CULTURAL PLURALISM IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Guide for the Classroom Teacher

by

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As a student of education I have spent the past few years critically analyzing the current condition of public education. This study has not been a scientific polling of schools throughout the nation regarding teacher attitudes and success rates. However during my experiences in the educational world of our nation's children I have been consistently observing. These observations were not only analyzed intellectually but also emotionally. Although on the whole I observed teachers who were serious about their profession and the role they play in the lives of today's youth, something essential seemed to be absent.

As an undergraduate, I have come in contact with many individuals and companies offering to give, or sell, me the tools to effective teaching. These tools usually include an unbreakable theory of discipline complete with common offenses and their "consequences", "exciting" lesson plans which usually include reproducible worksheets and culminating art projects utilizing milk cartons and construction paper, a plan for building a motivating classroom environment, and, to pull all this together, a plan for implementing these elements. Although these prepackaged approaches to teaching are appealing, most of these "cure-all" approaches to teaching ignore the social and emotional aspects of education.

As an elementary teacher, I am concerned with not only the academic needs of my students, but also emotional and social needs. There are times in a real classroom situation when these needs take precedence over the academic goals that have been established. I believe that the teacher's willingness to deal with these needs and situations is the essential element missing in our schools.
CULTURAL PLURALISM

AN ATTITUDE AND AN APPROACH
CULTURAL PLURALISM

AN ATTITUDE AND AN APPROACH

Speak the Truth to the people
To identify the enemy is to free the mind
Free the mind of the people
Speak to the mind of the people
Speak truth.

--Mari Evans (Stent, 110)

The National Coalition for Cultural Pluralism defined cultural pluralism as

a state of equal co-existence in a mutually supportive relationship within the boundaries or framework of one nation of people of diverse cultures with significantly different patterns of belief, behavior, color, and in many cases with different languages. To achieve cultural pluralism, there must be unity with diversity. Each person must be aware of and secure in his own identity, and be willing to extend to others the same respect and rights that he expects to enjoy himself (Stent, 14).

I define cultural pluralism as a single child who does not quite meet the uniform standards of a wealthy white society walking into a classroom and being met by a class of peers who accept and value him as a unique individual and a teacher who holds great expectations for this student. Cultural pluralism is an attitude and an educational approach which allows and encourages all students to succeed.
regardless of sex, race, or social class. Cultural pluralism is a method of dealing with students as whole, capable human beings. Cultural pluralism not only allows for diversity but utilizes it in order for all students to benefit from our educational system.

Cultural pluralism in the elementary school uses the educational system as a equalizing force among the people. True equality in education involves equal opportunities. The cultural minorities of our nation, however, have continually received an unequal education from our public school system. By developing a pluralistic attitude in our nation's elementary schools, we allow all students equal opportunities for success. These opportunities do not exist for minority students when teachers evaluate all students on majority or white standards.

Individuals categorize themselves by many different standards including skin color, sex, country of origin, group memberships, and socio-economic class. As teachers we must, therefore, allow our students to define their own cultural identity. We must resist the impulse to segregate the members of our class into a few major cultures based on their skin color or where they reside. Students should constantly be encouraged to analyze their own ethnic heritage and lifestyle in order to develop rational, positive self-concepts. We, as educators should severely limit the assumptions we make regarding a students inner identification with a particular culture.

Culture in itself is difficult to define. Appleton roughly explains culture as the major institutions, social structure, and rational for being of a society (1). Webster defines culture as the skills and arts of a given people at a give time. Culture, for the elementary classroom lies somewhere between the two definitions.
Culture determines who we believe ourselves to be and how we perceive others. Although we can easily study other cultures, it is extremely difficult to separate ourselves from our culture. Because of this, teachers should not ask young children to analyze their culture but to analyze themselves.

Teachers should attempt to incorporate the positive aspects of various cultures into the learning environment. For example, lessons on the Asian emphasis on education and how it influences the youth to spend more time studying than playing could help children understand the characteristics of successful learners. The noncompetitiveness common to the Mexican-American culture could be used to enhance cooperative games played as a class. However, we should carefully avoid common stereotypes or all-inclusive generalizations.

Three basic guidelines can be utilized for teachers preparing to incorporate cultural pluralism into their classes. The first step is to recognize the various beliefs, values, and lifestyles of the various cultures presented in the classroom. Next teachers should train themselves to consider all classroom activities and events through the eyes of a child who is a member of each represented culture. Teachers should also be aware of the variety of responses possible whenever questions are asked and be prepared to accept minority responses. Finally, teachers must realize that there are no steadfast right or wrong answers regarding cultural issues. We must train ourselves to not only accept responses and behaviors which are alien to our own culture but also to value them.

A cultural pluralistic classroom includes in its curriculum many opportunities for self-study, analyzing one's own place in our society. Essential to this self-study are communication skills including
introspection, interviewing, observation and participation. These four skills should be developed in all students for they can lead to a greater understanding of oneself.

Children should be taught to think about themselves, their thoughts, and their actions. Opportunities for introspection are numerous. A few which lend themselves nicely to the classroom situation are discussion, independent writing, and peer conversations. Introspection is also a useful tool regarding classroom discipline. Children should be taught to analyze themselves without automatically affixing a label of good or bad. They should be encouraged to separate themselves from their actions in order to evaluate or change them. We must know who we are before we can effectively contribute to our society.

Interviewing includes exciting opportunities for students to learn about those around them and gain a better understanding of our diversity as a nation. Children should be taught not only questioning skills, but also listening and note taking skills. They should be encouraged to suspend judgement until they are aware of all aspects of an individual or situation.

Observation is perhaps the most important skill a child needs in today's educational society. Observation opportunities should motivate questions in the students' minds. Children should be encouraged to be inventive observers of people, activities, and objects. Children should be trained to look for details during their observational exercises. There are many games which can be incorporated which encourage observation.

Finally the students' abilities to participate in the activities in the classroom should receive special attention. Teachers should
provide many opportunities for children to be successful when they participate. When a child knows success, he is less afraid of failure. Opportunities should be presented in the classroom for a wide variety of student participation beyond simply answering a question or playing a game. Children should be allowed to participate in a wide variety of roles including learner, friend, tutor, and decision-maker.

Through introspection, interviewing, observation, and participation children learn to communicate with and accept those around them. They develop positive attitudes toward themselves and their cultural heritage. In a cultural pluralistic classroom, the teacher’s main objective is to meet the individual needs and interests of each child. As a result children leave the class with higher self-esteem and a greater understanding and appreciation for the diverse society in which they reside.

A pluralistic society is totally compatible with America’s highest ideals. To the extent that pluralism is realized, all people may retain a healthy ethnic pride, an abiding sense of their own culture, and a respect for, and appreciation of, the people and individuals from ethnically and culturally different heritages. --William Smith (Gold, vii)
THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS
OF MINORITIES
A teacher need not be an avowed advocate of race or class supremacy to damage the emotional or intellectual growth of minority pupils. It is very possible for a well-intentioned teacher to succumb unwittingly to thinking that children who live in housing projects or slum tenements, who are supported by public assistance, whose skins are dark or whose language is nonstandard are not able to learn. Such beliefs may cause some teachers to despair at the hopelessness of it all or cause them to engage in the curious rationalization that because such pupils are unable to succeed, they would waste effort trying to teach them. —Donald Smith (Castaneda, 66)

In order to more effectively educate students who are members of racial minorities we must first examine what special needs these students bring with them into our classrooms. According to E. Louis Heath, "the schools (must) both respect them culturally and train them for jobs" (14). We as educators must become knowledgeable of the various cultures of our students and utilize that knowledge in the classroom so the students' experiences will be enhanced. By doing so, we will take a step closer towards equality in education.
THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS

Over the past twenty years progress has been made in both the way society views African-Americans and also in how they view themselves. The influence African-Americans and the African culture has had on our society is beginning to be recognized and celebrated. February has been declared by our government as Black History Month. We as a country are finally accepting the role African-Americans played in building our nation. The racist attitude which regards individuals with dark skin as being subservient to whites is no longer socially acceptable. Our media-centered existence is filled with prominent, intelligent African-Americans who serve as role models not only to black children but to all children.

Urban schools which usually have largely African-American student populations tend to be staffed with teachers who have less experience and lower qualifications than teachers who work in predominately white schools (Castaneda, 66). Foremost among the educational needs of African-American students is the need for well-trained, motivated, dedicated teachers who will not discount the promise a young mind holds because it is housed in a darker skin. There is a great need for minority teachers of all races including African-Americans. One should remember, however, that in a pluralistic society race is not a requirement for a role model; black students need good teachers regardless of their race.

The expectations held regarding the ability of African-American students should be raised to match those of their advantaged, white peers. We as educators must recognize our prejudices in order to
overcome them. For example, a teacher must admit to her reticence to embrace the young black student while she enjoys the affection her white pupils demonstrate. She must accept that to her ears the same speech given by an African-American student in his natural dialect does not please her as much as it would if presented by an obviously white voice. Once we recognize these feelings we may have, we can overcome them. We can learn to see all children as individuals instead of as colors.

African-Americans are developing a great pride in their culture. We as educators should build on that pride when our African-American students possess it. At the same time however, we must not expect a child to be interested in Black History simply because the child belongs to that classification. The elements of the rich African culture can be used to enhance the learning of all students in a class. Teachers should expect all students to be interested in African art or inspired by George Washington Carver if the information is presented properly. As we build culturally pluralistic classrooms we should also build pluralistic reservoirs of knowledge.

THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF MEXICAN-AMERICANS

Unlike African-American students in our public schools, many Mexican-American children face not only cultural, and physical differences but also language differences. Bilingual education has vast implications for our nations public schools. In order to provide equal opportunities for all students we must face the reality that not all of our students come to school fluent in English. In certain
areas of the country primary classes are taught both in Spanish and in English because of the vast majority of students whose native language is Spanish. English as a second language specialists are beginning to be employed and bilingual teachers are in great demand.

Teachers who are faced with Mexican-American students in their classrooms and who do not speak Spanish should not be dismayed. Children are touted as being quick to learn a second language and an honest desire to communicate can work wonders. Resources outside the immediate classroom should be investigated such as the students family, high school Spanish teachers, and bilingual volunteers from the community.

Guidelines based on the Mexican-American culture to follow include humanizing the science and math portions of the curriculum. Incorporate a multi-sensory, hands-on approach in these areas. Personalize the curriculum by relating to the children as individuals and addressing their needs and interests. Incorporate fantasy and humor by involving the children in creative dramatics such as role-playing. Maximize the adult and child contact by the arrangement of the classroom. Perhaps most importantly, use personalized rewards in order to develop and strengthen the teacher-student relationship.

(Castaneda, 24-25)

CONCLUSIONS

Because of our rapidly changing nation, teachers should expect to become responsible for the education of a wide variety of children with minority backgrounds, not simply African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. Beyond the considerations specific to these two
cultures, teachers should be sensitive to a few issues facing the minorities in our public school systems. As we consider these issues we should constantly integrate our objectives as educators.

Controversy has arisen regarding the objectivity of many commonly used standardized tests. The standardized tests given in today’s schools “measure competency in the use of standard English, mathematical skill, and knowledge of the Anglo core culture” (Banks, 96). The very nature of these tests discriminate against those students who are not a member of the mainstream white culture. As classroom teachers we must sensitize ourselves to the deficiencies of standardized tests and not utilize them as the sole basis for major educational decisions regarding students outside the mainstream.

Of equal importance is the emotional and social security of the minorities in our classrooms. As the educational guides for a number of youth, it is our responsibility to build acceptance and understanding among the students in our classrooms. All children should be valued and included in the everyday events of elementary school. To succeed in this, we must consciously encourage each member of our classes to develop pluralistic attitudes. The first step in this process is acting as a fair, unbiased, open, accepting role model. In addition we must establish classroom discipline and management strategies which encourage cooperation. Students should also be allowed and encouraged to explore and study a wide variety of cultures in order to build global understanding.

Teaching a pluralistic classroom is not a simple task. It requires constant attention to both major and minor infringements on the rights of individuals. It is a task not to be taken lightly but requires firm convictions and dedication to the development of our nation’s most important resource, children.
OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROUP EXCURSIONS
INTO VARIOUS CULTURES
OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROUP EXCURSIONS INTO VARIOUS CULTURES

One exciting option for integrating the study of culture into the elementary classroom is through group excursions. These academic trips through various cultures are appropriate for grade three and above. The plans presented here may, however, be modified for younger students. These group excursions would be called group reports by others. The term excursion is preferred because it focuses attention on the whole adventure or path traveled. The title group reports encourages one to focus on the final product; this set of activities teaches a valuable learning process not simply a finite product.

STEP ONE: BUILDING BACKGROUND

OBJECTIVES

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

The students will participate in a discussion regarding how people are different from each other.

The students will name an item relevant to their culture to be used in a concept map of "culture".

TEACHER OBJECTIVES

The teacher will introduce to the class the concepts of culture, and acceptance.

The teacher will guide the class in the discussion allowing each child an opportunity to contribute.

The teacher will assist the class in the construction of a concept map of "culture" either on the chalkboard or a bulletin board.
PROCEDURES

MOTIVATION/GETTING READY

Encourage each student to find one or two other students with whom he/she is different from in at least one way. Once these small groups are established encourage the students to find ways they are similar.

DISCUSSION

Disband the small groups which have formed. Encourage discussion regarding the motivational activity by asking a divergent question, "What did you discover about yourself? What did you discover about your friend(s)?"

Introduce the terms "culture" and "acceptance" by having the students discuss the dictionary citations for each word. Start the concept map of "culture".

Present the discussion topic, People Are Different. Facilitate discussion and encourage all students to participate. Encourage the students to think in terms of cultural differences.

FINAL ACTIVITY/LOOKING TOWARD TOMORROW

Return to the concept map of "culture". Complete the map by allowing each student to contribute an element of their culture such as their hairstyle or a typical food in their house. Encourage the students to think about different cultures for tomorrow's lesson.

STEP TWO: ENCOURAGING QUESTIONS

OBJECTIVES

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

The students will formulate questions regarding the cultural
The teacher will establish a set number of small groups for the learning expedition. These groups may be established by the abilities or the interests of the students. They should consist of no more than five students per group. The teacher will supply the students with a variety of materials from each culture being explored. These cultural materials must appeal to as many senses as possible such as a variety of large pictures, a tape of music from the culture, and a traditional costume from the culture. Libraries, media centers, and centers for the development of particular cultures are excellent resources.

PROCEDURES

MOTIVATION/REVIEW

Elicit examples of different cultures from the class. Use the concept map constructed in the previous lesson in order to review the concept culture. Allow the class to discuss the importance of acceptance; ask questions such as, “What would our world be like if everyone accepted those different than themselves?”

DIVISION/PRESENTATION

Divide the class into the small groups for the learning experience. Assign or allow the groups to select the culture each will explore. If students are allowed to select the culture to be studied this should be done one of two ways. The first option would be to select a number of cultures and gather materials for each then allow the groups to select from the list. An alternative method allowing the students free choice would have to be completed in advance to allow time for teacher preparation.
The students, in the small learning groups, should be presented with the materials from the culture they will explore and encouraged to formulate and record questions regarding the item. Guidelines should be established including the unbreakable rule no question is to be discounted regardless of how seemingly silly or complex. If this is the first independent group activity the class has been involved in, expect minor problems involving group dynamics. The group should be encouraged to settle their own disputes. It should be emphasized that this is designed to be a student project not a teacher one. The students should direct their own learning and, if at all possible, overcome their own obstacles. The teacher should act in the role as a facilitator of the learning experience.

DISCUSSION

The students should, after having time to formulate and record questions in the learning groups, be invited to share a few of the questions they had regarding the cultural materials. During this sharing, the teacher should explain that the groups will begin searching for answers during the next lesson. The teacher should elicit from the class ideas regarding the answers to the questions. At the close of this culminating discussion, the class should be empowered with many options regarding where they can search for the answers to their questions.

STEP THREE: SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

OBJECTIVES

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

The students will utilize a variety of reference and informational sources in order to explore the answers to
their questions regarding cultures.

The students in each learning group will begin to combine the information obtained regarding each culture into an organized presentation of their own design.

TEACHER OBJECTIVES

The teacher will assist with the use of reference materials and other possible sources of information.

The teacher will meet with each group, evaluate progress, and give suggestions regarding presentation possibilities.

PROCEDURES

The teacher will explain to the class the expectations regarding the gathering of information and group presentation emphasizing the importance of the journey not just the destination. The teacher will act as a resource person giving assistance as it is needed. It is still vital that groups be encouraged to work together to help and learn from each other before turning to the teacher. This is an exercise in acceptance, acceptance of other cultures and of other individuals. This portion of the project should be expanded to three periods at the least. Children need time to discovery their own abilities.

STEP FOUR: FINALIZING PRESENTATIONS

OBJECTIVES

STUDENT OBJECTIVE

The students will, working in their small groups, fine tune their presentations and practice as necessary.

TEACHER OBJECTIVE

The teacher will discuss with the class guidelines for a successful oral presentation.
The teacher will check with each individual regarding his/her preparedness to present with his/her group.

PROCEDURE

The teacher will guide a class discussion regarding the elements of a well presented oral presentation. A few main points might include: enthusiasm, projection of voice, eye contact, gestures, visual/auditory aides, expression in voice, and subject matter. This list will vary with the grade level and amount of exposure students have had to such activities.

Following this discussion, the teacher will allow the groups to fine tune their presentations and practice if they deem it necessary. During this time the teacher should conference with each individual and give any needed guidance.

STEP FIVE: LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER

OBJECTIVES

STUDENT OBJECTIVE

The students will present to the class their portion of their learning groups' presentation on a specific culture.

TEACHER OBJECTIVE

The teacher will evaluate the group presentations and give encouragement as needed to wary presenters.

PROCEDURE

This is the portion of this cultural project designed for the teacher's enjoyment. As each group takes its turn presenting to the class the information it has gained regarding a specific culture, the teacher should be evaluating not only the presenters performance but also the classes reaction. Although the method of evaluation is left to the individual teacher, it is encouraged that before assigning
letter or percentage grades one reviews the objectives of this activity. This is not only a research and public speaking assignment but also a lesson in acceptance. Teachers are encouraged to place high value on the social lesson this activity incorporates. The evaluation of this project should consider the students ability to grow in their acceptance of others and their acceptance of their own dependence on those in their group.

STEP SIX: DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Although this activity can be concluded with the final round of applause following the last group presentation, it is wise to take a few more minutes and discuss the project with the class. Not only should this be done to reinforce the concept of culture, which can be visualized through the concept map, but also that of acceptance. Depending on the age of the students, spelling out the importance of acceptance of others and cooperation to the success of the group presentation may be necessary. This can be accomplished by leading a discussion on the ways the individuals in each group worked together and the problems they overcame. For an alternative for older students, a short writing assignment on group dynamics and acceptance could be undertaken.
OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING
OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING

Discussion and independent writing hold great power in helping to develop a pluralistic classroom in which individual differences are embraced. The following list categorized by subject offers suggested topics which can be used to either start a class discussion or independent writing. This list is only a sampling of the many ways culture can effect elementary students; individual teachers should choose carefully from this list with consideration to the ability and readiness of each class.

If a discussion format is to be introduced, a few guidelines must first be discussed. Teachers should encourage all students to contribute but should not require all students to discuss. All students should, however, be required to listen. Before discussing a class must understand that everything said must be accepted without judgement. Discussions should be conducted as informally as possible. Allowing students to sit in a circle on the floor or move their chairs closer together are good ways to promote a sense of openness and also security.

If individual writing is the preferred form of expression one should also establish certain guidelines. Children need time to express themselves in writing. Set aside time, at least ten minutes, during which everyone, including the teacher, writes a response to the selected topic. The products of such sessions should not be used to evaluate grades for grammar but should be valued for content. As the students write personal responses their writing styles will improve as will their self-esteem. The children should have a choice
regarding sharing their written responses with the class. In certain situations it is preferable for them to choose whether or not to share their responses with the teacher. In such cases, the teacher can still make sure all have participated without reading the child's response. Teachers should consider having the students respond to each selected topic in a journal so that the personal growth of each child can be evaluated.

FAMILY
1. Who makes a family? or Define the word, family?
2. Who lives in your house? or If you were in charge of everything, who would live with you?
3. Who is in charge of your family? Why?
4. What are your responsibilities and benefits as part of your family?
5. Are children important to a family?
6. What role do children play in a family?
7. Why do we have families?
8. Why do we have parents?
9. Which is more important, the family or the family member?
10. Who do you trust in your family?
11. What do families do together?
12. How does a family spend its money?

SCHOOL
1. Is school important? Why or why not?
2. What does education have to offer?
3. Describe the job of a teacher. A student.
4. What is enjoyable about school?
5. Does school make us better individuals?
6. What is the most important lesson to learn?
7. If you were in charge, how would you change school?
8. If you could change places with anyone in this class, who would you choose?
9. Describe the best possible day at school.
10. Describe three good things about Monday.
11. Who is the most important person at your school? Who should be more important?
12. What is the best way to learn something new?
13. What should your teacher do that she/he does not do currently?
14. Who helps you with homework?
15. Describe the perfect classroom.
16. What would school be like if there were no school buildings?
17. What do you think school was like 100 years ago?
18. Should students ask teachers questions?
19. Do teachers always understand students?
20. How long does education last?

WORK AND PLAY

1. What is work?
2. What kinds of work do kids do?
3. Define the word, play.
4. Would you rather work or play? Why?
5. Is work or play more important?
6. What kind of work would you like to do when you are older?
7. What are the three best ways to play?
8. What kind, if any, chores do you do at home?
9. Describe the work you do at school.
10. When is the right time to play?
11. Are people limited to the types of work they can perform?
12. What is the purpose of play?

HOLIDAYS AND CELEBRATIONS
1. Describe the holidays your family celebrates?
2. Why are holidays important to you?
3. What was the last celebration in which you took part?
4. What is the purpose of this holiday? (Select an appropriate holiday.)
5. What cultural holidays are important to you?
6. Describe your favorite holiday/celebration.
7. Why do we have class parties?
8. What is the best why to celebrate an important day or event?

HISTORY AND TRADITION
1. Is history important to you and your family?
2. What do the elders of your family or community teach the children about the past?
3. Explain the significance of a historical figure.
4. What do you know about your ancestors?
5. Describe a family tradition.
WORKS CONSULTED
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