Multiculturalism in the Schools

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Multiculturalism in the Schools

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay’s first paragraph.

As an agent of societal and individual growth, schools play an important role in the community, and multiculturalism plays an important role in the schools. Many researchers agree that there is a need to include multicultural values and concepts in the classroom in order to benefit all students. Many researchers in the past few years have addressed the following issues regarding multicultural education and this literature review will focus on these same questions:

- What is multicultural education?
- How can multiculturalism be promoted in the classroom?
- Who should be exposed to multiculturalism and why?
- Why do teachers avoid using multicultural practices?

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Multiculturalism in the Schools
By: Tina Bianchi

Part I: A Review of the Literature
As an agent of societal and individual growth, schools play an important role in the community, and multiculturalism plays an important role in the schools. Many researchers agree that there is a need to include multicultural values and concepts in the classroom in order to benefit all students. Many researchers in the past few years have addressed the following issues regarding multicultural education and this literature review will focus on these same questions:
- What is multicultural education?
- How can multiculturalism be promoted in the classroom?
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- Why do teachers avoid using multicultural practices?

What is multicultural education?
One researcher refers to multicultural education as a teacher's promotion of "a more in-depth understanding of other cultures that exist within our own society."¹ By studying human values universally, students can better understand what it means to be a compassionate human being. Taking a diverse approach can also convey values as they are derived from group membership.
Another proposal describes multicultural education as an "educational strategy in which students' cultural backgrounds are viewed as positive and essential in developing classroom instruction and school environments."² The word 'strategy' implies that a multicultural education is a plan to be carried out, and therefore implies a more active approach to including diversity in the classroom. In this view, cultural concepts are supported in a school setting.

How can multiculturalism be promoted in the classroom?
In order for a curriculum to be truly multicultural, racial, ethnic, and gender issues must be identified and stereotyping of these groups must be countered. Often times, curriculums are too centered on the majority population. "One strategy...is to broaden the curriculum to include more about underrepresented people of color."³ When integrating multicultural material, however, it is important to ensure the authenticity of those materials. Comparatively, people of color have fewer opportunities to write and publish than do Caucasians and, as a result, people of color are often represented through stereotypes and misconceptions. Valid portrayals are necessary throughout the curriculum. As one article indicates, "Respect for cultural differences should be taught all the time, not reserved for the 'culture of the week'."⁴ Although multicultural researchers deem it important, it seems the curriculum has not been revised to meet this need of schools. "There is virtually no literature regarding multicultural curriculum modification ... the focus is primarily on verbal interaction rather than instructional methodologies."⁵

A good deal of this research advocates the use of multiculturalism in the classroom. "Literature is one of the best ways to learn about various cultural and ethnic groups."⁶ Literature provides a vicarious learning experience for its readers by drawing him or her into a character's situation. This almost forces the reader to actively worry about the choices a character will make and the outcome of those choices.

The Indiana Project, a cooperative community project to promote multicultural education, studied the interaction of three Indiana communities, one predominantly white,
one African-American, and one Hispanic. The communities were linked via the exchange of letters and videotaped discussions of multicultural books and issues. "Sharing books that explore diversity helped the children to see their own diversities in context." The project's outcome reinforced the research that supports promoting a multicultural education through the use of literature, as well as suggests cooperative learning as a method of promoting multiculturalism in a school setting. Overall, the research supports that the use of content integration, literature, student-centered classrooms, small group instruction, and cooperative learning are the best ways to promote multiculturalism in the classroom.

**Who should be exposed to a multicultural education and why?**

Almost every article used in this research indicates that a multicultural education will benefit all students, including Caucasians. "Multicultural education is not just for people of color." Many of the articles researched stress the importance of stretching education across cultural boundaries. It is important for students to be exposed to cultures other than their own for several different reasons. Not only will tolerance and understanding be promoted, but also one's own heritage will be better understood and appreciated for its uniqueness. As one article explains, "They [students] must gain the ability to weigh multiple viewpoints and to communicate effectively in different contexts." Therefore, it is important to introduce all students to cultures other than their own in order to prepare them for the society that exists outside of their own community. Beyond the classroom, college and work experiences will force exposure to diversity and a multicultural education will prepare students for those experiences.

Several studies have looked at the effects on adolescent well being as a result of ethnic identity. One such study predicts that "ethnic identity is crucial to the self-concept and the psychological functioning of individuals." Without significant exposure to one's own ethnicity, negative stereotypes or lack of tolerance can contribute to low self-esteem and confidence. The study compared several ethnic groups' well being for individuals with unexamined identity (one whose ethnicity had not been explored) and identity achievement (a state of clarity and understanding regarding ethnicity has been reached).

The results of the study were significant. The biggest increase in the category of self-esteem was Native American males, who went from the 13th to the 50th percentile. Black females were reported to gain the most points in their sense of well-being, jumping from the 7th to the 50th percentile. On average, each ethnic group's percentage points doubled when they reached identity achievement. "Those adolescents who have explored ethnicity as a factor in their lives and are clear about the meaning of their ethnicity are likely to show better overall adjustment than those who have not considered their ethnicity or are unclear about it."

Reinforcing and supporting ethnic groups of students within a school, as well as groups existing outside of it, can benefit all students by allowing them to make connections with their own culture and the many different cultures that exist around them.

**Why do teachers avoid using multicultural practices?**

The way in which a teacher interacts with his or her students will undoubtedly have a great impact on their education. Research supports that it is very important for individuals to be able to identify with their own culture and it would seem logical that teachers would be eager to provide as much of a multicultural education as possible. "Infusing culturally responsive and responsible pedagogy across the curriculum has been shown to ensure greater success for every student." According to a study which
interviewed over 100 graduate students working in the field of education, there is a lack of multicultural practices in all classrooms, regardless of grade level.

According to the study, there are five major reasons why teachers fail to use multicultural approaches in their classrooms. These reasons are:

- Teachers do not know or understand what MCE is.
- Teachers do not know how to use effective MCE practices.
- Teachers are not motivated to learn MCE practices.
- Teachers are resistant to learning effective MCE practices.
- Teachers do not realize their full responsibilities for using effective MCE practices.

Unfortunately, many responses indicated that teaching multiculturalism was not a required or available course during teacher preparation. Many schools have provided in-service programs to counter this problem, although many educators still feel there is no need for multiculturalism because the school and community represent only one culture, such as all white, black, etc.

Much of the research on multiculturalism in schools is dated within the last decade, which indicates the relatively new realization of the importance of this topic. As integration of multicultural materials becomes more prevalent, perhaps the future will hold generations of more tolerant and well-adjusted individuals. By introducing and reinforcing multicultural literature and other materials, while doing away with common negative stereotypes, teachers can help their students reflect on our culturally diverse world in a realistic and genuine way.

Part II: A Case Study

This case study includes an on-site observation, a review of the English Language Arts Core Curriculum, and two teacher interviews.

I. On-site observation

While observing a predominantly Caucasian ninth grade suburban classroom, I paid close attention to the interaction between Caucasian students and students of color. There was indeed interaction, as far as students conversing between classes and sitting together during lunch and group assignments. Because this school was predominantly Caucasian, I looked in the student handbook to see if diversity was addressed. The handbook listed diversity as the student's responsibility to "tolerate and appreciate racial, gender, and physical differences." Although the school itself was not culturally diverse, this concept seemed to be carried out through a Community Service program called "Helping Hands." This program sent students into the community to join inner-city kids for such activities as parties and volunteering in soup kitchens.

In one of the classrooms, an English class was studying The Odyssey. The students were encouraged to consider the many differences between our society and Greek society. They discussed and wrote about these cultural differences, allowing them to think about how they felt about such a society. Students were also encouraged to point out both positive and negative aspects of Greek society and explain how those opinions related to their own generation.
II. English Language Arts Core Curriculum

The curriculum for English is divided into standards, with reading being the one standard that deals with diversity. Multiculturalism is introduced as early as the K-1 level. The 5th-6th grade level introduces multiculturalism in more than one text, although it is not until the 7-8 grade levels that the objectives include identifying cultural and ethnic values and their impact on the content. The curriculum objectives in grades 9-12 barely touch on diversity issues. Here, the main relative objective is to consider cultural differences. This is unclear and does not actively promote a multicultural education.

While this model will vary by district, it seems to place relatively little value on the promotion of multiculturalism in education. This could be a possible reason as to why there are not very many educators using these practices in their classrooms. Also, while the objectives of the reading standard include some focus on diversity, the curriculum’s philosophy does not include anything about diversity in learning.

III. Interviews

I interviewed two teachers; one is a white male English teacher in a city high school (teacher “X”) and the other is a white female Math teacher in a suburban middle school (teacher “Y”). The question to be addressed was: What does the school do to value diversity?

Response 1: 11th grade English teacher

Teacher “X” explained that his school values diversity by supporting clubs and organizations for students of color. These clubs are similar to the Black and Latino Student Unions at St. John Fisher College. Students can also participate in a gospel choir. Teachers are encouraged to facilitate these organizations. The school also encourages and provides opportunities for students to create a monthly cultural bulletin board. Teacher "X" also stated, however, that "the school, as an institution, does not deal with multiculturalism in the academic realm"; this is up to the individual teacher and the curriculum.

Teacher “X” said that the make-up of his class determines his approach to multiculturalism. If the class is predominantly white, he will place less of a focus on culture. "Culture puts them to sleep," he stated. In a mostly black class, there is more of a need to focus on diversity because they’re interested in it. Teacher "X" said, "To keep their attention, you have to cover their interests." His final statement was: "I don’t agree with exposing everyone to the same stuff. I teach to the class."

This final statement deviates from the research literature that stresses the importance of exposing all kids to all cultures. While student interest is vital, it seems that there must be a viable way to make diversity experience issues relevant to students’ lives and experiences.

Response 2: 7th and 8th grade math teacher

Teacher "Y" explained that her school does not place a great deal of focus on diversity. They do have Spanish and French club, although the focus remains on the language rather than the culture as a whole. "We only have five or six black kids in the middle school, and maybe two Asian kids. They're more or less already assimilated into the mainstream," she said.
Teacher "Y" also explained that, as a Math teacher, she never really thought about including aspects of multiculturalism in her lessons. She also said, "Diversity wasn't really addressed when I was in college." This response corroborates the article on why teachers do not use multicultural practices. However, teacher "Y" indicated that she was very interested in my research and said she planned to consider multicultural education in her lessons from now on.

These findings appear to support the research that there are multiple answers to the question of what multiculturalism is and how to implement it, as well as who will benefit from the implementation. The schools are supporting diversity through programs and community service, but teachers may still need more training and information regarding the positive effects that a multicultural education can have on all students.
Endnotes

4 Lee 234.
7 Charles A. Elster & Trina Zych, "I wish I could have been there with you': linking diverse communities through social studies and literature," The Social Studies 89.1 (1998): 25.
8 Lee 233.
9 Elster & Zych 25.
11 Dukes & Martinez 504.