis must be placed on scholarship that strives to be multicultural (Carrillo, 1990). Focus has been directed towards individual classroom teachers as the agents of modeling a multicultural stance (Sleeter, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 1987). Yet teachers cannot fathom a large-scale reform such as multicultural education without support from the entire school and community structure.

Past research that has examined the process of implementation of multicultural frameworks suggests that most teachers "perpetuate business as usual even when constraints on their doing otherwise are weak" (Sleeter & Grant, 1987, p. 437). This was the situation in our setting prior to the school wide curriculum reform efforts. As a team, the entire school staff worked collaboratively, along with students and parents, to explore alternative ways of teaching and learning from the dominant norm. Learning to affirm differences, rather then deny them and moving beyond a pedagogy of tolerance (Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999) became an important premise of multicultural education for the daily practices in our school.

While our school embraced a multicultural stance, we remained defenseless to the fact that one of our teachers failed because the system was so different from her personal life experiences and teaching style. Why, we asked, did Ms. Emer fail in a school that viewed her cultural and linguistic diversity as a genuine asset for students and colleagues? Her failure was particularly problematic when noting that as administrators we were passionate about creating an alternative setting to the dominant school structure. Did we merely reproduce another dominant structure that dictated one perspective of teaching and learning, of reality, and of defining knowledge? Was she offered an equal voice in our school?

Essentially teachers cannot teach what they don't know. In the case of Ms. Emer, her inability to cope with the cultural diversity beyond traditions of the Thai culture illustrated the problematic faced by many Euro-American teachers in the United States today. Ideally teachers should have a clear definition of and understanding of multicultural education, accept the philosophy of cultural pluralism, and recognize that multiculturalism is a philosophical concept and an educational process that impacts all aspects of education (Nieto, 2000b). Yet, according to Sleeter (2001) and Grant (1993), teachers generally have not been educated in a multicultural perspective, nor have they defined the meaning of multicultural education in relationship to their own education.

Past research has found that in general most students have positive feelings about diverse ethnic groups (Contreras, 1987). Yet these same students are limited in their knowledge of different groups and are ill prepared in issues of sociocultural diversity. In response, Ms. Sledmayer provided her students with opportunities to learn about all kinds of people who shaped United States history. While her students were quite young, she made a commitment to the development of a focused curriculum which related knowledge about different ethnic and cultural groups that purposefully extended beyond a superficial treatment of ethnic foods, dress, and cultural holidays.

In this article a theoretical lens has been articulated for the purpose of examining multicultural education in the context of the social justice and power relationships that exist in school settings. Besides the development of awareness, this research has demonstrated that teachers need support and encouragement at the institutional level. Issues of power, control and equality must be dealt with and implemented at the institutional as well as the classroom level. The research agenda has been char-

acterized by attention to the relationship between knowledge, attempts to understand the influence and interaction of the different constructs of diversity, and fostering student voice for the purpose of enhancing educational experiences. Furthermore locating research within an epistemological foundation and theoretical framework has contributed to the knowledge base of how policies and practices of schooling influence the learning experiences of all students (Grant & Tate, 1995).

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