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Developing Multicultural Awareness in Preschool Children: A Pilot Intervention

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Abstract

The increasing diversity of the U.S. population presents a need to address developing stereotypes. Racial and ethnic attitudes and biases can develop at young ages. The current study examined a pilot classroom intervention, which exposed preschool children to different cultures and considered the intervention's influence on racial attitudes. Sixteen preschool students in two classrooms were randomly assigned to the experimental condition, multicultural themed lessons, or the control condition, animal themed lessons. Attitudes about children of various ethnicities were assessed before and after the intervention. Variables considered included same group bias and outgroup bias. The results indicated that children who received the multicultural intervention changed favorably their attitudes towards children of other ethnicities compared to children who did not receive the experimental intervention. This study demonstrates that attitudes and biases towards others may be influenced through early education and increased awareness.

Keywords

Children, Culture, Racial Attitudes, Racial Bias, Preschool Education

1. Introduction

As minority populations in the United States continue to rise, multicultural education is a growing necessity in society. It is estimated that by the year 2050, the majority of the U.S. will be represented by populations previously considered to be minorities (Romeny, 2008) [1]. This continually developing increase in diversity only heightens the need to address the stereotypes and misrepresentation of minorities that currently plague our society. Immigrants are typically viewed as responsible for problems with the economy, "overpopulation, pollution, increased violence, depleted social resources (*i.e*., medical and educational), erosion of cultural values, and terrorism" (Yakushko, 2009, p. 37) [2], which intensifies the perception that these individuals are "criminal,

poor, violent, desperate to live in the United States, and noneducated" (Yakushko *et al.*, 2008, p. 375) [3]. Even elementary school aged children have been found to hold negative attitudes towards immigrants, especially those who are undocumented and/or Mexican, and believe that immigrants residing in the U.S. illegally should be imprisoned, regardless of their understanding that most migrate to the U.S. for freedom, better economic opportunities, and safety from the devastating events occurring in their home country (Brown, 2011) [4]. This intolerance of foreigners may be related to limited exposure to quality multicultural education. The available literature has focused on the development of biased or stereotypical attitudes in children and racial influences, with few studies examining the potential to increase favorable attitudes towards individuals of different races and ethnicities. As a result, there is a need to expand upon prior research aimed at eliminating racial biases by teaching children about the differing values of other cultures.

Early research has indicated that negative views of race and physical differences begin at young ages (Porter, 1971) [5]. Children can detect differences in appearance and skin tones as early as ages 3 and 4 (Bernstein, Zimerman, Werner-Wilson, & Vosberg, 2000 [6]; Aboud, 1987 [7]; Porter, 1971 [5]), and stereotypical attitudes may develop based on these learned physical differences. In addition, children also develop racial attitudes during early socialization, at home and in school. Research suggests that a mother's implicit racial attitudes tend to be associated with their children's emergent racial attitudes (Castelli, Zogmaister, & Tomelleri, 2009) [8]. A child's family also begins to influence their racial attitudes early in development as children's early attitudes often align with parents' views (Njoroge, Benton, Lewis, & Njoroge, 2009) [9], further demonstrating the significance of familial factors in racial attitude development.

Similarly in school, early peer interactions are likely a building block towards later development of attitudes, including racial attitudes and attributions. In general, research suggests that with peers of similar age, same group racial preferences tend to increase as the children get older (Smith, Levine, Smith, Dumas, & Prinz, 2009) [10]. Smith *et al.* (2009) [10] found that same group preference is positively correlated to outgroup bias, as biases towards one's own group tend to increase the likelihood of increased outgroup biases. Smith *et al.* (2009) [10] also discovered that these attitudes and biases may not be expressed overtly, but do have the potential to influence the underlying social dynamics as children interact with peers. For example, racial group alliances and opposition can be identified through children's racial and ethnic conversations with their peers (Aukrust & Rydland, 2007) [11]. Based on this research, interventions within an early learning environment where children are learning to socialize with peers are likely to influence developing attitudes.

Racial attitudes may be influenced as early as preschool. Phinney and Rotheram (1987) [12] suggest that the process of reducing biased attitudes begins with increased cultural knowledge and awareness including, same group and outgroup awareness. Specifically, ethnic awareness involves knowledge about ethnic groups, as well as the difference between oneself and others. Ethnic awareness changes as the child develops cognitive abilities and is exposed to new information and experiences (Phinney & Rotherman, 1897) [12]. Kowalski (1998) [13] demonstrated that increasing preschoolers' ethnic/cultural awareness may in fact increase their identification with their own group. However, this increased in-group identity resulting from cultural knowledge and awareness did not lead to outgroup biases. Patterson and Bigler (2006) [14] found that preschool children exposed to group separation and labeling by colors (e.g. red or blue) tended to develop outgroup biased attitudes. Additionally, a study by Aboud (1987) [7] found that the process of self-identification becomes apparent when an individual is learning about new cultures and increasing their cultural awareness. These studies suggest that interventions that increase cultural knowledge might also increase self-identity with a group.

To date, few studies have investigated the impact of multicultural education on the developing racial and ethnic preferences of preschool children. Bernstein and colleagues (2000) [6] examined the effects of a preschool classroom diversity intervention program with nineteen 4 and 5 year olds, who were exposed to a range of culturally diverse families via reading stories. The authors found that children prior to the intervention tended to sort photos of racially diverse children based on race and after the intervention the children in the experimental condition categorized others based on gender and age and no longer based on race compared to children in the control condition.

Although the findings suggest the potential benefits of multicultural interventions, using sorting methods of photos of different races do not necessarily indicate biased attitudes. Instead, analyzing actual child preferences may be a more effective way to evaluate the outcome of an educational intervention proposed to alter developing racial attitudes. In a study aimed at reducing prejudice towards children with disabilities, Cameron and Rutland (2006) [15] utilized a similar methodology, reading storybooks, to influence children's opinions. Children's

attitudes were assessed by using the Intergroup Attitude Measure, in which children were presented with 20 adjectives, both positive and negative, and asked to sort them between three categories: not disabled, physically disabled, and learning difficulties. The findings suggested that children displayed increased positivity toward the disabled children when outgroup attitudes were measured, with intergroup, or same-group, condition showing the strongest effects. Although this study was limited in that there was no control group and all of the groups were exposed to the stories including disabled children as characters, it demonstrated an effective measure to assess children's attitudes by assigning adjectives.

In sum, there are limited interventions that have been studied specifically aimed at multicultural education and at reducing racial biases. The increased awareness from exposure to multicultural groups (Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009) [16] provides a useful framework for this study. The current study expands upon previous classroom interventions and continues efforts in this area by focusing on the attitudes towards alternative races/ ethnicities. The purpose of this study is to determine whether a classroom intervention aimed at increasing multicultural awareness influences preschoolers' attitudes towards children of other races and cultural backgrounds. It is hypothesized that the group receiving the multicultural intervention will demonstrate more favorable attitudes and decreased negative attitudes towards children of other cultures compared to children in the control condition. In addition, it is expected that participants will view other members of their own culture with similar attitudes or increased positive views as they become more aware of cultural groupings as indicated in previous research (Kowalski, 1998) [13]. These hypotheses, if supported, may offer further evidence in favor of education as a tool in eliminating cultural or racial bias.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants consisted of sixteen preschool children ages three-to five-years-old (9 male, 7 female, mean age = 4.0, SD = 0.365) who were enrolled in a university-affiliated preschool center. Parents reported child's race/ ethnicity on the demographic form. Based on parent report, participants were white/Caucasian (n = 10), Hispanic/Latino (n = 4), and black/African American (n = 2). All participants were born in the United States and spoke English as their primary language. Regarding parent's employment, 62.5% of mothers and 80% of fathers reported having full time employment. All of the mothers and a majority of fathers (87.5%) reported having a bachelor's degree or higher. A majority of participants were from families of above average socioeconomic status (SES) with an average income category of $85,000 to 99,999 (see **Table 1** for detailed demographic descriptions).

2.2. Procedures

2.2.1. Recruitment

Approval from the university's Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to the commencement of the study. Two preschool classrooms were selected for the intended population due to children's ability to recognize physical differences as young as 3 year of age (Bernstein *et al.*, 2000 [6]; Aboud, 1987 [7]; Porter, 1971 [5]). Classroom teachers approached parents and provided a letter describing the study and a parent consent form. In addition, parents were provided a demographic form to complete and return prior to the study commencement. Each child, whose parents consented to participate, was individually asked for verbal assent. Out of 24 students whose parents provided parental consent, 17 parents (71%) returned consent forms and agreed to participate. Of the initial 17 students with parental consent, 16 (94%) verbally assented and were included in the study. Children who did not receive parental consent or provide verbal assent engaged in an alternate activity with their classroom teacher during the study's lessons.

2.2.2. Assessment Procedure

Assessment prior to the intervention was administered by the primary investigator and a research assistant, both doctoral students in clinical psychology. Post-intervention assessments were conducted only by the graduate research assistant, who was blind to the intervention condition of participants. Assessors alternated approaching participants from each classroom to conduct assessments. The assessment was introduced to each child and they were offered a sticker for participation in the assessment activity. Each child was tested individually a week be-

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (n = 16).

Demographic Variable	Number of Participants (%)	
Ethnicity		
African American	2 (12.5)	
Caucasian	10 (62.5)	
Hispanic/Latino	4 (25)	
SES		
10,000 - 24,999	1 (6.25)	
25,000 - 39,999	1 (6.25)	
40,000 - 54,999	1 (6.25)	
100,000 - 114,999	4 (25)	
115,000 - 129,999	1 (6.25)	
130,000+	5 (31.25)	
Language		
English	13 (81.3)	
Portuguese	1 (6.3)	
English & Spanish	1 (6.3)	
English & Italian	1 (6.3)	
Religion		
Christian	8 (50)	
Jewish	5 (31.3)	
Parent Nationality	Mothers	Fathers
United States	12 (75)	9 (56.3)
England	0 (0)	1 (6.3)
Brazil	1 (6.3)	1 (6.3)
Venezuela	0 (0)	2 (12.5)
Colombia	2 (12.5)	1 (6.3)
Jamaica	0 (0)	1 (6.3)
Canada	1 (6.3)	1 (6.3)
Italy	0 (0)	1 (6.3)
Parent Employment	Mothers	Fathers
Full time	10 (62.5)	12 (75)
Part time	3 (18.8)	1 (6.3)
Unemployed	3 (18.8)	2 (12.5)
Parent Education	Mothers	Fathers
High school	0 (0)	1 (6.3)
Some college	0 (0)	1 (6.3)
Bachelor's degree	5 (31.3)	6 (37.5)
Master's degree	9 (56.3)	5 (31.3)
Doctoral degree	2 (12.5)	3 (18.8)

Note: Categories not adding to 100% represent areas in which participants did not respond.

fore and a week after the intervention period. The assessors were trained to conduct the assessment, including practice administration and scoring. Training included a practice assessment with three children (ages 3 - 6). Assessments lasted between 15 to 20 minutes per child.

2.2.3. Intervention Procedure

Setting parameters restricted randomization of the individual participants, therefore each classroom was randomly assigned to lesson content that is either multicultural stories in the experimental condition or animal stories in the control condition. Each classroom contained eight students (16 total) who participated in the study. Groups did not differ on demographic variables. Each group participated in a 30-minute lesson, twice a week for 8 weeks. The structure of the lessons was consistent between the two classrooms. Storybook readings and open discussion comprised the lessons, followed by the time spent on interactive activities reflecting the ideas and concepts covered in the stories. The primary investigator and another doctoral student in clinical psychology, who did not conduct assessments, conducted the bi-weekly lessons. In the opening and closing weeks of the multicultural intervention, instructors discussed general multicultural themes, while specific cultural groups were discussed each week for six consecutive weeks, in the following order: African Americans, Asian Americans, Arab and Middle Eastern Americans, Latin Americans/Hispanics, and Indian and American Indians. The control classroom lessons were themed around different animals and animal characteristics (e.g. different types of animals, animal families, how animals eat and sleep) in order to provide the same format and number of sessions without presenting the experimental content (e.g. cultural information).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire asked parents for background information about the family. Questions included child race/ethnicity, parent occupation and education, parent and child nationality, family religion, language spoken at home, and income.

2.3.2. Racial Attitudes Assessment

The Racial Attitudes Assessment was designed for this study to assess children's racial attitudes. This instrument was adapted from the Racial Attitudes, Beliefs, and Stereotypes Measure (RABS II, Spencer, 1996) [17] and similarly considers assessing racial attitudes through the assignment of positive and negative adjectives. Racial preferences were evaluated through the assignment of 8 adjectives, 4 positive (happy, friendly, smart, nice) and 4 negative (sad, rude, not smart, mean) to 8 portrait photos of boys and girls from 4 different races/cultures (*i.e.*, White, African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American). All photos had similar backgrounds and were chosen to provide discrepancies only through physical appearance reflecting race and cultural differences. Each individual child randomly choose one of eight photos, then the assessor asked each child 4 questions that required them to assign positive or negative adjectives to the child shown in the presented photo (e.g., "Do you think this child is nice or mean?" and "Do you think this child is rude or friendly?"). The child continues choosing photos randomly until all eight photos are chosen and the child responds to each question. Internal reliability of each item was measured using Cronbach's alpha. Each scale consisted of 8 items/photos: Nice or Mean ($\alpha = 0.797$), Rude or Friendly ($\alpha = 0.761$), Smart or Not Smart ($\alpha = 0.845$), and Sad or Happy ($\alpha = 0.560$).

Variables derived from the assessment included: *Same group bias*: This variable measures the child's attitudes towards the same race. *Same group positive bias* was calculated by counting the number of positive adjectives endorsed for photos of the same race, with a possible range from 0 to 8, and divided by 8. *Same group negative bias* was calculated by counting the number of negative adjectives endorsed for photos of the same race, with a possible range from 0 to 8, and divided by 8. *Same group bias* was measured by subtracting *same group negative bias* from *same group positive bias*. Scores range from −1 to 1, with higher values indicating more positive attitudes towards the same race.

Outgroup bias: This variable measures attitudes towards other races. *Outgroup positive bias* was measured by counting the number of positive adjectives endorsed for photos of children of any other race (besides the child's own), with a possible range from 0 to 24, and divided by 24. *Outgroup negative bias* was measured by counting the number of negative adjectives endorsed for photos of children of any other race (besides the child's own), with a possible range from 0 to 24, and divided by 24. *Outgroup group bias* was calculated by subtracting *out-*

group negative bias from *outgroup positive bias*. Scores range from −1 to 1, with higher values indicating more positive attitudes towards alternate races other than one's own.

2.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and frequencies were used to examine demographic variables (e.g. ethnicity, primary language, parental employment and SES, as well as parental education). These can be found in **Table 1**. The mean and standard deviation of each variable of interest derived from the Racial Attitudes Assessment were examined for both groups. Results were analyzed using a one-way within-subjects ANOVA design to examine each variable of interest, including same group bias and outgroup bias, where time (pre and post intervention) was the within-subjects factor and intervention group (multicultural theme or control) was the between-subject factor.

3. Results

Means and standard deviations for each variable of interest (same group bias, outgroup bias) for each condition measured pre-and post-intervention can be seen in **Table 2**.

3.1. Same Group Bias

The results for the ANOVA did not indicate a significant interaction effect for the intervention group over time, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.749$, $F(1, 14) = 0.107$, ns = 0.749, multivariate $\eta^2 = 0.008$. Therefore, on average, same group bias did not significantly change due to the intervention.

3.2. Outgroup Bias

The results for the ANOVA indicated a significant intervention group over time interaction effect, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.740$, $F(1, 14) = 4.913$, $p = 0.044$, multivariate $\eta^2 = 0.260$. Therefore, outgroup bias significantly changed due to the intervention. In other words, participants' attitudes towards other races changed positively after receiving the multicultural education compared to the participants' attitudes in the control group. Mean changes over time for both groups are represented in **Figure 1**.

4. Discussion

Although previous literature has considered the impact of increased awareness and exposure on racial attitudes, few have done so with very young children. This study expanded research in this area by examining explicit attitudes with preschool children. Exposure to children of other cultures, especially in a favorable manner, would presumably increase positive attitudes towards others (Klefstad & Martinez, 2013) [18]. In this study, it was hypothesized that the group receiving the multicultural intervention would demonstrate more favorable attitudes and decreased negative attitudes towards children of other cultures. In order to minimize the effects of attention and the story arrangement of the lessons, a control group was conducted in the same manner with neutral animal content.

As expected, the results indicated significant changes in outgroup attitudes from pre- to post-intervention in the multicultural group when compared to attitudes in the control group. Children in the multicultural (*i.e.*, experimental) group demonstrated improved outgroup bias as a result of the intervention when compared to children in the animal (*i.e.*, control) group. The mean differences between groups were significant, however, it should be

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of each variable for each group, pre and post intervention.

	Intervention				Control			
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Same Group Bias	0.75	0.299	0.5	0.463	0.75	0.378	0.406	0.694
Outgroup Bias	0.062*	0.605	0.344*	0.479	0.427*	0.59	−0.083*	0.604

Note: *Significant mean difference pre vs. post across groups; $p < 0.05$.
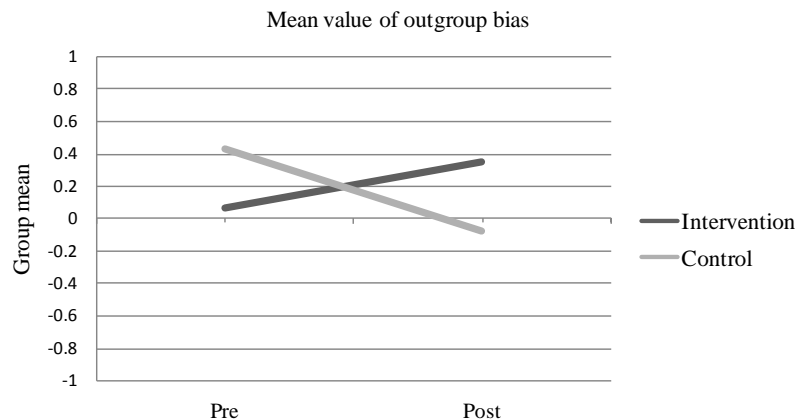
Mean value of outgroup bias

Figure 1. Means of each group (intervention and control) for outgroup bias variable compared across time (pre and post). Group means, −1 to 1, represent the overall outgroup bias, which was calculated by subtracting outgroup negative bias from outgroup positive bias. Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes towards alternate races other than one's own.

noted that the multicultural group exhibited a lower overall mean at pre-test for outgroup attitudes. This difference at the initial assessment was likely due to responses of three participants in which each chosen adjective during the assessment was negative. The same pattern was not found in the control group between pre- and post-assessments. These findings replicate Bernstein *et al.* (2000) [6] using a similar methodology for increasing ethnic/racial awareness and improving racial attitudes. Similar to Bernstein *et al.* (2000) [6], children in our study were exposed to multiple cultures through the use of stories and demonstrated improved attitudes after the intervention compared to children who did not receive the intervention. Thus, storytelling can be an effective method to introduce children to other cultures and expand their knowledge and tolerance toward children of races other than their own. However, we believe that assessing racial attitudes by asking children to assign negative or positive attributes to photos of children of racially diverse backgrounds provided a more robust method than that used by Bernstein *et al.* (2000) [6], which relied on a simple assortment of photos and the strategy used to categorize the photos (e.g., by race, age, or gender) was decided upon by the researchers.

While these results suggest a beneficial effect for reducing racial bias, some limitations of the current study deserve mention. Given that the sample size was relatively small, these findings should be considered preliminary and require replication in a larger sample. In particular, replications of these findings are needed within larger samples to control for alternate variables, such as the participant's prior exposure to other cultural groups (e.g., friends/relatives, parental attitudes, books in household, knowledge or tolerance of other groups). In this study, two intact classes were chosen for either the intervention or control group, which allowed the experimental and control conditions to follow particular curriculums according to the purposes of each condition. Future studies could randomly assign more classrooms to each condition in order to increase the applicability of random assignment. While the study consisted of 16 lessons, these provided children with limited exposure to each cultural group. The benefits of the study may be enhanced with increased exposure towards various cultural groups. Finally, the Racial Attitudes Assessment was adapted from previously used measures for the purposes of this study. The instrument's psychometric properties should be examined in a larger sample where it can be validated for use with children of various ages and ethnicities.

Children are often only exposed to the environments they grow up in and are likely unaware of the attitudes they may learn about other cultures. These attitudes are not necessarily a conscious decision, but may be a result of known traditions or implicit beliefs. Increased contact has resulted in more positive beliefs regarding other groups when children are given the opportunity to become familiar with other groups at a young age (Cameron *et al.*, 2006 [19]; Bernstein *et al.*, 2000 [6]; Phinney & Rotherman, 1897 [12]). Given that negative stereotypes regarding cultural minorities remain present in our society (Yoo & Pituc, 2013) [20], educational efforts would benefit from an increased multicultural perspective. More work has to be done examining the best way to integrate this multicultural perspective into the classroom, especially on how to apply cultural education into the established curriculum. For example, barriers such as feasibility (e.g. costs, time) and inclusion into existing class-

room material should be addressed. There have been recent efforts, in line with this study's findings, to encourage incorporation of multicultural books into preschool curriculum and to enhance cultural awareness (Klefstad & Martinez, 2013) [18]. Overall, this study offers promising findings regarding the role that education can play in reducing negative racial biases in young children.

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