Transformative Multiculturalism in Family Literacy Programs

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Abstract

The United States has an entrenched multigenerational illiteracy and low-literacy problem (Lunze & Paasche-Orlow, 2014) that has inspired three decades of family literacy programs. However, family literacy programming is often planned without consideration of the forms of social and systemic oppression faced by their target demographics. This typically results in failure to recognize the plurality of cultural perspectives, epistemologies, and unique strengths that diverse participants can offer. This paper argues that by effectively implementing Nieto and Bode's (2008) seven characteristics of multicultural education educators and administrators of family literacy programs may create programs that can offer real social transformation.

Transformative Multiculturalism in Family Literacy

Adult illiteracy has been called a "crisis" (Strauss, 2016) and an "epidemic" (Rasco, 2015). The results of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) have found that adult literacy in the United States is below the average for other developed nations (OECD, 2016). The PIAAC has also shed light on how the United States' illiteracy problem is multigenerational. The United States' survey results determined that the best predictor of a respondent's literacy score was their parents' level of education (Clymer, Toso, Grinder & Sauder, 2017, p. 1). Lunze and Paasche-Orlow (2014) asserted that the United States and Germany "stand out as having the most entrenched multigenerational literacy problem among the countries in the PIAAC survey. In other words, these countries have effectively established an educational caste system" (p. 17).

Recognizing that illiteracy is perpetuated across generations has encouraged intergenerational strategies for combatting the systems that allow this reality to persist. One strategy that rose to prominence in the 1980s is family literacy programs. These programs target parents as well as children for educational programs designed to serve the entire family and position parents as the first teachers of their children. In addition to resulting in better educational outcomes for children, Family Literacy programs tend to have lower attritions rates than other adult education programs which tend to have a completion rate of between 30% and 40% (Garcia & Hasson, 2014, p. 122).

However, too often family literacy programs are planned from a deficiency perspective and fail to account for the unique cultural perspectives and epistemologies of participants (Auerbach, 1995; Caspe, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to create a rationale for applying transformative multiculturalism to family literacy programs in order to create a create an

environment in which all participants can share their strengths. This will be done by applying the seven basic characteristics of multicultural education outlined by Nieto and Bode (2008).

Implementing Multicultural Education in Family Literacy Programming

In my professional career, I have often stood on the periphery of early childhood and youth education and parent engagement. While I have never been involved in a formal family literacy program, I have sat in many administrative meetings where staff who worked with children sought solutions on how to involve diverse parents in the education of their children. I believe that perhaps we were asking the wrong question—instead of asking how we could get parents of diverse backgrounds on board with their children's education who should have been asking how we could adapt *education* to meet their diverse family backgrounds.

This paper will provide a framework for creating family literacy program model that meets parents' culture rather than subjugating culture to the dominant norms as it employs the writings of Nieto and Bode (2008) to family literacy programs. Caspe (2003) notes that family literacy is a term used to encompass to describe the "study of literacy in the family", "describe a set of interventions related the literacy development of young children," and to refer to programs "designed to enhance the literacy skills of more than one family member." Caspe elaborates further explaining that

> family literacy may draw on many academic traditions, such as adult literacy, English as a second language education, child literacy development—in particular the field of emergent literacy and special education—early childhood development, cognitive psychology, and parent education. (Caspe, 2003, p.1)

However, at their root, family literacy programs are designed to improve educational outcomes for families in an attempt to combat cycles of low-education and poverty that persist in American

society. However, as this paper explores transformative multiculturalism, it will be demonstrated

that family literacy education must work in tandem with systemic social reform to improve

outcomes for marginalized and oppressed members of society.

       This paper does not target a specific family literacy program; rather, it is intended to

explore and provide suggestions for critically reviewing any family literacy undertaking. To do

so, it relies heavily on the definition of multicultural education outlined by Nieto and Bode

(2008). Nieto and Bode offer a lengthy definition of multicultural education that goes far beyond

surface-level sensitivity training or cultural celebration. Their definition may be summed up by

the seven essential features of multicultural education they outline:

1. Multicultural education is antiracist education.

2. Multicultural education is basic education.

3. Multicultural education is important for all students.

4. Multicultural education is pervasive.

5. Multicultural education is education for social justice.

6. Multicultural education is a process.

7. Multicultural education is critical pedagogy. (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p.44).

Nieto and Bode situate multicultural education within a school and classroom context; however,

these principles and their rationale can benefit any educational program. The following sections

will explore how each of these fundamentals of multicultural education may be applied to family

literacy programs.

Multicultural Education is Antiracist Education

The term antiracist could easily be replaced with antidiscriminatory to include the many classes of oppression that exist. However, it is prudent to recognize how often important intersections exist between race and other oppressed identities such as low socio-economic status, gender, etc. For example, over 25% of African American women in the United States live in poverty, as opposed to 11.6% of white women. Men of all races and ages are less likely to live in poverty than women of their same race and age (Cawthorne, 2008). This demonstrates just a few of the connections between race, gender, and poverty.

It is also important to acknowledge that individuals may paradoxically be privileged and oppressed at the same time. Examples may be a working-class, white male struggling to get by or a white, middle-class member of the LGBTQ+ community. Johnson (2006) explores that privilege and domination form a complex matrix where there are many implications of individuals' multifaceted identities, and ultimately asserts that we cannot eradicate racism without also combatting classism and sexism. Hence, facilitators should refrain from drawing quick conclusions based on limited demographic data, and as social justice-oriented educators, we should facilitate discussions of identity, privilege, and oppression.

Nieto and Bode (2008) strongly advocate for open discussion of racism and inequality. They concede that racism is often considered a "dirty word", but argue that curriculum that focuses cheerily on "getting along" is inadequate in a society that is characterized by "racism, sexism, linguicism, heterosexism, ageism, anti-Semitism, and ethnocentrism" (pp. 46-47). Johnson (2006) further argues that "you can't deal with a problem if you can't name it" (p. 9). Educators should strive to create environments in which these discussions can considerately flourish.

Related to naming racism and oppression, educators should avoid "sanitized" curriculum and topics (Nieto and Bode, 2008). Nieto and Bode point specifically to the way the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is frequently taught. Curriculum is quick to emphasize his "I Have a Dream Speech" while dodging his outspoken opposition of unbridled capitalism and the Vietnam War. I am guilty of the sin of simplifying the legacy of Dr. King to fluffy clouds on the baby blue background of a bulletin board on which middle school students could write their dreams. While this sort of reflective activity could have merit, without adequate background on the full extent of Dr. King's social justice advocacy, I blunted the impact of the activity. Teaching an honest, full account of the contributions of members of oppressed groups and the misdeeds of dominant classes provides learners with sharper tools for addressing systemic injustice.

Antiracism in Family Literacy Programs. As discussed earlier, family literacy programs can vary in the program offerings. Some may offer ESL classes or GED test prep, such as Boulder Valley Family Literacy Program while others may focus principally on how to transmit the literacy practices a child is learning in school into the home. However, one constant is that these programs have been mostly geared toward the "undereducated" and impoverished. Auerbach (1995) critiques that while many programs have changed from a deficit to an "intervention prevention" approach, the deficit language such as "at risk" and "disadvantaged" or referring to illiteracy as a "disease" is still used and continues to invoke "stereotypes of cultural deprivation" (p. 646) Unfortunately, according to Auerbach, this approach places the blame for illiteracy on "deficiencies in family literacy practices or attitudes" (p. 645).

It is imperative that family literacy practitioners examine their approach to assess whether they are placing the blame squarely on parents' deficiencies or whether they are also acknowledging systemic oppression that many classes within society face. One way to

thoughtfully examine this topic is to name racism and classism and make discussion of oppression a part of the curriculum. Literacy is an important first step in improving educational outcomes for all people; however, literacy or education in general is not a panacea for an oppressive world's ills. This can be easily illustrated by statistics regarding the education levels and employment status of African American men. Auerbach cites that in 1995, white males with high school diplomas had higher mean incomes than black males with college diplomas (p. 650). Nearly two decades later, a 2014 study concluded that black males with high school diplomas are 15% less likely to be employed than white male high school dropouts (O'Sullivan, Mugglestone, & Allison, 2014, p. 5). Family literacy practitioners should create a space where learners feel safe expressing their experiences with racism, sexism, classism and oppression in all its forms and facilitators should be trained in how to create spaces to effectively listen.

Further, curricular content should be carefully evaluated for cultural bias. Literacy practices and parenting values vary greatly across cultures. Family literacy practitioners should provide a full overview of available content, constantly seek new perspectives, and not presume the predominance of white, middle-class standards and attitudes. To do so requires practitioners who may be part of the dominant culture to develop a measure of cultural humility and recognize a plurality of perspectives on these topics. Family literacy programs should also actively seek out to recruit staff from diverse cultures or cultures that reflect the demographics of their learners. However, organizations should also be careful not to presume because learners may share some aspects of culture—such as language, national origin, etc.—that their "diverse" learners are monocultural. There may exist a vast array of cultural difference among individuals who share the same language, race, religion, etc.

Multicultural Education is Basic Education

The skills Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic are losing their status as basic skills to the newly minted 21st century skills—deep understanding, flexibility, creativity, and collaboration (Dumont & Istance, 2010, p. 20). The outdated focus of "the three R's" left little room for multicultural education. However, within the framework of the 21st century skills, educators are able to find the leeway to advocate for multicultural education's place at the table of basic competencies as a key component of collaboration and even deep understanding. Nieto and Bode (2008) contend that no educational program is doing a complete job unless students are developing multicultural literacy. They go on to say:

> Through such an education, we should expect student to develop social and intellectual skills that help them understand and empathize with a wide diversity of people. Nothing can be more basic than this. (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 50).

Multicultural Education as Basic Education in Family Literacy Programs. Family literacy programs should be actively including multicultural education as part of their programming whether it be focused on ESL, building literacy, or parenting skills. The focus needs to go beyond these basic proficiencies and provide multicultural awareness to allow learners to thrive in an increasingly diverse American society. It is essential that facilitators do not perceive multicultural education as simply an addendum but as a core competency.

Multicultural Education is Important for All Students

Too often there is the misperception that multicultural education is for learners who do not fit the mold of the dominant culture. Nieto and Bode (2008) boldly counter this point and attest that multicultural education is imperative for all learners to assure that the education they receive is not biased or one-sided. Multicultural education is becoming increasingly important in

a world that becomes more interconnected every day. Learners that are only exposed to the dominant culture's contributions and customs in this globalized world will likely find themselves at a distinct disadvantage. Further, it is not uncommon for members of the dominant culture to assume that they have no culture and assume the customs the ascribe to are the natural default— or more simply, "normal." Nieto and Bode succinctly summarize why multicultural education is essential for all learners.

> Multicultural education is, by definition, *inclusive.* Because it is *about* all people, it is also *for* all people regardless of their ethnicity, ability, social class, language, sexual orientation, religion, gender, race, or other difference. (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 51, emphasis original)

Multicultural Education for All Students in Family Literacy Programs. It is vital to acknowledge that multicultural education is also important in programs that serve mostly white learners. Multicultural education may be facilitated in these groups by making curricular choices that explore various literacy practice across cultures and consciously choosing materials authored by a diversity of races, religions, ethnicities, and genders. Discussion of oppression may or may not be as organic, but facilitators should always encourage thoughtful discussions on race, privilege, gender, socioeconomic status, etc., to increase awareness and promote advocacy for change.

I worked closely with a parent association at a Title I public school in East Harlem, New York where the vast majority of families identified as ethnic minorities and qualified for free and reduced lunch. The most visible ethnic groups in the school were Puerto Rican and Dominican although there were also students of diverse Asian heritages. The parent association did an excellent job outreaching and including parents who spoke Spanish as their first language.

However, their tendency to focus on only one type of linguistic diversity led to the exclusion of parents who may have wanted to be involved such as the mother who spoke Nepali and English or the mother who spoke an indigenous Mexican language and struggled with Spanish.

Educators must be wary of making sure that they are truly multicultural and not just including the diverse cultures that are the most accessible. Programs should carefully assess the diversity of the community in which their program exists and determine if the learners who participate in their programs reflect the diversity of the community. If they do not match, why not? Should marketing materials be translated into two, three, four, or more different languages? Are meetings held on days that prohibit some community members from participating for religious or other cultural reasons? Often family literacy programs will become geared toward one first-language group, which may at times help streamline instruction and discussion, but should not be done at the expense of making other groups that could benefit from education feel unwelcome.

The Jane Addams School for Democracy has developed a unique strategy for engaging diverse groups in ESL instruction. The school targets Spanish-speaking and Hmong groups for their English language instruction. They divide their instruction into three "circles" (based on Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory): one for Hmong adults, one for Spanish-speaking adults, and one for children of various cultural backgrounds. Circles may include members that do not belong to the cultural group—and circles do have native English speakers in their midst, but everyone in the circle is both a learner *and* a teacher (Caspe, 2003, p. 7). With the notable exception of the children's circle, the Hmong and Spanish-speaking adults participate in separate groups, but all are accommodated within the program.

Multicultural Education is Pervasive

Multicultural education is not achieved by including multicultural perspectives one day out of the month or week. Multiculturalism should be promoted in every activity. Further, it should extend beyond the strictures of the class and be apparent in the policies, environment, and relationships within the program. "Multicultural education is a philosophy, a way of looking at the world, not simply a program or a class or a teacher" (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 52). Multicultural awareness should be a filter through which every aspect of the teaching, learning, and administrative experience must pass through.

Nieto and Bode (2008) posit that a pervasive awareness of multiculturalism would result in vast reforms in educational programs. For one, tracking and grading methods, which tend to privilege certain backgrounds would, would be done away with. Teaching staff would be more representative of national diversity. Curriculum would be overhauled. Families and community member would become visible partners offering unique and helpful viewpoints (p. 52). To truly apply this element of multicultural education requires comprehensive analysis of every aspect of teaching and learning from expectations to environment to pedagogies and beyond.

Pervasive Multicultural Education in Family Literacy Programs. Related to the precept that multicultural education is basic education, educators should consider multicultural competency a core objective of their program. Discussion of oppression, difference, privilege and culture should not be included in one lesson and tossed aside for the duration of the program. Multiculturalism should also permeate beyond the classroom. Program staff should evaluate who their community partners are. Do their partners reflect the diversity of the community? They should continuously assess their programs and practices to be assured that they are multicultural.

What are their enrollment procedures? To whom are they marketing? Further, programs should be alert and recognize differences in cultural attitudes and behaviors that may be less obvious.

For example, a colleague of mine that teaches ESL at a program for refugees in Pittsburg noticed some of her students became incredibly awkward when she offered individual praise. She learned upon exploration that members of that culture tended to prefer group praise and that being praised individually made students uncomfortable. She adapted her classroom methods. However, it may have been useful for her to discuss her ignorance and open the class for discussion on this kind of difference. If students felt uncomfortable with her method of praise, she could have also conducted an anonymous survey and discussed the results as a group.

In addition, there has been a considerable amount of research done exploring how epistemologies may vary among race (Scheurich & Young, 1997) and socio-economic status (Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). To presume that everyone interacts with knowledge and creates meaning in the same way leaves students who have not had the same cultural conditioning as the dominant classes at a disadvantage. Educators must recognize that not all learners will interact with knowledge or create meaning in the same way. They may rely on academic works to glean some ideas on how epistemologies may differ, but the best means of finding out how their students learn is to ask *them*. This aligns with Auerbach's (1995) Multiple-Literacies approach to family literacy programming. She asserts that educators must begin from a "*stance of inquiry*" (p. 652, italics original). The educator must also approach learning with the perspective that "participants bring with them *culture-specific literacy practices and ways of knowing*" (p. 651, italics original).

Multicultural Education is Education for Social Justice

Multicultural education must be inextricably tied to action. Beverly Tatum (1992) writes, "Heightening students awareness of racism without also developing an awareness of the possibility of change is a prescription for despair" (p. 220). Hence, bringing attention to inequities and injustice is not enough. A multicultural educator strives to actively gear conversations toward social justice and inspire action. Individual programs can be developed into incubators for democracy and justice and inspire action outside of the confines of the learning program.

Multicultural Education for Social Justice in Family Literacy Programs. Education for social justice is not a new concept and has its modern genesis in the writings of Paulo Freire. Uniting multicultural education with social justice in family literacy programs involves evolving measures of program success beyond attaining proficiency as evaluated by tests or improving children's achievement and striving for learning outcomes that increase parent's civic engagement. Adult educator Carlock (2016) writes:

> [I] had witnessed inequity in education during seven years working in Virginia and El Salvador. I noted that the roots of many problems in schools began in the community, and this seemed the most evident in an imbalance of political power. Too often, the same parents whose children struggled academically were also excluded from decision making that affected their families' everyday lives. (Carlock, 2016, p. 104)

Family literacy programs that are truly multicultural will tailor learning in ways that empowers parents to advocate for reforms in their communities, schools, and greater society. To facilitate the most impact, instruction must be personalized to each group of learners. Some learners may be more interested in learning how to become involved and advocate for their

children and culture within the school. As discussed with pervasive multicultural education,

Auerbach (1995) insists that a vital principle for assuring the content is relevant and appropriate

is to actually involve learners in the curriculum development process and have them actively

shape the goals of the learning experience. She tells of learners in the Hmong Literacy Project in

Fresno, California, which sought to improve their literacy so that they could preserve their

culture for their children (p. 653). Carlock (2016) profiles an ESL student who was intimately

impacted by immigration policy and used her skills acquired to organize a public protest when

her partner was detained and marked for deportation (pp. 98-99). What is most important when

incorporating social justice into education is that the actions taken toward empowerment are not

tokenistic, and genuinely reflect the issues and injustices faced by the community of learners.

Multicultural Education is a Process

Nieto and Bode (2008) illustrate the notion that multicultural education is a process with

the following statement: "No one ever stops becoming a multicultural person, and knowledge is

never complete" (p.55). Multicultural education should be ongoing throughout every person's

life as horizons expand and new experiences provide opportunities for increased understanding.

Within the context of an educational program, this also means continuously updating policies

and teaching strategies to align with ever-increasing multicultural awareness.

Multicultural Education as a Process in Family Literacy. Just because an educator

within a family literacy program successfully concludes a multicultural program does not mean

that they have eternally mastered the art of multicultural education. Educators should celebrate

successes as well as critically analyze pitfalls and biases. They should be continuously

considering how programs can improve and become ever more inclusive. Related to concept of

multicultural education as pervasive, educators should review policies, enrollment, curriculum, etc. to determine if they can expand who they teach.

In my experience, I have seen parent engagement and family literacy programs market mostly to one minority group. Classes should strive to bring together students from a wide array of cultural backgrounds to reinforce that "multicultural education is for all students." Carlock (2016) writes that having a diverse body of learners "can contribute to the creation of new civic communities of practice that may be a model of interethnic collaboration in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual society (Ananyeva, 2014)" (p. 101). Part of the ongoing process of multicultural education should be continuing to build a multicultural group of learners that can work together to solve problems of oppression and underrepresentation within the community.

Multicultural Education is Critical Pedagogy

A key belief multicultural education is that curricular and policy decisions are political (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Every curricular decision reflects specific perspective and ideas. Critical pedagogy rejects notions of absolute truth in favor of plurality Nieto and Bode frame critical perspective with the following example:

> Let's say there are at least 17 ways of understanding reality, and, until we have learned
>
> all of them, we have only part of the truth. The point is that there are multiple
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> perspectives on every issue, but most of us have learned only the "safe" or standard way
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> of interpreting events or issues. (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 56)

Critical pedagogy also involves the examination and potential dismantling accepted truths. For example, the American Dream of obtaining wealth through hard work is often touted as reality and what makes America great. Sometimes this ideology can be used to castigate the poor and blame "laziness" for their economic state. However, the fact that systemic oppression

prevents many hard-working people from accessing the same opportunities as those in the dominant class can challenge these notions and lead to more fruitful discussions on the root causes of poverty.

Critical Pedagogy in Family Literacy Programs. Educators in family literacy programs should examine the presumptions they make and purport within their class. Notably, they should acknowledge that literacy is not a panacea and be open to critical perspectives. To make a difference in people's lives—particularly the lives of people of oppressed classes—literacy must be situated within a context of self-reflection, reflection on society, and action (Aronowitz, 2009). More literate students should not be the end goal of family literacy programs. The goals should be determined by the learners and reflect the freedom to critically analyze existing structures.

Carlock (2016) discusses how he adapted curriculum for diverse group of learners he taught in an ESL class called Helping Your Children In School based on the struggles they faced. The parents in the class identified that bullying in their children's schools because of their children's ethnic differences was a common problem. With the input of the ESL students, the teachers developed lessons that taught curriculum relevant to bullying and meeting with school administrators. They also taught the students about the school hierarchy and debunked the assumption that parents had little power within the power structure of the school. This dismantling of the assumption that school administrators had absolute authority resulted in many of the parents writing letters to the district, setting up meetings with school staff, or becoming volunteers teaching culture at their children's schools (pp. 112-117).

Conclusion

I began this paper by discussing the entrenched illiteracy problem faced in the United States. These sobering statistics are what often fuel funding for adult basic education and family literacy education. Unfortunately, emphasis on this data situates learners in a deficit rather than acknowledging their strengths. Applying transformative multiculturalism through the implementation of Nieto and Bode's (2008) seven characteristics of multicultural education can redistribute power to those disenfranchised and oppressed by dominant United States culture. I have developed a worksheet for assessing the level of multiculturalism within a program; see Appendix A. Becoming more multicultural may mean tossing standard curriculum and building a course based on the unique needs of specific sets of learners. It involves having open, consistent, action-oriented dialogue to challenge norms that subjugate individuals and families who are not part of the dominant culture. Multicultural education strives to be an antidote for oppression. To be such it must include both critical discussion and action. As Freire (1970) wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed:*

> To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. (Freire,1970, p. 29)

Devoted educators are imperative to moving family literacy programs beyond proficiency toward social justice and fuller humanity for all.

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