

Multicultural Education

Final Paper

CIG 750

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I have enjoyed learning about the traditions and customs of other cultures. Living in Northern Nevada and Southern Idaho most my life, I have been sheltered from any kind of real cultural diverse experiences. Although, some of the assignments in this class have made me realize that cultural diversity has probably always been very near me, but I did not see it or seek it out. I have found that asking people about their heritage evokes emotions of pride and excitement as my friends shared their culture and family stories with me. When I spoke with Margarita about her Columbian roots, she was happy to share with me a video she had made of Columbia and her family. She was also happy to share Columbian cuisine with me at a local Columbian restaurant. Peter and Lorraine also enjoyed sharing their history with me. They are so proud of their Irish and French/Spanish roots (respectively). I enjoyed hearing their emigration stories and comical instances that Lorraine's mother had from teaching herself English and having a heavy French accent.

I found myself wondering why I didn't have the same kind of passion about my ancestors as they did. I certainly had stories to tell. My ancestors came from Ireland, England and Scotland. They came to America searching for religious freedom. Once here, they were introduced to the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. They joined and suffered much tribulation at the hands of "anti-Mormons" and traveled with the Saints across much of America to the Salt Lake Valley where they found rest from their weary travels and persecutions. Perhaps the difference is that my ancestors came here so long ago, and my friends are 1st and 2nd generation Americans. Nonetheless, they have inspired me to be more willing to talk about my heritage and ask others of theirs.

As an educator in Las Vegas, Nevada, cultural diversity is becoming more and more prevalent in our public schools. Some feel that we should move towards teaching all students

with a multicultural perspective in mind, and others feel that encouraging cultural diversity will divide students and form isolated cliques. While I understand the viewpoint of the latter, I agree that a multicultural education will benefit all students. My friends, Margarita, Lorraine, and Peter, have shown me that, despite a love and pride for your own roots, you can also love America and get along with people from all different kinds of ethnic backgrounds.

So how then does one become a multicultural educator? A teacher must learn about the cultures of their students and incorporate some of their traditions, beliefs, or abilities into their teaching. It can be as simple as asking a student how to say some words in their native language, or as involved as doing a unit using literature from a specific culture. It does not have to be difficult, but it does take research into the cultures that you want to include in your teaching. But one must be careful not to generalize or stereotype individual students. Despite where we live and who our parents are, people are individuals and may or may not cling to their cultural customs and beliefs. Having said that, here are some of the things I have learned about the different cultures we have studied in this course:

The European culture is difficult to generalize because there are so many subcultures within, but Psychologist Judith Katz says that Europeans (white people) are generally rugged individuals who use emotional control, have a tendency to make and keep tight time schedules, believe in Christianity and romanticize war.¹ By speaking with Peter and Lorraine, I found that education is very important to the French and Irish; in fact, unlike in America, a successful person in France is one who is very well rounded in literature and arts; success does not depend at all upon how much money one makes. Having had a true English American student (heavy accent and all) in my class at the beginning of the year, I found him to be very inquisitive and

asked more questions than most other students. Perhaps his questioning was a result of his cultural tradition of the intrinsic value of knowledge.

The African American culture includes people whose families have been here since slavery, and people who have emigrated from Africa since slavery was abolished. African American students are aware of the injustices their people have suffered at the hands of white people, and may be bitter or use past circumstances to taint the experiences they have. While disciplining a few children after the bell rang for lunch one day, I had a student say to the others, “It’s ‘cause we b-l-a-c-k!” I just chuckled inside because of the five students in the room, only two of them were black. It is unfortunate that most black students have few black teachers to look up to, but that number is on the rise. A teacher of black students must be sensitive to their past and make an effort to treat them the same as they treat white students. If black Americans do hold the customs of Africa dear to their heart, they will be interested in native African stories, art, and music. They use many bright colors in African art, and love to sing and dance wearing fabric made of bright colors.

The Asian American culture is, perhaps, more varied than any other. There are twenty-seven different ethnicities labeled with the term “Asian.” Unfortunately, Asian Americans have been labeled the “model minority” which has put undue stress on many students that cannot live up to these stereotypes. They are believed to be calm, peaceful, nerdy, intelligent, and not interested in fun. The fact is that many Asian Americans are bright and successful, and many are poor, living below the poverty line, and their children struggle in school. There are even conflicts within the whole Asian group as some upper-class Asians do not want to associate with the lower-class for fear of being thought of as “welfare sponges.”² The best that a teacher can do

for these students is to not stereotype them and make sure that they are getting the educational support that they need.

The Latino culture (often referred to as Hispanic) includes people from the countries of Latin America; they may speak French, Spanish or Portuguese.³ The most prevalent immigrants from Latin America come from Mexico whose country borders our own. They come for better jobs and better education for their children, but usually keep strong ties with family back in Mexico. They are very family oriented and the women fulfill the traditional role of mother and homemaker. Unfortunately, Mexican Americans have the highest dropout rate among cultural groups here in America. Students often struggle with the language as they are taken from one country to another and thrown into an English speaking school system. Most parents want their children to learn English, but many Latino families still speak their native language at home, which makes getting help with homework a very difficult task. I think the best way for these students to fight against becoming another Hispanic dropout, is for educators to help them find Hispanic role models in their community. Teaching at a school whose student population is nearly ninety percent Hispanic, I am glad that we have several Hispanic teachers that the students can look up to.

The Native American culture also has harmful stereotypes to deal with. They have been thought of as being savages, hunters and warriors. They are sometimes used as school mascots which they may take offense to.⁴ Different tribes of Native Americans have their own values and customs; however, they all appear to have a respect for land and creatures that Europeans and the first Americans did not have as they usurped the land and forced Native Americans off their land onto small, isolated reservations. They also have a culture of storytelling that can be easily

incorporated into lessons on any subject. Their respect for the land could be incorporated into various science lessons as well.

The Arab American culture has two major groups: Those who are Christian and those who are Muslim. Those who are Christian do not have as difficult of a time fitting in with the American culture than those who are Muslim. Those who are Muslim may have strict clothing regulations to ensure modesty, specific dietary choices, and religious occasions that prevent them from attending school.⁵ Many do not want to take on American customs, and so they set up private schools in their tight communities. However, the Arab American community is growing rapidly, and educators should be sensitive and aware of their needs when they have an Arab American student. One thing to be aware of is gender separation. When using collaborative groups, a teacher may want to consider having an Arab American student in a group with members of the same gender.

The bi-racial culture in America is growing. Some students who have parents of different races may be struggling with their identity. So often on census forms and testing forms, there are checkboxes for the race of the individual. Students who come from parents who are different races may feel that they are more one race than the other, or hate one, or feel like they are equally both. If the instructions say to 'pick one' this may cause them a dilemma. We definitely need to be sensitive to their needs and not automatically categorize them by hypodescention.⁶ These students should be able to choose what culture(s) they want to be associated with and hopefully forms will soon say to 'check all that apply,' instead of making bi-racial children feel like they need to only choose one part of themselves.

Sometimes culture is not an ethnicity. Sometimes a culture stems from an ability or disability of the child. Special education is fading away as Inclusion is taking hold in many

schools across America. Just like any ethnic group, students with disabilities or special abilities must be given a good education and treated fairly. The argument remains on whether or not that is in a regular education classroom or with other peers like themselves. I believe that it is different for each child, and each case should be looked at separately.

Despite our differences, we all live here in Las Vegas, Nevada. And the culture here provides us with much diversity. Learning how to respect each other's differences and be proud of our own heritage does not have to be difficult; it simply takes effort. Learning about another's culture adds knowledge to our schema and enriches our personal lives. Public education may be the only place that students learn to accept one another if they are not taught so at home. As educators, we can strive to provide the kind of classroom where all students feel wanted and accepted – that is multicultural education.

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