

In Pursuit of the Multicultural Curriculum

Preparing Students for a Diverse Society

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With the increasing demands placed on teachers today, they must not only demonstrate competency in specialized content areas, they must also be versed on the latest child development theories and pedagogical practices. And, if this weren't enough, they must possess sophisticated communication skills for dealing with parents, colleagues, and the larger community. Add to this the fact that our classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, the challenges put before teachers and schools can be overwhelming.

Many classrooms today comprise children from diverse cultures, races, religions, socioeconomic groups, and family constellations. In addition, children with physical, mental, and learning disabilities, who were once assigned to separate specialized classes, are now placed in grade-level classrooms. Even though these students share a common classroom, all their differences can easily work to isolate them from one another. Finding a way to prevent this from happening requires teachers to be knowledgeable about and sensitive to the wealth of variety around them, as well as to possess excellent observation, listening, and human relations skills.

Striving to recognize, respect, and celebrate diversity, while at the same time working to build an inclusive multicultural sense of community in a classroom or school, is a complex endeavor. A case in point is a recent incident in a public school district. A group of parents reacted angrily to a white teacher's reading of a book entitled *Nappy Hair*. As a book written by a respected African-American author who intended it to be a celebration of racial diversity and pride, its use in a third-grade classroom was meant to be a positive act of inclusion. While the young teacher may have understood the use of the word "nappy" as simply a description of hair texture, for many it was a culturally loaded word and an objectionable insult. The incident resulted in the transfer of the teacher, a fracturing of the school community, and, unfortunately, the removal of several other critically acclaimed, but perhaps controversial, books from reading lists.

Despite the risks involved, our curricula must continue to include the perspectives, contributions, literature, history, and culture of all groups of people. We must always ask ourselves whose story is not being told. A monocultural view of the world is a distortion of reality, and to offer our children an education based on this narrow perspective would be to miseducate them. Limiting the voices and stories we allow our children to hear may temporarily quiet the controversy, but in the end will only deprive them of the opportunity to learn about and to confront issues of diversity in honest and thoughtful ways. The real challenge is how we prepare our teachers to receive this wide array of differences, and out of it build an inclusive, multicultural community in the classroom.

A successful model for this endeavor, I believe, takes into account four basic principles.

Principle # 1: *The practice of defining and validating the history, culture, and psychology of individuals within a community cannot be separated from the practice of encouraging each member of the community to accept, include, and empathize with others.*

The diversity of a given population can be quantified according to eight major and five minor categories of identity. The major categories include:

Ability -- learning, social, psychological, emotional, and physical attributes
Age -- chronological, developmental, and generational stages
Ethnicity -- national origin, linguistic background, immigrant status

Gender -- male or female identity

Race -- traditional anthropological categories such as Caucasian, Asian, African, and so on; may include biracial identity

Religion -- major religions as well as the degree of cultural and religious observance

Sexual Orientation -- gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual

Socioeconomic Status -- class differences, educational background, and social orientation

The minor categories include:

Situational Factors -- death of a family member, transient family patterns, chronic illness

Geographic Origin -- national, regional, or state origin; urban, rural, or suburban orientation

Marital Status -- single, married, divorced

Physical Appearance -- observable characteristics that cause negative reactions, such as stature, weight, or wearing braces or thick glasses

Role and Career -- parenting, grandparenting, adoption; working parent, at-home parent, dual career family, three generation families¹

At the same time these categories are used to describe the differences that exist in any population, they can also be used to discover the similarities, shared identities, and connections that may serve as the building blocks for a multicultural community.

Principle # 2: *Each school must devise its own plan for building a multicultural community.*

As made painfully clear in the "nappy hair" case, not every book on widely approved multicultural reading lists will be appropriate for every school. There are no universal blueprints for creating a multicultural climate, curriculum, and shared values within schools. However, the process should move along a continuum from *awareness* to *commitment* to *action*.

Principle # 3: *Sophisticated skills are required to turn a diverse population into a multicultural community.*

To become part of a multicultural community, members of a diverse population must become, like ethnographers, skilled at reading and interpreting culture. In his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz uses Gilbert Ryles's notion of "thin" and "thick" description to talk about understanding cultures. Thin description addresses the outer, observable, "photographable" characteristics of a person, action, or event. "Thick" description goes beyond this to arrive at a more complex understanding of context and underlying meanings. In the "nappy hair" case, for example, a thin interpretation of the use of the word "nappy" is as a simple description of hair texture. To understand why the use of the book *Nappy Hair* became so controversial, one must get at a "thick description" of the incident. This requires looking into any number of issues, such as who wrote the book, who read the book, who was being read to, what's the history behind the use of the word "nappy," and so on. Coming up with a "thick" description of a person, action, or event takes a great deal of skill, patience, and a drive toward personal and collective growth. Without making this effort, a diverse population has very little hope of becoming a multicultural community.

Another skill important in the creation of a multicultural community, borrowed from the literature of linguistics, is linguistic code-switching -- the ability to move from one language system to another. Psycho-emotional-social-code switching requires one to move from one set of codes and behaviors to another without losing one's own identity. Students should be helped to learn the skills of code-switching in order to function at a high level of communication. The acquisition of these code-switching skills should not be limited to such groups as women, people of color, and English-as-second-language students, but should be considered an important part of all students' lessons in human relations.

Principle # 4: *There are two important components to consider in the design of a multicultural curriculum; the sources of curriculum, and the methods of communication.*

Sources of Curriculum

Each member of the school community is potentially a source for ideas on the topics and content to include in a multicultural curriculum. By drawing from the experiences, interests, and knowledge of both the adults and students (and students' family members), a rich and meaningful curriculum can be developed.

Adults as a Source of Curriculum

An example of an adult serving as a source of curriculum occurs in our school every year on the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. On this day, our lower school counselor shares her life experiences and family history with all the kindergarten students. She begins her story by sharing a photograph of herself, her father, and Dr. Martin Luther King taken in her home. Then, using other family artifacts and treasures, she recounts her family history from the time of her great, great, great grandmother who was a slave. This personal account leads into an introduction to the civil rights movement and its impact on our nation's history. For many children, this experience begins an informal discussion that continues throughout the middle and high school years. This discussion is formally revisited each year in a middle and high school Martin Luther King Day celebration assembly.

Student as a Source of Curriculum

During late January or early February, most Asians celebrate the lunar new year. When our high school Asian Students Club initiated a plan to celebrate this occasion school-wide, we helped them do it. The club invited students from Chinatown to perform a traditional lion dance, complete with drums and a twenty-foot lion costume. A spectacular procession danced its way through the halls of the entire school. This inspired many classes to make their own masks and costumes, and to carry on the tradition of performing a lion dance to celebrate the lunar new year annually.

Adult Content as a Source of Curriculum

Eight years ago a committee of teachers at our school began assembling Global Study Boxes. Today we have over fifteen boxes. These boxes are organized by country, and each contains various artifacts, materials, information, and lists of available resources for a particular country. Every three months the contents of one of these boxes is placed on public display, in a museum-like fashion in a prominent place in the school. These boxes are also used extensively in the classrooms throughout the year in a program in which each grade level in our lower school selects a common country to study. In addition, individual classrooms can select one country to study based on the makeup and interests of the students in that particular class.

As an extension of the Global Study Boxes project, our parents association has sponsored an all-school International Festival each spring since 1993. This festival features booths from different countries. Each booth has a display of items from the country, information about the customs, language, festivals, and history of the country, and one or more hands-on craft or art activities relating to the country. An international cafe and multicultural performance program is also a part of the festival.

Student Content as a Source of Curriculum

The students own knowledge bases emerge as sources of curriculum in small ways every day. One example of this can be found in children's observations and comparisons of what they bring to lunch. One kindergartner's curiosity about the rice and pickles found in his friend's lunch every day lead to the class sharing in a Korean meal prepared and presented by the student's family.

Two other examples of students' knowledge serving as sources of curriculum come from our high school. As participants in a school-wide symposium on diversity, a group of students videotaped interviews with a cross-section of their fellow students. The resulting tape provided a provocative tool for initiating and continuing the thoughtful discussion of diversity issues in many other settings. Another group, the Jewish Students Club, decided that an important goal for its group was to inform and educate fellow students about the Holocaust. To accomplish this, the group designed and carried out a project that involved obtaining a list of all the Holocaust victims, copying these names onto a display, and mounting these throughout the

school hallways. Placed end-to-end, these plaques covered several floors of the building and imparted a powerful lesson on the magnitude of the Holocaust atrocities to everyone who saw them.

Methods of Communication

The second important component to consider in the development of a multicultural curriculum is the methods of communication.

Senses

A multicultural curriculum has rich possibilities for engaging all the senses. Recently one of our fourth grade classes experienced the sights, sounds, tastes, and feel of the Day of the Dead. The class constructed papier-mache skeletons, built a Day of the Dead altar, and told stories, ate food and sang songs to mark the occasion.

Multifaceted

A multifaceted approach to learning is particularly suited to a multicultural curriculum. In addition to using traditional sources of information, multicultural topics can be investigated through the use of "informants" or guest speakers and experts, multimedia materials, field trips, and Internet exchanges. In a highly successful project in our school, a number of classrooms spent several months researching the culture of the Kwakiutl people of the Northwest coast. Among other things, students used various sources to learn about the history and geography of the northwest coast. They read Kwakiutl myths, compared these to the myths of other peoples, and made up their own mythic stories. Following this research, a native Kwakiutl craftsman visited our school and launched the children on a project to design and make their own "button blankets," a traditional art form. Intricate designs of buttons with particular symbolic meaning and significance to the student designer are sewn onto these blankets. On special ceremonial occasions these blankets are worn like capes, and they are passed down as heirlooms. For several weeks after the visit, students worked on designing and making their own button blankets. The year-long project culminated with the celebration of a school "potlatch" during which students wore their button blankets.

Learning Styles

An inclusive curriculum must be sensitive to different learning styles. This can be done by giving students options to participate in the learning process in whatever way capitalizes on their talents and strengths. An example of how we try to do this at our school can be found in our very early grades. To help very young children learn to read and write, we employ a range of strategies for different learning styles and developmental stages. These include providing many opportunities to listen to oral storytelling by our librarians and in the classroom, opportunities for the children to tell stories orally, to dictate stories to an adult, to draw and use pictures to tell stories, to write stories using their own ideas, and to act out or perform their own storyplays. There should be as many ways as possible for the student voice to be heard and validated.

Interdisciplinary

There are many opportunities for interdisciplinary learning to take place in a multicultural curriculum. The button blanket project described above, for example, incorporated lessons in history, literacy, the arts, natural science, and mathematics. Reading myths in which animals play a prominent role lead to investigations of habitat and animal life, and the process of making a blanket from a small scale design involved the use of all kinds of mathematical skills from figuring out how many bolts of cloth and how many dozen buttons were needed, to measuring and cutting to size and working with scale enlargements.

All schools, even those with fairly homogeneous student populations, are finding they must address such issues of diversity as race, religion, gender, and socioeconomic stratification. We must take responsibility for preparing all students to live in a diverse society. Stories like the nappy hair incident tell just how difficult it can be for diverse groups to come together to form a multicultural community. The process of building this kind of community can be long, hard, and full of risk. But for those who successfully see this process through, the benefits are great. We found this out in our school after grappling with problems that

started over the issue of a Christmas tree. A few years ago, a number of our school community wanted to keep the long tradition of having a Christmas tree displayed in the school lobby, another group thought the tree should be placed in an area that was less central, and yet another group objected to any display at all. This disagreement prompted us to re-examine our entire policy on holiday celebrations. After much discussion it was agreed that too much attention had been centered exclusively on the Christmas holidays. Over the next three years the community worked hard to develop ways to celebrate many different kinds of holidays as a community beginning in September. Now we have a repertoire of community celebrations that occur throughout the school year, and we have expanded our winter holiday celebrations to include Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and Christmas. By diligently and thoughtfully pursuing a policy of inclusion, instead of exclusion, we have enriched the lives of everyone in our community.

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