

Cultural Diversity and Education

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It is readily apparent that the number of students in schools from culturally diverse backgrounds is increasing rapidly. For example, Kagen and Garcia (1991) indicate that 20% of the population in Head Start programs come from non-English speaking homes. Ramirez (1988) points out that by the year 2000, 40% of all public school students will be from ethnically diverse families. It has also been noted that in twenty-five of the nations largest cities at least half of the students are from linguistically and culturally diverse groups and the that Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic population in the country (Smith & Luckasson, 1992). These numbers point to a need to address cultural diversity in the schools.

Individuals can belong to many different micro-cultural groups (Banks, 1994). Micro-cultures are defined as smaller cultures that share common characteristics, values or patterns of behavior. Banks (1994) notes that there are a variety of micro-cultural groups that we are all a part of including gender, region, social class, ethnic group, language, disability, or religion.

Interest in cultural diversity has usually focused on ethnic differences. However, an awareness of cultural diversity needs to be thought of in broader terms to include differences

in gender, language, religion, age, social economic status (SES) and/or the presence or absence of a disability. This article will explore factors to consider when implementing cultural awareness activities in the schools.

Age

Age is not readily thought of as a form of cultural diversity. However, age is one of the ways in which we differ from others. The so called "generation-gap" is an indication of these differences. It is not unusual for "older" members of our society to think the young are reckless, listen to "bad" music, or dress inappropriately. Young people can often make fun of older people for "being out of touch."

Some of the differences related to age involves the zeitgeist, or spirit of the times. Differences in how people view the world can be based on the time in which they have lived. Young people today are growing up with technological advances no one would have dreamed about 50 years ago. My father was raised during the great depression and it significantly affected his life; he never wasted anything.

Gender Differences

One of the most obvious differences between people are gender differences. Men and women can differ in a variety of ways. For example, how we communicate with one another and how we express our emotions. It is important that we know something about how children are raised and treated, what behaviors are encouraged or discouraged, and how they view the opposite sex.

In a general sense, we may see children treated by what could be viewed as "boy behaviors" or "girl behaviors". For example, it has seemed generally well accepted that it is appropriate for little girls to play with dolls, but when little boys play with dolls some may question its appropriateness. The types of play that are encouraged or permitted, as well as the toys and playthings children play with, may be different based on gender differences.

Though some of the historical attitudes regarding what is appropriate for play and behavior among young boys and girls have changed, there still are areas in which differences can be noted. No where may this best be seen today as in regard to video games and computers. There is no question that boys tend to engage in a great deal more play with video games and computers, even at young ages, than girls..

One reason for this difference is that many video and computer games have violent themes that do not appeal to girls. Playing games in which someone is shot, stabbed, punched, etc. is common across many of these games. Many parents and professionals have raised concerns about what these games are teaching children in terms of cultural values.

Region of the Country in Which we Were Raised

Another way in which we may differ from others is based on where we were raised. Even in the U.S. children can experience different things and can be raised with different values based on where they live. Some of these differences may be due to

such things as climate, geography or differences between urban and rural environments. For example, children raised in the northern states are more likely to experience cold weather sports that children raised in the southern states would not experience. Children raised in the plains, in the mountains, or by the ocean have many different experiences and learning opportunities.

Differences in where we were raised can influence our knowledge of things, the language we use or the clothes we wear. It may also affect behavior. One notable difference in schools is that the highest rate of corporal punishment in schools is found in southern states.

Ethnic and Racial Differences

There are many ways in which we are similar to and different from each other and there is no question that one of the ways in which peoples differ is by their racial and ethnic heritage. Korra (1991) notes that it is estimated that there are more than 106 different ethnic groups in the United States. Teachers can not be expected to know all the culture variations of all peoples, but school staff can learn about the cultures of children in their buildings and make efforts to ensure that all children are treated equally.

Ethnic differences among people can be manifested in many ways. Differences can be noted by language and communication patterns, social interactions, or how children are raised. Even

though differences may exist, there can be similarities in how children are treated and raised across ethnic groups. Part of cultural diversity awareness is having an understanding of what these similarities and differences are. Though the focus has often been on differences, it is also important to note how similar peoples of different ethnic backgrounds can be.

It is an unfortunate reality that racism still exists and may be an everyday occurrence for many minority groups. Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds and Concelli (2000) note that racism is an everyday occurrence for blacks that affects their self-esteem and life satisfaction. This may be seen in figures which indicate that black men have higher rates of death, violence, homicide and incarceration. When confronted with racism many blacks will acquiesce because confrontation is seen as too costly or time consuming.

The fastest growing ethnic group in this country is the Hispanic population. A mistake that may be made is to "lump" all Latinos or hispanics into the same general category. This population can be made up of individuals from many different countries with differences in language, religion or social groups. The term Latino describes people of Spanish speaking Latin America whose descendants lived in the Southwest U.S. or Mexico.

In general, Hispanic parents are younger, poorer and less well educated than nonHispanics. They may be more likely to use authoritarian style of parenting and demand respect from their

children. Families are a source of pride for Latinos. Children are valued family members and children are expected to be well behaved in public. There is a strong sense of family obligation and respect for older family members (Fontes, 2002). Fontes indicates that many of these families, who have only recently arrived in the U.S. are undergoing culture shock because of the many differences in their culture and the more dominant culture of the U.S.

SES Influences

Socio-economic-status may not be commonly thought of when people think of cultural diversity. Yet, it may be one of the most significant ways in which people differ.

Payne (1998) in her book A Framework for Understanding Poverty notes approximately 17% of children are raised in poverty. While the number of white children in poverty is greater than minorities, the percentage of minorities in poverty is greater. For example, Payne notes that approximately 12% of white children are in poverty while Native Americans account for 38% and African Americans 39%. One in three Latino children are in poverty, due mostly to employment discrimination, low educational achievement, fewer women in the workforce and low hourly earnings by parents. Recent news reports indicate that there are more than 12 million children in poverty in the U.S. In general, children living in poverty are more likely to live in single-parent families and these families have lower education levels, poorer health and parents are not as likely to

be married. As these students get older they are more likely to experience a lack of success in school and have a higher rate of dropping out of school.

Payne (1998) notes many differences between children and families in poverty as compared to middle-class families or families of wealth. How each of these three broad groups functions day-to-day, or how they view such things as clothes or food can differ quite dramatically.

Some comparisons can be made between low SES families and middle SES families (Payne, 1998) which can include:

- Food – low SES, quantity is important; middle SES – quality is important.
- Clothing – low SES, valued for individual style and expression of personality; middle SES, valued for quality, acceptance to norm, and labels are important.
- Time – low SES, present time is important, decisions made for moment based on feelings; middle SES, future more important, decisions made against future ramifications.
- Personality – low SES, sense of humor is highly valued, personality is for entertainment; middle SES, achievement is valued, personality is for acquisition and stability.
- Destiny – low SES, believes in fate; middle SES, believes in choice, can change future with good choices.

Another important difference between individuals in poverty and middle and upper middle class individuals is in use of

language. Payne notes that individuals in poverty tend to use a "causal" form of language where higher SES individuals use more "formal" language. Formal language is characterized by standard sentence syntax and specific word choice for work or school and complete sentences. For individuals living in poverty language is about survival, for individuals from the middle class language is more about negotiation. Children from poverty may not use or understand this form of language and may not use the same syntax or sentence structure. Payne refers to this as a "hidden rule" of the middle class and is an important way in which these children may differ from their teachers.

Another important way in which children from poverty can differ from middle class children is in their behavior at school and how they react to discipline. Payne (1998) notes that it is important to remember that the behaviors of these children may be necessary on the streets for them to survive outside of school. It therefore may be very difficult to try and change these behaviors.

The behaviors of children living in poverty may mean that they react differently to school authority figures or to situations that may involve discipline. For example, they may laugh when disciplined, argue loudly with the teacher, have an anger response, use vulgar language or physically fight. Each of these behaviors would be considered to be inappropriate by teachers, yet each has a foundation in poverty and needs to be

understood if we are to work with these children successfully.

How children in poverty approach schoolwork may also differ from middle-class children. For example, Lubienski (2001) noted differences between middle SES and low SES students in math problem solving. The middle SES students showed more confidence in their ability to make sense of the problem and linked the problem to everyday life. The low SES students were confused by conflicting ideas in the questions, were unsure what they were suppose to be learning, needed more specific direction and seemed to miss the generalized point of the assignment.

Lubienski noted that the reasons for these differences could be due to child rearing differences in the two groups. The low SES children may more likely be raised in authoritative homes that require more obedience and conformity. The middle SES students may come from homes where problem solving is guided by asking questions.

Language and Communication

Languages across cultures generally tend to be functional equivalent, that is words and the ideas expressed by the words are generally the same. However, some languages will have concepts or words that are not a part of other cultures. In this sense, languages can often reflect the cultural values of a society. For example in the Sioux culture there is no word for time, or late or waiting. Children living in poverty use a more casual form of language than do middle class children.

We need to be aware of our language and the language used

by others. We need to be alert for what we might say or not say that conveys a value judgement. Children will pick up on messages from all of us, some verbal some nonverbal. We need to constantly monitor our thoughts, behaviors and language. Using appropriate language is more than just being politically correct. It is about holding other peoples rights and concerns in a positive regard (Kendall, 1996).

We need to be aware of how we say things to children and consider their level of development. For example, I recently observed a student teacher assessing a three-year-old girl who is deaf. The teacher and student were working on a color matching activity and several different colored blocks were arranged in front of the little girl. The teacher told the child to "Show me the red one". The little girl did not respond. The direction was repeated a couple of more times but the little girl still did not respond. However, when the teacher changed the wording of her direction to "Show me the red block", the little girl reached out and picked up the correct block. In this case, the child had interpreted the direction quite literally and because there was no "red one" she had not responded.

We need to consider communication in a broad sense to include nonverbal as well as verbal communication. This gets into the realm of metacommunication signals or the process of inferring meaning when there has not been direct communication. There are instances in which children, especially some children

with disabilities, will miss or not understand certain communication cues. For example, with young children who have behavior disorders there are indications that they will miss some social communication cues and engage in aggressive acts when other children are simply engaging in rough and tumble play. In this instance, these children have missed the cues that have indicated that this is just for fun, that no one is going to get hurt, etc.

Nonverbal communication also needs to be considered in terms of listening or touching. It is fairly well known today that many individuals from Native American or Asian culture feel it is inappropriate to make eye contact with elders during communication. It is considered disrespectful. This is in contrast to many people in the U.S. who feel that eye contact shows attentiveness and respect. Nonverbal communication can also differ in terms of physical contact. For example, a child from a Native American background may resent being touched especially on the head or hair as it is felt that only certain close relatives may touch ones head.

Communication patterns may differ among people in terms of the questions they ask. Non-Native American teachers may be surprised that Native American children may not ask a lot of questions. Rather, they will observe and learn from watching other people. Conversely, children with severe visual impairments may ask a lot of questions because that is one way in which they can learn about the world around them.

Many children in our country are growing up bilingual. For example, in a visit not long ago to a Head Start program I began interacting with a little girl in the block area. This little girl, from a Hispanic background, asked me in English if I could speak Spanish. I replied that I could speak only a little Spanish so she replied that she would "just speak English to me then". Though she preferred to speak Spanish it wasn't a problem for her to speak English.

We should make an effort to learn something about the language and communication patterns of children in our schools. However, we should not forget that in many homes in which English is not the dominant language that parents will want us to speak English to the children. The parents see the schools as a way of helping the children learn English.

Religions

It is impossible to consider cultural differences between peoples without considering religion. In every culture religious beliefs are generally an integral part of the culture. When we convey societal beliefs to children this is often done in terms of religious holidays. However, celebrating a holiday is not enough. We must make an effort to learn the meaning of the holiday so that children can associate it with its importance.

Though it is inappropriate to try to teach religion to children in schools it is not inappropriate to teach them about religions in the context of cultural diversity. In fact, it is

impossible to study and learn about peoples without considering the religious beliefs of the people. Religion and culture are closely related. Having a better understanding of different religious beliefs is part of understanding the culture of different peoples.

Despite that fact that peoples around the world can believe in and celebrate different religions, Korra (1991) notes that there are a number of things that most religions share in common. For example, most religions have a belief in being who is superior in some way, a being who is a source of life, a being who is to be worshiped. It is also common for religions to have symbols, places, or days of the year which are considered holy. Sacred writings and important people and events in the history of the religion are also common. Helping children to become aware of what is important to a particular religion is an important step toward understanding the people that believe in that religion.

Predominant religions in this country have included Catholic Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran and Jewish beliefs to name a few. However, children in preschool programs may come from families whose religious backgrounds are quite different from those historically found in this country. Children whose ethnic background is Japanese may believe in Shinto, Buddhism or Christianity for example. It is important for us to be aware of the religious backgrounds of children as it may effect what happens in the schools. As a case in point, I observed an

elementary classroom recently in which a young boy from a Jehovah Witness background needed to be removed from class when their was a birthday party for one of the other children.

Holidays

When examined from a multicultural perspective holidays can pose a problem for school staff. While much of the effort of multicultural education has focused on holidays, there are concerns raised that this represents only a superficial effort at promoting true cultural awareness.

When faced with the question of what holidays to celebrate teachers may be faced with an all or none approach. Either celebrate all the holidays that are important to the children and families in the school or don't celebrate any to not offend anyone.

Derman-Sparks (1989) notes that when teachers and school staff are considering the issue of celebrating holidays or deciding which holidays to celebrate they are usually faced with three options. In December, for example, staff could integrate December holidays from different culture groups, do December holidays other than Christmas, or don't do December holidays at all in the classroom.

Holidays should be seen as a way to help all of us learn something of other cultures. This can be done by looking at the reason for the holiday that is being celebrated. Holiday celebrations in many cultures often have a religious significance, but not all. For example, the Fourth of July in

the U.S. celebrates our independence; Cinco De Mayo in Mexico also celebrates independence. We need to consider what holidays are important to families in our community and why these are important.

Kendall(1996) suggests that we don't have holidays as a central focus and should not build thematic units around certain holidays. Rather we should provide simple, honest and historical accounts for holiday celebrations and give each holiday celebrated equal importance.

Disabilities

Children and adults with disabilities also need to be thought of in terms of cultural diversity. The presence of a disability poses challenges and discriminatory practices that individuals without disabilities may not fully understand. Even within certain categorical areas of handicaps there can be found certain shared beliefs and customs. For example, individuals who are deaf are said to be a part of the Deaf Culture (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997). The speech and language difficulties associated with deafness can make it difficult for individuals who are deaf to associate easily with people who do not have hearing difficulties. Individuals who are deaf will tend to associate with other individuals who are deaf because they share a common bond. However, the deaf culture extends beyond just language differences. Walker (1986) notes that certain social interaction patterns, marital patterns, jobs and even humor can all be very much a part of deaf culture.

Promoting Cultural Diversity

It is essential that teachers plan for or look for opportunities to promote an awareness of cultural diversity in their classrooms. A necessary first step for many teachers is to learn as much as they can about children from other cultures through readings, workshops or courses. The Ruby Payne (1998) on poverty would be an excellent source of information and could be considered essential reading for all teachers.

A Focus on Identity

Teachers should put an initial focus on helping children learn about their own identity and in helping children become aware of individual differences, and more important, that these individual differences are a natural and acceptable part of life. In so doing we can teach children to feel good about themselves and to be accepting of individual differences in other people.

It is very common for textbooks to note that the most important way of promoting cultural diversity is through the use of cooperative learning activities. Having children from different cultures work together successfully certainly can lead to acceptance and belonging. However, it should be noted that children will need some assistance in working together. Language differences or behavioral differences among children may make it difficult for them to work together. These "difficult" times should be viewed as learning opportunities and

teachers should assist children in learning how to resolve any conflict.

Families/Community

Focusing on families and the community can be two ways to help promote cultural awareness among children. Children need to recognize that there are different kinds of families. We could begin by asking children about their family, but it is important that teachers remain non-judgemental about what they hear. Kendall (1996) suggests that we can provide children with a blank book so that children can add information and pictures about their family. As children provide information we can point out what is similar and different about families.

We can also help children to learn that all kinds of people live and work in the community. Building from the focus on families we could introduce children to different occupations. Field trips may be a way to help children get a sense of all the different kinds of jobs that people can do. This is also a good way to incorporate information on career education to help children think about what kinds of jobs they might like and to link what they are learning in school to the broader world of work.

Games as a Reflection of Society

Games are played by peoples all over the world. In fact

some games have been played by peoples for centuries. Though some games are common to all peoples, the specific rules or other aspects of the game can vary from country to country. Games, however, are one of the things that can be similar from country to country. As noted by Ivac and Marjanovic (1986) games generally form an integral part of the culture in that it provides a means for communication of cultural norms and assists in the assimilation of group members. Kammii and DeVries (1980) stress that group games play an important role in the development of children because games have prescribed acts, rules and challenge. Games represent broader social and cultural concepts in as much as games can not begin until rules are agree upon and followed which is similar to our structure of law.

Card games are an example of games that tend to cross cultures. Children in countries such as Germany and Austria play a card game similar to the Old Maid card game played by children in this country. Across cultures card games are played by children and adults. Card games can be a fun way to promote concepts such as taking turns, counting, memory and socialization.

Grunfeld (1975) describes games played around the world and examines some of the history behind many games. Common games played by children and adults in this country actually have a long history. For example, the modern game of checkers dates back to the twelfth century. In the 1300's game pieces were made

of ivory and had elaborate decorations. Marbles is known to have been played in ancient Egypt and Rome and is played in some form around the world. Darts were played by the Pilgrims coming over on the Mayflower. Tiedt and Tiedt (1990) point out that some common games and sports played in this country originated with Native Americans. They note that Native Americans have played "shinny", a game played with a puck on ice that is similar to ice hockey. Native Americans have also played games similar to hopscotch and hide and seek.

Kites also have a long and varied history. In Honduras and Guatemala huge kites are flown on All Saints Day and All Souls Day. These celebrations occur in November when the winds bring in the dry season. The practice is a mixture of Native American and Spanish religious customs. Kite Day in China is on the 9th day of the 9th month of the year. At this time kites are flown by men and boys from hills or other high places. Kites in the East have been flown since before recorded history. Some peoples in Korea and Malaysia write down the misfortunes of the year on a kite. The kite is flown and the string may be cut so that the misfortunes of the past year can symbolically fly away and a new year can begin without old worries.

The way games are played can also tell us something about the culture of a people. For example, Cliff (1990) points out in a discussion of Navajo culture that cheating in games is not viewed negatively. Within the Navajo culture cheating in games may be viewed in a similar way as an April Fools joke is viewed

by other peoples. It has also been noted that in many Native American cultures competition is not stressed. Children will be urged to not compete either with other children or adults. In New Guinea, games can be played in which neither side wins. A game will end only when the two sides have reached a level of equality.

Asking children about the games they play can be an easy way to help all the children become aware of the similarities and differences in games that we play. For example, children could be asked to identify the games they like to play at home. If someone doesn't know a particular game the children can describe it to others (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1990).

In addition, school staff can develop some resources on various games played in different cultures. For example, an older publication by the International Council on Health, Physical Education and Recreation (1967) describes more than 65 different games and 39 dances from 58 countries. Although there is no discussion of the significance of these different games and dances, some of the similarities and differences in games from different countries will be clear.

Children can also be encouraged to work at creating their own games. Muri (1996) notes that activities such as lotto or puzzles can be developed by children and staff to help the children develop a multicultural awareness. Puzzles as well could be designed and developed by children. Puzzles could be developed by individual children or the whole class could work

on developing a puzzle through a cooperative learning type of task.

Kamii and DeVries (1980) suggest that we should not start children playing competitive games. Rather we should consider the developmental age of the children and encourage cooperation among them. These authors suggest that there are a wide variety of games that children can play including aiming games (ie dodge ball, bowling), races (musical chairs), chasing games (duck, duck, goose or tag), hiding games (hide and seek), games involving verbal commands (Simon Says), and board games (Candyland) which are a few examples.

We may also want to consider some of the newer ideas on multiple intelligences when we consider games for children. For example, we might incorporate activities that include spatial games, linguistic games, musical games, or interpersonal games. For example, Tiedt and Tiedt (1990) suggest that interpersonal games and activities could include role playing games or creating cartoons.

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