Promoting Diversity in Elementary School Curricula

Curriculum Unit 97.04.10
by Johanna Wilson

PURPOSE

The following narrative focuses upon our nation’s number one problem, racism, which has economic, political, social and philosophical implications.

My project, Promoting Diversity in Elementary School Curriculum, has a focus on social studies but, with an interdisciplinary approach, involving other areas of the curriculum. Although I designed this program specifically for my third grade classroom, other teachers can modify it by elaborating on and/or deleting information and activities to make it more flexible and age-appropriate for other grade levels.

It is my plan to spend approximately 2 to 3 months on a fairly in depth study of the following ethnic groups: Native-Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans.

The classic textbook approach to learning about our country and its evolution has been to read and study the typical White books and lessons and history—with maybe a few days before Thanksgiving to learn about the “Indians” and maybe in some schools, a week in January or February to learn about “Black History.” Since the true story of our country and its evolution began many hundreds of years ago though, and since the white Anglo-Saxon majority has oppressed People Of Color for many hundreds of years, our way of teaching must change. The history of our ethnic groups took hundreds of years to evolve and we cannot hope to teach it in a few short weeks.

For these reasons, I see this project, the study of Diversity, as a year-long endeavor rather than as a separate and distinct month-long unit.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of racial theorists proposes that “ethnicity” has replaced “race” as an identifying means of describing people. Therefore, belonging to an ethnic group is a behavioral descriptor as well as a biological one.
As different racial (ethnic) groups entered the United States, voluntarily or involuntarily, it was argued that all of these groups would assimilate into the mainstream U.S. society. In truth, some groups have reached varied levels of assimilation.

It is also true, however, that mainstream (white) society does not yet accept most groups as equal in our country. For this equality ever to be achieved, a major change must occur.

Historically, philosophies concerning race and ethnicity have shifted. The earliest theory was clear-cut in perceiving non-Caucasian races as different from and inferior to the Caucasian race biologically and totally with respect to the measures of comparison set forth by the Caucasian race.

The next shift was to a belief in sameness, also known as color-blindness, which espoused the fact that if we are all the same under the skin, then we all have the same opportunities in U.S. society and that if some fail to achieve, it is the fault of the people of color.

The most recent philosophical approach is back to the belief that there are differences in the races, but that these differences indicate autonomy of culture, values, aesthetics, etc. What is more important, the differences do not refer to racial characteristics but to our social structure. All three of the above theories exist to one extent or another in our country today.

Presently, the notion of “Multi-culturalism” is being touted as the solution to the problem. This simplistic attitude does not take into consideration a number of issues, including the following:

1. Multi-cultural programs cannot be created by Whites alone.
2. Most multi-culturalism efforts have been limited in scope.
3. Most multi-culturalism efforts have had little or no impact in educating people and/or changing their points of view on race.
4. Multi-culturalist approaches are watered-down by institutional White leadership.

The movement toward multi-culturalism is based upon the theory that equality and justice can eventually become truly characteristic of our country. Those races that mainstream White America previously excluded from social discourse will have positions of power when dominant attitudes change. Only then will all segments of society be equal participants in that society. Diversity of people creates more opportunities for sound decision-making in a sound society. Diversity can bring about equality.

Although the struggle for equality began with arguments about differences between Whites and People Of Color, today the struggle continues by affirming and appreciating these differences and by demanding equality because of these differences, rather than in spite of them. Cultural, rather than biological differences, have become positive expressions of self.

Diversity appears to be a logical approach to eliminating racism and discrimination. If we, that is, enough of our people, of all colors and ethnic groups, embrace this idea, it can be a significant move in the right
direction. By embracing diversity, we can begin to challenge major obstacles, including job discrimination, housing discrimination, segregated schools, etc. Diversity can do much to insure equality and dignity for all people.

Disgraceful as it is, these rights do not exist for most people of color in America today. The number of White adults in the United States who have been indoctrinated since childhood and who have these theories so ingrained in them is too great and the beliefs too entrenched. It is almost impossible to effect such changes in these people to the extent that our race problems would disappear.

But what about our children? It may not be too late for them. If we are able to reach them while they are still young enough, we can educate them so differently from their parents that they may come to espouse the values of diversity.

Prejudice. Racism. Discrimination. Hatred. These are the dangerous words and practices that have been dividing our country, disempowering and oppressing many of our people. These words and practices must be eliminated in order for our country to move forward, united, into the 21st century. This vital, intellectual, and political issue faces our generation and future generations.

In order to reach our children before the seeds of racism can grow and spread, our schools, both public and private, must be actively and aggressively involved. Schools must begin to combat, rather than perpetuate, racial, ethnic, and even gender inequalities. This should begin with young children, while they are still at an age where they can be taught and shaped by ideas and values which may be different from those of their parents. We must teach our children about diversity; they must be exposed to diversity; and they must embrace diversity.

As People of Color already know, being an American does not automatically mean being White. It is imperative, therefore, that we see ourselves as a multi-cultural and multi-racial society. My goal for our students in New Haven is for them to embrace this view of America by virtue of their classroom experiences, which will encourage them to understand, appreciate, accept and respect people of diverse cultures.

It is my plan for this Diversity curriculum to expose children to these cultures and to educate them about these cultures, as well as to the traditional “White America.” I will integrate this approach into all areas of my curriculum as I present the history, literature, holidays, music, languages, food, art, inventions, games, famous people, etc., of the above-mentioned racial and ethnic groups to my students.

Through a year-long curriculum on multi-culturalism, the students will be exposed not only to the cultures of the various groups, but also to their histories, to their suffering and losses as well as to their astounding accomplishments in the face of adversity—these are the glaring omissions in textbooks.

We will begin the school year with a general introduction to the study of the United States of America. There will be emphasis upon our country’s first inhabitants, Native-Americans. As the year progresses, our study will continue with the importation of African slaves and the tremendous impact of their presence in the United States. Later in the year, our study will focus upon the Asian-American experience, as those of Asian ancestry emigrated to the U.S. in mass numbers and began influencing American culture. Finally, we will study the Hispanic people and their contributions to American society.

Our curriculum will be greatly enhanced and enriched by such an approach. Along with learning the real, true history of our country and all our people, we will immerse our students in all of the subject areas.
In Literature, they will be actively involved in reading, writing, listening, etc., as they hear lectures and lessons, read and research, organize, write and illustrate their own work on different peoples.

In History, they will meet people of different ethnic and racial groups, people of great faith and courage and love—people who have made major contributions to our country.

In the Arts, they will have experiences with all forms of self-expression and emotion. Through music and dancing, movement and rhythm, they can see that these are ways to tell stories and to share feelings.

In the Visual Arts, they will view the creativity and techniques of outstanding artists from all groups.

In Languages, they will hear different vocabularies, sayings and riddles which have been passed down through generations. They will hear stories which have been told for centuries, even before written language began. Storytelling can entertain, teach lessons and explain why things are the way they are.

In Social Studies, festivals and holidays will be studied with special emphasis put on the ways in which they brought families together. Ethnic foods will be taught and tasted as the students gain an understanding of not just the food customs of peoples, but also the products of various regions and the methods of food preparation. Games from various cultures will be taught and played.

To conclude, this endeavor is all-encompassing: it is more than just a curriculum unit. It is much more of a belief and a philosophy. It is, especially, a more global way of teaching all areas of the curriculum. Not simply teaching the curriculum, but also living it. Living and modeling this concept called Diversity is a positive way to understand and appreciate various ethnic and racial groups.

As the students come to understand various racial and ethnic groups better, it is important that they view our country as diverse, dynamic and rich in contributions from all of its groups. They should view diversity as positive, sensitizing and empowering.

By the end of the year, the children should show their growth and knowledge and understanding of what diversity/multi-culturalism really means.

Three suitable methods of assessment could include:

1. Teacher-made tests on
   Native-American Indians
   African-Americans
   Asian Americans
   Hispanic Americans
2. Portfolios of student’s work on the 4 ethnic groups listed in #1.
3. Individual student logs in which they are able to document both facts and feelings.
A. OBJECTIVES

Social Studies is the study of people of different ethnic origins, creeds, cultures and social backgrounds in relation to their historical context.

Children need to learn, understand and believe that all people everywhere share common problems and common goals.

In addition, it is important for children to have a clear and real understanding of the historical events that shape their lives.

The two most important Social Studies goals for the elementary grades, according to the curriculum framework for the New Haven Public schools are: (1) Diversity ÐÐ that the students will understand the roles played by various racial, ethnic and religious groups in the development of American society; and (2) Diversity & Community ÐÐ that the students will understand the concept of racial and cultural diversity and global community, as these are joined by economic, political and cultural concerns. These two goals are important to focus upon in order to achieve the following objectives:

1. To increase the students' self-esteem and self-awareness.
2. To acquire sufficient factual information about their own heritage and their own people.
3. To become comfortable with their own identities.
4. To increase the students’ awareness, understanding and appreciation of other racial and ethnic groups.
5. To become familiar with some of the history, customs, languages, music, food, holidays, etc. of a variety of ethnic groups
6. To become comfortable with people of other cultures.

B. STRATEGIES

We will begin the school year with a brief review of self and family, upon which we will build our unit.

This integrated curriculum approach will have its basis in the area of social studies. There will, however, be many overlaps into other academic areas, such as literature, language arts, math, music, visual arts, etc.

A wide range of teaching strategies can be employed to allow for the students to become actively engaged in dialogue with their teacher in the classroom. Some possible strategies could include the following:

1. Teacher lectures: the teacher talks to the class about the topics at hand.
2. Group discussion: students and the teacher share information (facts about and feelings toward
the concept of diversity)
3. Investigation: Individual students and/or groups work on various aspects of class study involving group skills and research skills as they become involved in fact-finding about the different ethnic groups
4. Discovery: Instruction takes place through guided and unguided discovery as the students research, analyze and extend their abilities to problem solve through the inquiry approach to learning about themselves and others.
5. Simulation: students will engage in role playing of different people of different cultures
6. Learning Center: this provides an instructional display area where the students can work on educational tasks with specific objectives

C. ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY #1:

1. As an initiation to the unit, and to focus upon the concepts of “Community” and “Diversity,” the poem “We and They” by Lucille Clifton may be read aloud, first by the teacher to her class and subsequently by the entire class in unison or by a few self-selected readers who are members of that class.
2. The readings will be followed by a class discussion concerning the definitions for “similarities” and “differences.”
3. Students can then offer their own observations on similarities and differences in relation to the characters in the poem, beginning with commentary on their different names and their possible countries of origin.
4. Next, the students’ differences can be noted, such as skin color, hair color, eye color, language, traditions, customs, ethnic heritage, favorite holiday, types of clothing, etc.
5. Contrasting with this can be the things that the students themselves have in common, such as hair color, eye color, skin color, number of siblings, hobbies, interests, favorite foods, music, etc. A discussion of this type can lead students to realize that in spite of some differences among the students, as with all people, we all share some similarities.
6. A simple but effective method to make this point visually is to divide a large sheet of chart paper into three columns, illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Different</th>
<th>Same</th>
<th>Different</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>Us</td>
<td>They</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skin color</td>
<td>2 eyes</td>
<td>skin color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hair</td>
<td>2 ears</td>
<td>hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eyes</td>
<td>nose</td>
<td>eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>names</td>
<td>mouth</td>
<td>names</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This chart can show the students how “we” and “they” can become “us.”

7. Next students can copy the chart into their individual journals.
8. Students can also illustrate the two concepts of “same” and “different.”
9. The children can then work in small groups or teams of two and share their own individual traits that are the same or different and complete a sheet describing self and partner.

**ACTIVITY #2**

1. Introduce, read and discuss the following book: *The Land Of Many Colors*, authored by the children in the Klamath County YMCA Family Preschool.
   
   An added visual technique involves using self-cutouts in the shape of gingerbread men in purple, blue and green (to be used on a flannelboard as the story is being read to the children)

2. Discuss and list similarities and differences among the purple, blue and green people.
3. Ask the following questions:
   - what things did they all need?
   - how did the different colors of people get what they needed at the beginning of the story?
   - how did the different colors of people get what they needed at the end of the story?
   - what does the word “war” mean?
   - what does the word “peace” mean?
   - how did the different colored people change from “we” and “they” to us?

4. Do brainstorming activities with the class to help them get to the point where they can write original stories about war vs. peace (share ideas in a group first)
5. After editing and rewriting, the children can publish and illustrate their original stories, then display them in the classroom.
6. As a follow-up activity, the children can either paint a large rainbow to arch over the classroom doorway, or they may make it by dipping their hands into the various colors of paint to make the rainbow (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue and Violet).

7. An effective bulletin board display includes a large map of the world with either hands of all
colors around the circle map or silhouettes of all colors around the map, with the words “hello” and “welcome” written on each shape in a different language, as in the following example:

- Bienvenidos (Spanish)
- Karibu (Swahili)
- Hin Hahn Dón Tiep (Vietnamese)
- Welkom (Afrikaans)
- Shalom (Hebrew)
- Welcome (English)

8. Leave a wide variety of magazines at a learning center where students can find and cutout people of as many cultures as possible and paste them onto a huge posterboard for a collage to show all kinds of people.

9. Each student or team can select an ethnic group to research at the school’s media center and follow up with essays, posters, collages, book reports, original stories, charts, dioramas, etc.

**ACTIVITY #3**

1. Write the word “stereotype” on the board. Then, elicit responses from students about what they think the word means.

2. Write the following definition (or something similar):

   Stereotype: when somebody says something that’s not true about another group of
people

Then ask students to give examples and list them on board or chart paper.

3. Assign an investigative project to the students: examine a wide variety of children’s books and movies and note if stereotypes are shown. For example: In ABC books, is “I” always for Indian? Do pictures of Native-American Indians always show them wearing headdresses and feathers? Are African-Americans always shown excelling only as athletes?

4. Devise role-playing situations carried out in cooperative groups where children face various types of stereotyping in daily living and/or in children’s literature and movies.

5. Writing project: Students can write their perceptions and feelings on the topic of stereotyping in their personal journals.

Activity #4

1. Begin the lesson by asking the following questions:
   “How did so many different kinds of people from so many different places come to be in the United States?”
   “Who were the original inhabitants of this land?”
   Give students a chance to offer responses.
   Initiate a K.W. L. chart on large chart paper as in the following illustration:
   K
   What Students Know
   W
   Want To Learn
   L
   Did Learn

2. Initially, work just on the first column, which will reflect what the students already know or think they know.
   K
   Indians lived here first.
   They lived in tepees.
   They had red skin.
   They wore war paint.
   They like to paint.
   They were wild.

3. Next, brainstorm with the students to determine what the students want to learn. Some topics they may wish to explore include the following:
   1. What languages did they speak?
   2. What did they eat?
   3. How did they get from place to place?
   4. What did the children do all day?
   5. What was their language like?
4. Read and discuss *Kids Explore Native-American Heritage* by the Westridge Young Writer’s Workshop; *American Indian Families* by Jay Miller; *American Indian Games* by Jay Miller; and *American Indian Holidays* by Faith Winchester.

5. Writing and research can take place independently and in cooperative groups.

6. Cooperative learning—Indians create maps of various Indian nations and tribal locations.

7. Writing Center—Students can research and report on an individual nation or tribe with a focus on locations, homes, transportation, food, clothing, customs, families, people, etc.

8. Art Center—Using cardboard, construction paper, clay, students can make models of different types of housing, including teepees, wigwams, long houses, etc. Using milk cartons, construction paper and paint, students can make and decorate models of totem poles. Using yarn and sticks the students can create a God’s Eye-Indian talisman believed to bring good luck, improve the harvest, protect children, etc. Headbands, friendship bracelets and weavings can also be created by the children.

9. Music—“Iroquois Lullaby”; “Breezes Are Blowing”; and “I Walk In Beauty”

10. Food—Indian Fry Bread, Corn Bread

11. Choose Native-American names, e.g.,
   - Kim—Shining Star
   - Joe—Gray Wolf
   - Bob—Running Deer

12. After several weeks of learning and working on concepts relating to the Native-American culture, part 3 of the KWL chart can be completed. Conclusions to which students may come include the following:

   - Native-Americans lived here first.
   - They lived in many different tribes.
   - Different tribes were in different geographic areas.
   - Their homes were different depending on different geographic areas.
   - Their food was different depending on different geographic areas.
   - Europeans took their land from them.
   - They were peace-loving.
ACTIVITY #5

1. To introduce the true story of African-Americans, read and discuss *Children of Africa*, published by the 3rd World Press. Then tell the class the story of Joseph Cinque, an African man who was kidnapped and sent to America aboard the slaveship Amistad. He and his fellow Africans bravely tried to overcome their captors en route. After being arrested and imprisoned in New Haven, Cinque and the other Africans were set free and allowed to return to Africa.

2. Have class discussion about the story. Allow students to express their feelings orally and in their personal journals.

3. Read to class and discuss *African American Heritage* by the Westridge Young Writer’s Workshop.

4. Assign students the task of using their dictionaries to define the word “slavery.”

5. Investigation—students can read and report (in writing and/or orally) on stories of slavery and the underground railroad.

6. Students can complete research and report on the following topics: slavery, abolitionists, civil rights, inventors, celebrities, etc.

7. Culminating projects can include true stories, fiction, poetry, posters, murals, charts, etc.

8. Students can role play real situations or biographical sketches.

9. Students can read African fables, discuss them and share meanings.

10. Learn music—“Jambo”; “Banuwa”; “Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel,” etc.

11. Learn how to play Mancala, an African game

12. Discuss and sample African foods such as Corn bread and Sweet Potato Pie

(Similar types of activities can be used for the study of both Hispanic-Americans and Asian-Americans.)

The classroom environment should include large map displays—both a world map and a United States map—to use in tracing the journeys of the various ethnic groups who came to America.

A large and clearly visible time line can be placed on the walls around the classroom, marking the dates of important events involving people of various ethnic groups.

A variety of charts should be effectively displayed to indicate significant characteristics of the 4 groups.
studied, including homelands; physical features; foods; clothing; homes; music; holidays; customs and famous people.

A calendar of holidays could also be prominently displayed, indicating the following:

- **Kwanzaa**—an African-American holiday on which people celebrate their African heritage. The holiday is based on the harvest of first fruits of the land, from December 26 to January 1.
- **Cinco de Mayo**—a Mexican holiday honoring a battle that the Mexicans fought in 1862 against the French on May 5.
- **Chinese New Year**—the date varies from year to year, but it falls between January 21 and February 20.

The following is a sample of a letter which can be sent home to parents at the beginning of the school year. Such a letter can provide the students’ families with a clear-cut rationale for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of multi-culturalism.

Dear Families,

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you and your child to what I hope will be an exciting year of learning!

We all live in a world and in a community with all types of people. It is important for your children to learn as much as they can about their own ethnic background and culture, and also about the backgrounds and cultures of other groups.

In addition to learning about the traditional history which is usually taught in our public schools, your child will study the histories and cultures of the following groups:

- Native-American Indians
- Asian-Americans
- African-Americans
- Hispanic-Americans

Our class will become involved in reading, writing and discussing histories, famous people, customs, foods, music, games, etc., of the four groups listed above.

Through a variety of activities and art work, your child should learn about not only the differences in people, but more importantly, about the similarities which join us together. It is my hope that all the children will develop democratic, multi-cultural, anti-racist attitudes and beliefs. They will respect all people and celebrate humanity.

The more we learn that we have much in common with others, the more we, and especially our children, can learn to live in peace with all people.
Our theme for the year will be “Peace and Pride For All People.”

Please know that you are welcome to visit your child’s classroom at any time and look over the materials that we will be using this year.

Signed,

Johanna Wilson

SUGGESTED READINGS

For Adults


For Children


Badt, Karin Luisa. Hair, There and Everywhere. Children’s Press, Chicago, 1994. Children can see differences and similarities in the types of hair and hair styles of different ethnic groups.

Badt, Karin Luisa. On Your Feet. Children’s Press, Chicago, 1997. Children can see the different ways that people from different cultures get from place to place.

Badt, Karin Luisa. Pass the Bread. Children’s Press, Chicago, 1994. Children are introduced to a variety of breads, including babka, bagels, pita, tortilla, etc.

Jackson, Mike. Clothes from Many Lands. Steck-Vaughn, Austin, 1994. Children are shown a variety of types of clothing, including the
kimono, sarong, dashki, sarape, etc.


immigration, including language difficulties, resentment, prejudice, etc.


Hudson, Cheryl & Ford, Bernette. *Bright Eyes, Brown Skin*. Scholastic Publishing Co., NY, 1990. Young children see that we are the same, we are different and we love who we are.


Hamanaka, Shelia. *All the Colors of the Earth*. Morrow Junior Books, NY, 1994. It reveals in verse that despite outward differences, children everywhere are essentially the same.

Kates, Bobbi Jane. *We’re Different, We’re the Same*. Random House, NY, 1992. A simple rhyming text which shows different people with different shapes and colors of body parts, but with similar uses.


*For Teachers*


Bigelow, Bill. *Rethinking Columbus*. Rethinking Schools, Milwaukee, 1991. A new and more accurate way to look at history to counter the lies and myths perpetuated in our books and schools.


Seeger, Ruth C. *American Folk Songs for Children*. Doubleday, NY

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**SAMPLES OF MUSIC**

1. *Native American Indian*

   Chippewa Lullaby

   Iroquois Lullaby

   My Bark Canoe—Ojibway Song

   Lummi Paddling Song—Puget Sound Indians

   Tsaiyak Society Song and Dance—Puget Sound Indians

2. *African-American*

   Let Me Fly—Spiritual

   The Auction Block—Spiritual

   Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel—Spiritual

   This Little Light of Mine—Slave Work Song

   Go Tell It On the Mountain—Spiritual
Kumbaya—Spiritual

The Train is A Comin—Underground Railroad Song

3. **Hispanic**

La Bovinquena—Puerto Rican National Anthem

Duevme—Puerto Rico

De Colones—Puerto Rico

Somos El Barco—Puerto Rico

4. **Asian**

Sakura—Japanese

Lantern Song—Chinese

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