

12 Affirmation, Solidarity, and Critique

Moving Beyond Tolerance in Multicultural Education

“Tolerance” is a word commonly used when speaking about appropriate responses to difference. In fact, practicing “tolerance” is what many educators see as the best indication of a civil and respectful society. In the chapter that follows, I challenge this belief and suggest that tolerance actually represents a low level of support for differences. I submit that tolerance does little to encourage true diversity or help schools develop a multicultural perspective. If all we expect of our students is tolerance, can we ever hope that they will reach the point where they understand, respect, and affirm differences? That is the question this article seeks to answer.

By describing scenarios of various levels of support for diversity in a number of school settings, I propose an answer to this question by discussing both the conceptualization and the concrete implementation of a multicultural education that moves beyond tolerance. The chapter also suggests that implementation needs to take place not only inside the classroom but also in the school as a whole and, as such, that teachers and other educators have a significant role to play in supporting whole school reform.

Tolerance: the capacity for or the practice of recognizing and respecting the beliefs or practices of others.

—The American Heritage Dictionary, *as quoted in Teaching Tolerance, Spring, 1993.*

“We want our students to develop tolerance of others,” says a teacher when asked what multicultural education means to her. “The greatest gift we can give our students is a tolerance for differences,” is how a principal explains it. A school’s mission statement might be more explicit: “Students at the Jefferson School will develop critical habits of the mind, a capacity for creativity and risk-taking, and tolerance for those different from themselves.” In fact, if we were to listen to pronouncements at school board meetings, or conversations in teachers’ rooms, or if we perused school handbooks, we would probably discover that

when mentioned at all, multicultural education is associated more often with the term tolerance than with any other.

My purpose in this article is to challenge readers, and indeed the very way that multicultural education is practiced in schools in general, to move beyond tolerance in both conceptualization and implementation. It is my belief that a movement beyond tolerance is absolutely necessary if multicultural education is to become more than a superficial “bandaid” or a “feel-good” additive to our school curricula. I will argue that tolerance is actually a low level of multicultural support, reflecting as it does an acceptance of the status quo with but slight accommodations to difference. I will review and expand upon a model of multicultural education that I have developed elsewhere (See Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, Longman, 1992) in order to explore what multicultural education might actually look like in a school’s policies and practices.

Levels of Multicultural Education Support

Multicultural education is not a unitary concept. On the contrary, it can be thought of as a range of options across a wide spectrum that includes such diverse strategies as bilingual/bicultural programs, ethnic studies courses, Afrocentric curricula, or simply the addition of a few “Holidays and Heroes” to the standard curriculum (See James A. Banks, *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*, Allyn & Bacon, 1991), just to name a few. Although all of these may be important parts of multicultural education, they represent incomplete conceptualizations and operationalizations of this complex educational reform movement. Unfortunately, however, multicultural education is often approached as if there were a prescribed script.

The most common understanding of multicultural education is that it consists largely of additive content rather than of structural changes in content and process. It is not unusual, then, to hear teachers say that they are “doing” multicultural education this year, or, as in one case that I heard, that they could not “do it” in the Spring because they had too many other things to “do.” In spite of the fact that scholars and writers in multicultural education have been remarkably consistent over the years about the complexity of approaches in the field (see, especially, the analysis by Christine E. Sleeter & Carl A. Grant, “An Analysis of Multicultural Education in the United States, *Harvard Educational Review*, November, 1987), it has often been interpreted in either a simplistic or a monolithic way. It is because of this situation that I have attempted to develop a model that clarifies how various levels of multicultural education support may actually be apparent in schools.

Developing categories or models is always an inherently problematic venture, and I therefore present the following model with some hesitancy. Whenever we classify and categorize reality, we run the risk that it will be viewed as static and arbitrary, rather than as messy, complex, and contradictory, which we know it to be. Notwithstanding the value that theoretical models may have, they tend to represent information as if it were fixed and absolute. Yet we know too well that

nothing happens exactly as portrayed in models and charts, much less social interactions among real people in settings such as schools. In spite of this, models or categories can be useful because they help make concrete situations more understandable and manageable. I therefore present the following model with both reluctance and hope: reluctance because it may improperly be viewed as set in stone, but hope because it may challenge teachers, administrators, and educators in general to rethink what it means to develop a multicultural perspective in their schools.

The levels in this model should be viewed as necessarily dynamic, with penetrable borders. They should be understood as “interactive,” in the words of Peggy McIntosh (see her *Interactive Phases of Curricular Re-vision: A Feminist Perspective*, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1983). Thus, although these levels represent “ideal” categories that are internally consistent and therefore set, the model is not meant to suggest that schools are really like this. Probably no school would be a purely “monocultural” or “tolerant” school, given the stated characteristics under each of these categories. However, these categories are used in an effort to illustrate how support for diversity is manifested in schools in a variety of ways. Because multicultural education is primarily a set of beliefs and a philosophy, rather than a set program or fixed content, this model can assist us in determining how particular school policies and practices need to change in order to embrace the diversity of our students and their communities.

The four levels to be considered are: tolerance; acceptance; respect; and, finally, affirmation, solidarity, and critique. Before going on to consider how multicultural education is manifested in schools that profess these philosophical orientations, it is first helpful to explore the antithesis of multicultural education, namely, monocultural education, because without this analysis we have nothing with which to compare it.

In the scenarios that follow, we go into five schools that epitomize different levels of multicultural education. All are schools with growing cultural diversity in their student populations; differences include staff backgrounds, attitudes, and preparation, as well as curriculum and pedagogy. In our visits, we see how the curriculum, interactions among students, teachers, and parents, and other examples of attention to diversity are either apparent or lacking. We see how students of different backgrounds might respond to the policies and practices around them. (In another paper entitled “Creating Possibilities: Educating Latino Students in Massachusetts, in *The Education of Latino Students in Massachusetts: Policy and Research Implications*, published by the Gaston Institute for Latino Policy and Development in Boston, which I co-edited with R. Rivera, I developed scenarios of schools that would provide different levels of support specifically for Latino students.)

Monocultural Education

Monocultural education describes a situation in which school structures, policies, curricula, instructional materials, and even pedagogical strategies are primarily

representative of only the dominant culture. In most United States schools, it can be defined as “the way things are.”

We will begin our tour in a “monocultural school” that we’ll call the George Washington Middle School. When we walk in, we see a sign that says “NO UNAUTHORIZED PERSONS ARE ALLOWED IN THE SCHOOL. ALL VISITORS MUST REPORT DIRECTLY TO THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE.” The principal, assistant principal, and counselor are all European American males, although the school’s population is quite diverse, with large numbers of African American, Puerto Rican, Arab American, Central American, Korean, and Vietnamese students. As we walk down the hall, we see a number of bulletin boards. On one, the coming Christmas holiday is commemorated; on another, the P.T.O.’s bake sale is announced; and on a third, the four basic food groups are listed, with reference to only those foods generally considered to be “American.”

The school is organized into 45-minute periods of such courses as U.S. history, English, math, science, music appreciation, art, and physical education. In the U. S. history class, students learn of the proud exploits, usually through wars and conquest, of primarily European American males. They learn virtually nothing about the contributions, perspectives, or talents of women or those outside the cultural mainstream. U.S. slavery is mentioned briefly in relation to the Civil War, but African Americans are missing thereafter. In English class, the students have begun their immersion in the “canon,” reading works almost entirely written by European and European American males, although a smattering of women and African American (but no Asian, Latino, or American Indian) authors are included in the newest anthology. In music appreciation class, students are exposed to what is called “classical music,” that is, European classical music, but the “classical” music of societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America is nowhere to be found. In art classes, students may learn about the art work of famous European and European American artists, and occasionally about the “crafts” and “artifacts” of other cultures and societies mostly from the Third World.

Teachers at the George Washington Middle School are primarily European American women who have had little formal training in multicultural approaches or perspectives. They are proud of the fact that they are “color-blind,” that is, that they see no differences among their students, treating them all the same. Of course, this does not extend to tracking, which they generally perceive to be in the interest of teaching all students to the best of their abilities. Ability grouping is a standard practice at the George Washington Middle School. There are four distinct levels of ability, from “talented and gifted” to “remedial.” I.Q. tests are used to determine student placement and intellectually superior students are placed in “Talented and Gifted” programs, and in advanced levels of math, science, English, and social studies. Only these top students have the option of taking a foreign language. The top levels consist of overwhelmingly European American and Asian American students, but the school rationalizes that this is due to either the native intelligence of these students, or to the fact that they have a great deal more intellectual stimulation and encouragement in their homes. Thus, teachers have learned to expect excellent work from their top students, but

little of students in their low-level classes, who they often see as lazy and disruptive.

Students who speak a language other than English as their native language are either placed in regular classrooms where they will learn to “sink or swim” or in “NE” (non-English) classes, where they are drilled in English all day and where they will remain until they learn English sufficiently well to perform in the regular classroom. In addition, parents are urged to speak to their children only in English at home. Their native language, whether Spanish, Vietnamese, or Korean, is perceived as a handicap to their learning, and as soon as they forget it, they can get on with the real job of learning.

Although incidents of racism have occurred in the George Washington Middle School, they have been taken care of quietly and privately. For example, when racial slurs have been used, students have been admonished not to say them. When fights between children of different ethnic groups take place, the assistant principal has insisted that race or ethnicity has nothing to do with them; “kids will be kids” is the way he describes these incidents.

What exists in the George Washington Middle School is a monocultural environment with scant reference to the experiences of others from largely subordinated cultural groups. Little attention is paid to student diversity, and the school curriculum is generally presented as separate from the community in which it is located. In addition, “dangerous” topics such as racism, sexism, and homophobia are seldom discussed, and reality is represented as finished and static. In summary, the George Washington School is a depressingly familiar scenario because it reflects what goes on in most schools in American society.

Tolerance

How might a school characterized by “tolerance” be different from a monocultural school? It is important here to mention the difference between the denotation and the connotation of words. According to the dictionary definition given at the beginning of this article, tolerance is hardly a value that one could argue with. After all, what is wrong with “recognizing and respecting the beliefs or practices of others”? On the contrary, this is a quintessential part of developing a multicultural perspective. (*Teaching Tolerance*, a journal developed by the Southern Anti-Poverty Law Project, has no doubt been developed with this perspective in mind, and my critique here of tolerance is in no way meant to criticize this wonderful classroom and teacher resource.)

Nevertheless, the connotation of words is something else entirely. When we think of what tolerance means in practice, we have images of a grudging but somewhat distasteful acceptance. To tolerate differences means that they are endured, not necessarily embraced. In fact, this level of support for multicultural education stands on shaky ground because what is tolerated today can too easily be rejected tomorrow. A few examples will help illustrate this point.

Our “tolerant” school is the Brotherhood Middle School. Here, differences are understood to be the inevitable burden of a culturally pluralistic society. A level up from a “color-blind” monocultural school, the “tolerant” school

accepts differences but only if they can be modified. Thus, they are accepted, but because the ultimate goal is assimilation, differences in language and culture are replaced as quickly as possible. This ideology is reflected in the physical environment, the attitudes of staff, and the curriculum to which students are exposed.

When we enter the Brotherhood School, there are large signs in English welcoming visitors, although there are no staff on hand who can communicate with the families of the growing Cambodian student population. One prominently-placed bulletin board proudly portrays the winning essays of this year's writing contest with the theme of "Why I am proud to be an American." The winners, a European American sixth grader and a Vietnamese seventh grader, write in their essays about the many opportunities given to all people in our country, no matter what their race, ethnicity, or gender. Another bulletin board boasts the story of Rosa Parks, portrayed as a woman who was too tired to give up her seat on the bus, thus serving as a catalyst for the modern civil rights movement. (The Fall 1993 issue of *Multicultural Education* includes a powerful example of how people such as Rosa Parks have been de-contextualized to better fit in with the U.S. mainstream conception of individual rather than collective struggle, thus adding little to children's understanding of institutionalized discrimination on our society; see "The Myth of 'Rosa Parks the Tired,'" by Herbert Kohl, pages 6–10, in which Kohl reports that based on his research, most stories used in American schools present Rosa Parks simply as "Rosa Parks the Tired.")

Nevertheless, a number of important structural changes are taking place at the Brotherhood School. An experiment has recently begun in which the sixth and seventh graders are in "family" groupings, and these are labeled by family names such as the Jones family, the Smith family, and the Porter family. Students remain together as a family in their major subjects (English, social studies, math, and science) and there is no ability tracking in these classes. Because their teachers have a chance to meet and plan together daily, they are more readily able to develop integrated curricula. In fact, once in a while, they even combine classes so that they can team-teach and their students remain at a task for an hour and a half rather than the usual three quarters of an hour. The students seem to like this arrangement, and have done some interesting work in their study of Washington, D.C. For instance, they used geometry to learn how the city was designed, and have written to their congressional representatives to ask how bills become laws. Parents are involved in fund-raising for an upcoming trip to the capital, where students plan to interview a number of their local legislators.

The curriculum at the Brotherhood School has begun to reflect some of the changes that a multicultural society demands. Students are encouraged to study a foreign language (except, of course, for those who already speak one; they are expected to learn English and in the process, they usually forget their native language). In addition, a number of classes have added activities on women, African Americans, and American Indians. Last year, for instance, Martin Luther King Day was celebrated by having all students watch a video of the "I Have a Dream" speech.

The majority of changes in the curriculum have occurred in the social studies

and English departments, but the music teacher has also begun to add a more international flavor to her repertoire, and the art classes recently went to an exhibit of the work of Romare Bearden. This year, a “multicultural teacher” has been added to the staff. She meets with all students in the school, seeing each group once a week for one period. Thus far, she has taught students about Chinese New Year, *Kwanzaa*, *Ramadan*, and *Dia de los Reyes*. She is getting ready for the big multicultural event of the year, Black History Month. She hopes to work with other teachers to bring in guest speakers, show films about the civil rights movement, and have an art contest in which students draw what the world would be like if Dr. King’s dream of equality became a reality.

Students who speak a language other than English at the Brotherhood School are placed in special E.S.L. classes, where they are taught English as quickly, but sensitively, as possible. For instance, while they are encouraged to speak to one another in English, they are allowed to use their native language, but only as a last resort. The feeling is that if they use it more often, it will become a “crutch.” In any event, the E.S.L. teachers are not required to speak a language other than English; in fact, being bilingual is even considered a handicap because students might expect them to use their other language.

The principal of the Brotherhood School has made it clear that racism will not be tolerated here. Name-calling and the use of overtly racist and sexist textbooks and other materials are discouraged. Recently, some teachers attended a workshop on strategies for dealing with discrimination in the classroom. Some of those who attended expect to make some changes in how they treat students from different backgrounds.

Most teachers at the Brotherhood School have had little professional preparation to deal with the growing diversity of the student body. They like and genuinely want to help their students, but have made few changes in their curricular or instructional practices. For them, “being sensitive” to their students is what multicultural education should be about, not overhauling the curriculum. Thus, they acknowledge student differences in language, race, gender, and social class, but still cannot quite figure out why some students are more successful than others. Although they would like to think not, they wonder if genetics or poor parental attitudes about education have something to do with it. If not, what can explain these great discrepancies?

Acceptance

Acceptance is the next level of supporting diversity. It implies that differences are acknowledged and their importance is neither denied nor belittled. It is at this level that we see substantial movement toward multicultural education. A look at how some of the school’s policies and practices might change is indicative of this movement.

The name of our school is the Rainbow Middle School. As we enter, we see signs in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole, the major languages besides English spoken by students and their families. The principal of the Rainbow School is Dr. Belinda Clayton, the first African-American principal ever appointed. She has

designated her school as a “multicultural building,” and has promoted a number of professional development opportunities for teachers that focus on diversity. These include seminars on diverse learning styles, bias-free assessment, and bilingual education. In addition, she has hired not only Spanish- and Haitian Creole-speaking teachers for the bilingual classrooms, but has also diversified the staff in the “regular” program.

Bulletin boards outside the principal’s office display the pictures of the “Students of the Month.” This month’s winners are Rodney Thomas, a sixth-grader who has excelled in art, Neleida Cortes, a seventh-grade student in the bilingual program, and Melissa Newton, an eighth-grader in the special education program. All three were given a special luncheon by the principal and their homeroom teachers. Another bulletin board focuses on “Festivals of Light” and features information about Chanukah, Kwanzaa, and Christmas, with examples of Las Posadas in Mexico and Saint Lucia’s Day in Sweden.

The curriculum at the Rainbow Middle School has undergone some changes to reflect the growing diversity of the student body. English classes include more choices of African-American, Irish, Jewish, and Latino literature written in English. Some science and math teachers have begun to make reference to famous scientists and mathematicians from a variety of backgrounds. In one career-studies class, a number of parents have been invited to speak about their job and the training they had to receive in order to get those positions. All students are encouraged to study a foreign language, and choices have been expanded to include Spanish, French, German, and Mandarin Chinese.

Tracking has been eliminated in all but the very top levels at the Rainbow School. All students have the opportunity to learn algebra, although some are still counseled out of this option because their teachers believe it will be too difficult for them. The untracked classes seem to be a hit with the students, and preliminary results have shown a slight improvement among all students. Some attempts have been made to provide flexible scheduling, with one day a week devoted to entire “learning blocks” where students work on a special project. One group recently engaged in an in-depth study of the elderly in their community. They learned about services available to them, and they touched on poverty and lack of health care for many older Americans. As a result of this study, the group has added a community service component to the class; this involves going to the local Senior Center during their weekly learning block to read with the elderly residents.

Haitian and Spanish-speaking students are tested and, if found to be more proficient in their native language, are placed in transitional bilingual education programs. Because of lack of space in the school, the bilingual programs are located in the basement, near the boiler room. Here, students are taught the basic curriculum in their native language while learning English as a second language during one period of the day with an ESL specialist. Most ESL teachers are also fluent in a language other than English, helping them understand the process of acquiring a second language. The bilingual program calls for students to be “mainstreamed” (placed in what is called a “regular classroom”) as quickly as possible, with a limit of three years on the outside. In the meantime, they are

segregated from their peers for most of the day, but have some classes with English-speaking students, including physical education, art, and music. As they proceed through the program and become more fluent in English, they are “exited” out for some classes, beginning with math and social studies. While in the bilingual program, students’ native cultures are sometimes used as the basis of the curriculum, and they learn about the history of their people. There is, for instance, a history course on the Caribbean that is offered to both groups in their native languages. Nevertheless, neither Haitian nor Latino students who are not in the bilingual program, nor students of other backgrounds, have access to these courses.

Incidents of racism and other forms of discrimination are beginning to be faced at the Rainbow Middle School. Principal Clayton deals with these carefully, calling in the offending students as well as their parents, and she makes certain that students understand the severe consequences for name-calling or scapegoating others. Last year, one entire day was devoted to “diversity” and regular classes were canceled while students attended workshops focusing on discrimination, the importance of being sensitive to others, and the influence on U.S. history of many different immigrants. They have also hosted a “Multicultural Fair” and published a cookbook with recipes donated by many different parents.

The Rainbow Middle School is making steady progress in accepting the great diversity of its students. They have decided that perhaps assimilation should not be the goal, and have eschewed the old idea of the “melting pot.” In its place, they have the “salad bowl” metaphor, in which all students bring something special that need not be reconstituted or done away with.

Respect

Respect is the next level of multicultural education support. It implies admiration and high esteem for diversity. When differences are respected, they are used as the basis for much of what goes on in schools. Our next scenario describes what this might look like.

The Sojourner Truth Middle School is located in a mid-size town with a changing population. There is a fairly large African-American population with a growing number of students of Cape Verdean and Vietnamese background, and the school staff reflects these changes, including teachers, counselors, and special educators of diverse backgrounds. There is, for example, a Vietnamese speech pathologist, and his presence has helped to alleviate the concerns of some teachers that the special needs of the Vietnamese children were not being addressed. He has found that while some students do indeed have speech problems, others do not, but teachers’ unfamiliarity with the Vietnamese language made it difficult for them to know this.

When we enter the Sojourner Truth Middle School, we are greeted by a parent volunteer. She gives us printed material in all the languages represented in the school, and invites us to the parents’ lounge for coffee, tea, and danish. We are then encouraged to walk-around and explore the school. Bulletin boards boast of students’ accomplishments in the Spanish Spelling Bee, the local *Jeopardy*

Championship, and the W.E.B. DuBois Club of African-American history. It is clear from the children's pictures that there is wide participation of many students in all of these activities. The halls are abuzz with activity as students go from one class to another, and most seem eager and excited by school.

Professional development is an important principle at the Sojourner Truth Middle School. Teachers, counselors, and other staff are encouraged to take courses at the local university and to keep up with the literature in their field. To make this more feasible, the staff gets released time weekly to get together. As a consequence, the curriculum has been through tremendous changes. Teachers have formed committees to develop their curriculum. The English department decided to use its time to have reading and discussion groups with some of the newly available multicultural literature with which they were unfamiliar. As a result, they have revamped the curriculum into such overarching themes as coming of age, immigration, change and continuity, and individual and collective responsibility. They have found that it is easier to select literature to reflect themes such as these, and the literature is by its very nature multicultural. For instance, for the theme of individual and collective responsibility they have chosen stories of varying difficulty, including *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Bridge to Terabithia* (by Katherine Paterson), *Morning Girl* (by Michael Dorris), and *Let the Circle be Unbroken* (by Mildred D. Taylor), among others. The English teachers have in turn invited the history, art, and science departments to join them in developing some integrated units with these themes. Teachers from the art and music departments have agreed to work with them, and have included lessons on Vietnamese dance, Guatemalan weaving, Jewish Klezmer music, and American Indian storytelling as examples of individual and collective responsibility in different communities.

Other changes are apparent in the curriculum as well, for it has become more antiracist and honest. When studying World War II, students learn about the heroic role played by the United States, and also about the Holocaust, in which not only six million Jews, but millions of others, including Gypsies, gays and lesbians, and many dissenters of diverse backgrounds, were exterminated. They also learn, for the first time, about the internment of over a hundred thousand Japanese and Japanese Americans on our own soil.

It has become "safe" to talk about such issues as the crucial role of labor in U.S. history and the part played by African Americans in freeing themselves from bondage, both subjects thought too "sensitive" to be included previously. This is one reason why the school was renamed for a woman known for her integrity and courage.

The Sojourner Truth Middle School has done away with all ability grouping. When one goes into a classroom, it is hard to believe that students of all abilities are learning together because the instruction level seems to be so high. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that there are high expectations for all students. Different abilities are accommodated by having some students take more time than others, providing cooperative groups in which students change roles and responsibilities, and through ongoing dialogue among all students.

Students who speak a language other than English are given the option of being

in a “maintenance bilingual program,” that is, a program based on using their native language throughout their schooling, not just for three years. Changing the policy that only students who could not function in English were eligible for bilingual programs, this school has made the program available to those who speak English in addition to their native language. Parents and other community members who speak these languages are invited in to classes routinely to talk about their lives, jobs, or families, or to tell stories or share experiences. Students in the bilingual program are not, however, segregated from their peers all day, but join them for a number of academic classes.

Teachers and other staff members at this middle school have noticed that incidents of name-calling and interethnic hostility have diminished greatly since the revised curriculum was put into place. Perhaps more students see themselves in the curriculum and feel less angry about their invisibility; perhaps more teachers have developed an awareness and appreciation for their students’ diversity while learning about it; perhaps the more diverse staff is the answer; or maybe it’s because the community feels more welcome in the school. Whatever it is, the Sojourner Truth Middle School has developed an environment in which staff and students are both expanding their ways of looking at the world.

Affirmation, Solidarity, and Critique

Affirmation, solidarity, and critique is based on the premise that the most powerful learning results when students work and struggle with one another, even if it is sometimes difficult and challenging. It begins with the assumption that the many differences that students and their families represent are embraced and accepted as legitimate vehicles for learning, and that these are then extended. What makes this level different from the others is that conflict is not avoided, but rather accepted as an inevitable part of learning. Because multicultural education at this level is concerned with equity and social justice, and because the basic values of different groups are often diametrically opposed, conflict is bound to occur.

Affirmation, solidarity, and critique is also based on understanding that culture is not a fixed or unchangeable artifact, and is therefore subject to critique. Passively accepting the status quo of any culture is thus inconsistent with this level of multicultural education; simply substituting one myth for another contradicts its basic assumptions because no group is inherently superior or more heroic than any other. As eloquently expressed by Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope in their 1990 work *The Experience of Multicultural Education in Australia: Six Case Studies*, “Multicultural education, to be effective, needs to be more active. It needs to consider not just the pleasure of diversity but more fundamental issues that arise as different groups negotiate community and the basic issues of material life in the same space—a process that equally might generate conflict and pain.”

Multicultural education without critique may result in cultures remaining at the romantic or exotic stage. If students are to transcend their own cultural experience in order to understand the differences of others, they need to go through a process of reflection and critique of their cultures and those of others. This process of critique, however, begins with a solid core of solidarity with

others who are different from themselves. When based on true respect, critique is not only necessary but in fact healthy.

The Arturo Schomburg Middle School is located in a mid-size city with a very mixed population of Puerto Ricans, Salvadoreans, American Indians, Polish Americans, Irish Americans, Chinese Americans, Philipinos, and African Americans. The school was named for a Black Puerto Rican scholar who devoted his life to exploring the role of Africans in the Americas, in the process challenging the myth he had been told as a child in Puerto Rico that Africans had “no culture.”

The school’s logo, visible above the front door, is a huge tapestry made by the students, and it symbolizes a different model of multicultural education from that of either the “melting pot” or the “salad bowl.” According to a publication of the National Association of State Boards of Education (*The American Tapestry: Educating a Nation*), “A tapestry is a handwoven textile. When examined from the back, it may simply appear to be a motley group of threads. But when reversed, the threads work together to depict a picture of structure and beauty” (p. 1). According to Adelaide Sanford, one of the study group members who wrote this publication, a tapestry also symbolizes, through its knots, broken threads, and seeming jumble of colors and patterns on the back, the tensions, conflicts, and dilemmas that a society needs to work out. This spirit of both collaboration and struggle is evident in the school.

When we enter the Schomburg Middle School, the first thing we notice is a banner proclaiming the school’s motto: LEARN, REFLECT, QUESTION, AND WORK TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE. This is the message that reverberates throughout the school. Participation is another theme that is evident, and the main hall contains numerous pictures of students in classrooms, community service settings, and extracurricular activities. Although housed in a traditional school building, the school has been transformed into a place where all children feel safe and are encouraged to learn to the highest levels of learning. While there are typical classrooms of the kind that are immediately recognizable to us, the school also houses centers that focus on specific areas of learning. There is, for instance, a studio where students can be found practicing traditional Philippino dance and music, as well as European ballet, and modern American dance, among others. Outside, there is a large garden that is planted, cared for, and harvested by the students and faculty. The vegetables are used by the cafeteria staff in preparing meals and they have noticed a marked improvement in the eating habits of the children since the menu was changed to reflect a healthier and more ethnically diverse menu.

We are welcomed into the school by staff people who invite us to explore the many different classrooms and other learning centers. Those parents who are available during the day can be found assisting in classrooms, in the Parent’s Room working on art projects or computer classes, or attending workshops by other parents or teachers on topics ranging from cross-cultural child-rearing to ESL. The bulletin boards are ablaze with color and include a variety of languages, displaying student work from critical essays on what it means to be an American to art projects that celebrate the talents of many of the students. Learning is going

on everywhere, whether in classrooms or in small-group collaborative projects in halls.

What might the classrooms look like in this school? For one, they are characterized by tremendous diversity. Tracking and special education, as we know them, have been eliminated at the Schomburg Middle School. Students with special needs are taught along with all others, although they are sometimes separated for small-group instruction with students not classified as having special needs. All children are considered “talented” and special classes are occasionally organized for those who excel in dance, mathematics, poetry, or science. No interested students are excluded from any of these offerings. Furthermore, all students take algebra and geometry, and special coaching sessions are available before, after, and during school hours for these and other subjects.

Classes are flexible, with an interdisciplinary curriculum and team-teaching, resulting in sessions that sometimes last as long as three hours. The physical environment in classrooms is varied: some are organized with round work tables, others have traditional desks, and still others have scant furniture to allow for more movement. Class size also varies from small groups to large, depending on the topic at hand. Needless to say, scheduling at this school is a tremendous and continuing challenge, but faculty and students are committed to this more flexible arrangement and willing to allow for the daily problems that it may cause.

There are no “foreign languages” at the Schomburg Middle school, nor is there, strictly speaking, a bilingual program. Rather, the entire school is multilingual, and all students learn at least a second language in addition to their native language. This means that students are not segregated by language, but instead work in bilingual settings where two languages are used for instruction. At present, the major languages used are English, Spanish, and Tagalog, representing the most common languages spoken by this school’s community. It is not unusual to see students speaking these languages in classrooms, the hallways, or the playgrounds, even among those for whom English is a native language.

Students at the Schomburg Middle School seem engaged, engrossed, and excited about learning. They have been involved in a number of innovative long-range projects that have resulted from the interdisciplinary curriculum. For instance, working with a Chinese-American artist in residence, they wrote, directed, and produced a play focusing on the “Know-Nothing” Movement in U.S. history that resulted in, among other things, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In preparation for the play, they read a great deal and did extensive research. For example, they contacted the Library of Congress for information on primary sources and reviewed newspapers and magazines from the period to get a sense of the climate that led to Nativism. They also designed and sewed all the costumes and sets. In addition, they interviewed recent immigrants of many backgrounds, and found that they had a range of experiences from positive to negative in their new country. On the day of the play, hundreds of parents and other community members attended. Students also held a debate on the pros and cons of continued immigration, and received up-to-date information concerning immigration laws from their congressional representative.

The curriculum at the Schomburg Middle School is dramatically different

from the George Washington School, the first school we visited. Teachers take very seriously their responsibility of teaching complexity. Thus, students have learned that there are many sides to every story, and that in order to make informed decisions, they need as much information as they can get. Whether in English, science, art, or any other class, students have been encouraged to be critical of every book, newspaper, curriculum, or piece of information by asking questions such as: Who wrote the book? Who's missing in this story? Why? Using questions such as these as a basis, they are learning that every story has a point of view and that every point of view is at best partial and at worst distorted. They are also learning that their own backgrounds, rich and important as they may be, have limitations that can lead to parochial perceptions. Most of all, even at this age, students are learning that every topic is fraught with difficulties and they are wrestling with issues as diverse as homelessness, global warming, and how the gender expectations of different cultures might limit opportunities for girls. Here, nothing is taboo as a topic of discussion as long as it is approached with respect and in a climate of caring.

What this means for teachers is that they have had to become learners along with their students. They approach each subject with curiosity and an open mind, and during the school day they have time to study, meet with colleagues, and plan their curriculum accordingly. Professional development here means not only attending courses at a nearby university, but collaborating with colleagues in study groups that last anywhere from half a day to several months. These provide a forum in which teachers can carefully study relevant topics or vexing problems. Some of these study groups have focused on topics such as Reconstruction and the history of the Philippines, to educational issues such as cooperative learning and diverse cognitive styles.

Especially noteworthy at this school is that multicultural education is not separated from education; that is, all education is by its very nature multicultural. English classes use literature written by a wide variety of people from countries where English is spoken. This has resulted in these classes becoming not only multicultural, but international as well. Science classes do not focus on contributions made by members of specific ethnic groups, but have in fact been transformed to consider how science itself is conceptualized, valued, and practiced by those who have traditionally been outside the scientific mainstream. Issues such as AIDS education, healing in different cultures, and scientific racism have all been the subject of study.

One of the major differences between this school and the others we visited has to do with its governance structure. There is a Schomburg School Congress consisting of students, faculty, parents, and other community members, and it has wide decision-making powers, from selecting the principal to determining reasonable and equitable disciplinary policies and practices. Students are elected by their classmates and, although at the beginning these were little more than popularity contests, in recent months it has been clear that students are beginning to take this responsibility seriously. This is probably because they are being taken seriously by the adults in the group. For instance, when students in one class decided that they wanted to plan a class trip to a neighboring city to coincide with

their study of toxic wastes and the environment, they were advised to do some preliminary planning: what would be the educational objectives of such a trip? how long would it take? how much would it cost? After some research and planning, they presented their ideas to the Congress and a fund-raising plan that included students, parents, and community agencies was started.

The Schomburg School is a learning center that is undergoing important changes every day. As teachers discover the rich talents that all students bring to school, they develop high expectation for them all. The climate that exists in this school is one of possibility, because students' experiences are used to build on their learning and expand their horizons. Students in turn are realizing that while their experiences are important and unique, they are only one experience of many. A new definition of "American" is being forged at this school, one that includes everybody. Above all, learning here is exciting, engrossing, inclusive, and evolving.

Conclusion

One might well ask how realistic these scenarios are, particularly the last one. Could a school such as this really exist? Isn't this just wishful thinking? What about the reality of bond issues rejected by voters?, of teachers woefully unprepared to deal with the diversity in their classrooms?, of universities that do little more than offer stale "Mickey Mouse" courses?, of schools with no pencils, paper, and chalk, much less computers and video cameras?, of rampant violence in streets, homes, and schools?, of drugs and crime?, of parents who are barely struggling to keep their families together and can spare precious little time to devote to volunteering at school?

These are all legitimate concerns that our society needs to face, and they remind us that schools need to be understood within their sociopolitical contexts. That is, our schools exist in a society in which social and economic stratification are facts of life, where competition is taught over caring, and where the early sorting that takes place in educational settings often lasts a lifetime. Developing schools with a multicultural perspective is not easy; if it were, they would be everywhere. But schools with a true commitment to diversity, equity, and high levels of learning are difficult to achieve precisely because the problems they face are pervasive and seemingly impossible to solve. Although the many problems raised above are certainly daunting, the schools as currently organized are simply not up to the challenge. In the final analysis, if we believe that all students deserve to learn at the very highest levels, then we need a vision of education that will help achieve this end.

The scenarios above, however, are not simply figments of my imagination. As you read through the scenarios, you probably noticed bits and pieces of your own school here and there. However, because the "monocultural school" is the one with which we are most familiar, and unfortunately even comfortable, the other scenarios might seem far-fetched or unrealistic. Although they are ideal in the sense that they are not true pictures of specific schools, these scenarios nevertheless describe possibilities because they all exist to some degree in our schools

today. These are not pie-in-the-sky visions, but composites of what goes on in schools every day. As such, they provide building blocks for how we might go about transforming schools. In fact, were we to design schools based on the ideals that our society has always espoused, they would no doubt come close to the last scenario.

It is not, however, a monolithic model or one that can develop overnight. The participants in each school need to develop their own vision so that step by step, with incremental changes, schools become more multicultural, and thus more inclusive and more exciting places for learning. If we believe that young people deserve to be prepared with skills for living ethical and productive lives in an increasingly diverse and complex world, then we need to transform schools so that they not only teach what have been called “the basics,” but also provide an apprenticeship in democracy and social justice. It is unfair to expect our young people to develop an awareness and respect for democracy if they have not experienced it, and it is equally unrealistic to expect them to be able to function in a pluralistic society if all we give them are skills for a monocultural future. This is our challenge in the years ahead: to conquer the fear of change and imagine how we might create exciting possibilities for all students in all schools.

Critical Questions

- 1 Do you agree with the assertion that “tolerance” is a low level of support for multicultural education? Why or why not? Explain.
- 2 Using the levels described in the scenarios in this article, where would you place your school? Does it fit neatly into any of the levels? Why or why not? Give examples.
- 3 If you were to design a school that promoted diversity as you believe it should be promoted, what would it look like? Write a description of it.
- 4 Do you think the scenarios described above are realistic? If not, what would make them more so?

Activities for Your Classroom

- 1 Think about your classroom and what you can do within your own four walls to make it more responsive to higher levels of multicultural education. Make a list of changes you can begin to implement. Next to each, describe what resources you need, how you can get them, and a reasonable timeline for implementation. Begin implementing one of the ideas you have and report back to the other participants in the course about your progress.
- 2 Review some of your other ideas, and follow the same process as above. At the end of the semester, figure out how many of these ideas you have put into practice. Have they had an impact on the climate of your classroom? on student enthusiasm and learning? on family involvement? on your own thoughts on diversity?

Community-Based Activity and Advocacy

If there is a site-based management team in your school, consider becoming a member of it. Develop alliances with other teachers or parents who have expressed support for diversity. Bring up with the group some of the changes you considered for your own classroom and suggest how they might be implemented at the school level. Think about starting small, with incremental changes. Document your success with these changes, and reflect on why things have or have not worked. How might you change your approach in the future?

Supplementary Resources for Further Reflection and Study

Darling-Hammond, L. (2001). *The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

In this book, Darling-Hammond emphasizes the process of learning rather than the pervasiveness of testing. She believes that what is wrong with public schools today can, in great measure, be attributed to bureaucratization that leaves teachers with little time for teaching. American children do worse than students from other industrialized nations, Darling-Hammond suggests, because the American educational system is predicated on a “factory model” that processes students instead of teaching them.

Delpit, Lisa (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people’s children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58 (3), 280–298.

In this classic article, Delpit argues that as a first step toward a more just society, teachers need to teach all students, particularly Black and poor children, the explicit and implicit rules of power.

Entin, J. Rosen, R. C., & Vogt, L. (Eds.). (2008). *Controversies in the classroom: A Radical Teacher reader*. New York: Teachers College Press.

A compilation of some of the most thoughtful and inspiring articles published in the journal *Radical Teacher* during the past 15 years, this book includes pieces by well-known education reformers, researchers, classroom teachers, and others interested in promoting a democratic vision of public education.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

This highly readable book documents the characteristics and teaching practices of teachers who are especially effective with African American students. The last chapter, “Making Dreams into Reality,” describes the Paul Robeson Elementary School, the author’s vision of a culturally responsive learning environment.