

# The Role of Action Research in Fostering Culturally-Responsive Practices in a Preschool Classroom

Mariana Souto-Manning · Christina Hanson Mitchell

Published online: 24 September 2009  
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2009

**Abstract** Early childhood teachers and educational programs are expected to be the primary resources as children experience different and sometimes conflicting cultural contexts. Early educators can play a paramount role as young children move through fluid identities and start recognizing and navigating within and across spaces of cultural differences—e.g., between home cultures and the socially-dominant school culture. In this sense, we draw attention to a multi-year action research study, paying particular attention to the process whereby an early childhood teacher investigated, problematized, and challenged the nature of curriculum and practices in a diverse preschool classroom. We focus on the role of action research in fostering culturally-relevant teaching. As we do so, we analyze an early childhood teacher’s shifting perceptions of what it means to engage in culturally-relevant teaching, respecting and honoring cultural diversities.

**Keywords** Action research · Diversity · Preschool · Early childhood · Early education · Cultural diversity · Linguistic diversity · Culturally-relevant · Collaborative research · Narrative · Culture · Identities

## Introduction: Growing Diversity and its Implications for Early Education

Throughout the United States, there has been a steady and steep rise in diversity over the last decade. This is especially true for the population of children in this country. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2007), between the years of 2000 and 2005, there was a drop of 3% in the number of White children. At the same time, the number of African American children remained constant and the number of young Latinos rose by 16%. The population of Asian and Pacific Islander children grew by 12%, while those whose families were comprised of more than one race increased by 13%. This change in demographics has very strong implications for early childhood educators.

Preschool may be the first setting in which children systematically face dominant sociocultural values and are expected to abide by and embody them. Children who are from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds are often expected to learn in different cultural contexts than those they have experienced in their families, homes, and communities (Lahman and Park 2004). Some children are never exposed to the dominant culture and practices so prominently valued in schools prior to entering early education settings. Upon entering (pre)school, young children are often expected to immediately engage in cultural practices that may be different from those at home in order to be conceptualized as successful, ready, or capable (Gregory et al. 2004; Souto-Manning 2009). Multiple studies have found that culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse children are likely to be confronted with the challenges of being assimilated into mainstream values which conflict with familial practices and/or familiar values (Buysse et al. 2005; Kantor et al. 1992; Lahman and Park 2004; Pappamihel 2004). According to these studies,

---

M. Souto-Manning (✉)  
Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Teachers College,  
Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, USA  
e-mail: Souto-Manning@tc.columbia.edu

C. H. Mitchell  
The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA

young children who experience cultural discontinuity between home and school may perceive themselves as poor learners and may develop a negative self-concept.

Early childhood teachers and educational programs are expected to be the primary resources as children experience different and sometimes conflicting cultural contexts. Early educators can play a paramount role as young children move toward fluid identities and start recognizing and navigating within and across spaces of cultural differences—e.g., between their home cultures and the school-sponsored socially-dominant culture (Gee 1996; Souto-Manning 2009). In this sense, we (Souto-Manning—an early childhood teacher educator, and Mitchell—a preschool teacher<sup>1</sup>) draw attention to a multi-year action research study, paying particular attention to the nature of curriculum and practices in a preschool classroom which reflected culturally, economically and linguistically diverse characteristics. The study also portrays an early childhood teacher's shifting perceptions of implementing culturally-relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings 1995) in her preschool classroom, as she moved towards honoring the cultural diversity of her students (Landerhold et al. 2004; Rhedding-Jones 2002; Saft and Pianta 2001).

### Literature Review: Significance of Culturally-Relevant Early Education

Multiple research studies on early childhood education have emphasized the importance of developing culturally-responsive educational settings (Bernhard 1995; Buysse et al. 2005; Espinosa 2005; Gay 2000; Kontos et al. 2002). Such studies have indicated a need for improving teachers' abilities to understand, respect, and respond to diverse situations resulting from their interactions with young children who bring a multitude of home cultures and values to the classroom. There is a need for going beyond recognition of differences to engage in questioning the ways in which classroom practices and processes are honoring diversities (or not). For example, while many early childhood teachers recognized that children's behaviors are regulated through culturally-relevant ways and rules (Ladson-Billings 1995, 1998), according to Pappamihel (2004), most teachers were not likely to exhibit reactions indicating they understood cultural differences through the interaction with children from various cultures or nurture

their students in a culturally appropriate manner. Beyond not engaging in culturally appropriate or responsive ways of interacting with children, teachers' responses and stances in early childhood classrooms were at odds with those children who hadn't been acculturated to the dominant US culture (c.f. Espinosa 2005; Gay 2000; Lahman and Park 2004).

While ethnic and cultural similarities between child and teacher are likely to make the child perceive more affection and emotional support from the teacher and less difficulty in the relationship (Saft and Pianta 2001), this match of backgrounds is often not a reality in preschool classrooms as teachers and children typically occupy different socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and racial spaces. As teachers try to level the ground by socializing children into their own cultural contexts and expecting children to act in certain ways (e.g., direct eye contact, raising hands), when this happens, young children are likely to perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group and/or to lose their desire to maintain their parents' culture and language (Espinosa 2005; Rhedding-Jones 2002). To avoid these consequences and halt processes of cultural erasure, many studies have pointed out that early childhood teachers need to enhance knowledge of cultural diversity and to consider cultural aspects that affect how young children learn in school (Bernhard 1995; Buysse et al. 2005; Espinosa 2005; Lahman and Park 2004; Landerholm et al. 2004).

Recommendations point towards developing expectations that teachers seek a thorough knowledge of each child's home culture and family values, as this might be helpful for accurately interpreting the meaning of a child's behavior, honoring and respecting each child's culture, and minimizing the incidence of cultural conflicts in the early childhood classroom (Bernhard 1995; Buysse et al. 2005; Espinosa 2005; Lahman and Park 2004; Landerholm et al. 2004). Studies have highlighted the importance of developing a strong relationship with parents and families, as they are critical resources for culturally-responsive teaching (Gay 2000; Pappamihel 2004).

Seeking to move towards culturally-responsive teaching (Gay 2000) in a diverse preschool early childhood classroom, one preschool teacher took it upon herself to understand her students' home cultures, family values, and parental expectations. She worked diligently to build collaborative partnerships with parents based on reciprocal trust (Espinosa 2005). Seeing the mismatch between her cultural experiences and those experienced by the children in her classroom, the teacher embarked on a multi-year action research quest aimed at improving the ways in which the cultural practices of *all* children could be honored everyday in her classroom.

The teacher understood that truly honoring diverse children is a continuous process. Positioning herself as a

<sup>1</sup> Because we co-wrote this article yet had distinct roles in this study, we chose to refer to each other in third person according to our respective roles—teacher and teacher educator. When we refer to our collective actions, we use the pronoun *we*. While this initially felt awkward, we believe that ultimately it has added to the clarity of the article.

learner while seeking to address issues in her own classroom, the teacher engaged in action research. This article explains the process whereby the teacher negotiated action research as a way to move towards more culturally relevant practices (Ladson-Billings 1995) in her classroom. While it would be easy to report the successes, we choose to report the small steps we took as collaborative researchers in hopes that this process may shed light onto other contexts.

### Methodology: Action Research

According to Hansen (1997), “A teacher researcher, among other things, is a questioner. Her questions propel her forward” (p. 1). In her preschool classroom, the teacher sought to investigate ways to implement culturally-relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings 1995) with 3- and 4-year-old children. To get started, she attempted to understand why certain things were (or were not) happening in her classroom (Hubbard and Power 1993). After the teacher defined her focus of research, together we adopted the stance of collaborative action researchers, of ethnographers seeking to learn more about the culture of the classroom community and of the individual members of this community in and out of the educational setting (Gregory et al. 2004) in order to improve classroom practices.

Together, we—a teacher (Mitchell) and a teacher educator (Souto-Manning)—decided to employ the responsive teaching cycle (Whitin et al. 1990) to document what was happening, to frame events contextually, and to collectively (re)imagine spaces for transformative action. This cycle encompassed: (a) collecting data anecdotally and systematically through journaling, (b) interpreting these anecdotal notes narratively (Hankins 2003), and (c) making instructional decisions based on observations and interpretations.

The data in this study are threefold. There are (1) the narratives that take place during the events (a conversation, a story that a child told...). Next, there are (2) the interpretive narratives about the event or the recording of the way I viewed the event. That first recording might be in the form of an oral rehearsal, a journal entry, a quick jotted note stuck in my pocket, to be fleshed out later. However, the (3) narrative thought that drove the selection of the event from the multitude of classroom events in a day drive both (1) and (2). The data on one event may be threefold (recorded in three different time periods, for example), but data generally are, or become, one narrative that has been rewritten a number of times. Each time I reread, I edit and reflect again (Hankins 2003, p. 12).

By engaging in the responsive teaching cycle, using narratives as a way to document and interpret classroom events, the teacher embraced “an approach toward teaching in which teachers learn from and with their students” (Hansen 1997, p. 3). Thus, she journaled as she documented and reflected on her learnings (Souto-Manning 2006). While the teacher journaled events, the teacher educator took thick field notes as she observed from outside the classroom. We met biweekly for periods averaging 75 min and collectively analyzed the teacher’s narratives documenting her learning journey regarding the cultures of the children in her classroom.

During our meetings, we combined our insider and outsider perspectives, problematizing differing views and seeking to syncretically bring them together (Gregory et al. 2004). Then we dialogically negotiated the interpretive narrative orally and dialogically co-authored (reported in Analysis section). Finally, we talked about ways to address the issues documented in culturally-responsive ways. This is a quick summary of how we collaborated in action research seeking to make the classroom more inclusive and culturally-responsive (Gay 2000). For us, action research became a critical tool for gathering invisible and multifaceted knowledge that researchers as outsiders and teachers as insiders cannot solely record and/or obtain.

Thus, the teacher’s journal writings contained basic data, which were supplemented by observational data and interpreted again and again dialogically (examples can be found below). It is important to note that due to the triadic nature of narrative (as data, method, and findings), the excerpts below represent data analysis as they interpret events documented by the teacher. Children’s and parents’ narratives which were intertwined in the teacher’s journal writings provided entry into spaces that were previously relegated to the “out of school” realm (Hull and Schultz 2002). In considering these, we were better “able to see individuals within that classroom culture as representatives of world cultures and community cultures. The narratives then help... [us] acknowledge, value, and build on the personal experiences of individual students” (Hankins 2003, p. 11).

### Analyzing the Process: Action Research in/and Culturally-Relevant Teaching

The excerpts analyzed here reflect a teacher’s efforts to make holiday traditions inclusive and truly representative in her classroom context. This does not mean that she took a cafeteria approach to diversity, as culturally-relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995) was “just good teaching” (p. 159) for this teacher. Instead, we chose to focus on this unit (or theme) as it had proven particularly problematic in

classrooms as some teachers had tended to see this is as opportunity to “do diversity.” The process illustrated by the narratives below was employed throughout the year.

Below, we outline the process whereby we decided on a focus of research, developed a plan to gain insight, analyzed the data narratively and dialogically by looking for patterns and themes, and reported on what we learned. Excerpts selected by the teacher and included below are italicized and in first person to signify a shift between the article and the data in process. We chose to forefront the teacher-authored narratives as we hope they will speak to other teachers who may be experiencing somewhat similar situations.

Once we brought our narratives and notes together and engaged in collectively problematizing classroom events, reflecting upon them, narrative was transformed from data to method (Hankins 2003). The analysis and findings presented below focus on what this teacher did even though we engaged in a collaborative action research relationship. This is because our plans and decisions had direct impact in her classroom and were carried out by her.

#### Deciding on a Focus

As the preschool teacher tried to address the multiplicity of cultures present in her classroom, she first implemented a cafeteria-like approach, in which the children could sample how the holidays were implemented across cultures. Her knowledge came from multicultural books that, as she mentions below, provided “brief descriptions of holiday traditions.” Taking the role of the expert did not produce the respect for diverse cultures that the teacher had originally envisioned. Her narrative reflections below indicate a need for change and for including children’s specific experiences through home literacies (Gregory et al. 2004) and funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992) as a reflection that the children’s most positive experiences came when interacting with a parent who provided insider knowledge of cultural practices. This reflection indicates the need to take a humble stance (Freire 1998), and embody the position of a learner and teacher, blurring the boundaries of teacher and learner (Freire 1970), and learning alongside the children, their parents, and families.

*The winter of 2002 was my second year as lead teacher and my third year with preschool children. For the first time that year I designed multicultural holiday lesson plans for three and four year-olds. The first place I looked was in a few multicultural books we had at our center. They gave brief descriptions about holiday traditions from around the world. So I planned a week of holiday celebrations for*

*December. A co-teacher and I divided up the year-end holidays. During my week, the first day we talked about who Santa was and what countries he visited. We talked about how holidays are typically a time for giving. In addition, we discussed Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, and the Chinese New Year. As I now reflect back, I realize that my class really could not relate to what I was teaching them. I did base my lessons on children’s general backgrounds represented in my classroom, but not on the specific experiences they shared with their families. Looking back, I recall one of the kids’ favorite parts of their experience that year was a parent coming in to help make ornaments with the class. That parent presented first-hand experience and shared stories while actively engaging the children. Out of my own desire to constantly revamp and be a more diverse and reflective teacher, the next year I planned a little differently.*

Writing down her observations and reflecting upon them as portrayed above in the form of narrative as analysis (Hankins 2003) were important steps for deciding on the focus of her research; for embodying the stance of a researcher, and seeking to problem-solve in her own classroom.

#### Developing a Plan to Gain Insight

*In the winter of 2003, I tried to get more parents involved in integral ways since that was what several kids really seemed to enjoy. One advantage I had with this group of children was that I knew them well as I had been with them in the one-year-old classroom during 2001. So, again, parents came and talked to the kids about what their traditions were. We learned so much from them. The kids enjoyed the parents coming, reading and telling stories, and engaging in hands-on culturally-specific activities. They enjoyed learning about each other’s traditions and practices and started appreciating differences!*

In 2003, this teacher developed a plan to gain insight— involving more parents and capitalizing on funds of knowledge. Funds of knowledge are cultural artifacts and knowledge present in households which underlie family practices (Moll 2000). They are cultural resources that are important in cultural and familial networks. Furthermore, they are knowledge-based and authentic. Just as the teacher had analyzed through her narrative reflecting on her 2002 experience, funds of knowledge are situated and vary from one family to another or from one community to another. By developing a plan and inviting parents to share their cultural practices, the teacher was allowing cultural practices from the home to enter the classroom in authentic



ways. In addition, she was gaining insights on how to genuinely value multiple cultural practices in her classroom.

The decision to incorporate funds of knowledge into her unit plans was made after observations from her previous year—the aspect children seemed to enjoy the most was parents as experts sharing their authentic personal experiences in the classroom. Recognizing the connection she had already made with the families as she had taught some of these same children 2 years prior, she invited the parents into her classroom. This action required that she position herself as learner and parents as experts. The teacher and the students respected each other's backgrounds, honoring their cultural practices and families. As they did so, they adopted Freire's (1998) principle that "No one knows it all; no one is ignorant of everything" (p. 39).

This time, children were able to gain an insight and start the process of understanding cultural practices as diverse and valid. They started to understand the concept of perspectives, of diversity. Rather than measuring each other's practices against their own, they valued the practices for what they were, as valid and worthy.

As the teacher continued to develop (and revise during our collaborative action research sessions) a plan to gain insight, she realized that more time was needed to engage in dialogue about diverse cultural practices and to explore cultural practices beyond the surface level. She also recognized the advantage she had in looping with her students, as she had gotten to know them as human beings with a history. There was an atmosphere in the classroom that fostered respecting and valuing all students as human beings (Ayers 2004) and getting to know each student on a personal level.

*In 2005, I had a major advantage; I looped with many of my my students. So I knew more about their interests and could plan according to their experiences and interests. We explored holiday traditions across their cultures, homes, and countries of origin (or heritage). In order to become informed, I positioned myself as a learner and learned from the children's families and communities. I also engaged in internet research on holiday traditions from around the world. I found tons of information about holiday traditions from around the world. So, I planned 2 weeks of holiday traditions to talk about with the children in my class. I focused on traditions the children experienced so they could be experts. This also allowed for such traditions to become more concrete. In addition to the regular teaching, we practiced songs in many languages and went around in our building singing to others. The kids loved this! But it was not until the next year that my eyes were*

*opened and my soul awakened to the racing heartbeat of the children! I realized that two weeks were not enough. I also realized that no matter how much the parents contributed, holidays only happen one time per year, and not every family celebrates all of them. If I was really going to honor many cultures in my classroom, I have to start from day 1 and integrate them every day in every aspect of the teaching and learning in my classroom.*

In addition to capitalizing on funds of knowledge and stretching the unit of study, the teacher became a researcher herself, seeking to become better informed about cultures by conducting research through the internet and learning from family and community members that were part of the lives of her students. It was very important for her to step outside her comfort zone as she immersed herself in the homes and communities of her students. Additionally, it was important to socialize children toward the role of experts, so that they could talk about their own cultural traditions. This was done so often and in a voluntary way in the classroom that children felt comfortable sharing their own cultural practices. At no time were they representative of their entire ethnic group, but they were sharing what happened in their homes and/or communities.

Finally, the teacher sought to find resources to immerse children in the multiplicity of languages present in her classroom. While the efforts were extensive to the point of implementing multilingual education, through her systematic efforts, the children became aware that multiple languages were welcomed and encouraged in the classroom. Still, the following year, the teacher further refined her plan to gain insight, which is represented by "But it was not until the next year that my eyes were opened and my soul awakened to the racing heartbeat of the children!" Clearly, the teacher started positioning herself as a teacher always wanting to hone her practice to meet the needs of her students. She was always challenging herself to learn about her students instead of solely expecting her students to adapt to her cultural stance. This may be observed in her narrative below:

*In 2006, I decided to start the year out a little differently...We had many parents come and talk about their cultural traditions. They told stories and engaged in activities. Some brought in pictures. Because many of our parents had visited or lived in other towns, states, and countries they were able to talk to the children about very concrete experiences. But some others had lived their entire lives in the same community, yet had culturally specific practices that were particular to their families and/or communities. Family members came in and talked about their cultural practices and invited me to learn about*

*their backgrounds and experiences. I embedded these in the everydayness of the preschool classroom, combining children's background knowledge, cultural practices, and experiences with the content and themes being addressed. Because we had been incorporating many cultural knowledges in the classroom in an organic way, children came to see differences with new eyes. They stopped judging different practices against their own and learned from many cultures. Because we had been incorporating many cultural practices in the classroom every day, when December arrived, the children displayed an understanding of the different ways and reasons the holidays were celebrated. Instead of understanding holidays in terms of how they are supposed to be celebrated, they came to understand holidays in the contexts of multiple cultures and countries, developing a true appreciation for diverse perspectives. This year, in which holidays were not the main focus, children truly understood the richness of many cultures.*

This was the stance the teacher took throughout the year in her classroom, of reflectively refining plans to better meet the needs of the children. She recursively focused on becoming a better, culturally-responsive teacher.

#### Analyzing the Data by Looking for Patterns and Themes

As the teacher engaged in data analysis throughout the year, her practice came to recognize and value the importance of diversity in her classroom. She saw her stance change. As change happened, there were patterns in her narratives that indicated common themes, common stances that she embraced as she sought to promote diversity in the classroom. This was particularly interesting because there is often a belief that change must happen in the children. In this case, a change in teacher stance modified the atmosphere of the classroom, making it respectful of differences and embracing of diversity (of families, perspectives, languages, etc.). The themes are italicized below.

Respecting and seeking to respect students' backgrounds and cultural contexts, the teacher embodied a (1) *humble stance*. As she honored students' cultures and stories in the classroom, allowing them to take center stage, she promoted respect for others. While a simple word, this is not an easy stance to embody. According to Freire (1998), "...humility requires courage, self-confidence, self-respect, and respect for others" (p. 39). By embodying such a stance, this teacher modeled a respect for diversity, for cultural difference, and for multiple perspectives in her preschool classroom. This is illustrated by her supportive

role as parents and families came to share their funds of knowledge and were seen as experts in the classroom. She respected and valued all students and their families as human beings and got to know them on a personal level. She listened to their stories and encouraged an atmosphere of acceptance and respect in her classroom, fostering an environment that nurtured diversity.

In order to take a humble stance in the classroom and to model a learner, she constantly (2) *blurred the roles of learner (student) and teacher* navigating in, out, and between the traditional definitions of what it means to be a teacher and what it means to be a learner (Freire 1970). This was not an easy task. The teacher accomplished this as she shared ownership of knowledge in her classroom, by blurring the roles of teacher and learner, and learning from students and their families through funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992).

By blurring the roles of teacher and learner, the teacher embodied the stance of a researcher; more specifically, she attempted to constantly (3) *embody the stance of an ethnographer* (Gregory et al. 2004). The teacher learned about the histories behind children's cultural contexts and values. As she learned more about her students and their cultural values and backgrounds, she brought themes and stories that were important to specific members of her classroom community into her classroom. These themes served as dialogue starters.

The (4) *fostered dialogues* varied in terms of time, space, and participation—sometimes they happened at circle time, and sometimes they happened during meals and snacks; sometimes they included the entire class, sometimes they only involved a small group of children. They happened in the true sense of dialogue—all participants engaged in learning and respecting perspectives and experiences. Most importantly, these dialogues were encounters, conversations, mediated by the world in which its participants (teachers and students) lived, including their classroom, homes, and communities, their cultural traditions and values. In such encounters, participants conceptualized and learned about a diverse world and realized that their cultural traditions and values were not better or worse, just different and particular. While these are not described by the data above, they were common occurrences in this teacher's classroom. As you read in the previous interpretive excerpt, reflecting on the 2006 experience, she reported that "*They told stories and engaged in activities. Some brought in pictures.... the children displayed an understanding of the different ways and reasons the holidays were celebrated...*" Such an understanding did not come from the pictures or stories per se. While these were important, they were only tools to get children thinking and challenging their assumptions. This deeper understanding documented and interpreted by the

teacher came from dialogue that took place around such conversation starters.

As they talked and learned, their (5) *assumptions were challenged* and they started embracing and applying a true sense of diversity in their classroom. To put it very simply, even their most objective assumptions were challenged when they found out that Christmas (often called winter holidays in the school context) takes place in the summer in Southern Hemisphere countries such as Brazil and Australia. As assumptions were challenged, students and teachers moved towards a (6) *sociopolitical consciousness* (Ladson-Billings 1998) by getting involved with real community problems (such as whose culture is valued over others and why). This stance allowed both teachers and students to understand injustices and to act upon them, even if initially and apparently only within the classroom walls. While it might make teaching more challenging, such an approach allows for an explicit connection to the students' contexts and everyday lives. It allows for diversity to be truly nurtured.

When diversities are nurtured, early childhood teachers gain the potential to reach students from a multiplicity of sociocultural backgrounds (and vice versa), respecting and recognizing them above all for who they are and dialoguing about a multiplicity of cultural practices, contexts, values, and identities. From the teacher's narratives and years of reflective teaching and action research, during data coding we found a few components that were constantly recurring, which properly triangulated (e.g., through analysis of data, talking to peers, analysis of video data, children's reports) may shed some light on other classrooms.

As we read through these themes, it is important to remember that:

Any detailed case (e.g., a studied teacher's pedagogy, a child's learning history) is just that—a case. It is not the phenomenon itself (e.g., effective teaching, writing development). The phenomenon may look and sound different in different social and cultural circumstances, that is, in different cases. This relationship between a grand phenomenon and mundane particulars suggests key theoretical assumptions of qualitative case studies. (Dyson and Genishi 2005, p. 4)

Therefore, what we present here are not formulas, but themes that were recurrent in one early childhood teacher's narrative data. Recording themes below does not comprise a how-to list, but reiterates the important and recurrent components present in this teacher's practice as she moved towards creating a classroom community that nurtured and respected diversity: (1) As a teacher, she embodied a humble stance; (2) The teacher blurred the roles of learner (student) and teacher; (3) As a learner, the teacher took the stance of an ethnographer; (4) In her classroom, she

fostered dialogue; (5) During these dialogues, children's and teacher's assumptions were challenged; and (6) As assumptions were challenged, they moved towards socio-political consciousness.

### Reporting Learnings

As this early childhood teacher is concerned with the implications of her learnings to the larger early childhood community, the teacher is engaged in reporting her learnings in multiple realms. First and foremost, in the lab school where she works, she meets periodically with a teacher study group and has reported the process, findings, and implications with her colleagues, teachers of children zero to five. In this article, she seeks to reach a wider audience and share the process she underwent as well as case-specific findings that might serve to shed light in other contexts.

While some might think of this teacher action research as a holiday approach to diversities in the preschool classroom, we purposefully chose to document and portray how moving away from holiday practices and becoming aware of everyday cultural practices that shape the lives of young children and their families are much more powerful. Within this approach (which the teacher employed in 2006), holidays did not play a major part, but were framed within the context of a classroom that valued cultural practices and funds of knowledge day in and day out. By learning about and experiencing multiple cultural practices, this teacher was able to build on children's strengths and experiences, providing a more supportive and inclusive experience for all children.

### Implications for Educational Practice: Reflecting Back and Looking Ahead

The implications of this teacher's action research study are multiple. This article offers implications for early education in the US as well as in larger social contexts, as it shows how a teacher can honor children's multiple voices and cultural practices in the preschool classroom in integral ways. The teacher's journey highlights practices and processes that are situated in social, historical, and cultural contexts. Her teacher action research forefronts the process of rethinking and doing diversities (Genishi and Goodwin 2008) in the early childhood classroom—an ongoing negotiation, a continuous process. The teacher's experience is a situated representation of a larger phenomenon (Dyson and Genishi 2005) present in early childhood classrooms in the United States and throughout the world. As such, it sheds light onto other contexts and seeks to inspire preschool teachers to engage in teacher action research and

enact culturally-responsive teaching within their classroom, honoring and valuing differences while affirming children's diversities.

In the teacher's own words, she sees implications from this study illuminating early childhood educators seeking to nurture diversity in their own classrooms as she reflects on her multi-year study and continues to refine her plans reflectively. Such implications include ideas on how teachers, parents/families, and curriculum (and their roles) can be modified to foster a more diverse classroom that honors and respects diversity.

(1) *Teacher* Becoming a learner alongside your students

*From my experience trying to teach multicultural holiday traditions to preschool children, I have learned that you must learn about the cultural knowledges and practices children experience at home. You must incorporate these in integral ways all year long. Only from learning alongside your students and their families will you be able to honor diversities. Doing a holidays approach to diversity and multicultural education only serves to stereotype.*

(2) *Parents and Families* Welcoming parents and families as experts into your classroom

*The more parents and families you get involved the better. I found that they all have something to offer, they all have cultural practices to share. Whether they come read a book, come do art with the children, teach them a song, or simply come talk with them about their cultural practices, about their funds of knowledge; it is important to always get as much involvement as possible, to be as inclusive as possible, because they have first-hand knowledge and experiences that matter to the children. I grew as a teacher as I learned from the children's parents and families. I came to see them as experts, not as assistants!*

(3) *Curriculum* Making students' diverse experiences and backgrounds integral throughout the year

*It is important to talk about the cultures of children you are educating throughout the year, to incorporate them in integral ways in the classroom, every day. It is essential to make students' cultures and experiences an integral part of the classroom. Learning becomes much more significant and authentic for them when it incorporates home values and practices.*

Finally, she ends her analytical process by reflecting on her learning journey.

*I knew kids were learning about other cultural practices by their excitement and eagerness to inquire about diverse practices traditions not only during the holidays but throughout the year. We engaged in redefining culture (not only to include knowledge from different countries), but to include diversities in our own classroom community.*

Based on our experiences and action research, we propose that as preschool teachers position themselves as learners and value stories, families, and cultures in their own classrooms throughout the year, they will be better able to honor diversities in integral ways as they shift their understandings, coming to recognize the cultural construction of knowledges and practices. In doing so, they will be better positioned to create inclusive early educational settings that are welcoming of all children. It is a continuous and recursive journey as culture is not a fixed construct, yet a truly worthy one.

## References

- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2007). *2007 kids count data book: State profiles of child well-being*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- Ayers, W. (2004). *Teaching toward freedom: Moral communication and ethical action in the classroom*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bernhard, J. K. (1995). Child development, cultural diversity, and the professional training of early childhood educators. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 20(4), 415–436.
- Buysse, V., Castro, D. C., West, T., & Skinner, M. (2005). Addressing the needs of Latino children: A national survey of state administrators of early children programs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 20, 146–163.
- Dyson, A. H., & Genishi, C. (2005). *On the case: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Espinosa, L. M. (2005). Curriculum and assessment considerations for young children from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42(8), 837–853.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach*. Oxford: Westview Press.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, & practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Genishi, C., & Goodwin, A. L. (Eds.). (2008). *Diversities in early childhood education: Rethinking and doing*. New York: Routledge.
- Gregory, E., Long, S., & Volk, D. (2004). *Many pathways to literacy: Young children learning with siblings, grandparents, peers and communities*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Hankins, K. H. (2003). *Teaching through the storm: A journal of hope*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hansen, J. (1997). Researchers in our own classrooms: What propels teacher researchers? In D. Leu, C. Kinzer, & K. Hinchman (Eds.), *Literacies for the 21st century: Research and practice* (pp. 1–14). Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- Hubbard, R. S., & Power, B. M. (1993). Finding and framing a research question. In L. Patterson, C. M. Santa, K. G. Short, & K. Smith (Eds.), *Teachers are researchers: Reflection and action* (pp. 19–25). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Hull, G., & Schultz, K. (2002). *School's out! Bridging out-of-school literacies with classroom practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.



- Kanter, R., Miller, S. M., & Fernie, D. E. (1992). Diverse paths to literacy in a preschool classroom: A sociocultural perspective. *Reading Research Quarterly, 27*(3), 184–201.
- Kontos, S., Burchinal, M., Howes, C., Wisseh, S., & Galinsky, E. (2002). An eco-behavioral approach to examining the contextual effects of early childhood classrooms. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 17*, 239–258.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching!: The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice, 34*(3), 159–165.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Teaching in dangerous times: Culturally relevant approaches to teacher assessment. *Journal of Negro Education, 67*(3), 255–267.
- Lahman, M., & Park, S. (2004). Understanding children from diverse cultures: Bridging perspectives of parents and teachers. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 12*(2), 131–142.
- Landerholm, E., Gehrie, C., & Hao, Y. (2004). Educating early childhood teachers for the global world. *Early Child Development and Care, 174*(7–8), 593–606.
- Moll, L. (2000). *Exploring biliteracy and beyond: Developing a case example of educational sovereignty*. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from <http://www.gened.arizona.edu/tmiller/comlit/moll.htm>.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Nett, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching. *Theory Into Practice, 31*, 132–141.
- Pappamihel, N. E. (2004). Hugs and smiles: Demonstrating caring in a multicultural early childhood classroom. *Early Child Development and Care, 174*(6), 539–548.
- Rhedding-Jones, J. (2002). An undoing of documents and other texts: Toward a critical multi-culturalism in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 3*(1), 90–116.
- Saft, E. W., & Pianta, R. C. (2001). Teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students: Effects of child age, gender, and ethnicity of teachers and children. *School Psychology Quarterly, 16*(2), 125–141.
- Souto-Manning, M. (2006). A Latina teacher's journal: Reflections on language, culture, literacy, and discourse practices. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 5*(4), 293–303.
- Souto-Manning, M. (2009). Syncretic home literacies: Learning to read in two languages and three worlds. In G. Li (Ed.), *Multicultural families, home literacies, and mainstream schooling*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Whitin, D., Mills, H., & O'Keefe, T. (1990). *Living and learning mathematics: Stories and strategies for supporting mathematical literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Copyright of Early Childhood Education Journal is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Early Childhood Education Journal is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.