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license.Multiculturalism: A Dialogue Moving Toward Consensus and Implementation**

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Abstract

This paper examines the steps toward effective implementation of multiculturalism. We are encouraged to move beyond the extremes of definitions of multiculturalism to reflect upon our more personal perceptions in the form of open dialogue (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Nieto, Young, Tran, & Pang, 1994; Trubowitz, 1995). Techniques for building a consensus are outlined. Finally, strategies effective in moving toward successful implementation are highlighted. Infused into the discussion are case examples that personalize the valuable benefits of multiculturalism; challenging educators to end the debate on the value of multiculturalism, and to begin focusing on the development of effective practices.

Introduction

As one enters the classroom, a sense of energy envelops you. Bustling about at various learning stations are three and four year olds engaged in active learning. This classroom is familiar, as it has been observed on a monthly basis over a period of three years. Immediately a quiet girl draws your attention as she punches play dough without interacting or looking up. The teacher becomes aware of your observation and asks you if you speak Spanish. She goes on to explain that “Maria” (pseudonym) knows no English, and efforts to interact with her have been met with limited response. Smiling, the observer addresses the little girl by recalling as best as possible their limited second language linguistics; “Hola. Me Jamo “Beth” (pseudonym). Como estas? Me jamo bien.” With wide eyes of disbelief, the child looks up and begins observing the guest’s movements. After awhile, another child approaches interested in participating in the interaction. The classroom observer relays “Esta es ‘Susanna’ (pseudonym). Susanna es tu amiga.” By now a change in Maria is evident, as her face appears relaxed as she returns to molding her play dough. This time when she is asked, “Esta es bonita. Que es esta?” Maria responds by holding up a goopy figure and smilingly describing it to us. A month later, Maria continues to actively integrate into the classroom, teaching her classmates valuable lessons about other cultures, as she learns skills to benefit her own life.

When one puts a face on multiculturalism or diversity, clearly there is a strong case for embracing its philosophy. As in Maria’s case, students should not be made to feel ashamed of their home language or culture (Nieto, Young, Tran, & Pang, 1994). In reviewing the recent literature, one may find themselves surprised that there is still an ongoing debate regarding its inclusion. Multiculturalism is described as a volatile political issue full of both theoretical and ideological debates (Dunn, 1997; Nieto, 1999). Multiculturalism gives us the opportunity to move beyond our own paradigms, experiences, and cultures to understand a variety of world perspectives. The premise proposed is that multiculturalism should be infused in the curriculum in a three-step process of awareness, acceptance, and development and implementation of strategies.

In reviewing recent literature on multicultural education, it is not surprising to find there is still an ongoing debate regarding its inclusion. Multiculturalism is described as a volatile political issue full of both theoretical and ideological debates (Dunn, 1997; Nieto, 1999; Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). It gives us the opportunity to move beyond our own paradigms, experiences, and cultures to understand a variety of world perspectives. The premise proposed in this article is that multicultural education should be infused in the curriculum in a three-step process of awareness, acceptance, and development and implementation of strategies.

Multicultural education has many facets and almost as many definitions. Ornstein and Hunkins (1998) offer that this issue “calls for understanding and appreciating the differences among people so that ethnic groups can maintain their customs, folk mores, and languages and still be able to participate in the common, civic, mainstream culture” (p. 363). Dunn’s (1997) analysis describes the goals of multiculturalism as “promoting greater sensitivity to cultural differences in an attempt to reduce bias” (p. 74). Asante (1991) asserts multiculturalism as a “nonhierarchical approach that respects and celebrates a variety of perspectives on world phenomena” (p. 173). A broad description of multiculturalism is offered by Trubowitz (1995) as

“a process in which educators and pupils of different backgrounds develop a sense of empathy, sensitivity, respect, and understanding of each other” (p. 309). On the surface, the definitions may appear synonymous. Upon closer inspection each view stands alone with fine, but subtle distinctions in the agenda they represent. The nuances reflected in definitions of multiculturalism are as diverse as the students who are represented by its objectives. Our goal should be to develop effective instructional effective strategies for each individual student, while being respectful of the various ethnic and cultural groups.

Developing a Clear Dialogue

In an age of enlightenment and respect for diversity, one could easily be surprised that when the details of implementation are examined, there are points of contention. At first glance, one would easily concur with any of the definitions. If there is agreement on the value of a multicultural educational perspective, we must work toward a consensus on the best practices in delivery. The first step is to develop an honest, clear, interactive dialogue.

The reality is that none of us can truly understand the perspectives of one another in the same way as if we had personally experienced them in a lifetime of accumulated history. The need for educators to highlight the benefits of promoting a multicultural society reaches far beyond an application in textbooks. Educators could be instrumental in starting a dialogue and interchange between all students. The current day experiences of discrimination by minority groups are often discounted or relegated as insignificant by the mainstream.

A fully integrated multicultural curriculum could provide cohesion to our society by giving all students a sense of ownership. The goal would be for students to be likewise incensed if a fellow classmate experienced exclusion. Students should recognize that our strength as a nation stems from the variety of cultural influences. Even though we may not share each other's perspectives, we must respect the truth and reality of those perspectives to each individual.

Respecting the multi-cultural influences on our nation would help to bridge this very real chasm of public opinion. Unless students have a clear understanding of the social and historical influences of all groups, they cannot open their view to include and value the perspectives of others.

A dialogue on multiculturalism would be remiss if it did not address the disparities in opportunity to learn experienced by various groups within our society. Findings for the Condition of Education report by the U.S. Department of Education (1998) summarize a changing society with a shift to single parent households, an increase in minority students, and a greater percentage of children who struggle with the English language. This report verifies that the lack of human and financial resources of high-poverty schools contributes to a climate that is “less conducive to learning than in low-poverty schools” (p. 11). Nieto (1999), Banks (1997), and Trubowitz (1995) confirm these disproportions in opportunity to learn. The needs of these groups must be addressed as well as the inequities that result from more black and Hispanic children living in poverty and attending high poverty level schools.

It could be argued that for these inequities to be fully confronted, school funding must be revolutionized at the state, if not the federal level. Connell (1998) reminds us that the 1973 Rodriguez decision of the Supreme Court still stands upholding that equal access to education was not considered a fundamental right under the United States Constitution. Headlines in the news reflect an economy moving away from manufacturing making a quality, competitive, high tech education even more critical in order for students to succeed in the workplace. All students deserve access to such an education, not just those who are privileged to live in districts with adequate resources. Clearly, in discussing the direction of multiculturalism, we must infuse “a national dialogue on social justice, not just race” (Connell, 1998, p. 72).

A Related to opportunity to learn would be a dialogue analyzing the implications of the standards movement and multiculturalism. Banks (1997) cautions that the standards movement may not have taken into consideration its impact on diverse minority groups. We must carefully analyze whose standards we are promoting, such as when we study history from the perspective of the victors. If a disproportionate number of minorities fall short when assessed by standards; we must look to factors such as unequal resources, teacher quality, availability of advanced courses, and school safety, which may have impacted their performance (Banks, 1997). In light of these concerns regarding standards, it seems that schools need to develop additional assistance for groups of students who are economically disadvantaged. In conclusion, a multicultural curriculum would include a voice of advocacy for groups whose true ability may not be reflected in standards testing.

The core of another discourse is whether multicultural education serves to unite or divide us. Critics such as Ravitch (Famularo, 1996) express fear that there is a ‘fractionation’ where high school graduates can ‘no longer be said to share a common body of knowledge, not to mention a common culture’ (p. 43). Schmidt (1996) describes a common fear of losing our American identity by concentrating on varied cultures. Some could argue that multicultural education leads to a watered down, shallow curriculum as there is often little time to cover any one topic in length (Famularo, 1996). Related to this matter would be the difficulty in discerning whose culture should be taught, and whose should be omitted due to time constraints. These issues could be summarized as a discussion focusing on the concern that pointing out differences makes students lose sight of their commonalities leading to fragmentation.

On the other hand, proponents would argue that some Americans are left behind in a traditional Eurocentric approach (Asante, 1991; Nieto, 1999). These advocates offer that a multicultural curriculum would promote social justice and equality. As children learn best from the framework of their own culture (Asante, 1991; Webster, 2001), presenting a variety of worldviews should enhance the learning of all students. The dialogue recognizes that students can learn pride of their unique heritage while respecting the diverse backgrounds of others.

In addition to the outlined dialogue of adversaries and advocates, we can consider the voices raising current social concerns. Academic disciplines are just one part of education; as today’s students often need help with handling emotion because these skills are not always learned in the home setting. Martin’s (1995) contention that children need to “feel at home in both school and society,” calls for a “curriculum for the work, experience, and societal practices of women as well as men, poor people as well as the middle classes, and ethnic, racial, and other

minorities” (p.358). If students feel a void at home due to changes in our society, their need to feel included at school strengthens the case to have a multicultural curriculum.

One way to create an open dialogue to consolidate these various positions would be to develop a district committee to develop uniform guidelines and recommendations. Trubowitz (1995) suggests that members of such a group reflect the backgrounds and demographics of their students. While opinions may vary, they need to be spoken and understood by all with the goal of the dialogue being to develop a “consensus about the meaning of multicultural education” (Trubowitz, 1995, p. 308). While a school district may choose to develop guidelines as a result of such dialogue, it may be recommended that each school be given leeway to infuse additional recommendations to meet the needs of their student population.

When educators or students are discussing the sensitive issues surrounding multiculturalism, we must recognize that it may take time for individuals to develop the trust necessary to share on a deep personal level. One technique is to have participants disclose experiences that impacted their perceptions and mind-sets toward diverse groups (Nieto et al., 1994; Trubowitz, 1995). While it may be initially difficult or even painful to recount a negative experience, it quickly unifies the group by facing the reality that everyone has experienced some form of discrimination. On the other hand, positive examples of intercultural exchanges will validate the commonalities of the group. The key is for all participants to feel accepted and included, enabling open conversation without fear of being judged. We must move the dialogue beyond a focus of other groups, to a more personal assessment and adaptation of our own beliefs.

In summary, a dialogue must be created that respects, yet integrates seemingly contradictory views. It is important for educators to participate in frank conversation about the issues related to multiculturalism. Periodically revisiting the issues after a period of reflection may subtly shift perspectives or paradigms. Additionally, sharing ideas in an open forum provides the opportunity to bring one’s own current beliefs into sharper focus. Finally, verbal expression of the concepts moves us from the theoretical to practical applications we can use as educators in a diverse society.

Moving Toward Consensus

Once we have engaged in open dialogue regarding our various approaches to multicultural education, we can begin to unify in a voice of consensus. While we may not agree on the fine details, we can build a commitment to core principles. Winter (1994-1995) describes this as “recognizing the differences while emphasizing the similarities” in order to promote positive attitudes toward diversity (p. 93). Consensus can be built around standards, multisensory instructional approaches, and successful case studies.

One strategy for overcoming resistance to multiculturalism is to develop and adhere to appropriate standards that reflect diverse perspectives. The states that represent large markets for publishers are the same states that have panels that set standards. We are fortunate that these key states are very ethnically diverse, resulting in textbook curriculums that are multifaceted representing a myriad of views (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998). As most schools use such textbooks as the foundation of their curriculum, at least a minimal infusion of multicultural values is guaranteed.

A well thought out, sensitively presented exposure to the variety of cultures and perspectives will serve to make students better rounded and competent. As Dunn (1997) points out, the instructional methodology should be multisensory. Integration of cultures makes multiculturalism a natural process. Throughout the school, items such as trash cans and water fountains are labeled in at least three languages. Children in this school are as likely to come home singing a song in French or Spanish as they are in English. Furthermore, they exhibit a fascination with the variety of cultures and express enthusiasm for learning as well as pride in their vast knowledge. Students and parents work together to share information through cultural festivals. Because various cultures are seamlessly integrated into the curriculum, students are comfortable with diversity and even view it as the norm instead of something unusual. When given the opportunity to participate in a spiritual ritual of another culture, students approached it seriously and respectfully. In the big picture, the commonalities among students of different nationalities, ethnic and cultures will generally outweigh the differences. The value of having a multicultural curriculum may be more clearly evident when it is presented in hands on manner as opposed to textbook or theory. Valuing multiculturalism is the foundation of consensus building.

Ending the Debate: A Move to Quality Implementation

There is a hierarchy of multicultural implementation, and our goal should be to progress along the levels until we reach the pinnacle of challenging social inequities (Lawrence & Krause, 1996). Unfortunately, often our programs get stuck in the contributions approach limited to a describing multicultural contributions, heroes, and holidays. Confounding this methodology is the tendency to delegate these topics to specific times of the year such as having Black History month. Banks, Sleeter, Grant, and Nieto (Lawrence & Krause, 1996) would advocate that effective multicultural implementation moves beyond teaching students to respect and accept one another by critically analyzing issues to taking “action against the social inequities they find” (p. 33). Succeeding at reaching these higher levels of implementation include teamwork, training, instructional strategy, and transitioning the community view.

Teamwork.

Teamwork is critical if we are to infuse our educational system with the philosophy of multiculturalism (Lawrence and Krause, 1996; Trubowitz, 1995). Each school needs to develop a unified approach that everyone can truly support. Nieto describes the process where “the entire school system on all levels needs to embody an awareness, acceptance, and affirmation of differences” (Lawrence & Krause, 1996, p. 34). Without such unity, a school may find colleagues at odds, avoiding each other, and in isolation. Perhaps, even more of a concern, is that teachers may not progress beyond the lowest stage of implementation that of showing respect and celebrating differences.

Another key requirement needed for development of quality strategies is time for teachers to work together to develop a team approach. Thus, administrators become important advocates to provide teacher with both support to overcome any political obstacles, and with time to develop programs that move beyond a lip service only approach to multiculturalism. Lawrence

and Krause (1996) highlight research verifying the need for “opportunities to meet with other school personnel who share similar views about their practice” (p. 34). Without such time provisions from principals and other administrators, we cannot guarantee that all teachers will prioritize learning about multiculturalism implementation over many other demands.

Training

As the classroom teacher is on the frontline of the implementation process, we must look to educate both veteran and preservice teachers. This is especially true, as many veteran teachers have never received multicultural training. Even if they have, research upholds that often “professional development efforts tend to be brief and are not that successful in altering either teachers’ beliefs or classroom practice (Lawrence & Krause, 1996, p. 30). The teacher as a change agent can be met with resistance (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998; Schmidt, 1996). Even if educators receive proper training, research confirms that teachers must perceive the need for change in their classroom before true efforts will occur (Schmidt, 1996). One technique that has proven effective is to match new teachers with the multicultural leaders in the school (Lawrence & Krause, 1996). A core group made up of both experienced and novice teachers can be pivotal in changing the philosophical environment of their school.

Nieto et al (1994) outline statistics verifying the majority of prospective teachers are White, female, monolingual, and from rural or suburban communities with limited inter-racial experience. Because of this limited multicultural background experience, it could be suggested that rather than focusing on the debate surrounding multiculturalism; teacher education programs should stress a greater emphasis on how to effectively implement multiculturalism programs. Further, there is a clear need to recruit and retain educators who are representative and reflective of the diverse student population. Once educators have made a commitment to the philosophy of multiculturalism, they should be encouraged to pursue ongoing learning opportunities regarding effective implementation.

Nieto et al. (1994) outline components of a quality teacher education program designed to promote educators to view diversity as a resource rather than a difficulty. These include developing a personal understanding of our own cultural identity, reflecting upon our views toward other ethnocultural groups, accepting the reality of the dynamics of privilege, and becoming aware of the associations between language, learning and culture. None of these steps can occur unless a sense of community is established as outlined by the description of honest dialogue. It is important for teachers to model the assertion that the views and input of all students are valued.

Once community is established, Nieto et al. (1994) propose that we must look inwardly at our own biases, followed by looking outwardly at mainstream society. An excellent strategy to achieve these objectives is to literally immerse students into a new culture, such as by having them visit an African American congregation or visiting an area where English is not the dominant language. Another technique offered by Nieto et al. (1994) is choosing a controversial topic such as the death penalty, and polarizing positions by designating one end of the room pro-death penalty and the other anti-death penalty. Next, students line up on the imaginary line in the place that corresponds with their view. Finally, each student gives a brief explanation of his

or her view starting at one end and proceeding to the other. By discussing and analyzing the factors that contributed to our values formation, we can bring understanding and necessary modifications of our views toward other ethnocultural groups.

Perhaps even more challenging than learning how to critically evaluate our personal views, is the need to analyze mainstream culture for ways that it may perpetuate bias and oppression of certain groups. Nieto et al. (1994) suggest that studying articles and other media “on power and oppression can help students to understand class privilege, elites, and related issues” (p. 54). By evaluating the personal and social issues of multiculturalism, we are able to define our own views without simply regurgitating the status quo or blindly accepting intolerant views that have been instilled in our beliefs.

Instructional strategies

The relationships between language, learning, and culture have implications for instructional approaches. Researchers (Webster, 2001) found “students’ cultures had a significant influence on reading comprehension and interpretation that often resulted in different and contrasting interpretations of the same text” (p. 15). This reminds educators of the importance of presenting literature in a variety of culturally specific schemata. Interesting, when students felt that their culture was being presented accurately, they were more engaged in the text (Webster, 2001). Teachers can enhance the learning of all students by having classmates explain the nuances of their culture’s language expressions. Additionally, Nieto et al (1996) advocate that while students need to learn Standard English, we must be cautious to avoid making students feel that other English dialects, such as Ebonics, are inferior. By being respectful of linguistic differences, we can model respect for greater cultural differences.

This argument that students learned best when curriculum is presented from the perspective of their culture is a common one (Asante, 1991; Webster, 2001). Dunn (1997) disputes this contention with a study that demonstrated multisensory instruction as having a greater impact on achievement than strictly using a multiculturally sensitive curriculum. She highlights other studies in New York and North Carolina that document teaching to learning styles as also being successful with special education students and impoverished, large minority populations respectively. The key seems to be letting students choose to work alone, in a group, or with their teacher. Educators need to be reminded that all underachieving students from all cultures benefit when instruction is geared to correspond with their unique learning style. Dunn (1997) suggests that schools with limited budgets should avoid divisively separating students. Perhaps both positions can be accommodated by encouraging a variety of multisensory instructional approaches combined with exposure to a variety of cultural perspectives. Such a strategy should enhance all students’ acquisition of knowledge.

We can integrate Webster and Dunn’s analysis when implementing multiculturalism, by making sure that we do not make assumptions about any individual student based on a group to which they appear to belong. For example, educators have long been encouraged to avoid stereotyping girls as having less of an aptitude in math or science. Dunn (1997) challenges approaches used to implement multicultural curriculum that assume students from a particular group benefit from specific teaching practices, as no cultural group has been shown to have a

single learning style. Curriculum should be adapting to the learning styles of all students. Gallagher (1998) cites research indicating, “Latino and African-American students learn more working in cooperative groups” (p. 22). While this may be true for the groups as a whole, teachers must be perceptive as to the learning needs of students as individuals.

Some of the strategies used to implement multicultural education are sound instructional approaches that could be beneficial to all students. For example, Dunn (1997) advocates that stressing math and science by implementing new resources and methods should be done for all students, not just minorities and females. Likewise, bilingual approaches should be incorporated for all students, as the need to speak several languages has increased. We should teach critical thinking skills to all students. Multicultural programs should teach respect for all cultures as opposed to focusing on the majority subgroups. There needs to be an acknowledgement that the integration of all citizens creates our unique American culture.

Transitioning the community view

Transforming communities’ views requires a societal acceptance that we should not be striving for one ideal. Rather, we can help students, parents, and others to consider the celebration of our uniqueness, and the power of our combined strengths. Lack of support from parents is cited as contributing to a timid approach to multiculturalism (Lawrence and Krause, 1996). This reality may stem from the fact that rather than solely being a set of practices, multicultural education must be a valued philosophy. As individual teachers gain confidence and courage as they implement a multicultural curriculum, it will serve to enhance the greater community.

Another key to building community support is moving them beyond thinking that a one-time reference to a different culture is sufficient to achieve a multicultural curriculum. Learning activities such as field trips may expose students to other cultures and may offer merit as eye opening experiences to begin a dialogue regarding another culture. A memorable field experience can serve as a knowledge base to understanding classroom activities and to elicit an emotional connection to other worldviews. However, for multicultural implementation to be truly effective, its philosophy must be naturally, seamlessly integrated into all aspects of the instructional process.

Even when the implementation steps of teamwork, training, instructional strategies, and transitioning the community view have been met; educators must be selective when examining materials used to infuse a multicultural perspective. Without care, one’s best intentions can serve to perpetuate ethnic stereotypes or other forms of bias. Cruz-Janzen (1998) outlines several such stories used as multicultural literature that in reality reflect “gender and racial biases favoring boys and light-skinned people” (p. 5). It is important to examine the folklore of our own heritage for bias and to respect and pay attention to other groups when they discern bias in presenting their culture.

In conclusion, implementing multicultural academic experiences does not impinge upon identifying ourselves as American. It sometimes seems that other cultures have a clearer perception of what it means to be an American, than our pluralistic society does collectively.

Our goal should be to help students to define American in an inclusive way. Students can learn pride of their unique heritage while respecting the diverse backgrounds of others. A multicultural approach makes sense in a shrinking world with growing interconnectedness and a global economy. Dunn (1997) correctly cautions that when pointing out differences, we must make sure that students do not lose sight of their commonalities. Effective implementation of multiculturalism will bring these ideals to realities.

Looking to the Future

It would be interesting to be able to see a snapshot of our educational system in one hundred years. By then, students will have been raised by parents who were raised to value each individual. As for our current society, we are placing ourselves at a disadvantage if we do not expose ourselves to the larger world. We will know that we are closer to a multicultural curriculum when no large segments of our population have the need to bemoan their lack of inclusion. Until then, we must welcome even the smallest voice and respect their concerns as valid.

A deep understanding of others has always served to unite individuals as opposed to separating them into factions. Looking at the faces of our diverse students gives support to giving multiculturalism an obvious and resounding endorsement. Perhaps it is time to move beyond the debate over the value of multiculturalism, and instead focus on building a dialogue leading to a consensus of the most effective strategies to implement this perspective within our classrooms. Educators must be advocates for all students and address the needs of any special population. It could be suggested that we think of each individual student as a minority, and adjust the nuances of our instruction accordingly. Our country is one whose strength is built from an interconnectedness of unique cultural backgrounds. If we truly value the individual, we will be willing to embrace the totality of his/her culture as an asset to the myriad of voices that make up our nation.

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