



Early Childhood Personnel Center

Diversifying the Early Childhood Workforce in Early Childhood Special Education



Literature Review

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The United States has been a considerably diverse country for its whole history. Since the desegregation of schools, and the collection of workforce demographic data by the U.S. Department of Education, many initiatives have begun to recruit more teachers of color (Villegas et al., 2012). This call has persisted over the years, with the goal of having diversity amongst educators mirror the diversity seen in the classroom (Goldhaber et al., 2019; Vilson, 2015; Qi & Campbell, 2022). Goldhaber et al. (2019) provide a summary of theoretical reasons supporting the diversification of teachers, specifically when looking at student outcomes. One reason described by many scholars is that racially diverse students may benefit from seeing role models in positions of authority (i.e., teachers) that look like them (i.e., Redding, 2019; United States Department of Education, 2016; Villegas & Lucas, 2004; Whitebook et al., 2008). Additionally, it's argued that diverse educators bring an understanding of their own cultural background and experiences to the classroom (Goldhaber et al., 2019; Villegas & Lucas, 2004) that may inherently impact their instructional practices (i.e., teaching strategies, classroom management, interpretation of student behavior, disciplinary practices, etc.). This paper aims to contribute to the initiative of diversifying the early childhood workforce by exploring the impact of diverse teachers on young children, examining the shortage of diverse teachers for young children with disabilities, and providing general strategies to recruit and retain diverse educators in the field.

Impact of Diverse Early Childhood Teachers on Diverse Children

Empirical research examining the impact of diverse teachers on student outcomes often measures academic performance (i.e., Dee, 2004), however, other outcomes can be evaluated such as school discipline (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). The achievement gap and discipline gap have been described as two sides of the same coin (Gregory et al., 2010),

both of which have been associated with lower rates of educational attainment, often resulting in elevated risk of unemployment, poor health, civic disengagement, and other negative outcomes (Gershenson et al., 2017). In other words, both academic achievement and disciplinary practices are interrelated and, as aforementioned, could be addressed to better meet the needs of diverse students through the diversification of the teaching profession (Cheruvu et al., 2015). Although primarily focused on general and special education in K-12 settings (i.e., Patton et al., 2003; Vellagas et al., 2012), attention must be given to teacher diversification initiatives within the field of early childhood and early childhood special education; unfortunately, limited empirical evidence exists for the latter (Downer et al., 2016).

As is well established in the field, early childhood marks an important milestone in which considerable developmental growth is made. Young children are able to perceive and categorize both gender and race (Shutts, 2015); children are aware of and curious about the human diversity in their environment and supporting their identity development is among the many goals when providing care for young children in early education programs (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019; Morrison & Border, 2001). Researchers have suggested that it would be beneficial to have an early childhood workforce with similar backgrounds and cultures to those of the children attending such programs (Coll & Ferrer, 2021; Hydon & Bose-Rahman, 2016). Diandra Verwayne shares her experience as a kindergarten teacher in a diverse public school with the following:

Born in Guyana, she moved to the United States at the age of 6 and recalls that when she entered school, she was made to feel like an outsider because of cultural differences. She reported, “When I was in elementary school, I felt like I had to hide my culture so that I could be accepted by the masses. I don’t want that to

happen within my classroom. I want my kids to be able to recognize who they are.” Ms. Verwayne is committed to affirming children’s racial and cultural identities throughout the year. (Cole & Verwayne, 2018, p.36)

Young children naturally explore different roles and ask questions, often looking to teachers and adults to have the answers, providing them with the opportunity to foster the children’s identity development (Morrison & Border, 2001). As was described above, culturally and linguistically diverse educators bring both an awareness of their own culture and lived experiences to the classroom, which can act as a strong contribution to efforts aimed at promoting positive outcomes for all students, especially those from diverse backgrounds.

When examining the empirical literature that is available within the field of early childhood, mixed outcomes have been found concerning the impact of “matching” young children with a teacher of the same ethnicity/race. Howes and Shivers (2006) explored attachment relationships among young children with new caregivers, comparing outcomes (i.e., perceptions of the caregivers regarding the children) of those who did and did not have an ethnic match. Results within their study were mixed, with the most significant outcomes suggesting that if a child and caregiver lack a common cultural community (i.e., ethnicity), it may be more difficult to form a positive relationship, especially as challenging behavior, or conflict, arises. Furthermore, in non-matched pairs, it was not that caregivers perceived children of different backgrounds as more prone to conduct problems (i.e., challenging behavior), but rather that when conflict arose, it was more challenging for them to overcome in terms of fostering their relationships over time. Conversely, they found that children with low conflict levels during the initial pairing, regardless of whether or not they were ethnically matched with a caregiver, shared similar outcomes when looking at attachment (Howes & Shivers, 2006).

On a larger scale, Downer et al. (2016) used a longitudinal dataset representing 701 state-funded preschool classrooms across 11 states to explore two hypotheses: 1) students rated by same-race teachers would be perceived as being better adjusted at the beginning of preschool, and 2) children in a classroom with a teacher of the same race would demonstrate greater gains during preschool. Of the 2,982 students who participated, a subset of 1,116 was included in the final sample. The subset was comprised of 450 non-Hispanic African American, 348 English-proficient Latino, and 318 non-English proficient Latino children. A total of 701 teachers participated, of which 60% were Caucasian, 33% were Latino, and 6% were African American. Researchers assessed children's readiness for school during both the fall and spring of their preschool year, using teacher questionnaires and standardized academic achievement measures (a Spanish battery was used for Spanish-speaking students).

Results indicated that at the beginning of the academic year no differences were noted in ratings of social skills or behavior problems in either Black or Latino preschoolers based on the race of their teacher (Downer et al., 2016). However, greater language/literacy development scores (per teacher reports) were found in the fall for African American students taught by African American teachers as compared to African American students taught by Caucasian teachers. Conversely, no differences were found across Latino-children proficient and not proficient in English who were taught by either Latino or Caucasian teachers. When looking at development throughout the year, findings suggest greater early literacy skills (directly measured) among non-English proficient Latino children taught by Latino teachers than their peers who were taught by Caucasian teachers. Additionally, when accounting for gender, family background (poverty), and classroom (i.e., quality of teacher-child interactions, student demographics), results indicated that African American children taught by African American

teachers were rated as somewhat lower on language/literacy than African American peers taught by Caucasian teachers. A significant relationship between ethnic match and gender was also found, specifically that teacher ratings of problem behaviors of African American students who were boys increased at a significantly greater rate when their teacher was Caucasian than when their teacher was African American.

Similar findings are paralleled by Gilliam et al. (2016), who used eye-tracking procedures to examine the perceptions of early childhood teachers in observing unexpected behaviors among preschool-aged Black and White children. Participants included teachers in early childhood and preschool classrooms or that worked directly with young children. The majority of participants were women (93.9%) and identified as White (66.7%) or Black (22%); seventy-seven percent (77%) identified as non-Hispanic/non-Latino in origin. The first part of the study tracked participants' eye gaze as they watched a video of four children (balanced by sex and race) and were told to watch for challenging behavior, although it was planned that none would be present, as the children engaged in typical activities. The second part of the study had participants randomized into groups who received different vignettes of a preschooler with challenging behavior, with some groups receiving the vignette with the child's name that implied either a Black boy or girl or a White boy or girl, as well as randomization of whether or not they received background information on the child's family involvement. The teachers were then asked to provide ratings on the severity of the child's behavior, the degree of "hopelessness" in remediating the behaviors (using the Preschool Expulsion Risk measure), and lastly, a rating on their likelihood of recommending the child for expulsion or suspension (including the number of days that would be appropriate for the disciplinary action).

Analysis of the data indicated that when told to expect challenging behaviors (even though no challenging behaviors were present), teachers looked longer at Black children, specifically Black boys (Gilliam et al., 2016). Authors also suggested that implicit biases may differ depending on teacher race, finding that participant race predicted the length of time gazing at students: Black participants spent more time gazing at Black boys than other children as compared to White participants, and when asked about disciplinary practices, Black participants recommended expulsion or suspension for more days than the White participants. In prior literature, such as Downer et al. (2016), it is suggested that Black teachers may hold higher standards for Black children, thus causing this difference in attention/discipline. Conversely, White participants within Gilliam et al. (2016) may have been reluctant to express negative appraisals of performance for Black children (on the vignette task), though they displayed a tendency to gaze longer at the Black children, endorsing them at higher rates when asked to identify potentially challenging behavior/identifying who required the most attention when observing the children. Lastly, with respect to teacher-child ethnic matching during the second part of the study, Gilliam et al. (2016) write that Black teachers' perceptions of Black children's behavior, when provided with background information (i.e., family stressors), would decrease in severity. However, when Black teachers received information about familial stressors of White children, their severity ratings of those children's behavior increased. Similarly, White teachers' perceptions of the severity of behavior of Black children increased after learning about the family's background. It was suggested that Black teachers may be better equipped to use background information about family stressors to empathize with those children, while knowledge of family stressors for Black children may be overwhelming for White teachers.

Although there are trends in findings across the research that has been conducted with early childhood populations, not all studies found ethnicity or race to be a significant factor in outcome variables measured. For example, Ewing and Taylor (2009) examined the role of preschool-aged children's gender and ethnicity on both the quality of teacher-child relationships as well as on the behavioral adjustment of the children during preschool. Authors suggest that there were *gender* effects with respect to predicting hostile-aggressive behaviors based on teacher-child conflict (i.e., it was a stronger predictor for boys than girls) and in predicting school competence based on teacher-child closeness (i.e., it was a stronger predictor for girls than boys). However, Ewing and Taylor report that when testing ethnic teacher-child match as a moderating factor between the quality of the teacher-child relationship and child behavioral adjustment, it failed to account for any significant variance. Furthermore, similar patterns of association were documented between the quality of the teacher-child relationship and school behavioral adjustment for White, non-Hispanic children and those of Mexican origin. Ultimately, as is echoed across studies, more research is needed concerning the impact of diverse early childhood teachers on young children who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

Shortage of Diverse Teachers in the Field of Early Childhood Special Education

Diversifying the teacher workforce has been a longstanding movement in the field of education, though progress has been modest. Disparities in a diverse workforce are paralleled when looking at teachers serving school-aged children with disabilities (i.e., Patton et al., 2003; Simms et al., 2008; Tyler et al., 2004). Not only is there a shortage, but when looking at special education as a whole, McLesky et al. (2004) noted that during the 2000-2001 school year, approximately 11% of the teachers filling special education positions lacked appropriate special education certification (U.S. Department of Education, 2003 as cited in McLesky et al., 2004).

When looking at the diversity of the workforce, authors describe historical imbalances in the number of diverse teachers serving the large percentage of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students represented in special education. McLesky et al. (2004) posit several factors that may be impacting this pattern, including inequalities in public education that are fueled by understaffed schools in low-income areas, paired with lower teacher expectations, which often results in students being unprepared for college. Authors also identify the increase in tuition rates and a lack of financial support as contributing barriers to college attendance for CLD students. Early childhood special education is identified as an area within special education dealing with a national shortage of teachers, however, no reference is made regarding the lack of diverse educators specifically within the early childhood special education sector.

As Lee et al. (2006) write, one major challenge in providing effective early intervention services to young children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is the lack of *personnel* from CLD backgrounds. Though researchers have investigated the recruitment and retention of diverse special education teachers within the kindergarten through grade twelve settings and within the field of early childhood (i.e., Fenech et al., 2009; Garavuso, 2015; Oh-Young et al., 2022), the literature is sparse with respect to diversifying the educator workforce for young children with disabilities.

In light of teacher shortages and challenges with recruitment and retention of early childhood special educators, Lava et al. (2004) conducted a focus group with twenty-five professionals who had recently graduated from a Master's level early childhood special education (ECSE) program regarding their first five years of practice within an urban school setting. These professionals shared challenges faced within the school setting, such as carrying out multiple roles, for which they often received little support and few incentives to continue

growing in the field (Lava et al., 2004). Further, participants remarked that collaboration with colleagues, seeking supervision and support when working with families, and navigating the bureaucratic system were all issues that they faced daily, but did not feel adequately prepared for or supported when entering the field. A common theme across participants was the lack of formal or informal supports (i.e., supervision, professional networks, professional development) once in the field, as compared to the many supports provided during their educator preparation program (i.e., clinical supervision, support from faculty and their cohort, etc.). This feedback can be used to inform initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining diverse educators in the field of early childhood education, especially for those who will be working with young children with disabilities.

Evidence Based Strategies to Recruit and Retain Diverse Early Childhood Teachers

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a position statement in April of 2019 titled “Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education.” Children constantly receive racially coded messages that are embedded throughout classroom materials, curriculum, and in the interactions between educators and children (Abawi, 2021). As described by the NAEYC National Governing Board, all children benefit from having diverse educators, “but it is especially important for children whose social identities have historically been marginalized to see people like them as teachers and leaders” (2019, p.9). Among the recommendations made by the NAEYC for administrators within early childhood settings (i.e., schools, centers, family childcare homes) was the call to provide learning services that demonstrate a commitment to equitable outcomes for children, further writing that proactive steps must be taken in order to “recruit and retain educators and leaders who reflect the diversity of children and families served...” (NAEYC, 2019, p. 9). Additionally, it is recommended that

those facilitating educator preparation and professional development recruit and retain representative *faculty*.

What then, are evidence-based strategies to recruit and retain early childhood teachers who are from diverse backgrounds? A number of states have critically analyzed the status of their early childhood workforce in order to contribute to the literature needed to develop an evidence-based model for recruitment and retention of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers. Whitebook et al. (2008) examined the diversity and stratification across the early childhood workforce in California. Authors state that although the diversity within the workforce is a source of pride (representing a wide range of ethnicities and languages), it is significantly “stratified” by the educator’s education level and job title/role, creating a disproportionate representation of diversity across sectors. Ultimately, Whitebook et al. (2008) found that the greatest diversity was associated with the job titles subject to the lowest educational qualifications and requirements (i.e., family child care providers, assistant teachers). Consequently, their results indicated that the percentages of those who spoke a language other than English were greater for roles like assistant teacher (49%) than for those of roles like center teacher (37%) or director (25%). In tandem, authors looked at the percentages of educators with a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or higher across ethnicity, as compared to the total population of early childhood educators and found that those with the highest level of education (i.e., center-based teachers with BA’s) were significantly less diverse than other groups, such as licensed family child care providers. Authors concluded with the following recommendations: 1) create professional development and education opportunities targeted toward diverse teachers, 2) develop services aimed at supporting diverse students, such as student cohorts, academic counseling, and financial assistance, 3) recruit and invest in diverse leaders within the field of

early childhood education, and 4) reconfigure early childhood workforce compensation (Whitebook et al., 2008).

More recently, Zinsser and colleagues (2019) explored models for developing a more diverse workforce of early childhood educators in Chicago. Of greatest consequence, especially when looking across the literature broadly, is the idea of attending to “both the ‘pipeline’ through which new early childhood educators (ECEs) enter the workforce and the ‘pathways’ by which ECEs work toward and obtain the necessary credentials for different roles within the field” (Zinsser et al., 2019, pp.459-460). As was alluded to in Whitebook et al. (2008), early childhood education spans various settings including a wide range of roles and responsibilities. Consequently, services often have complex funding streams along with varying qualification requirements, such as core skills or base knowledge (Zinsser et al., 2019). The following examples were provided:

Someone could serve as a “Lead Teacher” in a licensed child care center with only a high school diploma and a minimum of six college credit hours in [ECE]. In order to hold a job with the same title in a program funded by the state’s preschool block grant, a teacher would need both a [BA] and an Illinois Professional Educator License with an endorsement in [ECE], a substantially higher bar. These differences are the product of the child care and early childhood education systems being administered by separate government agencies, each supported through different and overlapping funding sources and each mandating different and sometimes conflicting requirements... [creating] convoluted professional pathways with numerous dead ends and roadblocks ...[resulting] in

different experiences for children and families due to the disparate skills and knowledge required of the teacher. (Zinsser et al., 2019, p.460)

Furthermore, teachers who begin in one setting (i.e., a for-profit center-based preschool) face challenges when trying to transition elsewhere, such as going from a for-profit center-based preschool to a publicly funded preschool (Zinsser et al., 2019). Authors describe key program components, challenges, and outcomes related to the “Grow Your Own” model of diversifying the early childhood workforce, with the ultimate goal of making credentialing for better-paying positions in the field more accessible to historically marginalized populations.

When looking holistically across the literature pertaining to recruitment and retention of diverse teachers within early childhood, a number of themes emerge. Generally speaking, there is consensus that more research is needed in order to expand the knowledge base through a variety of means (Bryan & Milton Williams, 2017), such as data collection of statistics within the current ECE workforce (Gardner et al., 2019) and integrating voices of culturally and linguistically diverse ECEs in the development of educator preparation programs and fieldwork (Villegas & Lucas, 2004; Cheruvu et al., 2015) such as professional development. As Zinsser and colleagues pointed out (2019), attention must be given to both the “pipeline” and “pathways” impacting those pursuing a career in early childhood education, and those already holding positions. Under these broad umbrella terms fall several strategies to both recruit and retain diverse educators, as described below.

Recruitment and Training Programs

Locally, stakeholders can develop “Grow Your Own” educator preparation programs, which focus primarily on creating local pipelines of educators that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity seen in their community and early childhood population (Gardner et al.,

2019). More specifically, targeted recruitment programs such as Black male teacher recruitment programs (Bryan & Milton, 2017), like Pathways to Teaching and the Black Male Teaching Initiative. Specific to the recruitment of Latinx early childhood educators, often considered non-traditional students (i.e., first-generation college students), Gillanders et al. (2021) discuss the provision of financial incentives to facilitate program enrollment and completion (i.e., scholarships) and flexible recruitment strategies such as making connections with early childhood centers within the community. Similarly, Gardner and colleagues (2019) describe recruitment programs, such as the Family Child Care Apprenticeship, which leverage partnerships with referral networks that maintain relationships with local providers to identify potential participants. Additionally, programs were developing high school pathways (i.e., offering classes for dual enrollment) to reach a new set of prospective educators (Gardner et al., 2019).

Support for Diverse Students

Recruitment, however, is only the beginning; in order to diversify the workforce, successful completion of the training program and employment beyond must be supported (Cheruvu et al., 2015). Gillanders et al. (2021) speak to successful retention strategies in preparing Latinx early childhood educators, noting that many programs adopt the practice of actively identifying and responding to the structural inequities faced by non-traditional students (i.e., providing financial support, flexible scheduling, academic writing, and math skills, etc.). Other ways of supporting diverse students include using a cohort model, which can ameliorate many of the social challenges faced by non-traditional students by facilitating relationships amongst students and faculty (Chevuru et al., 2015), and addressing barriers such as child-care, transportation and support with the completion of required paperwork (Zinsser et al., 2019).

When looking at the training students receive, researchers have advocated for pre-practicum programs specifically for CLD students, as well as efforts to diversify the faculty of programs, including the provision of ongoing professional development for all faculty and practicum supervisors (Cheruvu et al., 2015; Qi & Campbell, 2022).

Policies

Practice is driven by policy and as Gide et al. (2022) wrote, much of early childhood policy related to diversity focuses on supporting culturally and linguistically diverse children and families while remaining relatively silent on the diversification of the workforce. The field of early childhood education is diverse in qualifications (i.e., state certification requirements), unified in only general standards related to preparation and practice from governing bodies such as NAEYC and the Council for Exceptional Children. This variability in training, certification, roles, and responsibilities creates a number of challenges both for practitioners and stakeholders at the state and national levels. This is especially prevalent when considering how young children with disabilities are served across state lines, with some educators receiving preparation for special education in grades preschool through grade eight (i.e., Massachusetts) and others having focused training on ages birth through kindergarten, including inclusionary practices for students with and without disabilities (i.e., Arkansas). A more unified approach to credentialing could have positive impacts on both research and practice in the field.

Gardner and colleagues (2019) describe general funding as another area impacting the diversification of the field, which has implications for both stakeholders and policymakers. For example, when reviewing programs that aimed to recruit and retain diverse students in the field, authors noted that each of the programs relied on outside funding to continuously improve their funding (i.e., faculty and staff development). Funding was also used to support high-quality

clinical experiences (i.e., lab schools, paid practicum experiences, apprenticeships) and fund other academic supports such as specialized advising (Gardner et al., 2019). Another key factor in recruiting diverse practitioners was the ability to provide financial assistance.

In addition to the need for funding universities and programs who preparing diverse early childhood educators, is the need to provide adequate wages to those in the field. Whitebook et. al. (2008) explained that early childhood educators in California receive very low compensation, offering little incentive for people to pursue the profession, as well as little incentive for those in the profession to further their education. NAEYC (2019) acknowledges the need to establish comparable compensation, with benefits, across early childhood settings with comparable qualifications, work experiences and job responsibilities, calling for compensation policies as a fundamental act of moving towards equity.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed three general areas with the goal of contributing to the initiative of diversifying the early childhood workforce: 1) exploring impacts of diverse teachers on young children, 2) looking at the shortage of diverse teachers for young children with disabilities, and 3) providing general strategies to recruit and retain diverse educators in the field. Research specifically looking at the impact of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers on an increasingly diverse early childhood population is limited and variable in its findings. There were, however, general themes across research studies that suggest a cultural or racial mismatch could impact things like perceptions of preschool readiness (Downer et al., 2016) and challenging behavior (Gilliam et al., 2016), ratings of students' social skills, behavior and academic abilities across the school year (Downer et al., 2016), and the ability to form a positive relationship, especially as conflict or challenging behavior arises (Howes & Shivers, 2006). With

variability within and across studies (i.e., see Ewing & Taylor, 2009), more research is needed to draw strong conclusions on the impact diverse teachers have on diverse preschool-aged children.

Amid the shortage of teachers nationwide, there is little data outlining the shortage of diverse teachers in the field of early childhood special education. There is, however, numerous articles delineating a shortage of diverse teachers in special education, K-12 settings (i.e., Simms et al., 2008; Tyler et al., 2004), as well as researchers who have spoken to early childhood special education teachers in the field from diverse backgrounds with regards to potential barriers or challenges faced during their educator training and beyond (Lava et al., 2004). These challenges included a lack of formal or informal supports, like supervision and professional development, when entering the field, which is contrasted with the plethora of supports received in their educator preparation program, such as support from faculty and others in their cohort.

To conclude, a number of strategies supported by current literature were outlined that focused on recruiting and retaining diverse early childhood educators. These strategies and recommendations spanned three general areas, the first of which was the development and use of specific recruitment and training programs. The “grow your own” model of training programs was mentioned, which capitalizes on building relationships within the community to recruit a diverse population representative of the children being served. Targeted recruitment programs were also highlighted, such as the Black Male Teaching program aimed at recruiting Black male teachers to the field of early childhood education, and other programs expanding the potential educator pool by connecting with local high schools. Once recruited, ways to address barriers to the completion of preparation programs and retaining positions beyond are outlined, such as using a cohort model, adopting a flexible course schedule, providing academic support, and offering things like childcare and transportation; the diversification of faculty in educator

preparation programs was also emphasized. Finally, implications for policy were outlined. This included addressing the qualifications and credentialing of early childhood educators, bolstering funding for both recruitment and educator preparation programs with diversification initiatives (i.e., scholarships for diverse students), and providing competitive wages for those in the field.

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