From Theory to Practice and from Practice to Theory:
Developing Teachers' Understanding
of Effective Multicultural Education in the United States

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I. Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

In the United States, people from a wide variety of cultures have come together to form a single nation. Those people have, over time, developed a distinctive culture that identifies them as "American." At the same time, however, the different groups have retained certain customs and values that come from their original cultures. Schools in the U.S. have traditionally reflected the cultures of only the Western European influence. Children from the middle class (and higher) who come from that tradition have usually been successful in their schooling. In contrast, children from working class or low-income families and children from other cultural groups (the two situations are often found together in the U.S.) have not always fared so well. This circumstance has led some American educators to seek new ways of teaching all children—ways that connect with and extend the knowledge and skills that the children acquire in their homes and communities.

A strong educational movement in response to this need has been multicultural education. This teaching approach requires that teachers use children's cultural knowledge as a basis for teaching across all subject areas. In order for teachers to teach in that manner, though, it is necessary that they become aware of and learn how to use the many dimensions of culture that affect children's learning (Banks & Banks, 1994).

The processes through which they may do this are embedded in the larger issues of how teachers learn to teach in general, how they make use of the content and methods that they are exposed to in courses of teacher preparation. Intensive work is now underway in the U.S. investigating the relationships between theory and practice in teaching and in the preparation of teachers (Chafel & Reifel, 1996).

Within that context, the specific purpose of this study is to examine ways that multicultural understanding can be promoted in teachers and ways that teachers can be helped to transform an emerging theory of multiculturalism into an effective classroom practice. A second phase of the study will be to explore how effective multicultural classroom practice might generate more adequate theory for future action.

II. Method and Procedures

This study has been conducted over the past three years and will continue for the next two years. This report presents the findings to date. The method has combined survey data from 60 students who had taken a semester-long course at the Masters level in multicultural theory and practice, with intensive and repeated interview and teaching observations of three of the students who have completed their Masters program and taken teaching positions. Analysis of the data (frequency counts and content analysis) has so far been directed toward assessing the degree to which the three former students have carried into practice the theory learned through their course experiences. Future data collection and analysis will be focused on the degree to which the teachers have continued to develop multicultural theory as they have refined their practice.
III. Findings to Date

Both survey and interview data have indicated that particular features of the preparatory experience had power for the graduate students. Those features were activities and exercises in their course and practical work that addressed their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings and connected them to positive, culturally sensitive educational practice with children. The experiences had been designed using the work of John Dewey (1904) and Lev Vygotsky (1962)—two early theorists whose writings are becoming increasingly important in elaborating the theoretical underpinnings of multiculturalism—regarding connection and continuity in experience, and the social nature of the construction of knowledge.

A second set of findings showed the salience of the attitudes, beliefs, and educational practices that the former graduate students had developed before they entered their Masters program, as well as the effects of continued conversation with colleagues and mentors from their Masters program after they had graduated from it.

Finally, there are strong indications that the characteristics of the settings in which the graduates took teaching positions deeply influenced their ability to transform theory into practice. The current investigation is exploring the graduates development of practical theory as they continue with their teaching.

IV. Discussion

This study combined investigation of how new teachers make use of their teacher preparation courses (and the effectiveness of such courses) with the specific concerns of implementing a multicultural approach to teaching in the classroom. The findings to date have corroborated some of the new research on the processes of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 1994) by underscoring the importance of the connection between beliefs and attitudes and learning, and by illustrating some of the ways in which knowledge is socially constructed (Dewey, 1904; Vygotsky, 1962). The findings have also raised many questions about the adequacy of current definitions of multicultural education, and about the incomplete state of development of theory to undergird the field.

The broader set of findings regarding the influences of the former preparation of teachers and the influences of the settings in which the teaching is done on teachers' ability to transform theory into practice also echo current findings on the complexity of theory/practice connections in teaching (Chafel & Reifel, 1996).

V. Considerations for Japanese Settings

As Japanese researchers are developing their own interest in internationalization, the situation of "returning" Japanese families, and the presence of foreign nationals within their schools, they are beginning to consider multicultural education. This study suggests the importance of starting their investigations with discovering the perceptions of teachers about diversity, in order to develop a definition and theory of multicultural education that fits the unique needs of Japanese teachers.

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References available on request.

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