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Teacher reflections on using inquiry-based instruction to engage young children in conversations about wealth and poverty

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of growing levels of economic inequality in the United States, elementary school teachers play a critical role in teaching their students about wealth and poverty and what it means to be responsible and justice-oriented citizens. Inquiry-based learning, a student-centered, participatory, and collaborative instructional method, is one approach that can be used to talk with young students about societal issues, but it has not been systematically applied to the study of student learning about issues related to economic inequality. In this qualitative study, we examined the successes and challenges faced by a team of three elementary school teachers as they designed and implemented an arts-infused inquiry unit focused on wealth and poverty with kindergarten, first, and second grade students. Through a series of six interviews, teachers discussed how they planned and implemented the units and shared reflections on engaging in this novel work. Next steps for educational practice and research focused on supporting teachers in teaching about wealth and poverty are discussed.

1. Introduction

With one of the highest rates of economic inequality among all industrialized countries (Stiglitz, 2012), the current state of the U.S. economy provides both an opportunity and a challenge for elementary school teachers and their instruction on wealth, poverty, and civic responsibility. On one hand, teachers have the chance to help students understand the meanings, causes, and consequences of wealth and poverty and engage them in lessons about the opportunities and obligations they have as citizens in a democratic society. On the other hand, teachers often report feeling unprepared to talk with elementary school students about issues pertaining to social class (White, Mistry, & Chow, 2013) and there is little in the way of existing curriculum resources available to help them navigate these complex conversations. Whether it is viewed as an opportunity or a challenge, the current level of economic inequality in the United States touches all students in myriad ways and initial attitudes and beliefs about wealth, poverty, and inequality will continue to develop and evolve over time. Therefore, it is crucial to find ways to help teachers teach about these topics that are, and will continue to be, relevant to the lives of their students. In doing so, teachers can encourage and support their students' development as "justice-oriented citizen[s]", who "critically assess social, political, and economic structures and consider collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address root causes of problems" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 243).

Although some may think elementary school students are too young to talk about wealth and poverty, decades of developmental research have documented children's emerging beliefs about social class, through the elementary school years, including their increasing endorsement of stereotypes about individuals living in poverty (Leahy, 1981; Mistry, Brown, White, Chow, & Gillen-O'Neel, 2015; Mistry et al., 2016; Sigelman, 2012). Preschoolers are able to recognize the external differences between the rich and poor (Ramsey, 1991) and demonstrate a preference for wealth-related status cues as compared with low-status cues (Shutts, Brey, Dornbusch, Slywotzky, & Olson, 2016), but are not yet able to make trait attributions about individuals based on social class group membership or identify causes of wealth and poverty. Children's class-based reasoning becomes more complex throughout the elementary school years such that by age 10, they are beginning to ascribe negative traits to the poor, such as not being smart and having fewer friends than the wealthy, and cite causal attributions for why someone is rich or poor (e.g., based on effort, ability, or structural conditions; Leahy, 1981; Mistry et al., 2015; Sigelman, 2012). It has been posited that such changes in children's thinking about social groups are due to significant growth and development in their socio-cognitive skills and greater awareness of group-based similarities and differences during the early school years (Aboud, 1981; Bigler, 1995; Bigler & Liben, 1993; Doyle & Aboud, 1995).

Class-based stereotypes rooted in childhood have implications for adults' views about and provisions to help those living in poverty. In

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comparison to lower-class adults, upper-class adults have been shown to favor more essentialist beliefs, endorse more dispositional explanations, and exhibit less empathy toward others of lower status (see Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012). Further, recent reviews show that American adults cognitively and psychologically distance themselves from those living in poverty and only weakly support policies and programs to assist the disadvantaged (Lott, 2002; Williams, 2009). Considering the potential trajectory of the development of beliefs from childhood to adulthood, conversations about wealth and poverty cannot wait until adolescence or adulthood. The early elementary school years are an ideal time for teachers to begin such conversations with students, while their ideas about social class are still malleable (Chafel, 1997).

In order to have such conversations with young children, it is necessary to use developmentally appropriate practices (e.g., whole group and small group instruction, hands-on art activities, discussions about read-alouds, opportunities for individual exploration) and to do so in ways that encourage students to think critically, dialogue with others respectfully, and work collaboratively (Cohen, 2006); skills necessary for engaging in conversations about a broad array of social issues in a productive and respectful manner. Inquiry is an instructional approach that embodies these ideals, as it is student-centered (Savery, 2015) and encourages participation, collaboration, and self-directed learning (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007). As such, for the larger project from which the current data are drawn, we utilized a clinical partnership model (Wagner, 1997) and worked collaboratively with teachers to create, implement, and evaluate an arts-infused inquiry unit focused on talking with early elementary students about wealth and poverty. In separate analyses and publications, we report on the efficacy of the curriculum unit in changing students' beliefs about wealth and poverty (see Mistry et al., 2016). For this paper, we present findings from our analysis of the successes and challenges the teachers faced in designing and implementing the arts-infused inquiry units in their early elementary classrooms. In so doing, we hope that their experiences can help inform other educators and researchers about developmentally appropriate pedagogical approaches that can be used to engage young children in conversations about wealth and poverty.

2. Developmental Intergroup Theory

A starting point for engaging young students in conversations related to social issues is offered by Developmental Intergroup Theory (DIT; Bigler & Liben, 2007). DIT articulates the developmental progression of children's reasoning about social groups, including the endorsement of stereotypes and biases, the role that cognition and environmental conditions play in shaping such beliefs, and effective strategies for intervening and disrupting stereotypic beliefs and attitudes in children. Although amply applied to research and intervention efforts regarding children's gender and racial biases, it has only recently been applied to children's reasoning about social class (see Mistry et al., 2015; Mistry et al., 2016). Of importance to the current study, DIT suggests that without opportunities to engage in developmentally guided and facilitated conversations about meaningful and relevant group-based similarities and differences, children come to their own, oftentimes inaccurate, conclusions (i.e., stereotypes and prejudices) about how groups differ from each other (Bigler & Liben, 2007). These ideas arise from a multi-step process, which begins when children notice differences between people as a function of group size, perceptual differences (e.g., race, age, gender), and either the explicit or implicit labeling and grouping of certain individuals in society (e.g., the oft-used greeting by teachers, "Good morning boys and girls"; observing the current and all former Presidents of the United States are, with the exception of President Obama, White men). As their socio-cognitive skills develop, children begin to sort people into groups based on these salient attributes and eventually form beliefs about members of specific groups (which may or may not be accurate) based on their own ideas and the implicit and explicit messages they have encountered. In response to this organic tendency among children to sort individuals into perceived meaningful groups, DIT emphasizes the importance of engaging young children in explicit conversations about social group similarities and differences in order to combat stereotypes and prejudices.

3. Using inquiry-based instruction to promote justice-oriented citizenship in early elementary classrooms

Although there is a demonstrated need for curricula aimed at teaching young students about the economic differences in society, there are few existing educational materials available for the early grades. While individual activities, such as discussing a book about volunteering in a soup kitchen (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005) and participating in role-playing activities (Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney, 2008) have been suggested, developmental theory and evidence indicates that a more expansive and integrated curriculum approach is necessary to produce more substantial and lasting changes in children's biased thinking (Pfeifer, Brown, & Juvonen, 2007). Studies have shown that curricular interventions targeting elementary school children can be effective in reducing children's stereotypic and biased beliefs about other social groups, such as gender and race (Lamb, Bigler, Liben, & Green, 2009; Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007) and that learning about biases can "increase the likelihood that both stigmatized and nonstigmatized children recognize and challenge prejudice and discrimination, and their inverse, privilege and favoritism" (Bigler & Wright, 2014, p. 21). Further, DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007) posits that lessons with clear and specific messages need to be implemented systematically in order to affect change in children's stereotypical thinking. For example, in a study by Hughes, Bigler, and Levy (2007), European American children who participated in a series of read-aloud lessons that explicitly focused on historical racism had more positive and less negative views of African Americans than did European American children who participated in similar read-aloud lessons that did not explicitly name and address societal and institutional racism faced by African Americans in the United States (e.g., Jackie Robinson).

One possible method of instruction that can be used to engage young students in explicit and systematic discussions about wealth and poverty is inquiry-based learning. Often used to teach science (Minner, Levy, & Century, 2010), inquiry approaches foster students' investigation of key topics and concepts through collaborative and scaffolded learning opportunities. Before and during the unit, teachers informally assess students' understanding of the topic, plan lessons according to these understandings and possible misconceptions, guide students' thinking through questions and conversations, and often work with students toward a culminating action-oriented final project. Students are encouraged to explain their reasoning and reflect on their learning throughout the unit (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).

While different inquiry structures exist (for other examples, see Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Stripling, 2003), in the current study, we drew upon an existing inquiry structure created and adopted by teachers and staff at the participating school that consisted of the following five components: **Beginning the Process** (e.g., plan concepts and core ideas, the physical learning environment, and the social emotional environment), **Investigation** (e.g., assess background knowledge; create learning experiences; use questioning), **Assessment** (e.g., use informal and formal assessments to inform teaching and learning), **Application of Knowledge** (e.g., engage students in in-depth projects; solve problems and design solutions; take action); and **Documentation** (e.g., make learning visible). These five components are not necessarily implemented in a consecutive order, but rather are key components that are used concurrently throughout the unit. For example, Investigation and Assessment may co-occur, as students participate in an activity to learn more about a topic (Investigation) and the teacher