South Texas Teachers' and Leaders' Perceptions of Multicultural Education

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ABSTRACT

There is a large body of literature that suggests that the increase of cultural diversity in schools should be understood as a call for new teaching approaches that promote multicultural awareness among students and where educators and school leaders exhibit culturally responsive organizational practices, behaviors and attitudes (Assaf, Garza, & Battle, 2010; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Sleeter, 2001). This naturalistic inquiry explores data from three South Texas educators and leaders with regard to their perceptions of multicultural education. Four key themes are shared: 1. General perceptions and definition of Multicultural Education, 2. Implementation of Multicultural Education, 3. Multicultural Education as a need, and, 4. Benefits of Multicultural Education.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Teaching Practices, Diversity

INTRODUCTION

The idea of implementing teaching practices that foster a cultural diverse understanding of school educators generates disagreement of opinions throughout general society (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004). Personal beliefs and perceptions are considered to be "powerful filters that shape how an individual sees the world, sees other people, and sees oneself" (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Specifically, educators' and school leaders' perceptions towards Multicultural Education has been identified to be key factors that can determine the success or failure of its implementation in schools (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Sleeter, 2001; Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010).

It is evident that educators' and school leaders' perception of Multicultural Education play a key role in how students understand and respond to culturally responsive instruction (Assaf et al., 2010; Bhargava, Hawley, & Scott, 2004), and furthermore, how they function in multicultural contexts (Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Okoye-Johnson, 2011). Hence, it is important to ascertain how teachers and school leaders perceive the implementation of Multicultural Education in their classrooms. The research on Multicultural Education is not new and has been well documented (Alvir-Martin & Ho, 2011; Banks, 2008; McCray et al., 2004). However, little research has been conducted to describe teachers' and school leaders' perceptions towards Multicultural Education, and even less to describe the perceptions of educators and school leaders toward the implementation of Multicultural Education in their classrooms and schools in the South Texas area.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to describe the perceptions of South Texas educators and school leaders towards the implementation of Multicultural Education in their classroom. At this stage in the research, Multicultural Education will be generally defined as instruction that attempts to "meet the cultural and academic needs of all students through the emphasis of the importance of all races and cultures, and the attitudes of students toward themselves and toward other cultures" (Banks, 1991 as cited in Okoye-Johnson, 2011, p. 1258).

The following research questions framed this study:
1. What are the perceptions of South Texas educators and school leaders toward the implementation of Multicultural Education in their classroom?
2. What are the possible outcomes of implementing Multicultural Education perceived by educators and school leaders in South Texas?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Currently, the population of American society represents the broadest scope of cultural diversity in the history of the country (McCray et al., 2004). More than 25% of the total population has been reported to belong to racial and ethnic minority groups (Cicchelli & Cho, 2007). Without a doubt, the demographics of the U.S. are changing and they will continue doing so (Cicchelli & Cho, 2007; Ford, 2004; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

According to several scholars, the current cultural diversity of the country is evidenced in school systems (McCray et al., 2004; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Okoye-Johnson, 2011). For example, it has been discussed that currently, 33% of the total student population in the U.S.

consists of minority students (Okoye-Johnson, 2011). Furthermore, it has been predicted that by the year 2020, the percentage of minority students will increase to approximately 50% of the total student population (McCray et al., 2004).

However, it has been reported that in the U.S. and Texas in particular, there are large cultural gaps between minority students and educators, who in most cases belong to the dominant cultural group (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Sleeter, 2001). Such demographics in the American schools and the increasing diversity in the U.S. call for a transformation in education that increases multicultural awareness, develop academic skills, and promote attitudes in favor of social peace (Bustamante et al., 2009; Cicchelli & Cho, 2007).

Moreover, Nelson and Guerra (2013) stated that due to the current demographic shifts occurring in the U.S., school leaders and educators need to be concerned about developing several reforms that respond to the cultural diversity of their student population with the purpose of increasing students' academic performance. Additionally, these educational reforms should not only focus on addressing the forms of social justice, but they should ensure that students and educators learn to appreciate their cultural differences (Clark, 2010).

According to Bhargava et al. (2004) and Bustamante et al. (2009), educators and school leaders have difficulties defining how to promote multiculturalism and cultural responsiveness in schools, because in most cases, they have a lack of cultural awareness and little understanding on how cultural differences might have an influence in school practices. This lack of knowledge has been related to educators and school leaders own biases, and negative perceptions towards the implementation of Multicultural Education in their classrooms (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Luther, 2009).

Similarly, Nelson and Guerra (2013) discussed that commonly, educators' and school leaders' attitudes towards Multicultural Education are based on deficit beliefs, which are not conducive to working with minority students, and on insufficient cultural knowledge to be able to recognize and respond to their students' cultural diversity. Also, it was argued by Oller, Vila, and Zufiaurre (2012) that typically, educators and school leaders have these negative attitudes towards Multicultural Education due to "their own stereotypes and prejudices towards cultural minorities" (p.354).

Furthermore, Sleeter (2001) explained that when educators or school leaders have difficulties in promoting Multicultural Education, they normally tend to utilize colorblindness practices as a way of handling anxiety and lack of cultural knowledge. Bhargava et al. (2004) argued that in order to implement effective Multicultural Education programs, teachers need specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes about cultural diversity.

Frequently, educators and school leaders who come from a different background than their minority students, tend to have little knowledge about the cultural traditions, values, and beliefs of their students, as well as a lack of understanding the discrimination and hostile attitudes that they have faced (Cicchelli & Cho, 2007). Therefore, they have big difficulties in demonstrating sympathy and understanding of the cultural realities that their students bring to the classroom (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010).

Several scholars have proposed that to implement and adopt an effective Multicultural Education program that emphasizes antiracist, social justice and critical learning, educators and school leaders must have positive perspectives and strong beliefs towards the benefits of Multicultural Education in all students' achievement (Assaf et al., 2010; Nelson & Guerra, 2013; Oller et al., 2012; Sleeter, 2001). This is because teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of Multicultural Education have a key role in the success of its implementation and the way

students will perceive and respond to this kind of educational programs (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Assaf et al., 2010)

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

As the purpose of this research is to describe the perceptions of South Texas educators and school leaders toward the implementation of Multicultural Education in their classroom, this project was conducted as a small-scale qualitative study utilizing a naturalistic inquiry design. According to Stake (1995), the purpose of a qualitative research is to disclose unanticipated and emergent data. Furthermore, because qualitative research is applied to obtain expressive information not expressed in quantitative data about beliefs, values, perceptions, attitudes, emotions, and motivations (Crabtree & Miller, 1992), this kind of design was used to obtain information that describes the perceptions of school leaders and educators regarding the implementation of Multicultural Education.

Participants and Site Selection

The participants in this study were selected through a purposeful and convenient sampling, which refers to the selection of informants who can provide great information about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Data was collected at locations that were selected for being convenient and conducive sites where the comfort level of subjects might promote elicit quality responses (Erlandson et. al., 1993). Additionally, the sites where this research was developed were used for being accessible and for not inhibiting or disrupting the continuity of the data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Data Collection

The data gathering instruments used in this study were open-ended semi-structured interviews, which were used as conversations (Dexter, 1970) with the purpose of getting credible answers that might provide unexpected, emergent data (Erlandson et al., 1993).

The interviews have a length of approximately one hour each and all of them were audio recorded. Then, interviews were transcribed verbatim for data. The information obtained from the interviews was coded in common themes that appear across the informant's responses.

Data Analysis

In the coding process, the researchers theme the data across interviews (Reissman, 1993) to ascertain common and emergent themes. Microsoft excel was utilized to analyze the data and develop the coding process. Additionally, data was analyzed by a constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) whereby themes were identified in the first interview, and subsequent data was compared to initial themes, continuing until common themes were established across all the interviews conducted in this research (Reissman, 1993). Subsequently,

the common themes found in the coding process were compared to the extant literature to recognize any new knowledge that could be shared, as well as confirmation of any extant themes in the literature.

Trustworthiness of the Data

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the data analyzed in this study, strategies such as member checking both during and post data transcription, theming the data were utilized. For instance, member checking post data transcription helped to determine the accuracy of the findings through taking the final transcript back to the participants to determine if they feel that the transcribe is accurate (Creswell, 2008). Finally, purposive sampling was utilized to ensure transferability, since Erlandson et al. (1993) suggested that the foundation of transferability is a suitable description of the context, hence, the research for data should be conducted by processes that will provide rich detail about it.

FINDINGS & INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this project was to describe the perceptions of South Texas educators and school leaders towards the implementation of Multicultural Education. The participants of this project were 3 South Texas educators and school leaders, two of them are females and one male. Their ages ranged between 35 to 55 years old. Additionally, they have worked in the field of education between 7 to 18 years as educators and school leaders. They all reside in South Texas, the natural boundary of the U.S. and Mexico. Pseudonyms were used for the participants including: Portos, Meli, and Isa.

Four themes emerged as findings across all the interviews conducted in this research. These are: 1) General perceptions and definition of Multicultural Education, 2) Implementation of Multicultural Education, 3) Multicultural Education as a need, and 4) Benefits of Multicultural Education.

General Perceptions and Definition of Multicultural Education

All participants agreed that the concept of Multicultural Education has been present across their teaching careers. Portos mentioned that he is, "pretty familiar with this concept."As well, Meli said that, "In my career and experience, this term is pretty common." Also, it was discussed that the size of their school district was not an impediment to be familiar or in contact with this approach to education.

Based on data shared in the interviews, the participants have similar perceptions of the definition of Multicultural Education. Meli defined it as, "teaching of children of various cultures in the same classroom . . . teaching about the diverse cultures . . . diversity in the classroom, the school, the world." Isa understood Multicultural Education as a way of teaching used to, "see that students have different languages and different ways of living." This can be seen as Multicultural Education and is a way to teach students about the diversity of cultures in all contexts around them. According to Portos, "Multicultural Education refers to educating children in their culture and language."

Moreover, the participants perceived Multicultural Education as a method of teaching that can help students to prepare for any situation that they might encounter that is related to

diversity. As Portos explained, "Multicultural Education . . . helps and encourages our students to understand and acknowledge the variety of different cultures that are present in their lives…including languages and values." Generally, the participants in this research perceived Multicultural Education as an opportunity to become aware of our culture and the culture of others.

Implementation of Multicultural Education

In summary, the participants agreed that Multicultural Education is a teaching method that is implemented with the purpose of ensuring that all students learn about ethnic diversity. All participants mentioned that the implementation of Multicultural Education should be done daily initially in the classroom.

Additionally, it was mentioned that there is not a single formula to implement Multicultural Education. Portos stated that, "Multicultural Education can be implemented in different ways . . . for sure there is not only one way to do it." Meli mentioned that, "Multicultural Education employs many different methods, people, materials and languages."

All participants shared a variety of strategies used in their classrooms to develop Multicultural Education. For instance, Meli mentioned the use of dynamics where the parents of the children share information with all the students in the class about their culture and traditions. Also, Isa explained that she encourages their students to discuss in the classroom about how they live their culture in their home country and with their families. As well, Portos mentioned that, "students participate in English and Spanish circle time . . . they are allowed to share anything they want in the language they prefer."

Furthermore, it was stated by Meli that the implementation of "Multicultural Education may not necessarily involve all students, but helps each one." According to Portos, the implementation of Multicultural Education needs, "the motivation that teachers and students have to learn and understand different cultures." In addition, Isa stated that, "in order to promote Multicultural Education, teachers need to know a little bit about it . . . teachers need to have a little understanding about cultural diversity."

Likewise, it was mentioned by all the participants that the use of students' native language was important to implement Multicultural Education. However, according to Portos, teachers and school leaders need to "have in mind that language is not everything . . . they need to understand the culture of the student because language is only a small part of the culture." Also, the participants of this study agreed students' motivation and interest in learning about other cultures are crucial determiners of the success of the implementation of Multicultural Education.

Multicultural Education as a Need

According to the information provided by Meli, Multicultural Education can be seen as a need for the educational and social development of the students. In her words, Multicultural Education is a need because, "fewer and fewer programs are being funded to help teach these children who come from other countries . . . however, it is critical that as teachers, we understand that they still need an education."

Additionally, Portos explained that Multicultural Education is needed to, "help us promote respect and tolerance . . . to create a better world." Furthermore, Isa discussed that

Multicultural Education, "gives the opportunity for students to become someone important . . . to achieve their dreams."

All participants agreed that Multicultural Education is a way to meet the needs of students for understanding and maintaining their own culture and language. Meli said that "in their life, these students need to realize the importance of their culture and language and the need to maintain it as they may need to use it later in life . . . that is the real importance of Multicultural Education."

Benefits of Multicultural Education

It was found that according to Meli Multicultural Education has a variety of benefits, for example, providing a welcome and safe environment for all students, promoting appreciation and understanding of cultural diversity, and helping students to become good citizens. Meli stated that with Multicultural Education- "many students become multicultural aware . . . and . . . loyal citizens of this country."

For teachers, Multicultural Education might contribute, "to learn and create different strategies that meet all our students learning skills . . . and understanding their culture and values", as mentioned by Portos. Also, he mentioned that Multicultural Education might help educators and school leaders create a closer relationship with their students, which can be done by, "learning their cultures, values and traditions."

All the participants discussed that one of the biggest benefits of Multicultural Education is that the majority of students become academically successful. For instance, Isa stated that, "most of the students become really successful after school . . . they learn to deal and function in a multicultural world." Portos said that, "it helps achieve goals and set higher goals." This might occur, "when the effort is truly made to help them succeed," according to Meli.

Furthermore, it was found that some of the responses of the participants coincide with the information of previous literature. For instance, some of the participants mentioned the importance of teachers' and school leaders' training in Multicultural Education. According to several scholars, when teachers and school leaders were not prepared for teaching in culturally diverse schools, they found it was difficult to successfully develop multiculturally responsive instruction (Assaf et al., 2010; Bustamante et al., 2009; Sleeter, 2001).

Also, the participants mentioned that one limiting factor of implementing Multicultural Education is that teachers have little knowledge and understanding of the cultural diversity of their students. This was also mentioned by scholars in the past, when they say that educators who lack multicultural understanding often create misconceptions and lower their educational expectations of their students (Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010; Sleeter, 2001).

In the same way, the participants mentioned that Multicultural Education can be seen as a necessity to help students achieve and to promote respect and appreciation for cultural diversity. This necessity has been largely discussed across the literature, which mentioned that Multicultural Education is perceived as a need to understand and function in the multicultural context that surrounds us, nowadays (Ford, 2014; Cicchelli & Cho, 2007; Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010).

Additionally, it was found in the data that the participants perceive that Multicultural Education has limiting factors towards the success of its implementation. For example, they mentioned the students' feelings of insecurity and fear can contribute to the failure of the

implementation of Multicultural Education, this limiting factor was not clearly found in the previous literature. Therefore, it is suggested that further research should take these issues into consideration in order to identify how an affective filter (Krashen as cited n Baker, 2006), such as insecurity or fear might inhibit the success of the implementation of Multicultural Education.

SIGNIFICANCE

This study is expected to contribute to the better implementation and understanding of Multicultural Education. Four significant themes emerged: 1. General perceptions and definition of Multicultural Education, 2. Implementation of Multicultural Education, 3. Multicultural Education as a need, and, 4. Benefits of Multicultural Education. All participants stated that Multicultural Education has diverse benefits for students and educators. It was mentioned by Isa that Multicultural Education benefits not only students from a minority culture, but, "teachers and students from the dominant culture learn from those who come from a diverse culture." According to Portos, "Multicultural Education gives students the opportunity to understand and appreciate differences . . . promotes respect and appreciation for cultural diversity." Perhaps that point is the most significant of all.

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