

2007

## Multicultural Considerations for Building Learning Communities

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### Recommended Citation

Edwards, C. N., & Edwards, S. (2007). Multicultural Considerations for Building Learning Communities. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/>-

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## Multicultural Considerations for Building Learning Communities

### Abstract

Educational policies call for inclusion and attention to cultural differences in our schools. Administrators, classroom educators, counselors, and other support staff attempt to attend to students through a cooperative effort of connecting with the community beyond the school building, as well as the families represented within it. As Christians, there is a higher calling to truly embrace those often underserved in our learning communities. This paper will address multicultural issues important for United States and United Kingdom school system staff to be mindful of when focusing on students and their families.

## **Multicultural Considerations for Building Learning Communities**

Cher N. Edwards and Scott Edwards

### **Abstract**

Educational policies call for inclusion and attention to cultural differences in our schools. Administrators, classroom educators, counselors, and other support staff attempt to attend to students through a cooperative effort of connecting with the community beyond the school building, as well as the families represented within it. As Christians, there is a higher calling to truly embrace those often underserved in our learning communities. This paper will address multicultural issues important for United States and United Kingdom school system staff to be mindful of when focusing on students and their families.

### **Introduction**

In his article providing recommendations for effective teaching strategies, Lambert (2006) encourages Christian educators to “learn about who they [students] are and what shapes their culture” (p.17). Cultural awareness encourages individuals to be responsive to the unique needs of diverse groups in our schools including the importance of advocacy for those often underserved. While the Bible contains many references that Christ made to the importance of serving the disadvantaged and marginalized populations of our society, scholarly literature for Christian educators is less prolific in this area. The following paragraphs will discuss various aspects of learning communities including multicultural considerations and best practice recommendations. For the purpose of this article, the term learning communities embraces all individuals who are considered educational stakeholders in the academic success of K-12 students including school staff (classroom educators, school counselors, administration, and support personnel), parents and other caregivers, students themselves, and referral sources (community counselors, therapists, social workers, translators, and other resources).

The field of theology has begun to look at the responsibility of Christians to be culturally aware as evidenced by the inception of a new journal (initiated in 2004) titled *Cultural Encounters: A Journal for the Theology of Culture*. This ideology is also apparent in Kujawa-Holbrook’s (2002) article which encourages theology students to become culturally competent in order to meet the needs of our culturally and racially diverse world. She writes, “I continue to ask myself how racial privilege impacts my teaching and how I can better use my institutional power to enhance the education of all students” (p. 141).

Diversity in the schools may best be described as a double edged sword; it’s one of the most significant strengths of learning communities, while at the same time the very issue which has the potential to present as one of the greatest challenges. Today’s schools are more culturally diverse than ever before. Just as U.S. Census data points to a growing multicultural population (United States Bureau of the Census, 2000), Europe is also experiencing cultural ties not previously known. McGrath and Ramler (2002) acknowledge this shift for Europe identifying the “single market under the umbrella of the European Union” (p. 88) as the impetus for changing relationships between countries and cultures: “Countries, which over 50 years ago were sworn enemies, now share a common currency (the euro), jointly manage their economic interests, and enjoy close cultural ties” (p. 88). Demographics are shifting to reveal a changing school population resulting in a change of school culture.

District, state, and national policies (i.e. No Child Left Behind, Title IV Civil Rights Act 1964) exist in an attempt to ensure that discrimination in our schools does not exist (Zehr, 2004). Above and beyond legal mandates, many school staff members are committed to celebrating the diversity in our schools and to ensuring that the academic and social needs of culturally diverse students are met. Despite this commitment by

some, culturally diverse students are often underrepresented, marginalized, and underserved in the educational community (Yosso, 2005).

### **The Influence of Culture on School Based Learning Communities**

The multicultural literature embraces many explanations of what the term culture represents and encompasses. According to Pederson and Carey (2003), there are over 150 definitions of culture. Many of these definitions share a theme of unique language, behaviors, and experiences passed along from one generation to another. Some attend to an inclusive view – embracing a very liberal view of multiculturalism to include all groups that have experienced oppression and segregation; while others focus on an exclusive view – attending to race and ethnicity as the definer of culture (Sue & Sue, 2003).

While there may be differences of opinion regarding what constitutes culture, most will agree there are benefits as well as potential challenges to cultural differences existing within the school environment. In simplistic explanation, the benefits of multiculturalism in our schools include the opportunities of all to benefit from the diversity within it, while the challenges include the potential for failing to attend to the needs of the diverse cultures represented. The challenge of cultural diversity in the schools is seen in Europe as well as the United States (U.S.). A network of schools referred to as the European Schools (ES) or Schola Europaea acknowledges that the diversity in schools, “while enriching, also produces complexity in the management of schedules, curriculum, and school life, requiring special skills and sensitivity in teaching and administration” (McGrath & Ramler, 2002, p. 89). Attending to these pertinent issues requires the support of the community outside the walls of the classrooms.

One of the concerns of the multicultural awareness movement in education focuses on the way we teach multicultural education in many of our schools (Banks, 2006). The taglines “teach tolerance” and “celebrate diversity” are often used to encourage individuals to acknowledge and embrace the differences among us all. One potential downfall of this intervention strategy lies in the way individuals perceive differences. Historically, many have used the obvious (and sometimes falsely created) differences among various

ethnicities as a basis for racism and oppression. Arguments that certain differences make some individuals inherently less intelligent, capable, or even human were the foundation of segregation as well as other institutions of ignorance (Adelman, 2003).

With this in mind, the trend in education has been to include an acknowledgement of the similarities between the various ethnicities and races; specifically, looking at what the dominant ethnicity/race (European American) shares with people of color regarding physical, affective, and motivational commonalities. A recent video series produced by California Newsreel entitled, *Race – The Power of an Illusion* (Adelman, 2003), focuses on the historical misrepresentations which have been propagated by the media and generally well-meaning medical practitioners attempting to identify physical, physiological, or other biologically-based evidence pointing to major differences between African American and European American individuals. The outcome of this research has been quite shocking to some – realizing there might be more genetic similarities between an African American individual and a European American than two individuals of the same race. In fact, according to the video series, two fruit flies potentially vary more in their genetic makeup than humans of different ethnic backgrounds (Adelman).

Aside from the genetic similarities we share, researchers are focusing on similarities relating to challenges experienced by all individuals, regardless of ethnicity. Harper and McFadden (2003) argue that, “there has been a tendency to overlook or underemphasize certain problems and issues that exist within cultures or across cultures such as health, unemployment, homelessness, spousal abuse, alcoholism and drug addiction, violence, and family conflict, among others” (p. 386). These issues are just a few which transcend culture and embrace all ethnicities in learning communities. It would behoove educators and support staff to acknowledge these similarities when developing proactive interventions for at-risk students. In addition to problems and potential risk factors, basic education issues such as learning, achievement, life skills, and career development exist for learning communities.

Palmer (1998) attends to the concept of community in education in his book *The Courage to Teach*:

The civic model of community has features vital to teaching and learning. In a society divided by race and ethnicity and gender, I am often moved by the fact that high school and college classrooms contain a broader cross section of people engaged in common work -and often doing it with civility, media-fueled “political correctness” wars notwithstanding – than one can find in many settings. As we reweave our tattered civic fabric, educational institutions are among our most important looms (p. 92).

### **A Call for Community Engagement**

It seems logical that the changes in the makeup of our communities and schools call for diverse strategies in the way we teach and support students. Durkheim, as cited by Battistich and colleagues (1999), notes, “The school is perhaps the only social institution that reaches youth from all of the diverse groups in society” (p. 417). Further emphasizing the role of the school as a learning community, Durkheim continues, “it serves as the intermediary between the intimate and particularistic relationships of the family and the more formal and pluralistic relationships of the larger society” (as cited in Battistich et al., 1999, p. 417). Furthermore, the American School Counselor Association (2003), in recognizing best practice for K-12 settings, recommends a comprehensive guidance perspective that encourages educators to work together to create a community to support student academic success.

The historical focus of academic achievement as the primary goal has overlooked the key goal of education: to “prepare students to be successful, contributing members of society” (Battistich et al., 1999, p. 416). This ultimate goal requires more than high scores on achievement tests or degree completion; education must engage the student and provide a caring and supportive community. Current methods of instruction have failed students of color and those of low socioeconomic status (Howard, 1999). If educators fail to acknowledge the cultural differences within their learning community, successful collaboration of students, parents, caregivers, and community members is unlikely. A framework for moving learning communities beyond the school context to include families and communities has already been established (Moles, 1996). This paper will further explore the cultural implications of this inclusion as well as provide recommendations for educators to emphasize cultural

sensitivity in this process.

The benefits of considering culture as it relates to building learning communities are undeniable. A lack of understanding of cultural issues has been a barrier to many relationships (Banks, 2006). If educators and school support staff truly hope to engage students to become a part of a community focused on achieving socially and ethically in addition to academically, it is imperative partnerships develop between the students and their families with educators and other staff (Battistich et al., 1999). It might be argued that Christian educators have a higher calling to go beyond policy to truly embrace students who might be otherwise overlooked. The Bible documents numerous accounts of Christ’s love for those overlooked by others and His commitment to ensuring the “last shall be first” (Matthew 20:16). The following paragraphs will explore ways in which this calling can be realized in our learning communities.

Christian educators are poised to nurture these community relationships. Reflecting on scripture, Romans 12:4-5 and I Corinthians 12:12-27, Paul reminds us of our responsibilities toward society and the importance and diversity of all gifts: “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:4-5).

The socio-cultural environment or climate of school-based learning communities is one of diverse languages, experiences, values, spirituality and religious orientations, and roles within family systems. Acknowledging this type of diversity is imperative as school staff attempt to connect with families and communities which adequately represent the students that schools serve. Just as Christ loved and honored those who were marginalized and with little to no social power, the Christian educator may be called to support and nurture learning communities. The following sections of this paper will identify different types of diversity within our schools, specific issues that may be relevant when attending to the needs of diverse and underrepresented students, as well as intervention strategies that are culturally and spiritually relevant.

## The Role of Christian School Staff

### Cultural Competency

There is a cliché in counseling that awareness is the first step – alluding to the idea that an individual is on the road to change once she or he becomes aware change is necessary. The same can be said for cultural awareness in learning communities. First and foremost, it is important that school staff acknowledge there are multicultural considerations when building learning communities and that these pertinent considerations require educators to be culturally aware of their own ethnic identity and the potential for ethnocentric attitudes and bias against other cultures, knowledgeable of various cultural groups and their challenges as well as special needs, and develop skills to adequately attend to the diverse students and their communities that we serve in today's schools (Banks, 2006).

Just as there are many different definitions of culture, there are numerous aspects of diversity to attend to within student populations. Multicultural and diversity issues of students exist in our school cultures: learning English as a second language, diversity due to ethnic and cultural differences, biracial or multiracial students and their families, and immigration and refugees to the U.K. or U.S. It is important to note that, while various groups are discussed in terms of cultural norms that often exist, there are many differences within cultures. It would not only be counterproductive but detrimental for school staff to make assumptions of individuals based on race, ethnicity, and other aspects of diversity. Issues such as age, gender, family history, family constellations, sexual orientation, physical and mental differences, spirituality and religion, socio-economic status, local communities, and many other factors contribute to the culture of each individual (Sue & Sue, 2003).

English language learners. English language learners are often left with the impression from the schools that their native language is one to be embarrassed of or even abandoned. The European Schools attend to this issue through their two complementary goals: “to preserve the child's national identity by encouraging the growth and development of her or his mother tongue and native culture while simultaneously striving to promote a European identity, a sense of European

citizenship” (McGrath & Ramler, 2002, p. 89). It is important to consider the challenges of students who, in essence, lead dual- or multi-cultural lives. At home, one culture and language is celebrated while at school, another. Additional challenges for the students may be associated with achievement testing. Many argue that while accommodations are made to translate tests into the native languages of students, the values and circumstances presented in the tests are culture-laden and are not as easily translated (Butler & Stevens, 2001).

Ethnically and culturally diverse students. To attend adequately to the needs of various ethnic and cultural groups within the context of this paper is impossible. A number of wonderful and thorough resources are available throughout the literature identifying the specific challenges and needs of groups such as African, Asian, Latino (a)/Hispanic, and Native American individuals (Lee, C., 1997; Lee, W., 1999; Sue & Sue, 2003; Vacc, Wittmer, & DeVaney, 1988). In general, it is important for educators and support staff to be aware of the cultural norms of various groups and the historical experiences of the group to which the student identifies ethnically. Christian educators are called to embrace these differences when building community relationships.

Biracial and Multiracial students and families. Biracial and Multiracial students are often faced with the difficulty of answering the question, “What are you?” regarding their ethnicity. Furthermore, they are often placed in a position to “check the box” regarding which ethnicity they identify with, forcing them to disregard a parent or grandparent's heritage by claiming only one aspect of who they are. While information and training exists regarding the cultural norms and common concerns among various ethnic groups, fewer resources are available regarding the biracial or multiracial student. It is not sufficient to simply learn about the various ethnic groups which comprise who the student is as a multiracial individual. The literature acknowledges issues and concerns specific to being biracial and multiracial (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Students who are immigrants or refugees. Anatole France is cited in Ehrlick & Debruhl's International Thesaurus of Quotations (1996) as saying, “All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must



die to one life before we can enter into another!” (p. 79). The most significant issue for learners whose families have immigrated to our countries or are refugees is that of cultural transition. Individuals in transition are at an increased risk of serious illness and depression (Lee, 1999). Pederson (1995) further discusses the rationale for the increased stress, also referred to as culture shock, associated with transitioning to a new cultural context. Several of the characteristics described by Pederson focus on the uncertainty associated with behavioral cues, value conflicts, feelings of disorientation and dissatisfaction, and inadequate coping skills. Some of the stressors many immigrant and refugee families experience include changes in socioeconomic status due to job loss (many families leave stable employment for change of better opportunities in a new country), undocumented status, and cultural racism. Pederson notes refugees are particularly at risk of psychological difficulties as these individuals have not left their country voluntarily but rather, were forced to leave. Many of these individuals have experienced significant trauma including abuse, torture, internment camps, and loss of family.

Just as with students who are English language learners, many students who are immigrants or refugees experience different languages at home and school. These students are also faced with the challenge of embracing one culture at home and another at school. Well-meaning school staff often place students in the position of translator between the school and parents, caregivers, and families— disrupting the balance of power in the family. Schools that function in legalities, opting only to communicate with the legal guardians of students, may find themselves offending and alienating the most involved individuals in students’ lives.

School staff would benefit from continued training around cultural competencies which focus on process and experience in addition to cultural norms and tendencies. Divac and Heapy (2005) describe a cultural training program in which trainees look at their own experiences of disadvantage and marginalization as well as having privilege which provides opportunities for participants to move past first order, content learning to “learning how to learn” about culture. In addition, they emphasize the importance of analyzing and developing an awareness of one’s own process of dominance and privilege through personal experience.

With a deepened awareness of salient cultural processes, school staff may be more aware of the potential challenges and strengths of each student in their school. While this paper cannot provide an all-inclusive list of what to do in each situation for each student, the intent is to create awareness of what types of issues should be considered as well as provide an impetus for change in schools to embrace the community in a way to support all student learners and their families in a way consistent with God’s calling for Christian educators.

If it is agreed upon that awareness is the first step, then educators and support staff can engage in awareness promoting activities to learn about their own cultural identity development as well as that of others. Professional organizations provide local, state, national, and international workshops and conferences focusing on the needs of diverse learners as well as topics which encourage self-reflection and awareness of privilege, personal bias, and racism. In addition to workshops and trainings, school staff can take courses specifically focusing on multicultural counseling and multicultural education at a local college or university. Cultural immersion is a key way to experience cultures which are different than one’s own. Seeking opportunities, both personally and professionally to experience the values, beliefs, celebrations, language, and foods of another culture is a wonderful way to not only learn from others but to connect with families in the community and encourage community members to become involved in the academic success of their students in collaboration with school staff.

### **Collaborating together**

Building successful learning communities that embrace cultural differences and celebrates the strengths of the students schools serve requires communities and school systems to work together. Educators and support staff are in a unique position to provide training and support services to embrace the community and to advocate for diverse students and their families. Regardless of the type of intervention or service that the school intends on providing, it is imperative to have the collaboration of the community members and families of the students as part of the planning process.

Celano and Kaslow (2000) provide several case illustrations of family interventions with students and

families which incorporate the importance of cultural competency. In formulating and co-creating culturally competent services, they recommend: 1) recognizing the effects of the educators' own culture on the collaborative relationships, 2) attending to the interplay of cultural processes and influences that affect the student's family functioning, and 3) applying problem-resolution strategies that are culturally acceptable. Family patterns may be viewed as pathological in the dominant culture or common, normed patterns of the minority culture. Exploring meanings of hierarchies, boundaries, and family lifecycle stages (McGoldrick, Pearce, & Giordano, 1996) are important to consider when developing interventions imbedded with various cultural contexts and processes.

School staff should also be aware of culturally appropriate and financially feasible referrals for diverse families including counseling services, English language services, translators, attorneys, domestic violence shelters, food and clothing banks, and other community services. School counseling groups can be provided to focus on cultural transition and diversity issues for parents and students. Classroom guidance activities and school-wide celebrations could be implemented focusing on common goals for education and career planning as well as to celebrate the diversity in our community. School counselors can be intentional about the use of counseling related intervention tools such as puppets, books, and handouts to ensure that all cultures are represented. All materials announcing the activity should be translated in languages that represent those spoken by the family members of the students. Educators and other support staff can be sure to include posters and bulletin boards that demonstrate a commitment to diversity. School texts can be chosen to ensure a multicultural perspective. The school calendar can incorporate a celebration of various cultural holidays and events throughout the school year. Guest speakers of diverse backgrounds can be invited to the school to discuss common concerns of all students such as drug and alcohol prevention, career concerns, friendship and relationship issues, time management, study skills, and other developmentally appropriate topic. Parent – teacher conferences can be intentional to include translators and written materials in languages represented by the families.

As with all interventions discussed, good intention is not enough. Simply throwing in a culturally sensitive

event or function in the midst of a school system that does not otherwise advocate for diverse students and families is ill conceived and out of place. Lanik (2002) writes in the journal *European Education*, “the attempt made by many schools to emphasize their function as venues for intercultural learning frequently results in well-intentioned failures” (p. 85). He continues on to say that, “children want to be recognized as individuals, not marketed as ethnographical pieces of art in an exhibition” (p. 86). All opportunities to celebrate the uniqueness of students needs to be done so in an integrated way that preserves the dignity of each student and honors the culture represented.

### **Extending beyond the school building**

School staff can serve as a bridge between the school as an entity and the community around it. Activities within the community in which school staff participate in or co-sponsor can create the opportunity for community members, who may be apprehensive about going in to the school, a chance to get to know teachers and other school personnel. At the same time, community activities provide the setting for school personnel to connect with parents, caregivers, families, and church communities that may not usually seek support from the school while experiencing the culture of the community.

Just as staff focus on cultural competency, so too is the importance of focusing on spiritual competencies as related to culture. Christian school staff are poised to bridge the gaps between the school system, students, and the cultural community through the avenue of spirituality. Drawing from the clinical context, Carlson and his colleagues (2002) offer suggestions “to draw on the unique relational experiences of our personal spiritualities in order to enhance and promote communal connection in the relationships we enter into and foster with our clients” (p.216). These suggestions are applicable to and pertinent for the educational domain.

Christian school staff can begin the process of attending to spiritual competencies by identifying their own spiritual preferences (Carlson et al., 2002). Exploring one's spiritual preferences allows the educator to utilize their beliefs as a resource not only in their personal lives, but in their professional relationships as an educator. For example, a Christian educator who wishes for her students that they feel loved may reflect on the



following question: In what way is the desire for others to feel loved related to your spiritual beliefs?

Carlson and his colleagues (2002) offer a second step in the process of attending to spiritual competencies, a critical reflection of spiritual preferences. This step involves critically reflecting on the daily implications of one's spiritual faith in the context of student relationships. Attending to the influence of spirituality within each relationship may result in a meaningful exploration of the impact one's spiritual preferences may have on the lives of each student. Remembering is a final process offered by Carlson and colleagues (2002) where one is encouraged to remember the relationships where one's spiritual preferences were nurtured. The process of anchoring one's Christian faith to a significant and nurturing relationship will create opportunities for spiritual conversations and relationships across the contexts of the school system and cultural community. Christian educators may benefit from these processes as they are called to a way of being in relationship with students and community, one that incorporates acceptance, understanding, unconditional love, inclusion, and respectfully valuing the marginalized.

## Conclusion

Learning communities are essential for supporting the academic, personal, and career success of students. Building relationships within the community is important for the type of partnership needed between the families represented in the schools and educators and support staff. Cultural differences have the potential to be a barrier to these types of relationships forming and developing. Culturally aware school staff who embrace culturally relevant strategies for building learning communities can serve in an instrumental role in the process of avoiding or breaking down cultural barriers. Christian educators are in a unique role to serve as leaders in their learning communities to reach out and embrace the students and families in their schools and districts.

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