



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Multiculturalism: Does the American Commitment to Constitutional Freedoms Negate the Prospect of Cultural Unity?

Curriculum Unit 96.01.15
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I am a Special Education teacher at Jackie Robinson Middle School in New Haven. At present I teach seventh and eighth graders in all content areas: Reading, Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. Our class is self-contained with academic performance levels ranging from first grade through fifth grade. One of the greatest advantages of teaching a self-contained group is the latitude to develop units that deal with relevant current issues for the young people as well as the incorporation of interesting material into all content areas.

The students I work with are concerned about their rights, the law and the application of the law as demonstrated through the law enforcement system. They worry about what rights they actually have that will hold up if challenged “on the streets”. They wonder whether their voices will be heard or even considered when a higher power takes charge of any aspect of their lives. They want to be treated humanely. They want to be accorded respect. They want stability; they need stability. Consequently, they have an interest in what people say their rights are and what rights they will actually be allowed when they assert those rights. It is because of the young people’s needs that I have chosen to research the topic of multiculturalism and the law and design means to educate the students. Armed with an education they will have a foundation on which to better understand life experiences.

I am a firm believer in rights and responsibilities. I do not believe that rights can exist without responsibilities. In my opinion, it is imperative that there be an acceptance of one’s responsibilities at the point of assertion of rights. For example, the freedom of speech does not mean the right to take away another person’s dignity. It does, however, mean a responsibility to utilize that freedom reasonably and to exercise the assertiveness to be heard. Boundaries that are both humane and legal should be identified as responsibilities of the person asserting the right and also as responsibilities of the person who might be prone to infringe upon that right.

How does this philosophy relate to “multiculturalism”? I believe that before there can be an appreciation, understanding and respect for each other as human beings we must be educated about the facts, specifically history. Students are aware of the current discussions about multiculturalism, diversity, racial balancing, national unity. As adolescents they need help to understand where they fit into the American scheme of “multiculturalism”. They need to learn what rights and corresponding responsibilities they can exercise. They need to learn how to protect themselves against anyone who tries to unrightfully deny the exercise of those rights.

Responsible decision-making skills are developed after knowledge of facts is introduced. When students know what rights belong to them they can begin to protect themselves from misuse of government or police power. It is quite possible that ignorance of privileges will result in a loss of rightful benefits.

Often the majority populations control minority groups by perpetuating ignorance. Being a member of a minority group should never be equated with acceptance of a less-than-human position of subservience. Our young people must claim their rightful place as American citizens with full rights and responsibilities accorded them.

Historically, human rights have been part of Western philosophy since the 18th century; however, the moral and political positions have often been in conflict. People in the United States have had to fight for what is humanly reasonable to have (ie. Constitutional Rights) and they have had to struggle to see that those rights are honored and applied equitably. I want the students I teach to explore a definition for “multiculturalism”, identify similarities and differences in people, state specific constitutional rights and the historical legal support for the application of those rights. I want the students to understand that rights and responsibilities go hand-in-hand.

What is “Multiculturalism”? Despite all that has been written about it, there is no finite definition of “Multiculturalism”. Some writers suggest that one first define “culture” and from that perspective then decide whether what you’re talking about fits the definition of a “culture”. Multiculturalism is often synonymous with diversity. Diversity is differences. The discussion usually continues to include the infamous comment, “Well, we’re more alike than we are different.” In the book, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, by Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan we are reminded that the human differences we see on the outside—size, skin color, eye shape, hair texture—are not matched by differences on the inside. In fact, every person on Earth shares 99.9 percent of the same DNA sequences. Consequently, no matter how ethnically diverse humans are, they are essentially identical and, as Sagan and Druyan note, “share the same fate”. Even in the war over culture, one of the most controversial issues is whether America has an identifiable heritage that should influence current values and beliefs. Which set of cultural traditions should serve as the guide for the nation’s future? Should any? Does America want a shared national culture the melting pot approacher will we continue to assert our belief in the right to dissent? In her book, *Constitutional Literacy*, Toni Massaro shows that the strong American constitutional commitment to equality, freedom of speech and freedom of religion pull us away from cultural consensus and at the same time can be used to form the basis, in her opinion, for a core curriculum in a multicultural nation.

Given that ‘the United States of America has a greater diversity than any other nation on earth’ it is worthwhile to discuss with students some of the differences amongst people. According to a 1993 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll reported in the Fall 1994 *Teaching Tolerance* magazine parents overwhelmingly report that their children should be taught respect for differences. Interestingly enough, who should be accorded respect is not “across the board”. Ninety-six percent (96%) think their children should be taught to respect people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Eighty-seven percent (87%) want their children to be taught to respect people of different religious beliefs and fifty percent (50%) wanted their children to be taught to respect people of different sexual orientations.

Upon observation some of the most obvious cultural differences in the United States are age, disabilities, ethnicity, gender, language, race, religion and sexual orientation. Identification of differences in people could also be based upon economic status, job descriptions, social class, national origin, physical appearance, employment opportunities, family composition, political opinion, etc. Each one of these categories could

provide a week's worth of discussion and deliberation in the classroom. Note too that there are similarities between some of the categories and also similarities within each category. No matter what the grouping there will be an adverse commentary made by someone at some time about something. What students need to learn is that although there will be inequities, both overt and covert, there are defenses to use for one's own protection.

It is important to discuss our perceptions about people who are different from ourselves. It is also important to learn respect for those who are different from ourselves. Our country actually encouraged students to ask their teachers questions about diversity and to celebrate the first National Diversity Day on October 18, 1993. While some proponents advocate such a national day of focus many, many segments of our society have made their own small, local strides to recognize cultural diversity. The fact that it is a current topic of discussion is one evidence of awareness. It is commonplace to read articles on multiculturalism in daily newspapers, weekly journals and magazines, monthly publications as well as hear references to it on television, radio and in song.

School settings tend to be in the forefront of the movement. Many schools and even towns have multicultural fairs, food festivals, cultural exchanges, semester projects of international studies, guest speakers, observations of ethnic holidays and celebrations. At Artesia High School in Los Angeles County the school newspaper is published in six languages (Chinese, Korean, Thai, Spanish, Tagalog and English), reflecting the ethnic diversity of the student body. Additionally, funding for this particular newspaper is generated by the students through food sales and donations from enterprises inside and outside of the school. Having community support is a boost to unity in an area of cultural diversity. Many public and private schools, kindergarten through college, offer curriculum units and/or courses on the topic of Multiculturalism.

Aside from the affective domain, concrete educational facts should be shared with the students. Students need to learn about the Constitution and discuss sections of it. The United States Constitution was developed as a plan for government. Historical study of the Constitution should take one week with specific attention being paid to the Bill of Rights.

It should be noted to students that the United States Constitution includes the Bill of Rights which spells out the basic freedoms guaranteed to all Americans. Caution! What is written is not always true to life. Those rights as written are NOT applied to all Americans in practice. Our students need to know what that what is granted is not always what is given. They deserve to know the fundamental constitutional bases and they deserve to know that equal opportunity is not actual.

All of the students in my class and 97 percent of the students in our school are African-Americans. They need to be truthfully told that although there are constitutional "guarantees", there are limitations imposed in the application of those "guarantees" when the person asserting the right is non-white. The intention of the truthfulness is not to stir up animosity among the races but rather to educate and equip the students with knowledge that will prevent them from allowing violations of those rights.

This unit can be easily expanded upon through impromptu discussions, extension of printed lesson plans, by student initiative to pursue the topic with staff facilitation. I recommend a time frame of four months for this subject matter to be taught with ongoing discussion of issues related to rights and responsibilities. Our young people are more likely to be productive citizens when we offer them the factual information coupled with an inviting forum to explore personal choices in decision-making.

The city of New Haven through its Board of Education and staff is in the process of defining a system-wide

curriculum to teach Multiculturalism/Diversity to all school-age children. Some schools have participated in Anti-Defamation League (ADL) training for the staff and parents through a seminar called “World of Difference”. This topic is at the forefront of many agendas. Given this present focus in education I am pleased to offer some teaching strategies to assist in the education of our young people.

LESSON #1

OBJECTIVE: To define “Multiculturalism”

MATERIALS: Chalk, chalkboard, dictionary (optional)

PROCEDURE:

1. Teacher will write the word “Multiculturalism” on the board.
2. Teacher will ask the students to define the word “Multiculturalism”.
3. Teacher will facilitate discussion of the meanings of words the students might know (ie. “multi” means many; “culture” means group, “ism” is action . . .). Teacher will encourage brainstorming.
4. Teacher will write student responses on the board under the word “Multiculturalism” as the students offer definitions.
5. Teacher will suggest that “Multiculturalism” refers to diversity and differences.
6. Teacher will generate more discussion about why we would even want to talk about differences or different people.
7. Teacher will list the differences that students can identify.

(Examples might include gender, age, disabilities . . .)

LESSON #2

OBJECTIVES: To identify differences and similarities among people; To discuss perceptions which people have about others

MATERIALS: Chalk, chalkboard (if done as a group orally)

Pen or pencil, lined paper (if done at desk as independent work)

PROCEDURE:

1. Teacher will ask students to tell/list how people are different. (Differences might include but are not limited to age, gender, sexual orientation, religious background, economic status . . .)
2. Teacher will ask for oral responses telling how all of the “different” people are similar. (For example, all eat, sleep, need air to breathe)
3. Teacher will facilitate discussion to identify our perceptions of various groups of people. Here are some sample questions that can be used:
 - a. How are older people treated differently than young people? Which of these actions are justifiable given the person’s age? Which of these actions are not justifiable because of a person’s age?
 - b. How would you feel about dating a blind person?
 - c. Can you tell who is homosexual and who is not?
 - d. Who worships the “right” God: Jews or Muslims or Christians?
 - e. If a mayor is elected, does it have to be a man? Why or why not?

LESSON #3

OBJECTIVES: To determine what stereotypes are; To identify what stereotypes we have learned

MATERIALS: Pen or pencil, paper (if statements are written in worksheet form)

PROCEDURE:

1. Teacher will follow-up the exercise about similarities and differences with this exercise in identification of learned stereotyping.
2. Teacher will generate scenarios for discussion. Teacher will encourage students responses and sharing.

Sample scenarios: How do you feel about . . .

- a Black female weightlifter?
- a 68 year old waitress?
- a white female rapper?
- a homeless alcoholic female?

- an Indian running a Chinese restaurant?
 - a three hundred pound woman eating donuts?
3. Teacher will lead the students into a discussion about fairness, equity, equal opportunity irrespective of differences.

LESSON #4

OBJECTIVES: To define the United States Constitution; To read and discuss the words in the U.S. Constitution

MATERIALS: One copy per student of the U.S. Constitution

PROCEDURE:

1. Teacher will define the document and purpose of the United States Constitution.
2. Teacher will show each student a copy of the Constitution.
3. Teacher will read sections of the Preamble to the students and ask for their interpretation of the words. (Note: The Preamble is not law.)
4. Teacher will identify the “Bill of Rights”.
5. Teacher will write a brief summary for each amendment on the board.
 - Follow-up Activities:
 - a. Ask students to rewrite the Preamble so that its purposes and goals are clear for ALL people.
 - b. Quiz students on the amendments.
 - c. Write each amendment on poster board and mount them in the classroom.

CONTACT PERSONS

Mr. Kenneth Bush at New Haven Connecticut Correctional Center, 245 Whalley Avenue, New Haven, CT 20S-789-7111.

Mr. Bush runs a program called “Choices”.

It is designed to teach children that they have choices to make and they can choose NOT to end up in jail. The program is a superb resource which can be tailored to your needs as a one-time project or as an ongoing school commitment.

Classroom visits can be set up as well as on-site jail visits with inmates talking to the students and engaging them in conversations about choices.

It is a FREE service provided by the State of Connecticut.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

from which lessons can be developed

1. Assertiveness Training
2. Visit to court
3. Visit to a nursing home. Let students hear from the elderly how they are treated by others.
4. Guest speaker to talk about juvenile rights and responsibilities
5. Go to a public rally where the topic is controversial in order for students to see “freedom of speech” in action.

6. Allow one week of study and discussion per cultural subgroup. Let students arrive at their own conclusions about each category.
7. Use current events and recent court cases to determine whether dispositions are “equitable” or rather “predictable” based on age or gender or race or sexual orientation . . .

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READING LIST for Students

1. Understanding the Holocaust by Betty Merti
2. Talk About a Family by Eloise Greenfield
3. Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor
4. Souder by William H. Armstrong
5. The Moves Make the Man by Bruce Brooks
6. Racism in America: Opposing Views
7. Respecting Our Differences: A Guide to Getting Along in a Changing World by Lynn Devall
8. Journey Around the World by Charlotte Jaffe and Anne Young
9. Cobblestone Publishing, Inc., Peterborough, NH has magazines for children to read which discuss people of the world.
10. Bread, Bread, Bread by Ken Heyman

LIST of Materials for Classroom Use

1. Multicultural Materials Catalog for Elementary and Secondary Students from A.W. Peller & Associates, Inc., 210 Sixth Avenue, P.O. Box 105, Hawthorne, NJ 07507-0106; (201)-423-4666 or

800-451-7450 or FAX (201)-423-5569.

2. Materials and resources from Southern Poverty Law Center, 400 Washington Avenue, Montgomery, AL (Ask for the free magazine called Teaching Tolerance.)
3. African American History on CD-Rom from A. W. Peller & Associates, Inc.
4. All Together! A Celebration of Diversity (video) from Peller & Associates, Inc.
5. The Shadow of Hate (Video Series: FREE) from Southern Poverty Law Center, Montgomery, AL.
6. The Family Channel's Educational Projects Schedule is available by calling 804-459-6169.
7. Cobblestone Publishing, Inc., 7 School Street, Peterborough, NH 03458-1454 has magazine publications monthly of the people of the world. Phone: (603)-924-7209 or 1-800-821-0155.

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