Multicultural Education Policies and State Legislatures: Analyzing the Factors Affecting Policy Adoption

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Repository Citation
https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/grad_symposium/2012/April_23/7
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Introduction:
This study looks at the factors that contribute to the adoption of multicultural education policies in the fifty US state legislatures plus the District of Columbia.

The demographics of the US are changing significantly. According to Frey (2011), “The 2010 census showed that among infants, almost half—49.8 percent—are minorities, and a quarter of these are Latinos.” Furthermore, it is now projected that by 2023 Whites will become a minority in the student populations nationwide and by 2042 Whites will be a minority within the general US population. In fact, according to the 2010 census there are already 11 states that have a minority-majority student population while an additional 11 states have minority student populations of 40% or more (See Figure 1).

The literature in education provides significant evidence of academic achievement gaps, especially among low-income and minority students. Additionally, multicultural education has been found in the literature to provide benefits for all students while specifically addressing achievement gaps of minority student populations. For example:

• African American and Hispanic students have lower achievement in reading and math than white students (Vanneman, et al 2009).

• Multicultural education has been found to improve both teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Webb 1990, Akiba 2010).

Furthermore, Gollnick (1995) conducted an extensive study of federal and state multicultural education policies and found that state legislated policies were the most effective. Therefore, this study seeks to understand what states are legislating multicultural education policies and what factors are contributing to this legislation.

Methods:
For this study I use the literature for Adoption of Innovations, where innovation is defined as something new in the form of a program of policy. This is a method used frequently in the literature to determine the causes of state policy adoption.

Examples of Adoption of Innovations used in Education:
• State Boards of Education (1950)
• Compulsory School Attendance (1966)
• School Choice (1997 and 1998)
• Charter Schools and School District Takeovers (2002)

There have been two bodies of literature regarding state adoption of policy. The first looks at internal determinants within a state. The second body of literature looks at external determinants, also referred to as diffusion. Diffusion is the process of states learning from one another and thereby emulating a neighboring state’s policy in some form. Berry and Berry (1990) unified the two literatures on state policy adoption by creating a unified model of state government innovation reflecting both internal and external determinants using Event History Analysis (EHA). EHA is “a longitudinal record of when events happened to a sample of individuals or collectivities” (Allison, 1984, p. 9)

For this study my Dependent Variable is the event of states legislating a multicultural education policy involving curriculum. My Independent Variables will include: political, demographic, educational, economic, and diffusion influences.

Research Question:
RQ1: What factors facilitate the adoption of multicultural education policies by state legislatures?

Multicultural Education:
It has been defined as an idea, reform movement, and process.
• Idea: “All students should have an equal opportunity to learn in school” (Banks 1993)
• Reform: Five approaches to multicultural education (Sleeter and Grant 1988)
  Five approaches:  
  1) Teaching the exceptional and culturally different  
  2) Human relations  
  3) Single-group studies  
  4) Multicultural education  
  5) Education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist
• Process: Educational equality “can never be fully achieved in a human society” (Banks 1993).

Preliminary Findings:
• Between 1978 and 2011 only six states legislated a multicultural education policy (See Figure 2).

• Variation in policies legislated were not captured in this analysis.
• A few states (i.e.: New Jersey) have comprehensive multicultural education policies with accountability at the State Board of Education level, which are also not included in this analysis.

Additional Research Questions:
RQ2: What has constrained the adoption of Multicultural Education policies?
RQ3: Did Adoption of Innovations not address this issue because state legislatures abdicated their responsibility to State Departments of Education and local school districts?