

THE INFLUENCE OF POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR TEACHERS AND TEACHER EDUCATION?

Monica Forrest
University of Kentucky

Karen L. Alexander
Texas Tech University

The authors of this article reference changing population demographics within the United States as grounds for needed changes in the education system, specifically Family and Consumer Sciences Teacher Education Programs. Statistics related to ethnicity, race, family composition, etc. are cited as a means of highlighting the diversity among the student population that teacher candidates will be charged with educating upon completion of their teacher education programs. Suggestions for modifications in teacher education program requirements are outlined, as are steps current educators and other professionals within the field of education can take to better prepare themselves and their students for the dramatic demographic changes that are projected to occur during the first half of the 21st century.

As the United States faces dramatic demographic changes in the 21st century, many may wonder, what kind of diversity exists in classrooms? Every kind of diversity exists in classrooms within the United States, which should be of special interest to all professionals within the field of education because it indicates that there is a need for change within the realm of education. As the voice of strong families, Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) teachers should be particularly concerned and work to accommodate the many races, ethnicities, family compositions, socioeconomic statuses, etc. that are seen throughout the nation because these changes impact children and families on a daily basis. Teachers today are being charged with the responsibility of educating people with backgrounds such as these. FACS teachers, especially, regularly confront these issues because students of varying levels enroll in their courses. The purpose of this article is to enable FACS teachers to question and explore what it would be like to teach in a setting as diverse as one that is created based on varying demographics.

Relevant statistics will aid in effectively conveying the diverse population demographics evident among school-aged children in America. To begin, an estimated 27 million children live in low-income families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2003), while about one in five live in poverty (Hodgkinson, 2001). People may question how socioeconomic status has any bearing on education. Those familiar with the effects poverty has on education and children would answer that money dictates many things in society, especially within the wealthiest nation on Earth. Often, it dictates how much funding a district receives because the amount of money spent on education is heavily influenced by local property taxes (Slavin, 1997). The differences between the poorest and wealthiest school districts are stupefying: 56 percent more per student is spent within the wealthiest school districts, when compared with the poorest (Children's Defense Fund, 2002). Hodgkinson notes that children who are classified as Black, Hispanic, from single parent homes, etc. are not thought to be automatically disadvantaged, as was previously the case. However, children who live in poverty have a universal disadvantage (2001) in part because of a

perceived lack of parental involvement. Often, the parents of these children may work frequently or have inconvenient work hours for school involvement. These considerations would affect the amount of time parents have to devote to their children or schools. Also, parents may not be an asset to their children with regard to certain subjects or issues because they may lack the knowledge necessary to effectively assist their children (Meyer, 1997).

Another consideration with regard to poverty is whether the children are receiving proper nutrition. If children are malnourished or undernourished, the effects on their educational performance and attendance could be profound. In fact, malnourished children may have deficits in intellectual development, which impair their ability to learn and cannot be overcome through schooling (Bellamy, 1998). Some specific examples include deficiencies due to lack of proper vitamin intake. For example, a severe lack of Niacin can result in a condition called Pellagra, which can cause, among other things, mental problems. On a similar note, an Iron deficiency can impact a child's cognitive development (Kids Care Clubs, 1999). Even if children are healthy enough to attend school, another aspect to consider is transportation. Impoverished children may not attend as many days of school as children with adequate transportation. Children living in poverty may not have access to a car, which would prevent them from attending school on days, for instance, when they missed the bus. Additionally, some school districts may not provide transportation or may rely on parents and/or public transit to transport students.

Some other applicable statistics relate to the family in which children are raised, i.e. family composition. Less than half of children live with both their biological parents and almost sixty percent will live in a single-parent household at some point before they turn eighteen (Sapon-Shevin, 2001). Although neither of these statistics suggests anything about how these situations may affect education, and they may have no adverse effect, it is important for teachers to be aware of the family compositions of their students. This information can be used to better communicate with the children and their parent(s) and to incorporate children's experiences into the discussions. With that in mind, it is also important to recognize other comparable statistics: somewhere between six and fourteen million children live in a house which is headed by gay or lesbian family members (Sapon-Shevin, 2001); 4.5 million children live in a household headed by a grandparent and one-third of these households do not have a parent present (AARP, 2003); one to two percent of children in the United States have been adopted, more often now from other countries; 500,000 children live with foster families (Sapon-Shevin, 2001).

What may seem more relevant to classroom teachers are facts and projections about diversity with regard to races, cultures and national origins. These figures are the ones constantly emphasized in the media and perhaps those that will require the most modifications and accommodations. Currently, at least one-third of the school aged population is of a racial or ethnic minority (Hodgkinson, 2001); this may seem like a modest figure when one considers that by the year 2020, students of color will comprise almost fifty percent of the school aged population (Allison, 2003). With regard to the population as a whole, the U.S. Bureau of the Census projects that by the year 2050 non-Hispanic Whites will be a minority (Clausell, 1998).

While these statistics indirectly affect education on many fronts, others have a more direct impact. For example, a conservative estimate in 1999 stated that 2.6 million children spoke another language at home and had difficulty speaking English (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), which is of great concern to educators, as they are responsible for identifying these children and providing applicable services to help them succeed to the best of their ability. It is likely that when teaching some of these children there are cultural and language and

communication barriers to the children's education, which make educating them, involving them in class, incorporating their experiences and communicating with their parents difficult. As these statistics help us to see more clearly, many unique issues are faced in today's classrooms. With this picture in mind, what can be done to better prepare future FACS educators for the classroom and the students that await them?

Addressing these demographic changes in teacher education is critical because the majority of teachers are white females. Teacher candidates, who are 84 percent Non-Hispanic Whites and 59 percent female, will face a diverse student population (Toppo, 2003). The first step is usually modifying teacher education class requirements so that they begin to recognize the need for diversity-friendly curriculum. For example, a course in multicultural education may be required in the teacher preparation curriculum, as a means of relaying the importance of considering the needs of all students. This course may convey information about the history and culture of a diverse population of students (Coballes-Vega, 1992). The course may be rooted in pedagogy or content or better yet, address both. Another change to existing teacher education programs may be increasing the time required within foreign language classes. In these classes, teacher candidates could acquire information on the differences between first and second language acquisition, so they can serve those students who have limited English proficiency (LEP). In a methods class, they may also be required to learn the best teaching practices for working with LEP students (Coballes-Vega, 1992).

The changes mentioned thus far may seem superficial after delving into the following suggestions for teacher education programs. One recommendation for effective teacher education programs includes teaching about the dynamics of racism and prejudice (Sapon-Shevin, 2001). This course or unit would be intense, as prospective teachers would examine their experiences, thought processes, attitudes and knowledge and be willing to make changes to all of them. A class of this nature would help future teachers to learn to question information sources, the accuracy of events and actions, possible flaws in history and education, etc. The content of this course should be supplemented with discussion, as a means of creating an environment where everyone's views, attitudes and opinions are considered and appreciated, which would hopefully be an objective present in the future classrooms of these teacher candidates.

Roach suggests situation-specific problem-solving sessions as an invaluable resource that should be mandatory in teacher education programs (1995). In these sessions, teacher candidates work together to develop strategies and identify resources that could help them manage certain situations they may encounter in a diverse classroom. One such resource is Dr. Ruby Payne's book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. A review of this book is available at www.enc.org, which itself is an invaluable resource, as it addresses issues related to equity in the classroom, diversity and multiculturalism and includes links to applicable journal articles related to the aforementioned topics. Another suggestion involves the way in which instruction is delivered to teacher candidates. Sapon-Shevin (2001) notes that it is essential for future educators to be able to learn in an environment, which is conducive to creating social relationships, which are essential for support, and an environment that is intellectually challenging.

Students frequently receive the most valuable information and experiences outside a teacher education classroom. Site visits are one example of outside experiences that would be beneficial, as they provide a frame of reference (Roach, 1995) for future educators, some of whom have never actually been in a classroom before this point. These visits serve to heighten

awareness and allow for extension of concepts beyond the confines of the classroom walls; therefore, the visits should be deliberately planned to allow for exposure to diverse learning situations. Following these visits, thorough discussion, deprogramming and reflection should occur. Another experience, one that currently is required in teacher education programs, is the student teaching experience. It is crucial to provide prospective teachers with this opportunity, but further, it is also important to expose them to students from different backgrounds during this experience (Coballes-Vega, 1992). Often, placements are made based on close proximity to the university, whereas a more deliberate placement should be made. A placement that considers the teacher candidate's background and previous experiences and charges the person with challenging their existing schemas and biases through teaching a diverse student population would be ideal.

As these recommendations are considered and implemented accordingly, they only address a specific population: future educators or teacher candidates. An effort must also be made to reach teachers who are already in the classroom. Although many continue their education in one form or another, there are often no direct outlets for this information. For this reason, it is critical to outline suggestions for teachers currently active in the profession so they will take initiative to adapt teaching practices to address relevant changes. While university teacher education programs sometimes take the lead in professional development, each school district has a responsibility to address these issues and ensure the continued training of their teachers.

With regard to diversity, the first step any teacher should take in creating a more student friendly classroom is generally considered the most difficult: acknowledgement of personal biases (Clausell, 1998). This step could entail many different things. One approach might be to research anti-bias curriculum, which seeks to nurture the development of every child's fullest potential by actively addressing issues of diversity and equity in the classroom, and its implementation (Hohensee & Derman-Sparks, 1992). This approach would help to highlight areas in which individuals were not aware they held any bias, and it would provide suggestions to combat such biases. Another approach might be to have colleagues observe classroom instruction and review their comments to determine what others perceive to be present or lacking. The bottom line is that to be able to change teaching strategies, thought processes or even curriculum, it is important first to acknowledge the need for it and then take action to improve the classroom experience.

While acknowledging biases, teachers will need to develop a clear sense of their own personal cultural identity (Allison, 2003). This will help them to foster collaboration, cooperation and appreciation for others in the classroom, while simultaneously educating themselves about contributions and significant points unique to their cultures. Another suggestion would be that teachers become bilingual; some sources even suggest they go beyond English and another language and actually become multilingual (Clausell, 1998). It would be beneficial to have knowledge and conversational skills in more than one language. However, some critics argue that this may be an unrealistic solution, for, if the teachers comprehend and use one foreign language and encounter the need for a different foreign language, then their time and efforts may seem wasted. Without seeking to acquire functional language skills in foreign languages, teachers can still arm themselves with information and resources that will aid them in communicating with students and parents with limited English proficiency. For example, there are websites available, such as <http://www.freetranslation.com>, which will translate text from one language to another at no cost.

The previous recommendations have all involved personal change. Now, let us shift the focus to adapting the environment, instruction and curriculum. Adapting the environment may include active promotion of diversity within the classroom and the school. It is important to remember that when promoting diversity, it is also important to recognize the commonalities among people. Too often the focus is on that which divides instead of that which brings together (Clausell, 1998). It is important for teachers to facilitate communication among and between students as they work to identify both similarities and differences.

With focus on pedagogy, the teachers are again forced to review themselves; this time they must acknowledge their preferred learning style, both the manner in which they like to learn and the manner in which they like to teach, and actively try to vary their instruction. It could be argued that this should be done in all classrooms. However, it is extremely significant when one considers that ethnicity and culture significantly influence how students learn (Allison, 2003). When each learning style is recognized and approaches are used to enhance the students' understanding and comprehension, the teachers not only improve their chances of reaching every learner, but they also exhibit a respect for diversity (Sapon-Shevin, 2001).

The last educational arena to be tackled is curriculum. Once teachers have changed their perceptions, actions, classroom environment and instruction, the next step is to change the material being presented to the students. Roach (1995) suggests using curricular adaptations and modifications when dealing with diverse learners. At least with inclusion of such aids, the teachers are relaying their enthusiasm and willingness to accommodate. Since research has shown that most materials used in schools reflect a European lifestyle, it is necessary to make provisions regardless of the student population, as to represent the appreciation of diversity whether it is present in a particular classroom or not. Teachers should aim to incorporate culturally relevant curriculum materials and instructional aids (Allison, 2003).

Finally, revision of the curriculum needs to be completed. Anyone working in the field of education knows that this is a huge undertaking, but for things to change, the existing curriculum has to be examined for its weaknesses with regard to diversity and given a complete overhaul to essentially create an anti-bias curriculum. This stage of curriculum adaptation involves administration, school boards, review committees, and comparable parties, so it is not expected that this be something teachers take on without support and planning. Perhaps after implementing some of the aforementioned changes, teachers can be credited with creating a new purpose and producing new outcomes within the realm of education; it has been debated whether or not real change like this has happened as yet in education (Parish & Aquila, 1996).

After detailing the many steps necessary for successful accommodation of most students, it is only logical to deduct that there are barriers to true multicultural education. Upon understanding the participation necessary from teachers and future teachers, it may come as no surprise that one of the most common obstacles to multicultural education is lack of interest, among teachers, administration and students (Darling, Greenwood & Hansen-Gandy, 1998). This is not a blanket statement, or accusation, but simply the findings of surveys conducted at the college level. Attitudes of individuals might also be impacted by the lack of financial resources, time, background, training and community resources that were identified as perceived barriers to the implementation of a multicultural education (Darling et. al., 1998).

Another seemingly invisible barrier to multicultural education is probably the most difficult to change: the organizational culture of the school. This term relates to the way in which the school is run and the expectations embedded within this culture. It is said that in American schools there are those students who are supposed to do well and then there are the

others, and the schooling culture knows which ones are which (Parish & Aquila, 1996). If schools continue to function on this premise, it is quite possible that no real change can occur, which would negatively affect the nation, not just the educational arena. Is this a sacrifice everyone is willing to make?

To end on a positive, possibilities for education in the future are endless. This article has outlined some of the many outlets available for teachers and future educators as they continue their educational careers. Change can be an intense and arduous process, and it begins slowly. But with all the information and resources available to those in the field of education, it will only be a matter of time before real changes are evident. All students, regardless of national origin, race, family background, etc. have the right to positive educational experiences and FACS teachers can lead the way to reporting that every kind of diversity is recognized and appreciated in U.S. classrooms.

References

- Allison, B.N. (2003). Multicultural classrooms: Implications for Family and Consumer Sciences teachers. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 95(2), 38-43.
- Author Unknown. (2003). Eisenhower National Clearinghouse. Retrieved on December 17, 2003 from <http://www.enc.org>
- Author Unknown. (2003). *Fact sheets*. Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health: National Center for Children in Poverty. Retrieved on September 9, 2003 from <http://www.nccp.org/fact.html>
- Author unknown. (2002). *Difficulty speaking English*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved on April 9, 2003 from <http://childstats.gov/ac2002/indicators.asp?IID=11&id=1>
- Author unknown. (2002). *Key facts about education*. Children's Defense Fund. Retrieved on September 11, 2003 from http://www.childrensdefense.org/keyfacts_education.htm
- Author unknown. (1999). *Issues education- malnutrition and poverty*. Kids Care Clubs, Points of Light Foundation. Retrieved on September 10, 2003 from <http://www.kidscare.org/kidscare/fthpoverty.html>
- Bellamy, C. (1998). *The state of the world's children: Focus on nutrition*. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Retrieved on September 10, 2003 from <http://www.unicef.org/sowc98/>
- Clausell, M. (1998). Challenges and opportunities for family and consumer sciences professionals in the new America. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 90(1), 3-7.
- Coballes-Vega, C. (1992). *Considerations in teaching culturally diverse children* (Report No. EDO-SP-90-2). Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education. (Eric Document Reproduction Service No. ED 341 648)
- Darling, C. Greenwood, B.B., Hansen-Gandy, S. (1998). Multicultural education in collegiate family and consumer sciences programs: Developing cultural competence. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 90(1), 42-48.
- Hodgkinson, H. (2001). Educational demographics: What teachers should know. *Educational Leadership*, 58(4), 6-11.

- Hohensee, J.B. & Derman-Sparks, L. (1992). *Implementing an anti-bias curriculum in early childhood classrooms*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED351146)
- Meyer, W. (1997). A turn down the harbor with at-risk children. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 79, 312-316.
- Parish, R. & Aquila, F. (1996). Cultural ways of working and believing in school: Preserving the way things are. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78(4), 298-305.
- Payne, R.K. (2001). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Highlands, TX: aha!Process, Inc.
- Roach, V. (1995). Supporting inclusion: Beyond the rhetoric. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(4), 295-299.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (2001). Schools fit for all. *Educational Leadership*, 58(4), 34-39.
- Slavin, R.E. (1997). Can education reduce social inequity? *Educational Leadership*, 55(4), 7-10.
- Toppo, G. (2003, July 2). *The face of the American teacher; White and female while her students are ethnically diverse*. USA Today. Retrieved October 12, 2003 from http://www.teachforamerica.org/pdfs/media/USAToday_07_02_03.pdf

About the Authors

Monica Forrest graduated from the University of Georgia with a Bachelor's in Child and Family Development in 2002 received her Master's degree in Vocational Education in Family and Consumer Sciences Education at the University of Kentucky. She is teaching middle school near Atlanta, Georgia.

Karen L. Alexander, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at Texas Tech University. She is the former Program Director for Family and Consumer Sciences Education at the University of Kentucky.