More than Just "Filling a Bucket": Inspiring Young Diverse Children to Grow and Thrive Through Culturally Sustaining Approaches

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Abstract

This qualitative case study analyzes the perceptions and practices of a diverse group of three Head Start Teachers in relation to their work "managing" their classrooms and supporting Socio-Emotional learning development for their historically underserved young learners (i.e., nationality, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, language, etc.). To explore these areas, the author collected data through 1) surveys, 2) interviews, and 3) classroom observations using the Metropolitan Urban Education Culturally Responsive Classroom Management Model as a Conceptual Framework. Results indicate that although Head Start Teachers are required to use a behavioral classroom management method, they also engage in culturally relevant practices to facilitate social efficacy. While each teacher frames their own work differently, they do share a common sense of justice and commitment to supporting their students to grow socially and emotionally. From a liberatory perspective, this study emphasizes the critical role of the early childhood teacher in conversations on engendering justice, equity, and agency with young diverse children.

Keywords: Classroom Management, Culturally Relevant Teaching, Early Childhood, Pre-K, Socio-Emotional Learning, Diversity, Equity, Head Start

Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19pandemic and George Floyd's death, it has become impossible to deny that we live in an unjust society. Sadly, policing Black and Brown bodies starts early in a child's life. In fact, Johnson, Boutte, and Bryan (2019) describe five types of violence that young black children experience as early as Pre-K - physical, symbolic, linguistic, pedagogical, and systemic. They assert that these forms of violence interfere with "revolutionary love" or what we refer to here as liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1972; Shor & Freire, 1987). Pre-K is often the first place where young children from culturally diverse backgrounds "systematically face dominant socio cultural values and are expected to abide by and embody them" (Soto-Manning, 2009, p. 1). Therefore, children of color are typically expected to learn in a different cultural context than their family and community. Yet, it is also where children spend a great deal of their time learning and growing.

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that children in the US spend 180 days or 1000 waking hours in school per year. Moreover, school is a place where children work on their socio-emotional (SE) skills (i.e., regulating emotion, relating with others, etc.).Likewise, culturally relevant

classroom management techniques can help children to develop SE skills in an effective manner. This paper analyzes the perceptions and practices of a diverse group of Head Start Teachers in relation to their work "managing" their classrooms and supporting SE learning development for their historically underserved young learners (i.e., nationality, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, language, etc.). Gay (2002) asserts that culturally responsive teaching is defined as

 "Using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively (p. 2)."

Likewise, Ladson-Billings (1994) states that the characteristics of culturally relevant teaching include: a) Positive perspectives on parents and families, b) Communication of high expectations, c) Learning within the context of culture, d) Student-centered instruction, e) Culturally mediated instruction, f) Reshaping the curriculum, and g) Teacher as facilitator. Moreover, teachers must extend upon these notions to include the notion of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). Paris (2012) asserts CSP exists wherever education sustains the life ways of communities that have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling. As such, CSP explicitly calls for schooling to be a site for sustaining—rather than eradicating—the cultural ways of being of communities of color. For the purposes of this study, although these three terms are nuanced and, the author particularly uses them interchangeably (p. 93) in considering culturally relevant classroom management and SE teaching strategies, it is imperative that teachers be cognizant of students' home culture and their specific strengths and needs.

Conceptual Framework

The author primarily relied on the research, theory, and practical suggestions outlined in the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education's Culturally Responsive Management Approach. This is "an approach to running classrooms with all children, [not simply for racial/ethnic minority children] in a culturally responsive way" (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, 2008, p. 3). The MCUE suggests that this practice includes: a) "recognition of one's own cultural lens and biases" (i.e. reflecting on one's own culture and assumptions) (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, Curran, 2004*)*, b) "knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds" (i.e. learning about home culture while avoiding stereotypes) (Sheets and Gay, 1996) , c) "awareness of the broader, social, economic and political context" (i.e. racial inequity and poverty etc.)(Nieto, 2003; Noguera, 2003), d) "ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate management strategies" (i.e. support SEL while being culturally responsive)(Weinstein, Curran, Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003) and e) "commitment to building caring classroom communities" (i.e. children feel safe and cared for while learning to care for others(Rodriguez, 2005; Tomlinson & Doubet, 2005). The author also considered notions from: a) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy &Teaching (Au, 1993, Delpit, 1995, Gay, 2018, Irvine, 2003, Ladson-Billings, 1997, Moll & Gonzalez, 2004, & Nieto, 2010), b) culturally sustaining pedagogy (Pairs & Alim, 2017), c) Liberation Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and d) culturally responsive socio-emotional learning (McCallops, Barnes, & Berte, Et al., 2019).

Research Methods

The author collected data through 1) survey, 2) interview, and 3) classroom observation using the Metropolitan Center Urban Education Culturally Responsive Classroom Management Model (CRCM) as a conceptual framework (Fowler, 2004). The survey was sent via Survey Monkey to explore how these three teachers teach through the lens of cultural responsiveness. The interviews were conducted in teachers' classrooms to ascertain how their beliefs have shaped teaching Black and Brown bodies in anHS (Head Start) environment. Observational data were collected by the researchers observing the classroom five times to see how teachers interact with children and vice versa. Member checking was conducted to ensure researchers were reporting what was observed and that the participants agreed with the researchers' notes. This is to ensure the credibility of the study. Using descriptive, in vivo, motif, and narrative coding methods, we coded both during and after data collection (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2013). Initial codes that were developed in conjunction with the participants included a) professional knowledge, b) perceptions, c) insights, and d) Head Start. We revisited by considering keywords in a context that

yielded several sub-codes including a) strategies, b) working with families, d) definitions, e) self-knowledge, f) insights, and e) institutional practices and policies (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). During our third and final round of coding, we used both axial and focused coding to merge the data. Axial coding enabled us to identify patterns and inconsistencies in participant narratives. After this extensive coding process, no new codes were generated and therefore we met theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

Research Context

Head Start (HS), serving over one million children annually, was "designed to help break the cycle of poverty, providing preschool children of 'low-income' families with a comprehensive program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs" (Head Start, 2020, p. 1). They are operated by school districts, local non-profits, or community action agencies. The Community Action Program (CAP) was founded in 1964 by the Economic Opportunity Act, as part of the War on Poverty. Community Action Agencies (CAA) are non-profit agencies that offer comprehensive programs and services that aim to "fight poverty by empowering the poor" (p. 1). HS is one such program.

Although HS has been both criticized and praised, positive impacts have been documented extensively (Bauer, 2019). For example, research indicates that this comprehensive program typically yields significant growth in socio-emotional (SE) development by 1) buffering the family from stress through connection with support services; 2) promoting positive relationships between parents and children; and 3) directly enhancing children's social-emotional (SE) skills, such as self-control and managing emotions (National Head Start Association, 2012). Moreover, these gains have been shown to have an impact through at least fifth grade. In addition, empirical studies document measurable impacts of HS indicate that children who participate a) "are more prepared to participate in kindergarten classrooms" and "are less likely to participate in criminal activity as young adults" as indicated by the fact that they are 31% less likely to be incarcerated by ages 20-21 than their peers. While it is important to consider that some of these findings may be culturally construed (e.g., aggressive behavior, etc.), they do closely relate to long-term success both in school and beyond. In other words, they relate to young children's abilities to self-regulate and form healthy relationships which translate to well-being and career success (cite).

Serving 761 students in 2018, the local HS program is embedded in a CAP agency. This group serves children and families across a large county in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. It includes urban, rural, and suburban contexts. Specifically, this area provides employment and services for migrant workers and refugees and therefore is home to a rapidly diversifying population. Local HS programs served 716 diverse young children and their families in 2019. HS students speak 10 different languages (e.g., Spanish, Arabic, Nepali, etc.), and come from at least 14 different countries (e.g.,Mexico, Nepal, Morocco, Ghana, etc.). Ninety percent of participating children are living in poverty conditions (up to 130% of the poverty level), are receiving public assistance, and/or are in foster care (Caplaw.org, 2020).

Participants

Teachers were recruited through purposeful sampling (McMurray, et al., 2004). Purposeful sampling in qualitative case study research synthesis involves selecting research participants for a specific purpose and because they are potentially "information-rich" and willing to participate (Patton, 2002, p. 7; Suri, 2011). Specifically, each serves in a local Head Start classroom and demonstrates a commitment to equity and diversity as observed by the researchers. Only teachers who taught in an HS were allowed to participate in the study. The participants include the following: a) Hala Mucuy, a Latinx teacher who has ten years of experience, b) Jolie Smith, a White teacher who has 15 years of experience, and c) Dina Johnson, an African American teaching assistant with 10 years of experience. Note, all names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of teachers and all teachers are working in Head Start Programs offered through the local CAP agency. All three teachers have been observed as having a strong commitment to working with diverse children and to serving children and families living in poverty conditions. Data were collected by the author and research assistants trained in data collection and coding.

Findings of Culturally Relevant Classroom Management

Classroom management is defined as "the methods and strategies an educator uses to maintain a classroom environment that is conducive to student success and learning" (Marzano, et al, 2003). Related to this, culturally relevant classroom management is "an approach to running classrooms with all children, [not simply for racial/ethnic minority children] in a culturally responsive way" (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 1). Lynch(2020) asserts that **"**a key principle of culturally responsive classroom management is explicit instruction about rules, delivered in a caring way. If students fail to adhere to a rule, contact is initiated in a caring fashion" (2020, p. 1). In other words, a teacher should understand that the learner behaves in certain ways for certain reasons. These may include, a) a perceived injustice, b) a culture clash, c) a deferential power, and/or d) an unrealistic rule or practice which may need reconsideration. Gay (2006) asserts that culturally responsive classroom management is more than just disciplining and controlling behavior. It requires "high levels of planning, facilitating, and monitoring experiences that provide high levels of learning" (p. 343). It requires "interactive relationships" and creating an environment that is "personally comfortable, racially and ethnically inclusive, and intellectually stimulating" (p. 343). In other words, classroom management has more to do with engagement than control.

Each of the teacher-participants/collaborators describes classroom management in overlapping but varying ways. For example, Jolie shares "Textbook classroom management definition has to do with teacher pleasing and "preventing chaos" but her definition also has to do with 'focusing on the positive." Dina states that her role involves "keeping the daily routines in order" and "helping set up activities and helping the classroom run smoothly." Hala states "When the children are the ones in direction of the teacher learning in the classroom, the teacher is a facilitator with a goal in mind and keeping the behavior and organization under control." But culturally relevant classroom management extends upon this notion to include the idea that it is important "not to marginalize" any of the kids and that depends upon each child's cultural norms. Jolie shares, "Textbook classroom management definition has to do with teacher pleasing and "preventing chaos" but her definition also has to do with 'focusing on the positive." All three agree that while the basic goal of classroom management must do as Hala shared "keeping the children at the center of the learning." Moreover, for them, culturally relevant classroom management relates to considering as Jolie describes "managing the class in culturally congruent ways." The section on strategies describes specific examples of this.

Culturally Relevant Socio-emotional Skill Development

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which one a) "understands and manages emotion**s,"** b) "sets and achieves positive goals," c) "feels and shows empathy for others," d) "establishes and maintains positive relationships," and e) "makes responsible decisions." (Collaborative for Academic Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020, p. 1). SE skills include; a) self-awareness, b) self-management, c) social awareness, d) relationship skills, and e) responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020, p. 1). Moreover, teaching SE skills in a culturally relevant manner requires that a teacher considers both their own and their students' cultures.

Hala asserts working in a culturally relevant manner to support SE learning pertains to helping children to grow socio-emotionally while understanding that "different cultures view emotions differently." For example, "some cultures express emotions more quietly and some do so in a more boisterous way." She specifies that children "delve into who they are and who the other kids are who are sitting next to them." In addition, the children learn from adults how they express themselves and how to behave with other people" including kids and adults. HA explains that healthy SEL is important for children of all cultures because it will "shape their future relationships" especially when they enter elementary school and even into their adulthood.

Likewise, Jolie emphasizes the importance of SEL for children stating it involves the "ability to know their emotions first and then second to know the cause of their emotions." She explains that some children get it quickly and some kids need more help by "breaking" these ideas into "smaller concepts." Therefore, some children are working on "higher order emotions" while some are working on emotions that may be more easily identified (i.e., sad, angry, and happy etc.). Her ideas align with HAs in that she agrees that being able to identify emotions and self-regulate them are important for success in school and in life. Likewise, Dina does emphasize the importance of SEL and agrees that children have varying capabilities to develop these skills, but she also teases out how SEL is shaped by cultural expectations.

Like Hala, Dina explains that SE learning is "different for every child that comes into your program" and "some may handle it better than others." She relates that SEL means different things in different cultures. For example, Dina relates that growing up as a young African American female, her mother wanted her to "do as I say not as I do" so for her family, SE means "holding emotions close to your chest." On the other hand, the White children, and families she works with have a very different idea what is SE appropriate in that white children are often encouraged to express emotions and may even have family members who "tolerate tantrums" even in public. Therefore, children develop different ways of relating based upon the expectations of parents. Dina recognizes this. The following section addresses teacher-participants' own experiences and practices in relation to these notions.

Insights into Culture

The following section outlines each teacher's insights into both their own and their students' cultures. These observations are particularly relevant not as a static recommendation for viewing culture but to help the reader understand elements of culture and cultural nuances that are displayed in a classroom. It also will give insight into the types of observations that teachers make in an early childhood classroom and how these teachers make sense of culture in relation to serving their students and families.

Hala emphasizes the importance of learning about her students' cultures and her own. She states "It's important to get to know what cultures you have in the classroom before you even start the school year. For example, I have children who are from Nepal, Central American Countries, European Countries, and the United States. When I learn about their cultural-related behavior and their family dynamics, it helps me better understand the child's behavior in the classroom. She adds.

"I do think that it's helpful for us to know where we stand as teachers explore and reflect on it in relation to development. For example, I know from my own experience that a lot of Hispanics tend to not attend parent conferences because they don't know the language. I used to translate for my mom."

Hala's comments reflect that she has critically reflected on her own and her students' home culture. Dina echoes Hala's sentiments stating.

"With each and every kid it's different on how you handle working with them and their families, each one is different and each one has a variety of strengths and needs." Therefore, Dina and Hala both affirm that it is important to be reflective and open to diverse perspectives. Jolie insights extend upon these ideas. Jolie states

"it's important to know your children very well, for example, I have 18 kiddos in my class, 50% of my students are Spanish speaking, a few are Nepali, and 2 are Swahili speaking. But I need to know more than just that, I need to find out more. In some sort of way, I still must try to learn from my kids and let them teach me about what they know about themselves and their home culture and country. I want to know what they are proud about and what their families' traditions are."

In this way, Jolie demonstrates that she understands that each child's culture is unique to them, and learning about these nuances takes time and effort. She also understands that there is no one culture shaped by living in poverty. She relates.

Different kids' experiences are impacted by their culture, and even how parents relate to them may be different. Children who are in poverty generally have parents in stressful situations. Some kids are in foster care, some have extended families raising them because of housing needs, and there are different rules for each adult. Most kids' parents have different rules than those in childcare. Behavior is judged and shaped by the setting the child is in. Trauma-informed care is important too. If you don't sleep all night, you are not going to concentrate on school. If you don't eat the food at school because it is culturally different, then you are still going to be hungry.

Jolie's comment relates to the importance of understanding how both culture and socio-economic conditions impact the way a young child behaves in school. If a teacher is not conscious, they could miss these important cues and misinterpret a child's needs. Jolie extends upon these notions. Jolie says there are differences in the way diverse cultures experience differences between home and school. For example,

> "I had a boy from Nepal who was constantly climbing on the shelves, and I didn't understand why. Then I went to his home and saw that he didn't have much furniture and so he needed to learn how to do this or in other words explore what furniture is and how to navigate it."

Jolie also reaffirms Hala's comments about knowing your own culture in relation to your students' culture. She is quoted as saying;

> "Everyone has biases and mindsets from the way they are raised. It's important to value your own roots. But it's also important to know that Badak's (pseudonym) roots are different from Markisha's (pseudonym) roots."

While Jolie understands that each child's culture is specific to them, she also encourages teachers to be sympathetic to children's experiences navigating the "culture of schooling. She states,

"Many of my students are navigating a foreign culture in school even those who are born here in the United States." She adds "Being in school can be a culturally different context for kids. I give them a lot of credit for learning in an environment that's different from home. You could take me out of my house and send me to another country. It would be stressful."

Understanding the challenges children face in school can help them not only be sympathetic but also minimize oppressive dynamics in school. Dina also describes her observations of her students' cultures in relation to her own. In her case, being an African-American woman, she often deals with bias. For example, she explains,

> "I have experienced cultural bias working in early childhood education. The majority of teachers are white and when assistants come in, they are typically Hispanic or African American so a lot of parents would rather speak to the teacher and director. On top of that, I am female so when we have parents who are from countries that elevate men, then the parents come in and want to talk to the one in charge. They ask for the teacher, and when she is a woman, then they ask for her supervisor. In other words, we had a parent who was from a country where women are deemed beneath men. He sees his son as a prince and therefore, doesn't have to listen to his teachers. I don't let this get to me. My job is to be there for the children. You can talk to my supervisor if you want to."

Dina's comments are particularly relevant to diverse teachers' experiences. Often, teachers who are from underrepresented groups may understand children and their needs extensively may not be heard. This is an area that deserves further research. In addition, Dina shares keen insights about working with children and families who have been underserved in school. In building relationships with people of color and their children, it is important to treat them as a whole person. For example, Dina explains.

> "My niece and nephew are quite different. My niece doesn't say much, and my nephew is the opposite, he is seen as an aggressor. As far as kids go, he was seen with bias. If an African American boy is aggressive then he's going to be labeled. In truth, he needed speech and

language support and because of that, he wasn't able to explain himself. He needs adults who understand that his behavior relates to his needs".

Dina's comments reflect her understanding that children from historically underserved groups are often "misunderstood." On the other hand, she also describes how white children's behavior is often privileged despite demonstrating behaviors that may be deemed challenging in a classroom.

> "White behavioral norms and expectations are typically less structured. For example, in their household mom is basically OK with what kids say. It'slike OK go ahead do it, do whatever you want. In contrast, in my culture, people expect children not to embarrass their parents by throwing tantrums or yelling in public."

In this way, Dina helps teachers understand how different parents have different expectations for behavior and they also have varying ways of working with teachers depending not only on the parents but also on the teachers' identity factors. This adds to the complexity of the teachers' role.

Structure, Environment, and Routines

Culturally Relevant Classroom Management must include consideration of the symbolic elements of the classroom including the visual imagery that is present, the structure of the day, the classroom environment, and daily routines (Apple & Apple, 2018). The curriculum of a classroom includes more than just written lesson plans, it also encompasses the posted images on Wales, the books in the library, and even the classroom routines and "implied" priorities demonstrated by adults. For example, Hala refers to "different kinds of toys we have including multicultural baby dolls and books." She also asserts that read-aloud should not just be focused on the "typical white child." She recommends that read-aloud books should include more African-American girls and that "different cultures are represented in the play area, dress-up area, and even the kitchen center." She also recommends that multiple languages be represented in the classroom. For example, areas and items present should be labeled in multiple languages AND they should all be spelled correctly. This requires teachers to consult with native speakers to ensure that "at least the home languages of all children in the class should be represented. This can happen by labeling toys, centers, and everyday items in the classroom." It is important that teachers not just attempt to represent multiple languages and cultures, they must also consult native speakers and cultural insiders to ensure that culture and language are represented appropriately in the classroom. This also relates to the way that teachers interpret and implement required curricular models and teaching methods. For example, Jolie discusses ways that Positive Based Intervention and Supports (PBIS) can be implemented in culturally congruent ways. Jolie says;

> "I have concluded that (PBIS) works for some kids but not all. I understand it and for some kids, I do it to a T and some other kids will laugh at me and say 'are you kidding me, why are you talking that way to me. They will laugh at you; I have kids who throw shoes at me. I try, it doesn't work for certain kids, and it all depends on the kind of way that they are treated at home. Some parents have been a little rough with them and some are extremely lenient. I have learned to know which kids PBIS works for and which it doesn't. It becomes clear the first few days of school."

Jolie's insights relate to the fact that some strategies, even behaviorally based ones, work well for some children and not as well for others. In addition, it is important for teachers to be "flexible enough to understand which strategies work for which kids and which ones do not" Moreover, teachers need to learn how to revise and adapt these strategies to implement them in culturally congruent ways. Both Jolie and Dina describe ways they modified PBIS to meet the needs of culturally diverse learners. For example, Jolie states that "classic" PBIS has to do with "bucket filling" meaning that children who demonstrate "positive behavior" get a pom-pom or token added to their "bucket" or cup. Both Dina and Jolie have revised this behavioral system to include a deeper understanding of positive behavior by providing children with the opportunity to "regulate their own behavior and reward positive peer SE competencies. Both Dina and Jolie explain that they do this by "modeling positive behavior" and encouraging children to "reward both themselves and others" by noticing and documenting positive SE behaviors. These

methods relate specifically to self-regulation and developing positive relationships with self and others (CASEL, 2012).

Managing Expectations and Social Interaction

As mentioned previously, culturally responsive, and sustaining methodologies fundamentally require creating "positive and reciprocal relationships" with children and families (Bakersville, 2011). Likewise, creating safe and caring relationships requires a) being dedicated to learning about culture and b) adjusting one's behavior and demeanor to as Jolie describes "meeting children and families where they are." For example, Hala explains.

> "Some students don't speak up as much when an adult is speaking. Some remain quiet. Some speak out and sometimes they don't wait for a prompt to speak. Sometimes their play is quite different from what we expect. It's important to get to know these ways of being in the classroom".

Hala understands that while children may be in a common place developmentally, culture impacts the way they show up in a classroom. This relates to the way that they attend to direction, respond to direction, and even the way they play.

> "Play not only varies depending on culture, but it also even relates to gender. Boys tend to play in ways that are different from girls. Boys often don't socialize with girls, especially boys from male-dominated societies. For example, I often hear boys say that they don't like to play with girls, but they will engage in parallel play with them. In other words, they will play next to girls but not actively engage with them. Boys in my class often like to play the boss but eventually, they learn that girls are fun to play with and they like to engage with them directly".

Hala notices that culture in the classroom impacts the way that all identity factors are interpreted including gender and gender roles. Hala's ideas relate closely to notions of Intersectionality and Intersectional positionality in that identity is layered and complex (Crenshaw, 2017).Jolie extends these notions in that she states

> "I try to work with the way I speak with some of my students that speak different first languages than the one that I speak (English). A lot of my kids are from non-English speaking backgrounds, and these are the kids who learn more from my facial expressions than what I say. Sometimes they think that I am mad, and I must be very self-aware of my facial expressions for those kids that don't speak English. I want them to understand that I am here for them, I am here to help you (them). That requires that I be careful about the way I speak, the way my facial expressions look, and even the way I carry myself".

Jolie's ideas emphasize that culture can be communicated in subtle ways including facial expressions and gestures. Similarly, Hala describes how she modifies her tone to connect with children.

> "I modify the tone of voice I use from an incredibly soft tone to a firm one. Most kids relate to one over the other. I modify my tone depending on what the children need. I also modify my expectations as to whether kids stay in the same spot or roam from space to space because there will be chaos if I don't understand different kids' needs for tone and different kids' needs for physical movement and freedom. Some kids need to roam, some kids need to be near me, and some kids need to play with toys by themselves in a quiet spot."

Moreover, while it is important to consider even these nuances, she also describes ways to connect with children and their families.

> "I try to learn a word or two from their home languages and what kind of foods they eat. This helps them know that I do care about them and that they are valued. It's interesting how important food is to kids. When I include food from home cultures and enable kids to share in foods that they eat at home, it helps them feel cared for and to get to know one another but this is tricky for

> example, some kids are not allowed to eat pork and some kids are. Some kids have food allergies to milk, wheat, and nuts and some don't. But when one kid eats something, they are all interested in trying it."

Jolie's statement emphasizes the importance of connecting to children's culture within the sometimes-rigid parameters of early childhood education given "daycare regulations" and "state requirements." Likewise, she describes ways that she connects to children's cultural experiences by considering lighting and furniture arrangement that may engage children or distract them because some children don't even have furniture at home and then they come to school and don't understand how furniture works. Some kids need to explore what furniture is for and how it works in our classroom. They may climb on furniture because they don't have much of it and they want to explore why it is needed. At the same time, we must ensure they are safe. So, some kids may climb on shelves because they don't understand that shelves are not climbing structures, they are used to store our toys and books.

While European American culture has certain expectations for children's behavior, the way that people interact in the early childhood setting, culture also influences the way that adults interact. Jolie shares how difficult it is to work with adults in her environment.

> "My assistant is African American Female and a boy kept calling my teaching assistant 'the black girl.' Over time talking and interacting, you start to break down the stereotypes and bias and they see people as people, also with special needs. At your house how do you do this? And honestly, I had to deal with my own feelings about how inappropriate and disrespectful this was. Yet, our student was a child and didn't have bad intentions. He just had a limited understanding of the significant role my assistant plays, how to show appropriate respect to her, and that my assistant is his teacher".

Jolie's quote relates to the complex nature of identity politics in an early childhood classroom. Not only are the children's cultures and identities relevant to consider but the teachers' and teaching assistants' identities are relevant as well.

Educational Activities

Culturally relevant curriculum and classroom activities are particularly important to consider when working with diverse and underserved young children and their families as reiterated by Hala from her quote.

> "My second language is Spanish, so I read to the children in Spanish. Sometimes they laugh because they don't understand. I also Invite parents to read in their native language. It's important for them and their children that their culture and language are respected. The books we read and the languages that they are read in reflect not just one specific type of way of looking. We read different books, we listento different languages, and we try to blend them into our classroom".

For Hala, language is an important facet of culture that can and should be a part of her classroom for all children. On the other hand, Jolie considers multiple ways of representing culture and emotion. For example, she uses cards with pictures and words that not only depict "lower and higher order emotions" she also considers the myriad ways in which emotions can be expressed in "culturally relevant ways" in that some cultures "reinforce more reserved ways of expressing emotions" and some adhere to "more overt and loud ways of expressing oneself." This quote affirms the idea that although varying cultures have expectations for the way emotions are demonstrated, that it is important for children to be able to identify their emotions and regulate them in a way that is culturally congruent and self-actualized (Karatas & Oral, 2915).

Exploring Culture

All three teachers agree that culture varies both within and across local and international contexts. They also describe ways they have worked with diverse students from various cultures. One specific way that has helped the children learn about one another has been to learn from and with each other and their

families. For example, all three teachers implemented activities where they explored each child's culture through curricular activities. For example, Hala creates an "all about me" book with her students. They create a family album, where each child shares a picture of themselves and their caregivers, siblings and/or other family members. They discuss family traditions and invite family members to visit their classroom to celebrate relevant holidays and celebrations.

Jolie and Dina both facilitate "family culture celebrations" where each child creates a family flag depicting things that are important to their family and share artifacts that are relevant to them such as clothes and pieces of art. Dina and Jolies' cultural sharing days also include parents, families, and community members. Each child gets a "passport" and "get stamps" when they "visit" their friends' cultures. In this way children get to learn about themselves and one another while including their family and being "experts of their own culture." It cannot be emphasized enough that "diverse people need to be "the experts of their own culture instead of being told what they need and how to be successful." Although this is not simple it is important that teachers work with children and families to explore how culture impacts learning and development, especially in relation to SEL.

Implications

The implications of this study are extensive and complex. They relate closely to Smith, Fisher, and Frye (2015) who assert that one assumption underpinning positive discipline is that responding to a student's misbehavior is not as efficacious as addressing him or her as a developing human being. It is an educative (Nolan 2006), rather than punitive, approach to discipline. Classroom behavior will presumably improve if students are explicitly taught how to express emotions, manage relationships with peers and teachers, and solve problems (McCluskey et al. 2007). In this pedagogical light, the disciplinary moment shifts from an impediment to education and becomes an instrument of education. Discipline becomes an opportunity for a teachable and even a transformative moment (Hamilton 2008, p. 7). Classroom management can provide teachers and children with teachable moments or with situations where "violence" occurs (Johnson, Et al., 2019).

Early childhood educators who are committed to culturally sustaining practices are particularly well suited to lead the way toward more liberatory educational experiences for young children. They can and should be honored and included in this important work. Specifically, their insights on culturally relevant classroom management and culturally sustaining socioemotional learning can further enhance the experiences and outcomes for young children, particularly those who have been underrepresented and underserved in schools. Additional research, practice-based literature, and professional development are needed.

Limitations

This study has limitations in terms of the small sample size that participated in the study and not addressing the intersectionality of gender, class, and culture in early childhood settings. The authors are examining these issues of intersectionality in furtherance of their research topic. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalizable to a larger sample size. Despite these limitations, the key findings point to the fact that elements of culture serve as critical drivers or barriers to shaping young learners in environments of learning.

Conclusion

This paper reports on a study that sought to explore how teachers' cultural backgrounds affect the way they teach in an HS classroom. Three HS classrooms observed had a majority of students who were students of color disproportionate to teachers who were white. Ten percent of students enrolled in the HS classroom were students with exceptionalities. The primary purpose was to find out how culturally responsive pedagogy was being employed and how teachers related to the families of children in their classroom based their identities and self-reflection. Three teachers of different nationalities (American, Hispanic, African American) who serve primarily students of color, answered survey questions. The

overall results indicated that injustices exist in our classrooms especially when there is a cultural disconnect. Themes that were found to underpin meeting out harsher punishments to students of color without considering cultural nuances include linguistic challenges, gender, culture, and under-representation. Frederick Douglas, as attributed by Greenberg (1998) asserts "It is easier to build strong children than fix broken men" (p. 7).

This study draws attention to how our current socio-political context underscores the critical moment we are living in. The Early Childhood context is both a site of hope and responsibility. This study revealed that we owe it to our children to work consciously with and for them in their classrooms and communities. Hala states

"One of the reasons I went into HS was to serve the Black and Hispanic community. They do need that help where kids can identify with a teacher. Some of them have language barriers and, because I speak multiple languages, especially Spanish, I can help with language barriers."

It is also important to note that not only do these teachers affirm their work verbally, but they also have all been observed and documented implementing these ideals in their classrooms and communities.

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