Use of Racial Identity Development Theory to Explore Cultural Competence among Early Childhood Educators

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In order to explore early childhood educators' cultural competence through a lens of racial identity development theory, a case study was conducted with four White Kindergarten teachers. Participants were surveyed and interviewed to understand their racial identity development as well as perspectives of teaching culturally diverse early childhood students. Findings suggest that representative characteristics of racial identities are evident among White early childhood educators, and that these characteristics influence their conceptualizations of teaching and understanding culturally diverse young students. Thus, authors recommend that racial identity development be considered as a crucial element of teacher professional developments in order to enhance their cultural competence.

Introduction

Despite continuing changes in the demographics of school-aged students, the majority of teachers in the U.S. public schools are White, female, suburban and middle-class (Hodgkinson, 2002; Zumwalt & Carig, 2008). In particular, the differences in gender, class, and racial/cultural background between teachers and students in low-resourced schools have often created misunderstandings and conflicts due to poor conceptualizations of student needs and abilities (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Irvine, 2003; Wilson, Floden, & Ferini-Mundy, 2001). As such, there is urgent need to develop and support teachers' cultural competence, which has been linked to students' increased academic performance, self-esteem, and overall well-being (Banks, 2004; Cummins, 1996; Diaz-Greenberg, 2001; Foster, Lewis, & Onafowra, 2003; Howard, 2006; Karunungan, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally competent teachers can serve as agents of change in improving student outcomes (Garmon, 2004; Nieto, 2000). Early childhood educators are no exception. Indeed, growing diversity in young student populations as well as the resultant academic, developmental, and interpersonal outcomes is a frequent challenge.

For teachers to develop the cultural competence necessary to reach diverse students, Carter and Goodwin (1994) recommended that teachers should first understand their teaching beliefs and practices. To begin this process, teachers should reflect on their own identity development and consider how their perspectives could influence their teaching and interaction with students, especially when working with students whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own (Howard, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In spite of these recommendations, few earlier studies have focused on White teachers' multicultural teaching experiences and competencies aligned with racial identity development theory. Few reported how

White practicing early childhood educators perceive their racial identities and, importantly, how those identities impact their beliefs and instructional perspectives. Hence, the authors begin with a review of the literature on White racial identity development theory and then present the findings from a case study that provide evidence of representative characteristics among White Kindergarten teachers at varying statuses of racial identity development. Finally, implications and suggestions for teacher education are discussed.

Background

Many Whites argue that racism no longer exists in U.S. society and believe that race and culture are relatively unimportant, particularly given the recent high-level achievements of non-Whites (Newport, Jones, Saad, Gallup, & Israel, 2009). Nonetheless, along with the need for focused education for teachers, there is a growing demand for teachers to recognize that they are 'teaching what they are' (Banks, 1994; Howard, 2006; Nieto, 2000; Tatum, 1997). Scholars purport that teaching is often based upon where teachers came from (i.e., how they were previously taught) and where they are now (i.e., what they know, believe, and value). In short, teachers either consciously or unconsciously reveal their identities to the students they teach. In a study conducted with African-American teachers, Irvine (2003) found that these teachers defined teaching from a more empathetic perspective, such as caring, other mothering, and believing than their White counterparts. This perspective of teaching originated from their racial/cultural backgrounds. Not surprisingly, African-American students performed better at schools when taught by African-American teachers. Irvine explained this phenomenon as 'teaching with a cultural eye'. She suggested that, if teachers learn to look through the cultural eye, they are able to see different perspectives among students and view diversity as an asset. To this end, efforts continue to help teachers effectively teach diverse students. Teacher educators employed various methods to foster change in teachers' thinking, attitudes, and behaviors regarding racial/cultural diversity and sensitivity. Yet, these efforts yielded mixed results, often because they focused on addressing content knowledge rather than on the teachers' process of cross-cultural learning (McAllister & Irvine, 2000).

Cross-cultural learning and cultural competency among teachers is a topic of study around the world (e.g., Australia, Canada, United Kingdom), as teacher educators attempt to incorporate racial identity development theory into teacher preparation programs (Aveling, 2006; Horton & Scott, 2004; Johnson, 2002; LeCompte & McCray, 2002; Rezai-Rashti & Soloman, 2004). Across these studies, findings suggest that, in spite of the challenges of initiating conversation about the impact of race and culture in teaching with White teachers or teacher candidates, the results are beneficial and thus the explicit efforts should continue.

White Racial Identity Development Theory

Borrowed from the discipline of counseling, racial identity refers to a "sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1990, p.3). The concept of racial identity development was initially applied to understanding people of color who were assumed to have distinct cultural heritages (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1988). Although this approach was promising because it facilitated White counselors' interactions with people of color, many experts began to emphasize the need for and understanding of White racial identity development as well. A number of models were proposed to understand White racial identity development as well as its implications (Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1984, 1990, 1995; Ponterotto, 1988; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994). Hardiman (1982) built upon the generic stages of social identity theory by studying autobiographies of White participants, and presented a conceptual

basis of White racial identity development with the five distinct stages: Lack of Social Consciousness; Acceptance; Resistance; Redefinition; and Internalization. Importantly, Hardiman focused on racism as a central issue of Whites' identity (Sue & Sue, 2003).

One of the most widely accepted models of White racial identity was proposed by Helms (1984, 1990, 1995) who assumed racism as an integral issue of White racial identity. Further she believed that the development of a healthy White racial identity requires progressing through two phases: (a) abandonment of racism and (b) defining a non-racist White identity. She eventually proposed six specific White racial identity statuses. In the first status, Contact, Whites are unaware of racism and discrimination, believe that everyone has an equal chance for success, and may have minimal experiences with people of color. The second status, Disintegration, occurs when a person becomes conflicted over irresolvable racial moral dilemmas. As Whites become conscious of their Whiteness, they may experience dissonance, conflict, guilt, helplessness, or anxiety. Reintegration, the third status, can best be characterized as a regression when Whites return to a basic belief of White superiority and minority inferiority. In the fourth status, Pseudoindependence, there are conscious and deliberate attempts by Whites to understand racial differences and interact with people of color. However, these attempts remain within the intellectual domain and do not yet reach the affective domain. In the fifth status, Immersion/Emersion, Whites demonstrate an increasing willingness to redefine their Whiteness and confront their prejudices. There is also an increased experiential and affective understanding that was heretofore lacking. Finally, in the last status, Autonomy, Whites become knowledgeable about racial differences, value the diversity, are no longer uncomfortable with the experiential reality of race, and establish a non-racist attitude. It is important to note that racial identity is often situationally influenced; thus, one's status should not be considered static but fluid as well as context-driven (Helms, 1995).

Implications of Racial Identity Development in Teacher Education

As a topic of research, the influence of racial identity was initially sparked in the field of vocational studies. Block, Roberson, and Neuger (1995) studied White employees to examine the relationship between their attitudes and reactions to interracial situations at work. Their findings suggested that those individuals with high levels of Autonomy characteristics had more positive reactions to interracial situations at work whereas those individuals characterized by high levels of Disintegration and Reintegration characteristics had more negative reactions. In another study, Ottavi, Pope-Davis, and Ding (1994) tested the White counselor trainees' racial identity development and their self reported cultural competencies. Findings indicated that White racial identity explained variability in cultural competencies beyond that accounted for by demographic, educational, and clinical variables. These outcomes suggest that there could be a correlation between one's racial identity and one's attitudes toward other racial groups, attitudes toward complex moral issues, such as racism, equality, and social justice, as well as cultural competencies (McAllister & Irvine, 2000).

Teacher education research includes studies examining the effects of teacher training as well as the relationship between racial identity and cultural competencies in educational settings. While the idea of White racial identity was not directly utilized, Sleeter's (1992) use of narrative anecdotes revealed changes in teachers' behaviors. Teachers who participated in a two-year in-service program showed an increased attention to African-American students as well as an increased use of cooperative learning activities. Similarly, in a study by Lawrence and Tatum (1997), teachers who participated in a seven-month professional development sessions

reported changes in their thinking, attitudes, and behaviors regarding race. Specifically, most of the teachers who began with attitudes that reflected racism-oriented identity statuses, based on Helm's theory, moved toward more positive anti-racist identity statuses and took some forms of action to combat racism. Other scholars also identified a causal relationship between the interventions and the changes in White participants' racial identity (Brown, Parham, & Yonker, 1996; Neville, Heppner, Louie, Thompson, Brooks, & Baker, 1996). All these findings further suggest the need for multicultural courses or trainings in order to facilitate Whites' racial identity development.

Methods

This qualitative investigation utilized a case study approach to examine the how's and why's of the participants' worldviews (Yin, 2003). The first author of this paper and the principal investigator of the study is an Asian female early childhood teacher educator. The second author is an African-American female counselor educator with a research emphasis on multicultural counseling and the third author is a White female teacher educator with a special interest in multicultural education. As such, the investigators carried their ethno-cultural beliefs and engendered experiences into the study. Their assumptions shaped the ways in which they viewed, understood, and analyzed the data.

Following approval from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the local school districts, participants were recruited through a mail invitation, and were compensated with a $20 gift card. The participants included four White Kindergarten teachers in four different public elementary schools located in the southeast regions of the U.S. (see Table 1). Data sources included self-report ratings on the White Racial Consciousness Development Scale-Revised (WRCDS-R) (Lee et al. 2007) and two semi-structured individual interviews. The WRCDS-R, based on Helms' model, included four statuses

(contact; reintegration; pseudoindependence; autonomy), and presented the respondent's prominent racial identity status. Interview questions were developed based upon a review of the literature and in consultation with experts in the field of multicultural counseling and early childhood teacher education. The principal investigator conducted the interviews over a two-week period. Interviews offered participants the opportunity to share their personal and instructional experiences related to race and culture as well as to debrief their thoughts of multicultural education at the Kindergarten level. Each interview took place in the participating teachers' classrooms, and audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the interviewer.

Grounded theory approach guided the data analyses such that it was both descriptive and explanatory to identify emerging themes. Data analysis procedures involved reviewing the transcript for accuracy and then highlighting phrases that were descriptive of participants' experiences. Subsequently, key phrases were highlighted and organized into summary statements in the margin of the transcript. Finally, domains of meaning were created from the summary statements and then parted with related quotes. To ensure credibility of the investigation, peer examination, member checking, and confirmatory analysis were used (Creswell, 2008). For peer examination, the principal investigator employed the assistance of an early childhood teacher educator to review the data and themes. Verification of results was also attained through on-going member checks by sharing the findings with the participants. Confirmatory analysis, or audit review evaluation, is a method of comparing the findings to what has actually been reported in the literature (Stringer & Dwyer, 2005). An audit was used to compare what researchers had explored in the literature to the findings in this study. The extracted themes are identified followed by the supporting narratives in the next section (pseudonyms used to maintain anonymity).

Findings

Stories of Contact Status

One theme emerged from the teachers' narratives that mirrored previous studies was their limited cross-racial/cultural experiences, especially from a personal stance. Further, the lack of experiences appeared to limit the perspectives of those teachers once they entered a classroom with students from diverse racial/cultural backgrounds. These limited perspectives created peculiar tendencies. One tendency identified was to ignore students' different backgrounds and take a color-blind approach. When teachers were asked to identify their student population by demographics, some admitted their lack of awareness without embarrassment. Another tendency was to depreciate the importance of multicultural education in early childhood and deny their personal influence on students.

Julia: I was born and grew up in a very sheltered environment in the Midwest region of the U.S. The school district I grew up, they were all White. Actually, all the way up to the middle school and high school, I didn't go to school with any Black kids. And when I went to college, there were a few percentages of people from different cultural groups. But still I went along with girls who I was friends with since high school and we lived at the dorm together. … Throughout all of my teaching experiences across different states, I wouldn't say that I've encountered diverse children very much. I guess I had a kind of protective teaching environment in that sense. Especially this is a very much community based school.… You just every now and then have a child who's Spanish, but overall we don't have a real diversified culture thing.

Helen: In terms of my current student ratio, I don't even think that way to group my kids like that. … [in terms of multicultural education] Maybe in older grades you might have to think more about those issues, but in Kindergarten I don't think there's that much. Everything's wonderful when you're five. And regardless of what grade, in education, everything is theory based and researched-based. Yes I do have my own beliefs but I think my teaching more fits into what I learned as far as what's appropriate for the child or not.

Susan: In terms of multicultural teaching, I'm not sure. Besides that Black history month, and I guess it's because it's February and my mind is filled up with that, but I still teach the same here as I taught in the other school. Whenever I see the kids I don't think I really want to divide them into different racial groups. I mean they are just kids, and they are only five, they are babies.

Stories of Disintegration Status

The major theme that distinguished this status from the Contact status was the teachers' emerging consciousness of racial/cultural differences, often in a form of conflict or confusion. Moreover, with these realizations, the teachers experienced dilemmas in teaching diverse group of students.

Mary: I'm confused because I think it's definitely a society that gives me, just as a White female, more advantages. I don't think when I walk in to a store, anybody looks at me in any kind of a suspicious way. But I heard from a few people who I've been friends with had a few people being stereotyped just by walking into a restaurant.

Susan: When I was teaching at primarily Black school before, which I did for 5 years, I remember I tried to cover as much as I could for those kids. For example, I wanted them to learn about many famous Black person such as Martin Luther King. Whereas, here, it's more of an issue how much do I get into Black history month. I don't want to overfill the children too much that their parents are getting upset. In January, I taught them about Martin Luther King, I touched

the highlights - this is what he fought for, this is what he believed, and he was a good person, and then I dropped it there. Again, this is a very racial [predominantly White] area and I don't want their parents to get ticked off of what their kids say everyday and finally say "I'm getting tired of hearing what that Black man did". Then even though I teach them good things, their parents are going to wipe off couple statements. So here I'm trying to find a balance, which is not always easy.

Stories of Reintegration Status

Even with the realization of contradictions, it is not uncommon for Whites to return to an earlier status and refuse to think about race and its implications anymore. For example, when prompted to think about advantages they had in this country, some of the teachers became defensive and claimed their innocence of being White. These ideas of White superiority and minority inferiority became evident in the lack of understanding of minority students in a classroom setting.

Helen: I don't think I had any incidents that made me feel I was taking advantage of being a White person in this society. I didn't do anything to get anything - I'm just me. … This year, I have a boy who speaks Arabic and he's actually having a difficult time socializing with other children. And what I've learned is that in the Arabic culture, boys are babied. I think that's their culture, and due to that he's having a difficult time because there's no independence or responsibility at home and you need those in school.

Julia: Actually, the first school I taught in SC was maybe 50% Black, and that was a situation I've never dealt with. I couldn't even understand the children. I couldn't even interpret what they're saying. There seems to be a language barrier just because of the way they talked. It was a small rural area, so almost all of the families have developed their own language, and it was just so hard.

Stories of Pseudoindependence Status

A turning point toward this status was the awareness of their White privilege. Further, this awareness transferred into their understanding of importance to develop cross-racial/cultural relationships.

Mary: I probably get a lot more opportunities than other people. I think there's definitely an unconscious favoritism in such kind of a way. But probably it's not equal for people from other races. … Both my parents were teachers, and as a child I used to go to the elementary school where my mother worked. It was a very diverse school, both racially and socioeconomically, and I remember thinking it was normal. Reflecting back, I have to think that such experiences helped me better understand others from different background than myself. I mean, it at least eliminated many wrong worries I could have had otherwise.

Susan: I grew up with quite a few African American friends, and even admiring Cosby family as my dream family. Now I think I'm fairly comfortable having African American kids in my classrooms maybe because I've had more experience with that particular group. Even these days, my African-American friends frequently come over to my house, we raise cows together, we bottle feed the babies, and that doesn't bother me. I feel comfortable with it.

Stories of Immersion/Emersion Status

The themes that distinguished this status are the affective understandings about students from different backgrounds together with increased consciousness of their cultural competency.

Susan: I had a few incidents at the other school where the populations were mostly African-Americans and I was the minority. It was somewhat scary when after the gathering you walk out the school, it's dark, and you don't see another White face in the parking lot. I could

imagine what the other people must have felt in such situations.

Mary: I've taken classes about multicultural teaching, we've had quite a few trainings along those lines, and I thought I was fairly knowledgeable of people of other races. But after talking to you, maybe I don't know as much as I should. If I had to deal with children from more different cultures than what I have now, I would definitely make more efforts to learn about different cultures where the children are coming from.

Stories of Autonomy Status

When the teachers were asked for reactions to any discriminatory comments they heard or events they encountered, two teachers represented the theme of non-racist White identity. They further demonstrated the themes of appreciation of multicultural education as well as the awareness of the impact of their identity on teaching students.

Susan: Oh yes, I would say something about that. Especially being a mom, I wouldn't want my daughter to grow up listening to certain words or experiencing certain things. Maybe I'm more sensitive or protective for that reason now than I used to be. I simply hope the world would be better for my child, and hope to do whatever I can within my control.

Mary: It's probably going to differ who it was and where it was. Perhaps if I was in a public situation and I hear a stranger saying something, I'll probably keep walking. But, if I'm comfortable with the people, I would say that's inappropriate. I try to put my opinion in there. … I don't think that we're all the same. I don't think even all White people are the same is the fair statement. Same as all African-American people are the same is not the fair statement. While it is important to know where your children are coming from in order to help them appropriately, I think it is equally important to remember that each

situation and each people is different regardless of what race or culture. To me that's the central message of multicultural education at this age. Letting them know that we're all different but same at the same time, and that being different is an okay thing. … I think there are some things about me that just fall into the classroom like I act that way and I do things that way. I think there are more things that I may not directly teach, but just comes out and influences the classroom community. So I think it's important to know what you're doing and saying in the classroom, and also why you think so.

Discussion

While the importance of one's racial identity development originally emerged from the field of counseling and therapy, its implications are no less important in the field of teacher education (Aveling, 2006; Carter & Goodwin, 1994; McAllister & Irvine, 2000). In this case study, the authors investigated how White teachers' racial identity impacts not only their personal beliefs but also their instructional beliefs and perspectives as early childhood educators. It was found that these four teachers' White racial identities are evident, and that these identities do influence their conceptualizations of teaching and understanding culturally diverse young students. In addition, as can be found in their narratives, while these teachers' prominent identity status was identified by WRCDS-R instrument, all of them concurrently represented multiple statuses of White racial identity development outlined by Helms. Moreover, those statuses were often not in the sequence of Helms' model. Overall developmental approach (i.e., oblivious to awareness, racism to non-racist) seem to be arguable, and some characteristics may be understood by considering each teacher's age and recent societal changes, however, there is a need to better explain such variations. Findings also support Helms' (1995) notion that each individual's racial identity development is not always linear; rather progression along statuses is multifaceted and situationally influenced.

Nonetheless, White racial identity development theory provides significant conceptual insights for both research and practice of multicultural teacher education. As the findings from this case study indicate, White racial identity development is an essential component for teachers to understand who they are as teachers. It is noteworthy that scholars asserted the importance of self-recognition and awareness as a key prerequisite for effective multicultural teaching (Banks, 1994, 2004; Foster, Lewis, & Onafowra, 2003; Gay, 2000; Han & Thomas, 2010; Nieto, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Banks articulated that individuals do not become sensitive and open to different ethnic groups until and unless they develop a positive sense of self, including an awareness and acceptance of their own ethnic group. Therefore, it is important to reiterate that "racial identity theory and research inform us that the task of developing effective skill, competence, and awareness about race and culture is something all educators, White and non-White alike, must undertake" (Carter & Goodwin, 1994, p.324). Not only does understanding of the theory help teachers self-examine their identities, it also assists teacher educators to identify where teachers are located along the continuum of racial identity development in order to differentiate the support for those in different statuses (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Johnson, 2002; McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Professional development programs intended to increase teachers' cultural competencies should intentionally attend to the impact that these programs could have on the participants' racial identity development (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997). Additionally, the structure of the intervention should be designed to provide support as well as challenge participants to reflect the nature of the cross-cultural learning, and not to merely share disconnected contents about other cultures.

In sum, many researchers reported that higher statuses of White racial identity were associated with higher levels of cultural capacities, such as an increased ability to accept racial difference, less racist behavior, and an apprecia-tion for diversity, all of which could be considered effective multicultural teaching competencies. Although reflecting on and challenging one's identity is a life-long process, embedding racial identity development theory into the multicultural courses for early childhood teacher candidates as well as professional development for practicing teachers can help decrease their resistance while increasing their knowledge and skills in order to become effective educators of culturally diverse students (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Rezai-Rashti & Solomon, 2004).

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Tables

Table 1
Participant Information

Participant	Age	Years of Teaching	Educational Background	School Location & Environment	WRCDS-R Status
Julia	54	25	Bachelors in Elementary and Early Childhood Education	Small suburban; Majority of students are Whites	Contact
Helen	42	7	Bachelors in Early Childhood Education	Upper middle class neighborhood; Majority of students are from affluent White families	Reintegration
Susan	35	10	Bachelors in Elementary and Early Childhood Education	Very sheltered rural area; Majority of students are Whites	Pseudoindependence
Mary	23	0-1	Masters in Early Childhood Education	Major college town; Diverse student demographics (e.g., at least 6 different racial backgrounds)	Autonomy