

WITH EYES TO SEE



MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURALISM

The terms "multicultural education" and "multiculturalism" are now common in the lexicon of our schools and society. It is rare to find parents, politicians, or educators today that do not espouse the importance of learning about the different cultures in this country and around the world, recognizing that we live in a pluralistic society, and that learning about our different cultures, histories, and traditions is important on many levels. Racism, bigotry, and Western-centered ideologies still pervade our society, unfortunately, and there are "leaders" among us who advocate a monocultural (read white, Christian) society, or who believe in the assimilation of non-whites into the dominant culture of this country (as it is defined by European American, Christian values). We must not ignore the fact that too many people in positions of power oppose multicultural societies, for when we do these individuals/groups become presidents, congresspeople, school board members, etc. We must at the same time celebrate the gains we have made in our society to create, in the words of the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico, "a world where many worlds fit."

What does a multicultural education look like that supports this many worlds' view? Enid Lee, a leader in what she refers to as "anti-racist education," describes four stages of multicultural education in schools, and encourages educators to create classroom that moves beyond the first two stages:

1. The classroom has signs, foods, and festivals representing varied cultures (a "heroes and fiestas" approach);
2. Isolated teaching units on different cultures, groups;
3. Diverse narratives/histories are part of the core curriculum;
4. The classroom is in the community, and students are engaged in transforming the world for the common good.

Comprehensive multicultural education, however, goes beyond the curriculum of the classroom, and should take into account the following:

- Do the toys, images, and authors represent many cultures?
- Are the teachers in the school of diverse backgrounds?
- Are parents involved in the school on many levels?
- Who makes the decisions in the school (financial, hiring, curriculum), and how?
- Is there a safe environment in the classroom and the school to address issues of racial tension, bullying, sexism, etc., and do teachers and administrators enable such issues to be dealt with?

Most editions of this newsletter include ideas of activities and resources to be used in the classroom. This edition of *With Eyes to See*, however, is focused on teachers themselves, with ideas for how to critically examine the multicultural education of their classrooms and their school.

ideas for
teachers

who want
to
integrate
social
justice
concepts

into what
and how
they teach

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CONCERN AMERICA

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IDEAS

"...in Canada, multicultural education often has come to mean something that is quite superficial: the dances, the dress, the dialect, the dinners. And it does so without focusing on what those expressions of culture mean: the values, the power relationships that shape the culture.."
-Enid Lee (educator)

Who are the Teachers and Students of Your School?

There exists a significant racial divide between teachers and students in this country. Consider the following from the 2006 report from the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, "The Segregation of American Teachers."

- Students of color comprise approximately 42% of public school students
- Approximately 90% of public school teachers are white
- White teachers, on average, attended elementary schools that were over 90% white, and currently teach in schools where close to 90% of the faculty and 70% of the students are white
- Teachers of color tend to be in schools with more low-income children, higher teacher turnover, and a greater likelihood of NCLB sanctions
- The South has the most integrated teaching force, while the Northeast and Midwest have the most segregated. The West is the only region with a significant percentage of Latino teachers: 11%.

What does this mean for our classrooms? Often, teachers do not have significant experiences of other cultures, including those of their students, to aid their teaching about those cultures or of the diverse students in their charge. Thankfully, there are many resources in our communities and within our students themselves, providing opportunities to learn about other cultures, especially those represented in our classrooms, through home visits, student narratives, visits from parents/grandparents of students, and events in the community.

What is the reality at your school? Involve the students in researching the demographics of your school: collect data on the racial background of teachers, administrators, support staff, and the students themselves. Compile the data and talk about the implications for the teaching/learning in the school. These discussions could lead to any number of projects about race, community, and education.

Who is in OUR Classroom?

Another way to involve students as researchers to critically examine multicultural education in their school is to quantify the racial backgrounds of the educational materials throughout the classroom, including images are on the walls, student work, famous quotes, math formulas, art, famous individuals, etc.? Which of these can be identified by the race of the author, person, artist, etc.? Also, what books are in the classroom? Who are the authors? What toys (usually in lower grade classrooms) are present, and what cultures do they represent?

Together with the students, find a way to represent the results of your investigation, and talk about the findings. Do the images and materials of the classroom reflect the racial backgrounds of the students themselves, and/or our diverse world? If not, how can this be changed while maintaining an integrated, academically challenging curriculum?

And the Parents?

It is generally believed that children who have parents/guardians involved in their education do better in school. Yet, what does parental involvement mean? Helping with homework each evening? Accompanying field trips? Forming part of faculty hiring committees? Working with teachers to plan and teach lessons? Bottom line: Are parents, especially parents of color, part of the decision making processes of school? Why or why not? Should they be? Exploring these questions among faculty and students will probably draw diverse opinions, and may lead to an important exploration of the role of parents in schools.

Multiculturalism and Multicultural Education

The "Multicultural Education" movement grew out of the civil rights and women's rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and though it takes many forms in our schools today, it is generally accepted that multiculturalism is an important ideal to teach our children. This focus on racial equality and pluralism is important and hopeful, and our society, for all of its shortcomings, has many examples of supporting diversity and criticizing racism; take the recent firing of talk show host Don Imis and his disgraceful reference to the Rutgers female basketball players. Digging a bit deeper, what exactly are our schools' views of multiculturalism, and how does this translate into the multicultural education the students receive?

Start with a small group of teachers of confidence, and ask them to define "multiculturalism" and "multicultural education." Sit together and compare each others' definitions, and see where the discussion takes you. Try developing a multicultural education mission statement that incorporates the views of the group. How does it compare with the mission statement and actual teaching taking place in the school? Is it necessary to initiate a dialogue on the topic with the rest of the staff, the administration, parents, and students?

See the Resource section on page 4, under the National Association for Multicultural Education, for a link to a definition of "multicultural education" that may be of use for these dialogues.

Safety First

Children learn best when they feel as though they are in a safe learning environment. Safety in a classroom can be defined on various levels: clean air, non-toxic classroom materials, healthy food served in the cafeteria, and building materials that are clean and healthy; students feel free from physical and mental intimidation and threats; the lives, ethnicities, and work of the students are reflected on the walls and activities of the classroom; and, students are able to be creative, take chances, and explore their surroundings and that which they learning.

In terms of multicultural education, this safety is of utmost importance, especially when issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc. arise:

- If students are making racist comments about each other, how is this dealt with? Does this behavior lead to classroom discussions about racism and name calling?
- When girls are sexually harassed, what happens (if anything) to the perpetrators? Is this treated as a community issue to be addressed, a matter for disciplinary action, or a situation of simply "boys will be boys"?

In short, is the classroom (and school) a safe, supportive environment in which serious matters can be worked out by all students, teachers, and administration (apart from those issues of requiring confidentiality)? Part of multicultural education is the hard work of exploring the many stereotypes, fears, and noise that our society throws at our students through television, music, movies, parents, peers, etc. It is often not easy, but helping our children work through their feelings and actions concerning diversity is some of the most important multicultural education we can provide as educators.

"In order to teach you, I must know you."
-Native Alaskan educator

"Maybe we should try to think of American culture as a conversation among different voices - even if it's a conversation that some of us weren't able to join until recently."
-Henry Louis Gates Jr. (scholar and cultural critic)

RECOMMENDED

RESOURCES

The following resources only scratch the surface, but can be used as a start:

1. National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME)

Since 1990, NAME has worked to bring together individuals and groups with an interest in multicultural education from all levels of education, different academic disciplines, and from diverse educational institutions and occupations. NAME's website has lesson plans, articles, conference information, etc. Visit their following link for a good definition of "multicultural education": www.name.org/resolutions/definition.htm

2. Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education (EMME)

EMME is an open-access e-journal published twice a year for international scholars, practitioners, and students of multicultural education. Each issue of EMME contains articles, instructional ideas, and reviews of arts, juvenile and professional books, and multimedia materials on a particular theme. www.eastern.edu/publications/emme

3. Multicultural Pavilion

This website contains information and links to many multicultural education and social justice education topics: www.edchange.org/multicultural

"There is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others."
-Michel de Montaigne (writer in the French Renaissance)

"In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate."
-Toni Morrison (contemporary writer)

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- * The St. Nicholas Project
- * Walk Out of Poverty
- * Infusion Method Workshops for teachers
- * "Training for Transformation" Workshops for adults
- * School and parish consulting for the implementation of the Bishops' Pastoral: "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions" (June, 1998)
- * Lending library for resources of peace and social justice

Feel free to contact the Education Coordinator at Concern America for more information on any of these projects.

When You Need a Hammer, Ask a Carpenter

Learning about multicultural education is not something that one can do by studying a series of textbooks. Multiculturalism is not a quantifiable subject area, rather a goal that should permeate all aspects of the curriculum and be a lens through which lessons are designed and taught. When the need arises for specific resources on a culture or group of people, for example, and there is no one from that group available to give first-hand input, try the internet. Just about any group imaginable has some form of informational web site that can help.

If you wanted to choose children's books on Native Americans based on recommendations from Native peoples themselves, for example, try the American Indians in Children's Literature site/blog at www.americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com. There are many more such sites that can be found with a simple internet search using terms such as "native american children literature," many providing useful lists of resources, books, and classroom materials.