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Teaching Social Justice through the Lens of Multicultural Education

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As reported by Patricia G. Ramsey (2006), projections from the Census Bureau demonstrate public school populations growing in socio-economic and racial diversity. There is a clear need for an understanding of this diversity to occur at the early childhood level. Teachers are in a crucial position to develop the appropriate understanding, attitudes, and social action skills that will be necessary to combat all forms of prejudice and discrimination. Students can learn to think deeply about social justice concepts such as tolerance and respect for all people through the implementation of multicultural education. The acceptance and celebration of diversity can be instituted through the inclusion of multicultural education in all classrooms, regardless of geographical location or school population. In order to truly adopt multicultural education as an integral part of a student's academic growth, teachers must carefully consider the meaning of "cultural competence". The benefit of beginning to teach social justice at the early childhood level is that students can take these values with them through the rest of their academic careers. It is in the first years of a student's education that fundamental values in regard to tolerance, as well as the celebration of diverse identities, can be developed as the building blocks for future culturally competent human beings.

In a book titled Building the Primary Classroom: a Complete Guide to Teaching and Learning, Toni S. Bickart, Judy R. Jablon, and Diane Trister Dodge (1999) describe, "A deeper understanding of children in the context of culture can have a significant impact on whether or not they succeed in school." When considering the history of American public schools, the targeted demographic was initially the white male. Sharonda Allen's (2008) article in Black History Bulletin suggests that, today, almost four hundred years later, there have been few successful transformative processes for reforming the educational system in order to accommodate specific needs of students who are culturally diverse. The need to integrate

multicultural education into early childhood classrooms is evident in the statistics that show disparities in the academic success of students who are not members of the dominant white European American culture. One example of this systemic discrepancy is the fact that African American students continue to have disproportionately high rates of dropout, high representation in special education, low representation in gifted programs, and high rates of poor academic performance. According to Barbara J. Frye and Helen A. Vogt (2010), African American children make up approximately 16% of the students in our country's public schools, they only make up 8.4% of students in gifted programs. This statistic has remained stagnant over the past ten years. In New York City, there was a 6% drop in the number of African American students identified for gifted programs from 2007 to 2008. A large portion of school funding has been given to the task of closing the achievement gap between European American and African American students. However, this financial support is given mostly to resources used for African American students who are not meeting specific academic benchmarks, instead of towards African American students who excel, and therefore require additional challenges in order to progress even further. This neglect ultimately stems from the systemic and cultural biases and negative stereotypes surrounding this diverse population of students in terms of academic and intellectual functioning. There is a need to examine the school culture and environment in order to reveal any disconnect in the expectations for some students compared to other students. All students should be treated as scholars, thereby instilling a sense of pride and esteem that is vital for academic advancement (Allen, 2008).

Students come to school with a wide array of life experiences within the context of cultural settings ranging from large, multiethnic urban areas, to small, rural, homogeneous regions. In their article published in Multicultural Perspectives, Dora W. Chen, John Nimmo,

and Heather Fraser (2009) explain that diversity is sometimes incorrectly labeled as something existing only in other people, when really it is the relationship between oneself and others that we encounter. Most researchers agree that the acquisition of culture occurs through associations with family members and throughout overarching communities. Paula G. Purnell, Parveen Ali, Nurun Begum, and Marilyn Carter (2007) clarify the theory that these interactions are the foundation for the development of a world outlook. According to theorist Jerome Bruner, knowledge is always constructed through the perspective of culture. “Cultural products, such as language and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality” (Purnell et al., 2007). Cultural influence becomes the catalyst for a child’s constructed understanding of human differences and similarities during their earliest years.

In her book titled Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education, Sonia Nieto (2004) discusses the need to become culturally competent. She explains the idea that a teacher can instill values within his or her students by first examining his or her own identity. The majority of teacher candidates have been educated in monocultural environments that make it difficult to adjust to a new, multicultural perspective. Many teachers are threatened by the topic of discrimination and rarely conduct fruitful discussions about social justice issues due to this uneasiness. These inequalities may be invisible to the untrained eye which thereby perpetuates the discrimination through inactivity. Teacher education programs can guide pre-service educators through the complex process of self-reflection, questioning, and analysis of the existing systems of privilege and oppression. Professional development in the form of experiential preparation can have a crucial impact on the way a teacher embraces diversity within the classroom setting. By consistently confronting the issues that are so deeply

embedded within the institutions of our society, teachers can develop valid anti-discriminatory curricula. One way to facilitate this process is through the use of self-reflective tools like checklists. In order to cover all facets of anti-bias curriculum planning and implementation, a checklist should include various domains: self-awareness, the physical environment, the pedagogical environment, and relationships with families and communities. These checklists must ask probing questions such as: “Am I aware of my own cultural identity and history?” and “Am I able to effectively use resources and other adults in the community to enhance children’s learning about diversity and bias?” First, a teacher must be committed to learning about people and events that may be unfamiliar through books and other materials that provide background information. Second, one must honestly and thoughtfully confront his or her own biases. Third, the multicultural individual must develop open mindedness and learn to view reality from multiple lenses. By thoughtfully answering questions and engaging in meaningful dialogue within a teacher preparation cohort, teachers can hone the skills necessary for working with students from diverse backgrounds.

Nieto describes culturally responsive teaching in the context of socio-political awareness, meaning that knowledge is presumably constructed and used toward the eradication of injustice. When there are more cultural differences between a teacher and his or her students, there is a need for a stronger effort made by the teacher to get to know the children. This will, in turn, support their learning most effectively. Since culture affects our interactions, expectations of others, and the way we communicate, it is essential that teachers are aware of their attitudes towards various cultures. Teacher preparation programs are in a crucial position to instill a knowledge base about the inequalities that exist in our society’s educational system. Both teachers and learners must be aware of socio-cultural, socio-historic, and socio-political

implication in regards to diversity. This idea of cultural responsiveness must be accepted as a dispositional and attitudinal transformation, rather than a mere shift in teaching strategies. Cultural competence suggests that teachers understand and view both themselves and their students as cultural beings (Frye & Vogt, 2010). This viewpoint is then used for the basis upon which the learning process is premised.

In a review of related literature included in her book, Nieto (2004) found that teacher education students, most of whom are white and monolingual, generally view diversity of student backgrounds as a problem. Often, teacher education programs function within a monocultural framework, reinforcing the values of only the dominant culture. As a result, many teachers are unprepared to face the wide range of cultures, languages, lifestyles, and values of many classroom settings. Teachers may try to treat all students the same way, suggesting that this “colorblindness” is the best way to promote equality. Also explored in Nieto’s written review were most common characteristics of effective teachers in urban schools. These characteristics include a belief that all students are capable learners and an ability to communicate this belief directly to students. Kenneth Zeichner (2003) describes effective teachers as those who maintain consistently high standards for all students and did not blame students for failure. Instead, these teachers are aware that a lack of multicultural education negatively affects students and can cause students to exhibit indifference. In many cases, poor performance is not the result of an inability to complete the work but rather the manifestation of a lack of willpower. “If students do not believe they have the ability...it makes little sense for them to invest any effort at all in their learning,” (Nieto, 2004). When a curriculum becomes purely standardized and only reflective of the dominant culture in a society, students that are members of other cultures become more disengaged.

According to Sandra L. Mahoney and Jon F. Schamber (2004), cultural difference is often seen as a threat because it presents a challenge to an individual's ethnocentric view of the world. When exposed to diversity, one is forced to negotiate each intercultural encounter with an open mind and as a unique experience. Dr. Milton Bennett (1993), co-founder of the Intercultural Communication Institute, established a framework to explain the reactions of people to cultural differences. Known as "The Bennett Scale", this evaluative tool is organized by stages that indicate a particular cognitive structure, expressed in certain attitudes and behavior. The first stages are described as ethnocentric, referring to the fact that one's own culture, at this point, is experienced as central to one's reality. Ethnocentric stages begin with *denial* of cultural difference. Essentially, this is the avoidance of diversity by maintaining a sense of cultural isolation and disinterest in uncovering differences. The next stage, *defense*, is characterized by a notion of "us and them", which manifests itself as a feeling of threat in regards to diversity. People in this stage tend to be very critical of other cultures and may view their own culture as superior. In the *minimization* stage, people obscure and idealize deep cultural differences by clinging to the assumption that one's own cultural worldview is universal. In the last three phases of this scale, individuals enter the ethnorelative realm, meaning that one's culture is experienced in the context of other cultures. In the stage of *acceptance*, one acknowledges and respects the fact that there are many equally complex cultural worldviews. With *adaptation* to cultural differences, people learn about the perception and behavior appropriate to other cultures. One's perspective has been widened and communication is now shifted to effectively take into account other perspectives. In the final stage, integration, one's sense of self is expanded to include the ongoing in-and-out movement of different cultural worldviews. Among individuals in non-dominant minority groups, this stage can involve dealing with one's own cultural marginality.

Dr. Bennett's work in this nonprofit charity demonstrates a lifelong mission to fostering an awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity. This program serves both the international and domestic arenas through the development of products, workshops, and seminars that enhance global cultural awareness. Products such as "Diversafari: A Learning Adventure" can be purchased by sole proprietors or through school districts. This particular "Learning Map Program" is divided into modules that allow participants to define diversity, inclusion, and culture, while also learning about cultural values and differences in behavior, and differences in cultural communication styles. Workshops and seminars are directed towards both young students and professional teachers to enhance effective communication among diverse cultures (Intercultural Communication Institute, 2010).

By engaging in self-study, teachers can self-evaluate through a systematic inquiry of one's practice and by thinking more deeply about one's teaching style in relation to the students one teaches. Short checklists can be created to focus on the cultural relevancy of the classroom's visual imagery. From the standpoint of instructional practice, teachers must consider language use as well as behavior management techniques to ensure that they address the needs of a culturally diverse classroom. To assist culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, teachers can learn key phrases in a student's primary language. The structure of classroom activities should be varied so as to meet the needs of a wide range of learning styles. Instead of only engaging children in whole-class discussions in which some students may not feel comfortable to volunteer, the teacher can ask students to turn and talk to a friend. The type of classroom activities should also be varied to include small group work, independent work, and whole-class work. Different choices for demonstrating learning can be provided, including writing, drama, art, music, and building (Bickart et al., 1999). In conjunction with individual

evaluation, teachers must collaborate with colleagues and families so as to bring about potential programmatic change. Some schools have developed a Diversity, Equity, and Bias Taskforce (DEBT) to serve as the forum for collaboration within a district (Chen et al., 2009). Researchers have developed reflective tools that provoke thinking about attitudes, assumptions, and knowledge base regarding culturally responsive teaching.

Without a close bond between student and teacher, learning becomes impersonal and there is a lack of a foundation from which a student can progress. According to Mariana Souto-Manning and Jamie L. Dice (2007), a teacher's limited knowledge of a school's cultural community, as well as student demographics, can result in a deficit perspective that places barriers to the development of close relationships with students from diverse cultures. Effective learning is so deeply influenced by social mediation on the part of the teacher, along with contextual appropriateness for students. It is critical that teachers learn about the differing social and family dynamics and begin to comprehend the sociopolitical, historical, and economic contexts in which people from diverse multicultural groups are embedded (Chen et al., 2009).

It is important to reflect on the idea that "Equal is not the same", meaning that treating every student in the same way will not necessarily result in equality. In fact, it may actually perpetuate inequalities by denying the differences that exist among students. "Learning to affirm differences rather than deny them is what a multicultural perspective is about" (Nieto, 2004). An understanding of the function of culture comes from a dually explicit and implicit perception. "Language, rituals, tools, edifices, and arts are the explicit manifestations of the implicit beliefs, values, and orientations that define a culture," (Ramsey, 2006). In the early childhood classroom setting, play is a significant vehicle through which children explore differences and commonalities, thereby allowing them to create more equitable relationships.

The process of developing a positive cultural identity differs among children and adults from the mainstream culture and those from a culture that has historically had oppression and social biases directed toward it (Chen et al., 2009). A teacher's background and position in society can influence beliefs, biases, what one chooses to ignore or act upon, family values, the raising of children, and which behaviors are viewed as acceptable or unacceptable. "An essential first step in constructing curriculum that helps all children to succeed is to recognize that each child comes to school with a unique set of cultural and experiential influences that shape how the child learns" (Bickart et al., 1999). If teachers fail to recognize the cultural differences of students, then teachers also risk the formation of incorrect assumptions on which invalid assessment of academic performance is then based. "Expectations and cultural biases, both positive and negative, are likely to determine whether and how we establish a relationship with that person. First impressions can have a significant impact on how teachers get to know and develop a relationship with each child" (Bickart et al., 1999). It is essential that teachers go beyond this first impression to ensure equal and fair instruction and assessment. "Only when we acknowledge and accept differences and appreciate the ways they add richness to the classroom, can we develop a positive and supportive relationship with each child," (Bickart et al., 1999). Case studies serve as examples to demonstrate how easy it can be to form a misinterpretation of a situation when looking solely through one's own cultural lens.

Shirley Brice Heath (1982) conducted a five-year ethnographic study to examine the role of questioning in language and socialization to discover why a group of African American children, from a working class community in a moderate-sized city in the Southeast, seemed unresponsive to questions posed by white teachers. Through her research, she found that the primary type of question asked by the teachers was closed questions, or those that call for a

single, specific answer. Heath also found that in the children's community, questioning took a different form: questions focused on whole events or, when referencing objects, questions emphasized their uses, and causes and effects related to them. Many answers were accepted and most answers involved telling a story, describing a situation, or making comparisons or connections. Heath uncovered the underlying problem: these children perceived the questions asked by the teacher as "silly" because the teacher already knew the answer he or she was looking for. As a result, these students did not respond and the teachers assumed this meant they did not know the answers. Heath described the ways in which these teachers modified their teaching to meet the needs of diverse learners. They asked more open-ended questions and aimed to build students' repertoire of questioning strategies by incorporating tape recordings with picture books including both "closed" and open-ended questions in the classroom listening center.

A similar case of culture-based misinterpretation and subsequent miscommunication is revealed in the findings of Susan Philips (1972). She studied group participation in the classroom and compared it to group participation in the Warm Springs Indian Reservation community in central Oregon. She observed Native American students in classrooms with non-Native American teachers and found that the children were hesitant to speak during group lessons controlled by the teacher. However, these children were extremely verbal during interactions with peers. Philips suggests that a foundational rule in the classroom was unknowingly established right from the beginning – the teacher controlled who spoke and when during the activity and the student was expected to accept his or her authority. Comparatively, within the community on the reservation, no context existed in which one person arbitrarily controlled another's actions, specifically in regard to verbal communication. The children in the

classroom were clearly unfamiliar with the unspoken “code” of the classroom and subsequently, withdrew from teacher-directed conversations. As a result, the teachers misinterpreted this behavior and assumed that these students simply could not participate in class activities, thereby creating the potential for school failure and low self-esteem.

In order to resolve this problem, teachers on the reservation changed the dynamic of group discussions. They examined one factor affecting group participation, wait time, or the interval of time between asking a question and calling on a child for an answer. The amount of time a child uses to process an answer to a question can be affected by culture. Some children need more time to process information and organize their thoughts while others raise their hands almost immediately, sometimes before the question is even asked. In order to accommodate the needs of a diverse class, teachers need to be aware of wait time and use it effectively during class discussions.

Related to whole-class discussions, group sharing time is another situation that researchers have analyzed to uncover potential culturally-based misinterpretations. Sara Michaels and Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1979) studied the effect culture can have on children’s responses to sharing time in a classroom. They conducted this study in a first grade classroom in which half of the children were white and half were African American. They observed significant differences in student participation during a sharing time planned by the teacher to practice oral discourse. White students used a style called “topic-centered” storytelling in which the stories centered on a single topic. Whereas African American students used a storytelling style termed “topic-chaining” in which stories moved from topic to topic and focused on personal connections. As a white woman, the teacher was more familiar with “topic-centered” stories and had difficulty understanding the topic and story line of the stories told by African

American students. The teacher perceived the latter as “rambling” because she saw no clear beginning, middle, and end. She questioned students during their stories which often threw them off balance and interrupted their thought process. In terms of cultural influence, some families expect children to listen and respond only when they are asked to speak. In reference to sharing out, some cultures believe it is appropriate to talk about personal characteristics, while others perceive this as bragging. As a result of the cultural mismatch between the teacher and the African American children, more opportunities were given to white students for share time which provided them with more practice and feedback. With a greater understanding of the differences in story sharing as a result of culture, the teacher could have been more sensitive in her responses to ensure a comfortable sharing atmosphere for all students. All of these case studies illustrate the importance of understanding that cultural groups have various styles of communicating.

A teacher’s awareness and recognition of culture is affected by the steps he or she takes to learn about diversity in the school environment. One idea for the beginning of the year is to take a walk around the school’s surrounding neighborhood with other teachers or a parent who can point out areas of interest and introduce members of the community. Teachers should gather information about each child in his or her class directly from families, so that a clear team effort is established right from the start. To continue to learn about the interests and skills of each student, one can speak to former classroom teachers. Observation is also a key element in getting to know a diverse class. Informal one-on-one conversations can take place during arrival, snack time, and reading or writing conferences. Questions about what students like to do after school and on the weekend, who students enjoy playing with, and which activities they like to do for fun can shed light on how a student will function in the classroom setting. Throughout the

school day, anecdotal records can be taken while a teacher observes a student at work and at play, paying particular attention to behaviors, interactions, and communication skills (Bickart et al., 1999). These observations, when combined with active listening, can be an invaluable source of knowledge about each individual student.

According to Maja Bratanic's article titled "Nonverbal Communication as a Factor in Linguistic and Cultural Miscommunication" (2007), people generally make sense of nonverbal behavior by attaching any meaning at hand to unknown or unusual forms, creating in the process a lot of room for potential miscommunication. Our words, actions, postures, gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions, handling of materials, and the way we work and play are all affected by culture. Researchers use the term "communicative competence" to describe the comprehension and expression of actions and behaviors within an individual's cultural background. "When we fail to take into account the culture of each child we teach, we are in danger of reaching only those children who share our own ways of communicating and interacting.

Bickart et al. (1999) describe the idea that when communication between teachers and children fails, learning subsequently fails. Educators must look for ways to understand each child's actions and views of situations or tasks in the context of that student's culture. It is critical to learn about the expectations of students and their families in terms of appropriate behavior, goals for personal achievement, and valid measures of success. In one study, teachers misperceived Hawaiian children as not completing their own work or "cheating" whenever they sought help from another peer. In their home culture, this behavior was both widely accepted and highly valued. Children were accustomed to helping one another and being helped by siblings and peers. To meet the cultural needs of these students and make learning more

meaningful, teachers changed the classroom structure to include more collaborative learning experiences.

Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2000) describes an intercultural, or culturally competent human being as one who “possesses an intellectual and emotional commitment to the fundamental unity of all humans and, at the same time, accepts and appreciates the differences that lie between people of different cultures.” All children have the right to expect mutual respect, fair treatment, and equal access to experiences. Karen Cachevki Williams and Margaret H. Cooney (2006) explain that through multicultural education, teachers can encourage a willingness to learn about the diverse perspectives of other individuals. Educators can ensure the social and emotional growth of children from very diverse backgrounds by integrating early literacy skills and the arts to cultivate an appreciation of cultures in early childhood classrooms. Through reading, writing, and art, students learn to celebrate unique life experiences and discover that individuality and diversity can also unify a class. In order to ensure that lesson plans are based on culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers should critically evaluate all aspects of instruction. According to psychologist and theorist, Lev Vygotsky, learning occurs within the context of social interactions that engage the learner in culturally meaningful activities. The teacher must serve as the facilitator of these activities, responsive to the needs for assistance through scaffolding instruction for the development of specific skills.

Multicultural education can be defined, in the broadest sense, as encompassing all of the aspects of individuality encountered by young children on a regular basis that can potentially create stereotypes. Multicultural education is frequently mistaken for the “tokenism” that is merely the brief study of culture from an outsider’s perspective in the form of holidays or potentially stereotypical “traditions”. Cultures are sometimes studied only in respect to holidays

or only for a fixed period of time (Williams & Cooney, 2006). The term “tokenism” can be used to describe the practice of having children dress up as other people. For example, many teachers still incorporate stereotypical depictions of Native Americans in units of study surrounding the American Thanksgiving tradition. Instead of facilitating a culture study that only focuses on feather headbands, teachers and students can discuss the meaningful contributions of Native Americans, as well as the marginalization of Native American culture. Tokenism can perpetuate stereotypes by reducing a culture to a narrow lens through which it is viewed by the dominant culture in a society. In this way, culture can seem isolated and artificial in the classroom setting, rather than an integrated, all-encompassing part of daily learning. Learning about cultural differences does not just involve knowing small aspects of culture such as Cinco de Mayo in the Mexican American community. There is no way a teacher can learn everything about a culture because culture itself is a dynamic, ever-changing, multifaceted worldview. “A more promising approach is to be prepared to reflect on how cultural differences may affect student learning and to be open to changing [one’s] curriculum and pedagogy accordingly” (Nieto, 2004).

In a culturally responsive classroom, differences are not merely tolerated but rather, welcomed and celebrated, thus establishing an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance for all cultural identities. Culturally responsive teaching employs a pedagogy that integrates multicultural education into all practices and disciplines. In order to demonstrate cultural competence, teachers must stress respect for diversity in order to engage the motivation of all learners (Purnell et al., 2007). The learning environment of an early childhood classroom should be safe and inclusive so as to encourage self-expression and affirmation of diversity. Culturally responsive environments are important for students from the dominant cultural grouping because they should feel security, not superiority, in relation to others. For nondominant group members,

the goal is to be able to participate fully in both their home culture and society. With a confident identity, children of the nondominant culture can negotiate issues that may arise from the differences between their home culture and the dominant culture and learn to stand up for themselves in the face of injustice (Chen et al., 2009). In terms of curricula, social justice and equity must be placed at the forefront of learning objectives. James A. Banks (2006), professor and specialist in multicultural education at Washington University, defines content integration as “the extent to which teachers use examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline.”

In 1991, the Southern Poverty Law Center founded Teaching Tolerance, an organization dedicated to improving relations between groups, reducing prejudice, and providing school experiences to increase equality for our nation’s youth. Teaching Tolerance has created a magazine and curricular kits and provides free materials to teachers and school practitioners. This organization has also developed a national campaign called Mix It Up at Lunch Day, a program aimed at increasing inclusion within school communities. As described on the Teaching Tolerance website, “Mix It Up seeks to break down the barriers between students and improve intergroup relations so there are fewer misunderstandings that can lead to conflicts, bullying and harassment.” The website also includes resources such as diversity-focused lesson plans and activities, picture books, textbooks, class kits, magazines and ideas for professional development opportunities directed toward classrooms ranging from early childhood preschool settings to high schools (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011).

One’s identity is often shaped by the family members and other important people with whom one spends the most time. Lessons about families allow children to recognize different

family structures and compositions. “Teaching Tolerance” offers a comprehensive lesson plan for early childhood grades with a central focus on diverse families. The website provides key vocabulary that teachers can include when designing an input chart for students to reference throughout the lesson. The word “family” is described as “a group of people going through the world together, often adults and the children they care for”, a definition that allows for full inclusion of all types of families. Students begin the lesson by discussing the essential questions including, “What makes some families different from others and in what ways is your own family unique?” and, “How does having different kinds of families make the world and our classroom community a richer place?” After this discussion, each student is asked to brainstorm one thing that makes his or her family special and write it down on a sticky note. As a class, the sticky notes are discussed, differences and similarities noted. Next, students meet with a partner to share something their families have taught them. As an independent project, students paint family portraits that depict specific differences compared to other families. These portraits are shared as a final culmination activity and students are asked a closure question: “Did seeing your classmates’ portraits change your understanding of families at all?” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011). This is just one of many other lesson plan ideas that allow teachers to integrate culturally-responsive teaching into the classroom setting and weave the concept of diversity throughout all content areas.

From this idea comes the need to reform curricula so that they are culturally inclusive and contain content that does not omit or further marginalize diverse groups. The content within a classroom should serve to validate all identities in a way that is empowering, transformative, and emancipating (Allen, 2008). Classroom goals should be discussed with families so that a common understanding of “success” is established. Research has shown that the development

of early literacy skills can be negatively impacted by social stress and cultural ambivalence. Literacy learning occurs when students can make direct and personal connections to stories that reflect and validate each student's cultural identity (Bickart et al., 1999). It is essential that students see their own life experiences expressed and illustrated in the pages of multicultural literature. Culturally relevant stories and follow-up activities help young students grasp academic concepts by activating schema (Purnell et al., 2007). The multicultural story The Village Basket Weaver, by Johnathan London, can be used as a launching point for a discussion-based lesson on family traditions, one of the many influential components of culture. Teachers should read books to engage students in discussions about being respectful and ask questions that allow students to describe characters that demonstrate respect. Some books that deal specifically with friendships include Timothy Goes to School, by Rosemary Wells, Leo, Zack, and Emmie, by Amy Ehrlich and More Stories Julian Tells by Ann Cameron. Even when there is not much obvious diversity, teachers can expose students to diversity through books, posters, and videos. Visitors can be invited into the classroom. Discussions can focus on similarities and differences in an atmosphere where acceptance and respect are valued (Bickart et al., 1999). According to Thomas Lickona (1991), in his book titled Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility, teachers can serve as ethical mentors by providing instruction and guidance through explanation, discussion, storytelling, and corrective feedback when students experience conflicts. These transformative approaches can provide windows into a new realm of experience for children who may not have had prior exposure to diversity.

Multicultural literacy is an alternative to monocultural literacy which focuses solely on students becoming fluent in the dominant culture's language. Some researchers suggest that, at the very least, all schools should expect students to learn a language aside from their own,

become aware of literature and arts valued in other cultures, and develop a knowledge base about the history and geography other countries. Nieto (2004) writes, “Through such an education, we would expect students to develop social and intellectual skills that would help them understand and empathize with a wide diversity of people.” Multicultural literature is just one of the many ways in which culturally responsive teaching is put into practice within the classroom setting. Cultural competence enters the instructional sphere when teachers design lessons that build upon students’ prior knowledge and experiences. This allows students to construct their own knowledge with cultural identity as the basis for learning and exploration. Lisa Perez and Jennifer Judson (2007) suggest that, by integrating culture into the social studies curriculum, teachers can encourage students to foster an understanding of and respect for diversity. It is critical that teachers take steps to help students learn about historical people and events that represent struggles faced by diverse groups of people. In this way, students can relate to and better understand social justice issues while also building self-confidence. In one sample lesson plan targeted to elementary students, the following message is expressed as a learning objective: “We differ in many ways, but these differences are what make our world interesting and make us all unique. We each deserve respect, and we must respect one another. By understanding our own traditions and identities, we can better understand others,” (Perez & Judson, 2007).

In conjunction with reading multicultural literature, students come to know themselves and their world through expressive writing. In their book about inquiry-based learning as a mode of world discovery, Brad Buhrow and Anne Upczak Garcia (2006) discuss creative writing routines that allow students to bring forth individuality and establish a strong sense of self. Classes can engage in a daily or weekly project called “Class News” to report important events that have happened to individual students. By writing, reading, listening, and speaking, these

students have the opportunity to collaborate and express themselves in a way that affirms individual identities (Buhrow & Garcia, 2006).

Developmental psychologist, Howard Gardner's theory of "multiple intelligences" has implications for differentiated instruction that must occur in all classrooms to ensure culturally compatible education. This theory highlights the idea that "each human being is capable of several relatively independent forms of information processing, and each of these is a specific 'intelligence'." A student's strengths and abilities to solve problems are exhibited through these intelligences which include: logical-mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial, naturalistic, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. By accommodating and supporting the development of each of these intelligences, teachers can encourage students to develop critical thinking skills in response to social justice issues. "Gardner's research has demonstrated that individuals differ in the specific profile of intelligences that they exhibit, and these differences may be influenced by what is valued in their culture" (Nieto, 2004). This theory is particularly important because it acknowledges that intelligence can exist in many forms, not just the typically accepted types, namely book knowledge or ability to take standardized tests. Yet, it is also critical that assumptions or generalizations are not made with regard to certain cultures possessing certain intelligences. It may be true that specific cultures are highly developed in specific intelligences based on geographic location or political circumstances. However, conclusions should not be made that group all individuals into one intelligence simply because of the culture within which they identify.

Children learn from what they observe on a daily basis. One of the primary ways in which teachers can instill values of respect and positivity within students is through modeling this behavior. One should use the words and phrases that one would want to hear coming from

students such as, “Please”, “Thank you”, and “I’m sorry.” Role plays can also be conducted to illustrate how to handle peer conflicts in a way that is respectful and appropriate for all cultures. Teachers can use natural reinforcement to remind students about the importance of using respectful words. This can be done by helping children recognize the positive consequences of their behavior (Bickart et al., 1999). To solicit a response that will help a student express his or her perspective and effectively resolve a conflict, one can ask, “How do you think it makes your friend feel when you share your markers with her?”

The construction of a knowledgeable, confident identity can be viewed from one’s function as an individual and as a member within multiple groups (Chen et al., 2009). Every child should be encouraged to build confidence in his or her self-identity, develop meaningful interactions with diversity, and expand on critical thinking skills. This higher-level thinking can be a powerful tool for promoting skills that will allow students to stand up in the face of injustice. Epistemological psychologist, Jean Piaget, determined that young children exhibit egocentrism. This means that they have difficulty understanding that which is abstract or that which does not belong to them. This reiterates the significance of guiding students in self-affirming experiences that assist them in identifying and regulating emotions, relating to others in a positive way, and making friends. “Student of the Week” is a popular classroom tradition that allows each child to feel known and valued by the whole group. Each week, a featured student is randomly selected to be in the spotlight. Students get to learn more about this individual by asking “interview” questions to find out about particular interests and qualities. In some classrooms, students anonymously write down kind words and phrases that describe the “Student of the Week”. Once every child has been interviewed, teachers can create a book that includes a page dedicated to each student (Lickona, 1991). Teachers can also create a take home

learning bag so that families can view this book and learn more about the students in the class. “Researchers have found that there is a strong connection between social and emotional competence and academic success; children are more likely to succeed when they are aware of emotions in themselves and others, work cooperatively with peers, and use adults and other children as resources (Bickart et al., 1999). “Children’s affective needs – the need for cognitive, emotional, and intellectual safety – must be met in order for children to flourish academically. It is not unusual for children who feel insecure or socially isolated to shut down cognitively,” (Purnell et al., 2007).

Nieto (2004) makes clear the idea that multicultural education is not merely about developing a set of activities, materials, or approaches in a classroom. To ignore the moral and ethical issues that are directly connected to the need for change would be to engage in a superficial form of multicultural education. She explains, “The current conditions in our world call for critical thinkers who can face and resolve complex issues...in sensitive and ethical ways” (Nieto, 2004). She urges educators to utilize the talents and strengths of young students as a starting point for the development of critical thinking skills in regards to social justice.

Alongside the curriculum in a school, the classroom community should provide students with opportunities to engage in an ongoing thought process about moral behavior. Teachers can instill two very important concepts that stem from social justice: respect for self and for others, and a sense of responsibility for self, the community, and the larger environment. Character education guides students to explore how and why to be a moral person rather than simply forcing students to learn the “right” answers for morality. Children can learn to recognize and accept differences through working and playing with their peers. This is a forum that allows the teacher to facilitate the confrontation of bias, the value of respect, and the demonstration of how

differences can be resolved without verbal or physical abuse. The goal is for children to decipher moral choices and decisions that will guide all interactions and content learning (Bickart et al., 1999).

Thomas Lickona (1991) suggests the need for schools to return to teaching morals. He writes, “Children learn morality by living it. They need to be in a community – to interact, form relationships, work out problems, grow as a group, and learn directly, from their first-hand experience, lessons about fair play, cooperation, forgiveness, and respect for the worth and dignity of every individual.” Lickona uses Aristotle’s definition of good character – the life of right conduct in relation to others and in relation to oneself – as a foundation for the argument that wise societies have not just educated for intellect, literacy, and knowledge, but for character, decency, and virtue as well. This statement is logical in the sense that citizens who are educated in this way will be more likely to use their intelligence to benefit others, as well as themselves, thus achieving a better world. There has been controversy surrounding the idea of American schools teaching values. Lickona describes this cycle of debate as “pluralism” producing “paralysis”, resulting in schools attempting to remain officially neutral on the subject. However, in the face of escalating moral problems ranging from greed and dishonesty to violent crime, schools cannot be stagnant. According to Lickona’s research, the United States is the most violent country in the industrialized world, with homicide, rape, assault, and battery rates many times those of other countries. In a national survey, 91% of the responding teachers reported increased violence among children in their classrooms as a result of cross-media marketing of violent cartoons, toys, videos, and other licensed products. Lickona eloquently expresses, “Universal moral values – such as treating all people justly and respecting their lives, liberty, and

equality – bind all persons everywhere because they affirm our fundamental human worth and dignity.”

Empirical research has been conducted to answer the question: “Does a multifaceted values program, begun in kindergarten and sustained throughout a child’s elementary school years, make a measurable and lasting difference in a child’s moral thinking, attitudes, and behavior?” (Lickona, 1991). An example of a shift in the inclusion of character education is evident in a case study conducted in Winkelman Elementary School in a diverse community north of Chicago. This school initially reported serious problems with fights and put-downs among the student population. The school launched a project called Let’s Be Courteous, Let’s Be Caring to make a change. Photos were displayed in the hallways depicting acts of courtesy, whole-class discussions, as well as one-on-one conversations between students and teachers were conducted. There were school assemblies, citizenship awards, meetings with parents, and service projects in the community. Lickona discovered through assessment data and evaluative interviews that the school’s moral environment steadily improved as evidenced by a decrease in school fights and an increase in respectful behavior among children.

Another successful study was conducted to examine the effects of character-building programs in California schools. California’s Child Development Project supported by its Hewlett Foundation employed a team of research psychologists to analyze the significant differences in the following areas: classroom behavior, playground behavior, social problem-solving skills, and commitment to democratic values. Psychologists observed acts of helping, cooperation, affection, and encouragement in the classrooms. Outside the classroom, children were observed demonstrating concern toward others. When students resolved conflicts, they paid attention to the needs of all parties and created alternative solutions rather than engaging in

acts of aggression. Finally, democratic values were evident in the schools that utilized a character education program. For example, students actively expressed the belief that all members of a group have the right to participate in that group's activities and decisions (Lickona, 1991). Teachers in these schools effectively integrated social justice as a part of daily instruction by modeling concern and moral reasoning in response to any conflict. They established high standards for all students, which allowed students to build self-esteem.

According to Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (2003), positive school experiences greatly contribute to the resilience of children who have been exposed to stress or violence. By creating a warm, nurturing relationship with students, teachers can promote the formation of a positive cultural identity. Most teachers have not been trained to work specifically with students who have been exposed to violent behavior. In addition, schools in urban areas with high levels of poverty, continue to have the highest levels of crime, yet the fewest resources for combating this violence. For this reason, it is crucial that teachers establish trust with each student and promote teaching practices that address violence prevention (Dines & Humez, 2003). In response to the need for alternative conflict resolution techniques, teachers can implement constructivist approaches such as role-playing, research projects, and small group discussions that challenge students to negotiate cultural differences. "The critical element in the expansion of intercultural learning is not the fullness with which one knows each culture, but the degree to which the process of cross-cultural learning, communication, and human relations [has] been mastered" (Mahoney & Schamber, 2004). When a curriculum employs analysis and evaluation of cultural difference as an alternative to fighting or minimization, it yields significant changes in intercultural sensitivity development.

Developing a multicultural perspective connects reflection with action in the sense that students learn to think in inclusive and expansive terms that can be applied to real encounters with diversity. It extends far beyond the simplistic inclusion of culturally-based lesson plans and activities. Nieto (2004) writes, “If the purpose of education is to prepare young people for productive and critical participation in a democratic and pluralistic society, the activities, strategies, and approaches we use with them need to echo these concerns.” When students are encouraged and affirmed in their own cultural identities, they will be empowered to fight for change on a larger scale as they grow and develop into adult citizens of our society (Nieto, 2004). Whether debating a particular issue, developing collaborative programs, contributing to community-based written expressions, or organizing petitions against dangerous conditions, students will be able to use the critical thinking skills and the confidence they have fostered through multicultural education for the greater good.

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