

Multiethnic Education for White Ethnic Children: A Study Revisited

By Gloria Tansits Wenzé

The Great Migration (1885-1925) brought scores of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe to American shores at the turn of the twentieth century. For a number of years, various professional fields documented the assimilation of the White Ethnic immigrants and their descendents into the general American populace. In the earliest years, a melting pot was the analogy used to describe the assimilation of the immigrants into mainstream America. To become more American, the immigrants sacrificed much of their native ways to become a part of this new world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, with the White Ethnic populations then in their third- and fourth-generation from the original immigrant, an interest in ethnicity and ethnic identity ensued. It was 1968 that Stein and Hill (1977) marked as the beginning of the White Ethnic Movement. By 1973, Novak argued that the melting pot did not work, that the descendants of the Great Migration were *unmeltable ethnics*. Contemporarily, Andrew Greeley (1974, 1975) and others (DeMichele, 1982; Dickeman, 1973; Greene, 1978; Handlin, 1973) wrote prolifically about White Ethnics participating fully in being American, but living in, or returning to, ethnic neighborhoods where traditional foods, languages, and customs persisted.

Concurrent with the White Ethnic movement, the multicultural education movement emerged focused on a concern with creating educational environments in

which students from all cultural groups (racial/ethnic, religious, special needs, gender, linguistic) would experience educational equity. In his description of multicultural education, Banks (1981) further defined the concept by discussing multiethnic education as a specific form of multicultural education.

Multiethnic education is concerned with modifying the total school environment so that it is more reflective of the ethnic diversity within American society. Among its goals are: (1) to help reduce discrimination against ethnic groups and to provide all students equal educational opportunities; and (2) to help reduce ethnic isolation and encapsulation (Banks, 1981). One of the ways these goals can be approached is through ethnically relevant curriculum materials.

Although multicultural education grew with the times and continues to play a vitally important role in planning school curriculum for diverse populations, the uniqueness of White Ethnic groups seems to be overlooked. White Ethnicity draws slight attention despite the persistence of ethnicity found among White Ethnic groups.

For example, beyond the White Ethnic movement of the 1970s, Waters (1990) found similarities in ethnicity among White Ethnic groups in California and Pennsylvania, and Alba (1997) wrote about the large White Ethnic populations in the major Northeast cities such as New York City. He noted that White Ethnic neighborhoods are "viewed with uncertainty by sociologists: a historical relic, yet evidence of the persistence of ethnicity." Similar White Ethnic populations can be found in Northeastern Pennsylvania, the site of this study.

The current study is a replication of

the author's unpublished dissertation conducted almost twenty years previously in a public school in Scranton, Pennsylvania (Wenzé, 1984). Census 2000 indicated a growing cultural diversity in populations entering the Scranton area, however, it continued to show strong evidence of White Ethnic groups.

Purpose of the Study

As with the original study, the purpose of the replicated study was to determine White Ethnic children's need for multiethnic education as it was perceived by their parents. It was considered that by identifying the elements of ethnicity (consciousness and locus of ethnicity), the need of White Ethnic children for multiethnic education could be determined.

The rationale for the original study emanated as advocates of multicultural education proposed multiethnic educational programs for children of American ethnic groups who are phenotypically different from the dominant White American group. The original study suggested that White Ethnics are another group whose children would also benefit from multicultural/multiethnic education.

In order to determine if a need for multiethnic education for White Ethnic children still existed, it was the goal of the original study to survey a group of White Ethnic parents who had children in a public elementary school determined by census and ethnographic data to be in a White Ethnic neighborhood. The goals were: (1) to determine if an ethnic consciousness existed among the parents; and (2) whether the locus of ethnicity is in the school or elsewhere. The American public school system

*Gloria Tansits Wenzé
is a professor
with the Education Department
at the University of Scranton,
Scranton, Pennsylvania.*

has historically been a vehicle of Americanization for White Ethnics (Dicke-man, 1973; Tyack, 1967).

Design of the Study

The 1980 Census was used for the original study to confirm the continued presence of large populations of White Ethnic groups in Scranton, Pennsylvania. A visit to the area to conduct the study included ethnographic research interviewing key community members to confirm the existence of White Ethnic traditions and customs that continued to be practiced among the White Ethnic populations. The survey instrument was constructed based on data from the interviews, as well as from contemporary professional literature on multicultural education.

Survey Instrument

Items in the survey instrument covered three major categories: demographics, ethnic consciousness, and school curriculum. Demographic information included the respondent's gender, age, family income, and educational level. Ethnic consciousness items addressed evidence of ethnicity as demonstrated by parents and the locus of ethnicity for the parent and child. School curriculum items were designed to address whether White Ethnicity should be shared through the school curriculum to enhance children's learning.

Choosing the Original Survey Population

The selection of the elementary school chosen as the site of the original study was based on local census data, ethnic composition, and size. The census tracts in the area of this school were reported as having dense populations of Italian, Polish, Slovak, and Irish groups. Further evidence of White Ethnicity in the area included three Roman Catholic parishes located in or near the school boundaries that were founded by the ethnic immigrant ancestors of the current parishioners.

Original Procedure

The period of data collection began in mid-November to coincide with the school's parent teacher conferences, and extended to mid-December. A letter was sent to the parents from the principal telling the parents of the study; then, parents choosing to participate in the study signed a consent form and returned it to the school. The survey instruments were distributed to those parents who had signed a consent form. By the end of the original data-col-

lecting period 142 questionnaires were completed and returned.

Replicated Study

Although the population appears to be growing more culturally diverse, an observable "persistence of ethnicity" continues to flourish among the White Ethnic groups in the Scranton area. This, along with a sustained absence of White Ethnic representation in the multicultural education literature, led to the replication of the study.

The replication of the original study was conducted at the same site as the original study. With the concurrence of the current principal, the data collection period occurred in the same time period as the original study, mid-November to mid-December. A similar procedure was used to notify the parents of the study and to distribute the survey instruments. By the end of the replicated data collection period, 113 questionnaires were completed and returned. With the reduction of the school population, this number was compatible to the original study.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, both studies were compared. Tables were constructed as illustrated.

Demographic Comparisons

In comparing the data (see Table 1), the populations surveyed seemed to remain consistent with most respondents being mothers, ages 30-39. An interesting note is that 21% of those responding in the replicated study are older mothers, ages 40-49.

More respondents in the replicated study have attained education beyond high school.

Those surveyed in both studies have remained consistent with religious preferences, with about two thirds of both populations preferring Roman Catholic religion, and one-fourth preferring a Protestant religion.

Ethnic Consciousness Comparisons

Frequency information was obtained on the variables that were designed to address ethnic consciousness including locus of ethnicity, and school curriculum.

Ethnic Consciousness

A number of survey items attempted to measure the ethnic consciousness of the population. Evidence of ethnic conscious-

Table 1
Relationship to Child

| | %-Original | %-Replication |
|----------------------------|------------|---------------|
| Parent | 98 | 96 |
| Female | 85 | 91 |
| 18-24YO | 21 | 12 |
| 30-39YO | 60 | 58 |
| 40-49YO | NA | 21 |
| Highest Education Attained | | |
| High School | 54 | 36 |
| Vocational-Technical | 9 | 17 |
| College (2 yrs) | 6 | 19 |
| College (4 yrs) | 9 | 9 |
| Graduate School | 6 | 3 |
| Religion | | |
| Roman Catholic | 65 | 62 |
| Protestant | 25 | 26 |
| Jewish | 2 | 1 |
| No Preference | 5 | 7 |
| Income | | |
| Under \$10,000-29,000 | 90 | 40 |
| \$30,000-39,000 | 9 | 20 |
| \$40,000-49,000 | | 14 |
| \$50,000-higher | | 16 |

ness would tend to verify the ethnic identity of the people and the importance their ethnicity has to them.

Questions pertaining to ethnic consciousness were derived from professional literature that described characteristics in behavior observed among White Ethnics. Another aspect of ethnic consciousness, ethnic identity, was reflected in a group of questions which asked the respondent to identify him/herself in reference to his/her ethnic group. The data obtained from these items indicated a range of responses from those that illustrated characteristics that were quite evident, or salient, to those which were moderate or negligible.

Salient Ethnicity

Novak (1973) noted that White Ethnic extended families often live together, or in close proximity (e.g., same neighborhood, within walking distance), and that they socialize with family members frequently. Survey items addressed this observation and were considered evidence of ethnic salience (see Table 2).

Respondents in both the original and replicated studies supported Novak's (1973) observation of White Ethnic families often living together or in close proximity. At least 90% of the original respondents and even more, 95%, of the replicating respondents live in close proximity to family members.

Table 2
Ethnic Salience

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|--|----------------|-------------------|
| Expended family living in close proximity elsewhere in the Scranton area | 52 | 55 |
| Socializing | | |
| Prefer family members as close friends | 41 | 52 |
| Family members and non-family members are in same group of close friends | 29 | 26 |
| Socialize with family 1-2 times/week | 60 | 43 |
| Socialize with family once a month | 18 | 27 |

Not only do family members live close by, but the data of both studies illustrate that they socialize frequently with family members. Of interest to note is that families of the replicating study socialize with family members once a month versus the weekly visits of the original study.

Subsequent questions in this category asked if the respondent could trace their family tree to the actual ancestor who migrated to America, and whether they would be interested in visiting the European homeland of their immigrant ancestor (see Table 3).

The respondents in both studies were consistent in being able to trace the original ancestor, but respondents of the replicated study appear to have less interest in visiting their ancestor's homeland.

Moderate or Negligible Ethnicity

The response to several of the items questioning the salience of ethnicity indicated that the importance of ethnic traditions may be waning or may no longer have meaning. What follows represents some of the items on which the survey population

Table 3
Immigrant Ancestors

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|---|----------------|-------------------|
| Can trace family tree to original immigrant | | |
| Yes | 49 | 49 |
| No | 45 | 45 |
| Interested in visiting homeland of ancestor | 80 | 52 |

illustrated moderate or negligible ethnicity.

Moderate. The responses to some questions concerning ethnic consciousness showed an equal amount of identification and lack of identification by the respondents with their ethnic heritage (see Table 4).

In regard to ethnic meals in the home, respondents noted ethnic meals that were shared traditionally around holidays or special occasions. In regard to events at their weddings, many respondents referred to the "bridal dance" as a custom done at their wedding. In regard to ethnic names in the family, a larger number of Irish names like Brian, Sean, Patrick, Maureen, and Kathleen were identified in the original study. Other names included Anthony, Aniela, Tekla, Gaetano, Gup, Dutcher, Halancha, and Hatch. In the current study, ethnic names or nicknames reported were, again, mostly Irish names, such as Kelly, Mollie, Erin, Shane, Connor, and Austin. Other names identified included Chachie (Aunt), BaBa (Grandmother), Pooka (baby), Anthony, Stash, Ciocie, Arie, and Lucretia.

Negligible. In the early years of the Great Migration, unity was important for survival among the immigrants. Many immigrants belonged to ethnic clubs, read ethnic newspapers, and conducted business with members of their own ethnicity. Perhaps as evidence of assimilation, these items showed negligible ethnic consciousness (see Table 5).

Although ethnic clubs no longer hold the importance they did for the immigrant ancestors, some White Ethnics in this study belong to the few that remain. Of those mentioned by respondents in the original study were the Irish Cultural So-

Table 4
Indicators of Ethnic Heritage

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|---|----------------|-------------------|
| Frequent ethnic meals at home | 41 | 37 |
| Interested in reading ethnic literature | 37 | 38 |
| Ethnic customs | | |
| Feels closer to family and ethnic members | 42 | 35 |
| Never thought about ethnic customs | 45 | 48 |
| Ethnic customs at wedding | | |
| Yes | 23 | 59 |
| No | 73 | 41 |
| Ethnic names in the family | | |
| No | 79 | 75 |

Table 5
Ethnic Consciousness

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Member of ethnic club | | |
| No | 92 | 87 |
| Subscribe to ethnic newspaper | | |
| No | 91 | 89 |
| Ethnic language in the home | | |
| Yes | 15 | 12 |

ciety, the German Society, the Taurus Club (Lithuanian), and the Polish Progressive Club. In the replicated study, respondents belonged to the Irish Cultural Society, the Ancient Order Hibernians, and the Taurus Club.

Perhaps one of the most obvious traits of many ethnic groups is the retention of native languages. In the original study, only 15% mentioned the presence of another language in their home. Its use was fragmentary, as in phrases or individual words, rather than in principal use in the home. The most frequently mentioned language in use then was Polish, followed by Lithuanian, French, and Italian. Other languages mentioned were Hebrew, Ukranian, Spanish, and Slovak. In the current study, 12% identified Spanish, Italian, and Polish as languages heard in their home. Other languages mentioned were Hebrew, and Lithuanian.

Ethnic Identity

A key question in the set of ethnic consciousness questions asked the respondents how they refer to themselves in terms of ethnicity. As Burkey (1978) stated, "...there are many White Ethnics who reject that label (White Ethnic) and who regard themselves only as American." In this case, a sense of ethnic consciousness may truly exist for the parents, but in their desire to appear no different from the dominant American society, they may retain their ethnicity privately (see Table 6).

Of those who mentioned one ethnic group, Irish and Italian held the largest percentages in the original survey, and Irish held the largest percentage in the replicated survey. There was a plethora of combinations mentioned in the hyphenated groups.

In summary, the evidence of ethnicity as illustrated in the foregoing section suggests that the salience of ethnicity, or ethnic consciousness, of the survey population

Table 6
Ethnic Identity

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|---|----------------|-------------------|
| Ethnic Identity | | |
| Just plain American | 62 | 78 |
| What is your ethnic heritage? | | |
| One ethnicity (ex: Lithuanian) | 45 | 35 |
| Two ethnicities (ex: Polish-Italian) | 53 | 24 |
| Three or more ethnicities (ex: German -Irish, Russian) | 20 | 25 |

for both the original and replicated surveys flows in a continuum of assimilation with various questions revealing a high, moderate, or negligible level of ethnic consciousness among the people.

Although 62-78% of the survey population identified themselves as “just plain American, period!” in one question, in another item asking for the respondent’s ethnic heritage, the number of ethnic heritages abounded! A similar proliferation of multiple ethnicities was evidenced in Census 2000.

Locus of Ethnicity

Another set of questions on the survey instrument addressed the locus of ethnicity, or where the respondents believed they and their children learned about their ethnic heritage. One question asked the respondents to rank in the order of priority where they learned their ethnic heritage: home, school, church, or community. The next item asked the respondents to order the same ranking for their children (see Table 7).

Table 7
Locus of Ethnicity

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|-----------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Where is ethnicity learned? | | |
| Home | | |
| Parent | 94 | 73 |
| Child | 91 | 69 |
| School | | |
| Parent | 28 | 2 |
| Child | 32 | 3 |
| Church | | |
| Parent | 30 | 23 |
| Child | 20 | 13 |
| Community | | |
| Parent | 26 | 13 |
| Child | 23 | 13 |

A second set of items asked the parents if they thought that having ethnically relevant curriculum materials in the school is a good idea, and whether it is a good idea for their own child (see Table 8).

It appears from the frequency of responses to these items that the locus of learning ethnic heritages is in the home. Although the parents in the replicated study did not see school as a place where children learn about their ethnicity, it appears that it has potential to be a place for their children to learn ethnic heritages as judged by the interest shown in having ethnically relevant materials in the school. As one parent noted in the replicated study, “We believe strongly in introducing our children to as many ethnic groups and their traditions as possible. Having the school do the same would lessen the differences.”

Curriculum

A question essential to the concept of ethnically relevant curriculum materials was placed prior to the other curriculum-oriented items on the questionnaire. It asked how schools ought to balance the teaching of basic skills with helping children to learn through ethnically relevant materials. The following table illustrates how the parents responded (see Table 9).

Several parents added remarks to this item, including:

Children should know where they come from.

I do believe that ethnic values and culture should be taught at home.

Home is where you learn about your own customs but school is where you learn about everyone else’s. This is where tolerance grows.

We are All “Americans” no matter our ethnic backgrounds.

We believe all Americans are equal.

I consider myself as an American family where all are important.

Our children learn about our culture at home but learn about other cultures at school.

There are many different ethnic groups in our school. How could they all be covered?

Families should teach their ethnicity, schools have enough to teach already.

Diversity breeds acceptance.

Two interesting observations come to light from the parents’ remarks. First, several of the remarks reflect the literature, especially Burkey’s (1978) statement that “there are many White Ethnics who reject that label (White Ethnic) and who regard themselves only as American,” and Dickeman’s (1973) description of the American public school being the vehicle of Americanization and retaining home and church as the bastions of ethnicity.

Secondly, it’s interesting to note that this is a predominantly Caucasian school population, yet the parents comment on the many ethnic heritages in the classrooms. It is unlikely that an outsider coming from what is considered a diverse population would see as many differences in ethnic heritages as these parents do.

Next, a number of questionnaire items addressed school curriculum. A major portion named some ideas for ethnically relevant curriculum materials and activities that may be used in a classroom. The respondents were asked to indicate a level of importance for having these ideas represented in their child’s classroom. Of the fifteen curriculum ideas listed, these held the highest and lowest frequencies (see Table 10).

Finally, respondents were asked if they would approve of an Ethnic Heritage Day conducted at the school during which the children would participate in activities of the ethnic heritages represented, and if they could contribute support for such a day. The frequencies in the studies follow (see Table 11).

In summary, the respondents in both studies acknowledged the importance of their children learning basic skills in

Table 8
Ethnically-Relevant Curriculum Materials

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|-------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Good idea in school | 73 | 80 |
| Good idea for own child | 71 | 74 |

Table 9
Basic Skills

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|---|----------------|-------------------|
| Learning basic skills is more important than having ethnically relevant curriculum materials | 60 | 50 |
| Learning basic skills and having ethnically relevant curriculum materials are equally important | 38 | 50 |

Table 10
Importance of Ideas

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|---|----------------|-------------------|
| Some importance to including ethnically relevant ideas in the curriculum | 60 | 60 |
| Learning about European lifestyles of today and how they compare to American lifestyles | 77 | 68 |
| Learning about contributions of European-Americans in the area of sports | 41 | 41 |

Table 11
Ethnic Heritage Day

| | %- Original | %- Replication |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Approve of an Ethnic Heritage Day | 93 | 88 |
| Contribute support | 78 | 20 |

school, but they also expressed an interest in their children learning about their own, as well as other, ethnic heritages. As one respondent in the current study wrote, "Usually, I would think that there would be about 10 different ethnic heritages in my son's classroom. I think if you stress one culture you should stress them all."

Discussion: Were the Questions Answered?

Is There An Ethnic Consciousness?

Both studies provided evidence that a salience of ethnicity, an ethnic consciousness and ethnic identity, remains for a major portion of the survey population.

Where is the Locus of Ethnicity?

The locus of ethnicity for both survey populations is predominantly in the home. Parents showed an interest in their children learning about ethnic heritages in the school, as well as learning about other ethnic heritages in the United States.

What Implications Does This Have for School Curriculum?

If learning about White Ethnic heritages is not already a part of the school curriculum, then including multiethnic studies to the curriculum will enrich the educational experiences for the children.

Conclusion

Twenty-first century American classrooms are booming with students of diversity. It is a time when teachers are challenged, yet committed, to meeting the needs of their students, however diverse. In doing so, teachers are encouraged to remember the numerous diversities found among their White Ethnic students, as well as the diversities found among their students of color and linguistic differences.

White Ethnics of today may be generations removed from the original immigrant ancestor, and the need for multicultural/multiethnic education for White Ethnic children may not be as clearly evident now as it appeared at the turn of the twentieth century. However, the results of the original and replicated study suggest that a desire for culturally relevant curriculum materials exists to enhance the educational opportunities of White Ethnic children. More so, it is an opportunity to inform students in diverse classrooms about the wealth of different ethnicities found among White Ethnic people.

Discovering different ethnicities among White Ethnic people is an area that warrants further study. Future studies can explore ways to enhance the curriculum for White Ethnic children, as well as make comparative surveys with White Ethnic communities in other parts of the United

States. Multiethnic education for White Ethnic children is an area just waiting to be explored!

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