

A World Called Home: Global Citizenship Education at Sunshine Preschool

Introduction

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By the time preschool-aged African American children enter preschool, they have already been exposed to many indicators which inform them of their “place” and their “worth” in the communities they frequent. The general consensus among teachers is that a globalized education carries the benefit of positively altering the child’s understanding of their worth and position in the world. There is a gap in the literature on global education in early education classrooms. Specifically, almost no research has been done on the value of global education for African American children. As a result, there are few early childhood curricula that have been documented in the classroom to provide evidence of the benefits or setbacks to providing this type of curriculum to African American children. Due to this gap, a case study was conducted in 2013 to document the enactment of a global citizenship curriculum in a small, private preschool serving a predominantly African American population in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York was conducted.

The study identified five primary themes within the curriculum at the preschool; Lessons in Power, Membership in a Global Community, Self Esteem Development, Stewardship and Teacher Intentionality. The study confirmed that it is possible for social awareness at this early age to be positively influenced in a classroom setting to develop a robust self-identity. It considers the ways that a global citizenship education can contribute to this identity development. Further evaluation revealed the particular ways that the enactment of global citizenship curriculum can contribute to countering negative conceptions of self in very young African American children.

In this study, a framework rooted in Anti-colonial theory is what differentiates global citizenship education from an education that is purely multicultural. Teaching that is anti-colonial relies on teaching within a context that acknowledges that colonialism exists in the present as an ongoing phenomenon (Childs & Williams, 1997). It follows, that a curriculum that is both global in scope and speaks to the unique history and culture of African American children is emancipatory when it provides a perspective which challenges the unique type of colonialism present in more traditional classroom settings and referred to by Ladson-Billings (2009) as the White supremacist master script.

Sunshine is a four-room preschool housed in a converted warehouse in a predominantly African American, African, and Afro Caribbean corner of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn. In the main space, the classrooms are divided by cubbies, bookcases and dramatic play structures instead of walls. There are on nearly every surface, colorful posters of historical heroes from every continent, children’s artwork and statements of affirmation such as “We are the Fourions and we are POWERFUL”. The cement floor is covered with colorful carpets that help to designate the various areas of the classrooms. The classrooms themselves are tightly packed with materials, tables, cubbies and storage spaces. There are two separate, smaller rooms at the back of the preschool in addition to a small kitchen, the director’s office and an

administrative office. The teachers use the smaller classrooms for dance, music, and other small group activities. With no windows save for the toddler classroom and the director's office, the majority of the school is lit with artificial light.

The preschool enrolls approximately 85 children between the ages of two and 5 years old and employs 10 full time teachers, auxiliary staff as well as several administrative personnel. The children come from a mixture of working and middle class families, predominantly living in Bedford Stuyvesant. The classroom is predominantly African American. At the time of observation, there were two children out of the full class of 16 who were not African American. The director is a native of Bedford Stuyvesant and opened the center in 1980 after becoming frustrated with the lack of quality, socially reflective early education programs that were available for her own young child. As an active member of the progressive education movement and strong supporter of the Uhuru Sasa, or Freedom Now School, Mama Felicia, as she is affectionately known, has uniquely relevant experience in the education of young African American children. I was curious about what she and her teachers hoped to instill in the children and how a curriculum that privileges the history and cultures within the African Diaspora through a globalized curriculum assists them in accomplishing this.

Lessons in Power

There is a very consistent effort to decenter mass media images at Sunshine. "Everything that is mass media, the institutional structures that have a Eurocentric model demonize and denigrate all of these cultures and people in one way or another" is the almost hyper awareness with the result being that "We try really hard not to have mass media symbols." In place of these images the school actively places pictures and paintings and posters featuring Black people, Black children and the families of the children themselves throughout the school. By not buying and displaying mass media images, which still overwhelmingly portray children who do not look like the demographic educated at Sunshine, the school has engaged in a power shift. By centralizing the images that children are familiar with, they are learning that they and those who look like them are worth displaying, valuing and celebrating.

Properly identifying emotions and having space to exhibit them in a safe space is another way that children learn how to exist powerfully. During a small group conversation about a book about a boy that the children labeled as "naughty" a child offered "I go hyper sometimes." Mama Aamiyah countered that "We all go hyper sometimes." In this simple exchange the teacher validated the child's self-concept. This is highly empowering because, in letting her know that she too experienced a similar sensation, the teacher took a mildly negative self-reflection and framed it as normal and free of judgment.

In the same vein as expressing emotions safely, communication and problem-solving are encouraged in the classroom daily. Although the classroom rule limits the block area to four bodies, six jockeyed for space in the corner one morning. One boy pushed another. The second yelled forcefully 'I don't like that. Don't do that to me!' Mama Aamiyah, from the other side of the room instantly reinforced "That's right T., if you don't like something that someone is doing, tell him in a clear voice. And I see too

many bodies in the block area anyways.” Identifying the problem and simultaneously giving children tools for how to handle difficult scenarios is the type of work that commonly occurs in the classroom to create an environment that is both safe and encouraging for children learning to express themselves.

While power is learned through the freedom of movement and communication, it is always learned through the development of self-regulation and mindfulness. Mama Barbara is a yoga teacher based in Harlem who comes to Sunshine on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons to teach yoga to any child whose parents are willing to pay an extra fee. In addition to the more active poses called “waking up our energy”, there is a strong emphasis on finding peace within yourself. Mama Barbara asks throughout the practice if each child feels calm. She encourages slow and deep breathing. At the end of each practice, she brings out her singing bowl, a favorite of the children’s. Each child who wants to gets a turn listening for the low hum of the bowl. All the while, Mama Barbara encourages quietly “Can you hear it...you have to be calm and quiet and peaceful inside to hear it. That’s your energy” It is a personal triumph when each child catches the sound and with Mama Barbara’s help, they come to understand that it is their own self regulation that brings about the inner quiet necessary to find the singing bowl’s song.

Membership in a Global Community

Sunshine preschool operates as a buzzing hive effectively surrounding the children with concentric circles. With the child at the center, they are surrounded most centrally by their immediate families who have an exceptionally strong presence due to Sunshine’s open door policy. Parents taking an active role in curriculum building, teaching, their own learning and support of the school. The immediate family is surrounded by the extended family of the school with teachers and other adult guests addressed as “Mama” and “Baba” instead of the traditional “Ms.” And “Mr.” Next is a circle of community that the children engage with through neighborhood walks and community members who support the school in a variety of ways. The local farmer’s market supplies the schools fresh fruits and vegetables for lunch. The local church houses their plays, musicals and graduation. The chess teacher, yoga instructor and choir director are all members of the community. And on and on. Surrounding all of this is the global community which the children engage with in a number of ways, including the following.

In this space and throughout these radiating circles, children at Sunshine learn that Black and Brown people are everywhere in the world, that they themselves are Black (and Brown in some cases), and what follows is that they are part of a group that is large, dynamic and everywhere on Earth. Mama Felicia notes that “we talk about, deeply explore, honor and raise up the culture, history, and practices of people of the diaspora, particularly people who are black and brown.” Evidence of the success of this attempt can be seen in the conversations children have with each other. Sitting at the table two Fourior girls discussed their families.

Cadence: My mom says that I’m brown but I’m not as brown as her. I’m browner than my dad.

Cedella: My mom says my skin is beautiful

Cadence: I was looking at a picture of a girl...of a girl in Australia and she looked like me.

Cedella: Brown...Broooooown!

There is a focus throughout in what Mama Felicia refers to as the “global majority”. “We try to make sure that we have a really big presence [of materials] in the class that relate to people of, what I think of as the global majority.”

Later in the week while talking about different types of homes, Mama Aaliyah showed the children pictures of homes on the smart board.

“This is a mud house. Do we live in houses like this?”

Children- No.

Teacher- What kind of houses do we live in?

Children- Big buildings...apartments...brownstones...

What followed was a complex conversation that had the children relating their experiences in their own homes with children in homes around the world. This built out into a reflection on the similarities between villages and neighborhoods in New York City. Mama Aaliyah offered that “a village is where many people [live] together sharing the same traditions and beliefs. So village is kind of like another word for n...? Where do we live where our houses are all together? Children- neighborhood!” The profound comparison between traditional village structure as a place where families live and traditions are practiced and the neighborhood serving the same purpose speaks both to Mama Felicia’s concern with preserving and maintaining the cultural integrity of Bedford Stuyvesant and the school’s curricula of connecting children with other cultures around the world in ways that make sense to them.

The intentional relationship that is fostered between children and cultures in the diaspora is a primary indicator of the focus on global community. Another strategy I observed for reinforcing a connection between themselves and the people around the world is by highlighting the physical beauty of those people.

Teacher: What do you notice about these people?

Cecilia: They’re brown people.

Teacher: They’re brown people.

Michael: They’re different.

Teacher: Are they different but beautiful?

Children: Yea.

Teacher-In fact, they’re not that different because we just had our Kwanzaa play and our black history play. Is this the kinds of things that we wear?

Children: Yes.

Teacher: Are they beautiful?

Children: Yes.

Teacher They kind of remind me of you guys.

Cecilia: They’re cutie pies.

Teacher: They’re cutie pies like you guys.

By doing this Mama Aamiyah is not simply highlighting the beauty of people who traditionally are not identified as beautiful but she is actively creating connections between those people and the children in her classroom, thereby intentionally giving the children concrete indicators of their relationship.

Self Esteem Development

“We believe identity gets established starting from drawing the first breath. It doesn’t wait until you’re in junior high school or high school...the establishment of identity and what’s good about you starts really early and having a positive reflection of you, of your people, of cultures that you can identify with in your home, in your neighborhood, with your family and how things happen with you are useful...Our children need to take in that the truth about them is very positive. There’s great things that happened. Their people and their cultures are wonderful”- Sunshine Staff Statement

In order to achieve this particular type of identity development, intentional lessons in children’s self worth begin as early as possible in the youngest classrooms at Sunshine where children start out as 18 month olds. Numerous bodies of research have found correlations between a belief in personal physical beauty and self-esteem (Mathes & Kahn, 2010; Wade, 2010, Patrick, Neighbors & Knee, 2004) ...) Perhaps one of the most overt ways that positive self esteem is taught at Sunshine is by constantly telling the children that they themselves are beautiful. Dolls, books, food, movies, artwork, community trips, music, the presence of Black and brown teachers and conversations all corroborate to tell children that they are physically beautiful and valuable. This goes beyond the food, music and holiday multiculturalism that is present but impersonal in many schools and speaks to a culture at the school that directly addresses the lived experiences of the children at Sunshine. Physical beauty is highlighted by drawing comparison to children in other parts of the world.

Teacher: African girls love to wear beads in their hair.

Cedella: [To her neighbor] “Look at my hair. Mine has beads on it the same as you.”

Teacher: That’s right. [pointing to the picture] Her beads look a lot like yours.”

And later in the day, while looking at pictures in a book alone on the rug...

Cedella:[to herself] If you’re brown...if you’re brown, you’re beautiful.

In addition to encouraging an understanding that they are physically beautiful, the staff works diligently to teach children that they are innately worthy of help and care. Sorrells (2012), quotes McIntosh who noted that “within this vast world, the marks of a global citizenship would need to include affection, respect, care, curiosity and concern for the well being of all living things (p.70).” Care and kindness thread their way through each day at Sunshine. Children are encouraged to be sensitive to each other’s needs and to stay vigilant to moments where they can offer their assistance and expertise.

Sue: Want me to help you? Let me help you wipe the carpet. There's no one to help you. I'll help you a tiny bit.

These interactions give the helper practice but also assist the helped in understanding that they are worthy of care and exist a space where it is normal for their peers to look out for them. Knowing that they reside in an environment where their emotions are properly interpreted and where care and affection are regularly offered assists in teaching the child that she is valuable. On the giving end, good global citizens (as defined by Gaudelli, 2003) are those who know when and how to express care.

Stewardship

Responsibility for the quality of the classroom, activities engaged in, and (as observed above) for each other falls deeply on the children in the Fouriors class. Each child is given the opportunity to choose a job that they are responsible for each week. These jobs vary from bird-feeder to table wiper and chair pusher. During the morning meeting Mama Aamiyah will often prep children by saying "I want everybody to think about what [job] they would like to do this week in our class." Often times during these meetings, the children eagerly scan the board to see what roles are still available- certain jobs, such as snack helper and line leader are highly coveted. Children are admonished if their jobs are not done or not done to completion. Mama Ayanaa, is clear when she highlights an incomplete that she gives context, explaining that as a member of the class, the child is responsible for how beautiful it is, how comfortable it is and how happy it feels. As a result, there is an urgency to complete the job well.

The obligation placed on the children for the quality of their surroundings, extends beyond the classroom. The Fouriors walk through the neighborhood everyday that the weather is good and observe what they see on the way to the playground. While walking, they are actively engaged in conversation by their teachers. Often, the conversations center on the physical aspects of the streets that they walk through.

Michael: The ground has cracks

Sue- That's concrete. The concrete is old. It has cracks

Teacher- Why do you think that is?

Sue- It's because they haven't fixed it yet.

Dion- Our school isn't on this street. It's on the next street. I wish they'd fix this one and make it look nice.

Teacher- Why should they fix it?

Dion- They should be able to walk and not trip. We walk this way everyday. We should be able to walk and not trip.

Here the children are examining their physical surroundings in relation to themselves and identifying their expectations for their environment in the process. In doing so, they are beginning to develop a critical eye while also problem solving utilizing local and familiar resources.

Teacher Intentionality

The New Teacher project released a publication called *Greenhouse schools; How schools can build culture where teachers and students thrive* in 2012 in which it asserted that “[teachers] value working with their colleagues toward clearly defined goals, with the help of leaders committed to each teacher’s success.” There is palpable camaraderie among the staff at Sunshine which is built and expressed in a variety of ways. Weekly staff meetings are used to share curriculum, trouble shoot together and unite around common goals. Critical self-reflection is also a key piece of the intentionality expressed by teachers, who are themselves predominantly of color, in their global citizenship work at Sunshine. The questions

What do I believe about myself?

What do I believe about my children?

What do I believe about the community that my children live in?

What do I believe about myself in relation to my children and their communities? are key first steps in creating an environment where children feel validated and loved and not imposed upon by any internalized racial inferiority that their teachers may be working through.

The teachers at Sunshine operate within a space that encourages their agency as well. Mama Cari is free to create her own concepts of dance based on African and South American tradition. Mama Barbara takes multiple opportunities to teach unique styles of children’s yoga in ways that are relevant and mindful. Mama Ayanna’s firm but attentive teaching style keeps children alert and on task. Mama Aamiyah tailors the weekly curriculum to the individual needs of children. The freedom that the teachers have in the classroom contributes to a healthy work environment where teachers are motivated and children are responded to in a way that encourages their healthy social development.

Finally, the school is committed to connecting to and collaborating with other schools and resources as a way of learning and implementing as much quality strategy as possible. As Mama Felicia notes,

“I’ve been touring these schools just for my own information...what happens in these schools, what do they do, how do they push their programs. I want to design our program along these lines, not with the Eurocentric approach that they often take but with that deep cognitive approach.”

Simultaneously, Mama Felicia and teachers intentionally create curricula that reflect an effort to surround the children with books, dolls and other commonly used materials that are visually representative of them. This isn’t only so that children can have toys that look like them. It is also an active way of countering the overwhelming prevalence of what Mama Felicia calls “the other side of identity”

“I looked for only dolls that were black and brown, just because I feel like the other side of the identity is so fierce and so all encompassing that I had to try and do something on the other end...there’s something else, there’s another perspective.”

Conclusion

The purpose of this ongoing exploration is to examine the use of a global citizenship curriculum as a means of challenging negative messages of self worth and assigned place received by very young African American. By replacing these messages

with one where children are members of a large, welcoming and validating worldwide community, the majority of which are Black and Brown, the intention at Sunshine Preschool is to inspire emancipation from the negative messages about themselves and their communities that they are already receiving and are empowered as a result, to exist in the world unrestricted by such messages. As Mama Felicia says, it is a means of creating a framework in the mind of the 3 and 4 year old child so that when they encounter racist messages about their value and the value of their community, they can say “No, I know something different about myself.” Truly, their stories are valuable and with the help of such curricula will not, as Ladson-Billings says, be muted or erased.

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