Prejudice Reduction through Multicultural Education: Connecting Multiple Literatures

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Abstract

Banks (1994) names prejudice reduction as one of five dimensions of multicultural education. Although children develop prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and values at young ages, research demonstrates that when multicultural knowledge and values are combined with intergroup contact, prejudice is often reduced. In this article, I connect multiple literatures in order to present an overarching picture of prejudice and its reduction in classrooms. First, I describe some negative impacts of prejudice and how prejudice develops at very young ages. Second, utilizing another of Banks’s dimensions of multicultural education, I describe the knowledge construction process as a necessary factor in prejudice reduction. Finally, intergroup contact theory and complex instruction are described as a guide for reducing prejudice in classrooms.

Introduction

Prejudicial attitudes and beliefs undermine principles of social justice in a liberal democracy. Prejudice in schools is especially troubling because schools are public places in which students learn to negotiate and construct knowledge of differences. When prejudicial beliefs go unexamined in schools, students are not given the opportunity to deconstruct prejudicial knowledge. The impact of prejudicial attitudes on students is wide ranging, spanning from lower school performance to poor physical and mental health. For example, Pang, Kiang, and Pak (2004) describe the experiences of Asian Pacific American students who face prejudicial attitudes concerning expectations of high academic performance. Individual Asian Pacific American students are often expected to excel in academics based upon aggregate group data regardless of their individual needs or abilities. These prejudices combine with family expectations to produce high levels of stress in students. As a result, some Asian Pacific American students report higher incidences of depression and suicidal thoughts than their European American peers. The reduction of prejudice is vital for equitable and vigorous learning environments that foster students’ academic, mental, and physical health.

The harm of prejudicial attitudes is not always explicit (Fiske, 2002; Steele, 1997). Steele describes a phenomenon termed stereotype threat whereby students perceive prejudicial attitudes related to their expected performance in a school subject, and as a result, their performance
declines in the subject. For example, when female students perceived prejudicial attitudes in the area of mathematics, their performance in mathematics suffered. Because stereotype threat is, as Steel describes it, “in the air,” the inequity of student learning and assessment is concealed, and norms supporting prejudicial attitudes are reinforced.

When students experience prejudice in school, they sometimes disengage from school because they disassociate the setting of school from their overarching identities (Spencer, 1982; 1983; 1985; Steele, 1997). This is a way to disassociate self-identity with tasks and settings that are prejudicial. This is dire because disassociation with school often leads to school failure. Prejudice reduction as part of multicultural education decreases student disassociation with school, leading to learning environments that affirm the values of equitable education and social justice.

Prejudice reduction is a necessary component of multicultural education (Banks, 1994). Educators are in unique positions to improve intergroup relations inside and outside of school because public schools offer two resources: differences and common goals (Parker, 2003). It is within this social milieu that multicultural education and prejudice reduction can transpire. When students attempt to express differences and reach cooperative goals (e.g., solve a science problem or deliberate socially just rules in their school), they can gain perspective consciousness of their classmates and others. In other words, students can become aware that there are multiple perspectives concerning social conditions or the best course of action for their community (Camicia, 2007). Multicultural education helps students see these multiple perspectives with an eye toward ending social oppression (Kumashiro, 2003). In the following review, I attempt to make connections between multiple literatures in order to paint an overarching picture that will guide educators toward reducing prejudice in their classrooms. I discuss how prejudice develops from a young age and how educators can play a significant role in reducing prejudicial knowledge, beliefs, and values.

**Prejudice and Its Development**

In an effort to promote prejudice reduction through multicultural education, it is first helpful to understand the nature and development of prejudicial attitudes and beliefs. Prejudice occurs when negative attitudes concerning a social group are extended toward an individual based upon that individual’s perceived membership in the group (Stephan, 1985; Stephan & Stephan, 2001). The group categories upon which these negative attitudes are based can be wide-ranging, including categories such as race, social class, gender, religion, age, sexuality, ability, and ethnicity.

Dovidio et al. (2004) describe prejudicial attitudes as having cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Successful multicultural education addresses each of these components in the prejudice reduction process. First, the cognitive component of prejudice encompasses the negative thoughts or beliefs students have concerning an individual or group. School sites are ideal social milieus for examining prejudicial knowledge when such examinations are sanctioned by educators. Later in this article, I discuss the role of knowledge construction in dismantling prejudicial knowledge. Second, an affective component of prejudice entails negative student feelings about a target person or group. Under optimal conditions of intergroup contact in a multicultural curriculum, students are able to build positive affective ties with peers by placing value upon these relationships (van Dick et al., 2004). Third, a behavioral component of prejudice influences students’ prejudicial attitudes when they consider past or future experiences.
with a target person or group. Students can examine past experiences with intergroup contacts and role-play future contacts with positive behavioral outcomes. Prejudice reduction is possible when multicultural education targets cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, and as a result, negative intergroup prejudices are transformed into positive intergroup relationships.

Because prejudice develops at very early ages, prejudice reduction often involves an examination of longstanding unexamined beliefs. Although social categorization is a natural process of cognition (Fiske, 2002), the cues for learning categorization and prejudicial attitudes are derived from an environment that reflects fundamental inequities. The construction of prejudicial knowledge is reinforced through a child’s perception of these inequities (Spencer, 1985). Biases in young children serve as powerful examples of the pervasive power that societal prejudice has upon social reproduction and the knowledge construction process.

Spencer (1982, 1983) found that white bias is a reflection of children constructing prejudicial knowledge of society rather than their constructing prejudicial knowledge toward themselves. Children learn very early through a variety of sources about the “answers” that society gives to questions concerning cultural preferences. Children mirror white bias in a cognitive process that mimics the values of the society that children are embedded, but the adoption of such a bias in children of color does not necessarily influence self-esteem. Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) write:

Cognitive awareness appears to support the acquisition of pro-majority group or Caucasian-oriented attitudes among racial or ethnic minority children. Such results may not necessarily suggest misidentification or self-rejection in the case of very young children. Given the more positive attributes credited to white stimuli, instead, the response pattern may reflect young children's identification (of the self) with the (perceived) more valued stimuli. (p. 296)

Within a milieu of intersecting social contexts and cues, individuals attempt to construct judgments that reflect prejudicial attitudes based upon the prevalent judgments of mainstream society. In other words, prejudicial attitudes and beliefs concerning society are internalized by all who are part of society, regardless of whether individuals benefit or suffer from mainstream attitudes and beliefs. This defines hegemony whereby social inequalities are maintained by prejudices that strengthen consent to one social group’s domination of other social groups (Gramsci, 1972). Prejudice reduction in multicultural education aims at creating learning environments where the societal prejudices that fuel hegemony are not reproduced in classrooms. The following section discusses ways that teachers can help students deconstruct prejudicial knowledge.

**Prejudice Reduction: Knowledge Construction**

Banks (1994) includes knowledge construction as another dimension of multicultural education. The process of knowledge construction is simultaneously a process of knowledge deconstruction. As students examine alternate narratives of out-groups, they begin the deconstruction of hegemonic mainstream narratives that perpetuate social inequality. For example, rather than a monolingual voice in subjects such as history, students are able to listen to many voices that describe history from a variety of perspectives. By studying multiple perspectives, students develop the ability to analyze inconsistencies that serve to perpetuate
inequalities. Banks (2002) writes, “By revealing and articulating the inconsistency between the democratic ideals within a society and its practices, transformative knowledge becomes a potential source for substantial change” (p. 22). The transformation of knowledge includes asking different questions and reexamining what Apple (1990) terms “official” knowledge. Official knowledge describes the elevation of mainstream narratives to the status of being “truth,” “normal,” or “natural.” Because “official” knowledge is often perpetuated by school curriculum, a critical examination of the curriculum is an important dimension of multicultural education. This examination is necessary in order for students to deconstruct prejudicial knowledge and construct an appreciation of diverse perspectives.

Because the reification of prejudicial “official” knowledge is often facilitated through schools (King, 1991) and media (Cortés, 2000), these are important focal points in multicultural education. King stresses that the school curriculum often lulls students into a hegemonic sleep by holding knowledge as culturally neutral. Claims of neutrality render critical student inquiry of such claims difficult. Because students are not encouraged to question the source, perspective, or quality of knowledge claims, prejudice is strengthened, extended, legitimized, and reproduced throughout society. For example, the knowledge found in textbooks often reifies conceptions of Eurocentric perspectives by organizing curricula around such terms as “a nation of immigrants,” perpetuating conceptions of American culture that noticeably lack any non-Eurocentric perspectives. When applied to curriculum reform, Banks (1994) describes a transformative approach that encourages students to construct new democratic paradigms favoring the appreciation of cultural differences rather than the reproduction of mainstream narratives. It is only through such a transformation of prejudicial knowledge that a multicultural curriculum is possible.

The critical pedagogy described by King (1991) and Banks (1994) is a central theme of Ladson-Billings’ (1999) work. She emphasizes the need for schools to serve as places where students critically and dynamically decipher traditional claims that support the legitimacy of hierarchies that imprison knowledge and reify social ranking. Critical race theory begins with the premise that racism is so embedded in American society that prejudicial attitudes remain largely unrecognized. Provided with such a premise, students are able to examine racism from a variety of perspectives, as well as examine structural mechanisms developed by power elite that serve to promote and sustain racism. The deployment of critical race theory can serve as an important component to multicultural education and prejudice reduction because the hidden assumptions that foster prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination are exposed and examined by students.

Because mass media play a significant role in the construction of prejudicial knowledge, educators can also help students examine the manner in which different social groups are portrayed in mass media. Cortes (2000) found that although mass media are sometimes used to foster a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, media often foster the construction of prejudicial beliefs. Similar to the insidious nature of Steele’s (1997) stereotype threat, Bandura (1977) describes the powerful effect that the media has upon learning. The text and images in media shape behavior and attitudes. Because people often have limited exposure to diverse cultures, the symbolic modeling of culture through media, such as the television, often encourages individuals to essentialize other cultures. The process of essentializing is intensified in homogeneous communities in which media are the only sources of knowledge students have about different social groups. Schools are ideal locations for students to critically analyze media representations and the role of media in the construction of individual and societal prejudices.
Prejudice Reduction: Intergroup Contact

Educators can also reduce prejudice by facilitating environments of positive intergroup contact. In his meta-analytic review of 516 intergroup contact studies, Pettigrew (2004) reported that “intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice,” and the “changes wrought by contact are broad. Intergroup contact reduces many different manifestations of prejudice” (p. 775). The seminal work of Allport (1979) formed the foundation for a half century of intergroup contact research (Pettigrew, 2004). Allport writes:

Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom, or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups. (p.281)

Allport’s (1979) four conditions of positive contact (equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support) are based upon democratic principles of justice and equality. Teachers can facilitate learning environments that emphasize equal status and common goals by carefully monitoring classroom social dynamics and scaffolding learning activities that ameliorate status differences and promote common goals. Equity pedagogy, as described by Banks and Banks (1995), is inclusive of all aspects of school policies and curricula that combine Allport’s conditions. Banks and Banks state that equity pedagogy involves “teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within and help create and perpetuate a just, humane, and democratic society” (p. 152). Positive intergroup contact conditions foster democratic attitudes that help all students reduce prejudice and learn equitably.

Unfortunately, learning environments are often inequitable due to prejudice. Cohen and Roper (1985) found that differences in perceived ethnicities among students can lead to prejudicial assignment of low-status in group work. In differentiated status classrooms, the communication of high-status students is valued, and the communication of low-status students is devalued. When this component is attached to the assignment of ethnicity, prejudice is increased.

Because very little learning occurs if low-status students are hindered from social interaction, inequitable status results in an inequitable learning environment (Cohen, 1994). Low-status students are often not encouraged or allowed to express themselves, and a hegemonic discourse is strengthened. This has devastating consequences as students of high-status command high valuation of their thoughts while the thoughts of low-status students are devalued. If inequitable status is based upon individual cultural differences, hegemony is reinforced and prejudicial attitudes are strengthened.

Fortunately, schools continue to have a powerful potential for fostering multicultural education and prejudice reduction by implementing Allport’s (1979) four conditions. Cohen’s (1994) method of complex instruction provides an on-the-ground example of how educators can create the conditions for equitable learning and positive contact between students from different social groups.
Allport’s (1979) condition of equal status is the foundation of complex instruction. In an attempt to ameliorate status inequity, Cohen recommended two methods that facilitate what she terms “status treatment” (Cohen & Lotan, 2004). First, students must be provided a multiple-ability curriculum. When all students are provided multiple opportunities for success, they are more likely to form equal status structures than if success is limited to narrow academic parameters. For example, an over reliance upon writing as an assessment of student learning can increase status differences in the classroom. Alternatively, teachers can provide students with multiple ways to learn and demonstrate learning, and as a result, all students are given opportunities to be successful.

A second method of status treatment involves additional assignment of competence to low-status students. When teachers assign competence to low-status students, low-status students are elevated to equal status positions. This can be accomplished by recognizing a low-status student’s achievements or assigning a low-status student to a high-status role in group work. For example, teachers can assign low-status students the role of a group leader or reporter. This increases the sense of voice and significance of low-status students and decreases social inequities that foster prejudice. In a study of 13 elementary school classrooms, Cohen & Lotan (1995) found that status treatment raised the participation level of low-status students but did not affect the participation level of high-status students.

An equitable classroom, as described by Cohen and Lotan (1995), intersects Allport’s (1979) “positive factors” framework in numerous ways. First, Allport’s condition of equal status plays an important part in intergroup contact and equity in heterogeneous classrooms. In traditional classrooms, students and teachers often assign student status based upon prejudicial beliefs and academic achievement. The resulting hierarchy consigns some students to premium educational opportunities, while other students, often poor or students of color, are relegated to a low-quality education (Oakes, 1985). The result is an increase in the construction of prejudicial knowledge. In contrast, prejudice is reduced when such status hierarchies are discharged and students are given equal status.

The second and third of Allport’s (1979) positive contact conditions, which require common goals and cooperation, are also present in equitable classrooms of complex instruction because students cooperate to reach common goals in group work. When students work cooperatively, for example, on a science project, they can develop a group identity that reduces prejudicial attitudes. The same phenomenon of prejudice reduction has been seen in sports teams because members of the team have a common goal.

Educators can support Allport’s (1979) fourth condition of positive intergroup contact (institutional support) because positive contact activities can be sanctioned by the authority of educators. This last condition has far-reaching implications for school culture, educational policy, and educational research. Broadening the scope of the fourth contact condition to the entire school, Stephan and Stephan (2001) recommend that schools implement behavioral norms of tolerance and respect. As a result of clear norms prohibiting prejudicial actions, the atmosphere of a school becomes one that affirms multicultural values leading to attitudes and beliefs consistent with equity and social justice. Stephan and Stephan emphasize that when faculty and staff model democratic norms and welcome the examination of school policies, students respond by adopting democratic attitudes.

Finally, discriminatory practices such as tracking should be dismantled as a way to reduce prejudice. Schofield (2004) calls attention to the importance of removing the discriminatory practice of tracking that promotes school resegregation. Such practices lead to
increased prejudice and model a school culture that supports hegemony. However, Schofield warns that simply preventing resegregation is not enough. Rather than stop short at a “neutral” stance, school policies must nurture the power of all groups to express themselves and participate in the functioning of the school. Schools are ideal laboratories for understanding the social and political dynamics that breed oppression, prejudice, and intolerance. If a school’s goals include commitments to equity, social justice, and prejudice reduction, students are encouraged to transfer their critical stance to contexts far beyond the boundaries of school.

Conclusion

Multicultural education must permeate a broad range of activities and beliefs with an eye toward fostering and implementing democratic values such as social justice, equality, tolerance, prejudice reduction, and appreciation of diversity. In this article, I have attempted to examine the origin of beliefs and behaviors that are the antithesis of democratic values, as well as examine some suggestions for replacing undemocratic teaching methods with democratic teaching methods. Although prejudice reduction is a constant concern, systemic changes can only occur when prejudice reduction and knowledge transformation are extended to social activism.

Schools have the potential to be effective agents of social change. By providing model environments where democratic ideals are valued and implemented, students are able to see the reification of democratic ideals, and at the same time, they are empowered to construct the knowledge necessary to combat social injustices (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, age-ism, able-ism, language-ism). The authors and researchers cited in this article carry the ideals of social justice into classrooms and schools. Multicultural education enables students to critically examine traditional mainstream and hegemonic narratives across subject areas. In doing so, students develop the critical faculties necessary to challenge the hierarchies that serve as tools for prejudice construction and social injustice.
References


