Sergio Diaz Luna

Professor Cohen

Multicultural Education

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The Multicultural Classroom

Most of the year, Monday to Friday students across the United States attend school. Preschool students at La Casa are no exception. Their parents bring them to school each morning and attend their own classroom in the downstairs portion of the community center. Throughout my field visits to La Casa, I’ve learned the daily routine Ms. Rodriguez sets up for the preschool students. As students walk in they’re greeted by Ms. Rodriguez and her teaching assistant and start by doing a warm-up activity of writing their names on dry-erase personal boards and shapes. Once everyone is in the classroom, she gathers them together and reads them a story. Students are then asked to stand up and dance to different music and sing along to the ABC’s, count up to 20, and learn popular lullaby songs. Ms. Rodriguez then has structured lesson time with sentence identification where students can go up to the board and point out letters or words they know. Ms. Rodriguez then has them do an arts and craft activity or puzzle with a theme depending on what the unit she’s teaching is focused on. As students finish their activity they wash their hands and get ready for lunch. After eating students have free reign during playtime for about an hour and a half where students can do as they wish for the rest of the day. At the end of the day students return to their parents and I end my placement. The class runs for about 4 hours in total and the learning the students undergo is integral to their future development as adults and in navigating the education system. Admittedly, beginning the placement I had no idea what to expect and I had a hard time understanding how education took place in a pre-school setting. I specifically chose the setting for this reason. Questions I had ranged from topics like what material do students use to learn in this setting to what teaching practices would help best for this age group. Because it is a bilingual preschool setting I also wondered how students and teachers navigate the role of language to use it as a resource and to not deter future development or create a conflicting identity. How would these children of immigrants fair in a system that wasn’t created for them? I came in to learn and I was lucky Ms. Rodriguez was there to teach. Her level of commitment and teaching intentionality revealed just how powerful and necessary the role of a multicultural educator and really helped me understand some basic principles to carry forward in the road to becoming an effective multicultural educator.

Throughout my placement Ms. Rodriguez was a caring and overall great pre-school teacher by being conscious of student perspective and language barriers that existed in the bilingual setting. However, the first time I met her I noticed I brought in some of my own bias to the conversation that made me question her competency to teach these students. The first field visit Ms. Rodriguez made a few micro-aggressive comments towards the students she taught saying, “These guys most of them are from immigrant families from Mexico. They’re poor Mexicans so they go crazy for the little things we give them.” This comment stood out to me the most and made me question why I was even in this setting. I understood my reaction was bias because I myself am one of these “poor Mexicans” but I didn’t want to pass judgement onto Ms. Rodriguez for the phrasing and continued with the first meeting. She then said something else that took me aback. “I’m getting paid to teach them English so that’s what I’m going to do.” I interpreted both comments as surfacing of her own preconceived bias against her students thinking to myself, “is she just teaching for the money and does she really understand what I means to teach a bilingual classroom without bias?”(Field Notes) Although I tried to leave my bias at the door, I wasn’t able to let it go and I noticed my future observations of her teaching picking up more of what I believed to be micro-aggressive comments. It didn’t affect my interactions with her as a student and teacher but it did make me more aware of her actions and made me question her bias much more than I would have to someone else. In reality, there is some truth to what she said. She does have to teach English to these students and that is what they’re paying her to do; which made me question how she carried this out and whether or not this effected student interaction with school.

The majority of students only spoke Spanish making bilingualism central to the placement and a large focus on equipping students with the English necessary to succeed in Kindergarten, where they will only speak English as required by state laws. One of the great difficulties I had based on my own personal experience was the problematizing of identity based on these language differences. Like Yukari Takimoto Amos, I believe that language is an important part of student identity could be an effective tool in navigating the marginalization of identity. (Amos, 2004) By using student language not as a helpless quality but one that can inform future learning bilingual education can become much more welcoming. Ms. Rodriguez’s “I’m paid to teach them English” attitude wasn’t really what I was expecting and although she didn’t mean it in any bad way or anything like that, I felt it was an attack on the non-dominant language something directly conflicting with this view of bilingualism. Soon, however, I learned that she wasn’t attacking non-dominant languages as much as she was criticizing the way English is the dominant language in the setting. She explained to me towards the end of the semester that the reason she pushes for learning English is because the district is pushing for an English education. As I learned in this conversation, she understands the implications of teaching English only for identity but does so because of the local school district policy. “The local school district pushes us to teach English and they tell the parents to speak English only at home. I tell the parents to use Spanish at home and English at school because the students will do better this way. Being bilingual is a real skill.” (Field Notes) From here I saw how her personal opinion was overshadowed by district policy and it was really the systematic need to learn English to succeed that creates conflict.

Could it be that the district was not built to manage the bilingual setting? If so shouldn’t it be in the power of the people who take part of the system to change this? Meira Levinson gives us a way to interact with this inequity in representation by showing us the civic empowerment gap that Latin@, Black, and poor students face. (Levinson, 2012) Students in La Casa share the Latin@ and low-income identities but they also share an immigrant identity which doubly and triply disadvantage parents and some of the children because they will never be able to exercise civic engagement because voting rights are restricted to US-born people. This reinforcing of the position as an outsiders to society forces them to culturally assimilate based on majority population biases in order to succeed. This is something I find problematic in this placement. The hegemony of whiteness created in educational institutions allowed by the adaptive unconscious has made the district push for students to assimilate to mainstream society making it difficult or “othering” those who do not fit the mainstream model. As Stuart Hall points out, in our society both multiculturalism and racism exist simultaneously. (Hall, 2001) In creating an imagined community like the American, we have to create outsiders to it, and doing so we reinforce the idea of the “other” and allow the racism to exist. Even if we welcome outsiders to become part of the American, they must be American in order to be perceived as an American. Knowing that these students will face these challenges in the future and their identity will be problematized because of it, how can one be a multicultural educator in this bilingual immigrant setting?

Ms. Rodriguez is very aware of her role as a multicultural educator because of her own experiences as a marginalized minority. A daughter to Puerto Rican immigrants, Ms. Rodriguez understands the position many of her students are in and does her best challenge them to reach their full potential. Through her class activities constantly asking her students for more from their responses and having them carry out complicated tasks, Ms. Rodriguez assumes the position of a “warm demander.” (Delpeit, 2012) She helps her students do better by continuously pressing her students to give more, like asking them to repeat things they just said in Spanish in English and reading out more than one word on the board.(Field Notes) Her personal experiences also helps her understand student marginalization in a different, and arguably better, way than other teachers. Being a daughter of immigrants and a Latina herself, Ms. Rodriguez knows how important cultural roots are for students. When she heard that the class I was taking was Multicultural Education, she was eager to point out the decorations throughout the room that included Aztec pyramids, small flags hung up on the window, and that she sung Des Colores as one of the warm-up songs of the day. She even celebrated important holidays like Easter by doing traditionally Latin@ activities. By taking this approach in her classroom, she is able to celebrate student identities and bring in ancestral memory as a teaching tool. Here we see how the role of a teacher through the model Chia-lin Huang presents as one that must learn about student behavior and adapt to it without judgement. I say that although this is important to be a multicultural educator, in this setting Ms. Rodriguez’s identity as Latin@ helps her be more aware of what students need in terms of cultural content. Celebrating identity was a central theme in La Casa but more relevant to the age group, Ms. Rodriguez spent a large part of her time ensuring students learned conflict resolution skills and other social norms.

I remember one placement in particular when Ms. Rodriguez and I had a long conversation of how students that she had, aside from having to learn English, had to learn how to interact with other students. This happened because Juan and Tony one day were arguing over the use of dinosaurs. Juan, who often tries to dominate the dinosaurs, had become upset because Tony didn’t want to let him borrow any more dinosaurs saying that Juan had to share because they were communal toys not just Juan’s. Juan appealed to Ms. Rodriguez and Ms. Rodriguez sided with Tony, explaining to him that he must learn how to control his actions if he wanted to keep playing with the dinosaurs. Juan pouted and was visibly upset by this trying to argue against the teacher but Ms. Rodriguez wasn’t having it and put him in time out. According to Ms. Rodriguez, the two kids fight often and she has told Juan to defend himself so that he can obtain the skills necessary to succeed socially. She really takes into consideration all of her student’s interactions telling me that she tries to provide students a fun environment where they would want to come back to and where they can learn from each other. During story time she Embodies Christine Sleeter’s description of students as curriculum by asking them questions like, “what was your favorite part of the book?” with a follow up being “what do you like about it?” (Sleeter, 2005) As she explained to me, she asks these questions as a “weak form of the Socratic method of questioning.” These questions usually engage students of this age group and another way she brings in personal stories of her students is by asking them other simple questions and things that often relate with Latin@ identity. In one placement while reading a book about butterflies she said that when she had gone down to Mexico she saw a large swarm of butterflies, asking students if they had ever gone to Mexico. Although many students are excited to talk about Mexico they get off topic easily making it difficult for students to have an at-length discussion exercising the full scale of students as curriculum. Regardless, the quality of discussion they do have and the agency students feel by bringing in their stories makes the environment very welcoming and a great place for students to learn.

Although much of the curriculum is centered on the role of students learning for themselves and much of the content is multiculturally oriented, the structured class time Ms. Rodriguez organizes is no joke. On the first day of placement as she was doing an in-class activity giving complicated instructions to students Ms. Rodriguez pointed straight to me and said “Zone proximal development from Vygotsky theory, I’m explaining this to them but they won’t understand half of what I’m saying but it will build up their capacity for learning.” I knew that teaching pre-school students would be a difficult job but I wasn’t expecting it to be as difficult as it seemed to be during my placement. Throughout the placement she made comments pointing out teaching practices as part of a larger plan for students to develop their skills as learners. It really helped me understand just how much goes into teaching and dismissed my initial bias of Ms. Rodriguez making me appreciate what she does in the classroom. Coming in to learn how teaching takes place in a pre-school setting, I was very happy to have Ms. Rodriguez as an instructor because of the devotion and intentionality behind her actions. She was also very conscious of the language differences, translating complicated words and consciously celebrating cultural differences. In her own way she has resisted the hegemony of whiteness in the district and has helped students push forward in their education and personal development. I believe her personal experience as a Latin@ has been one of the contributing factors to her being so conscious as a multicultural educator which makes me question whether or not multiculturalism can be celebrated by someone who is not a marginalized minority. Regardless I learned so much in the field I wanted to and I believe the experience gave me a better understanding of how multiculturalism comes into the classroom.

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