Multicultural Education for Rural Schools: Creating Relevancy in Rural America

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The mobility of capital today has meant that unprecedented numbers of low-wage, low-skill jobs continue to be created in the nation’s rural areas, and these jobs are often filled by culturally and linguistically diverse individuals. As a consequence, many rural areas are becoming just as diverse today as urban areas. The changing demographics have prompted efforts to incorporate multicultural education into the curriculum of schools where ethnic diversity exists. However, research suggests that rural schools in homogeneous populations are more likely to hold negative views of multicultural education. This article examines the history of multicultural education and the many schools of thought within multicultural education for the purpose of developing an approach better suited to rural schools.

Introduction

How relevant is multicultural education for rural schools? A national study of 50 state departments of public instruction found that personnel from all-White school districts did not view multicultural education as important (Ayalon, 1993). Similarly, Fred Yeo (1999) found rural school administrators indifferent to multicultural education due to the absence of diversity in their student populations while more recent research links school size with principal’s perceived support for multicultural education. In their attempt to uncover attitudes of school administrators, Carlos McCray, James Wright, and Floyd Beachum (2004) found that secondary school principals’ support for multicultural education differed based on school size with principals in rural schools more inclined to have negative perceptions of multicultural education than their counterparts in urban and suburban communities. McCray, Wright, and Beachum (2004) found that principals in larger urban and suburban communities were more positive about multicultural education because larger schools meant a higher likelihood of having a student population that was more culturally and ethnically diverse.

Increased diversity in the school population has a profound effect on school’s attention to ideas and strategies associated with multicultural education. According to Harmon (2001) multicultural education has become the “hot topic” for rural areas experiencing a rapid increase in the racial and ethnic diversity in their student population. Examples of this are becoming more prevalent in areas once considered to be rural and homogeneous. One such community in the upper Midwest where the Hispanic population has grown to be the majority, the school district has implemented a dual language classroom where teachers teach using Spanish in the morning and English in the afternoon. Another large school district in South Dakota is now planning a Spanish only kindergarten that immerses the students in the language all day every day.

While changes are occurring in schools with increased student population, rural places without the “visible” diversity remain indifferent. Research by Ayalon (2003) suggests that limited attention to rural issues in multicultural education could be to blame for the indifference in rural schools. In his study of multicultural textbooks for teacher education programs, Ayalon (2003) found that the rural perspective was often missing in many of the highly regarded texts while the urban context was usually clearly acknowledged. In addition, white teacher education students from rural areas expressed concerns over the irrelevance of the multicultural education textbooks to their work in rural communities (Ayalon, 2003). Which begs the question; how relevant is multicultural education in rural schools?

Multicultural education is an important curriculum consideration in rural schools when students with a first language other than English enter schools districts. However, as often portrayed, it appears to be a curriculum fix for a student population “gone diverse” with diversity defined in the narrowest of cultural definitions; race and language differences. Herein lies part of the problem; diversity is limited to race matters. Nieto (2004) maintains that such a limited definition fails to consider the diversity
of social class, sexual preference, physical ability, and other human and social differences that exist in all societies such as the culture of rural. It may also be argued that “rurality” has been overlooked in the definitions of diversity. Atkin (2003) argues that “rurality” has a real influence on identity and behavior, and is thus better associated with a distinct culture. This offers insight to the dilemma of finding a fit for multicultural education in rural schools, especially for schools that, at first glance, seem to be lacking in diversity.

A look at the early years provides a starting point for understanding the current views of multicultural education and its relevancy for rural homogeneous school populations.

Multicultural Education: The Early Years

Long before the 1964 Civil Rights Act and even before the U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1954 in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, ruled that separate is not equal, signs of multicultural education began to emerge. The first schools established in Massachusetts and Virginia during the 1640s were not segregated institutions (Banks, 2001). However, by the 1800s discrimination in public schools had forced African Americans to develop their own schools, hire their own teachers, and create their own curriculum. Public funding for separate schools began during 1818 in Boston but it was not until after the Civil War that schools were segregated by laws created by white legislators. Problems for the African American population surfaced as the segregated-by-law schools often became defined by the unequal distribution of per pupil expenditures. Additionally, these schools were governed by the white majority who maintained control over textbook selection which ultimately resulted in the exclusion of any ethnic materials in the curriculum.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, African American scholars began to voice strong opposition to what they believed were unfair pedagogical practices. This marked the beginning of an ethnic studies movement widely considered to be the foundation of the current multicultural education movement. G. W. Williams, Carter Woodson, Charles C. Wesley, and W. E. B. DuBois fought to overcome the underrepresentation of African Americans in school curriculum (Banks, 2001).

A second larger and somewhat more widespread effort developed in the years following World War II when African Americans and Hispanics were brought into closer living and working conditions with one another and with the majority white population. Frequently tensions mounted as workers from different ethnic and racial backgrounds competed for available jobs and affordable housing. Educators responded by implementing what came to be called an “intergroup education” movement. Whereas the earlier ethnic studies effort had focused on student learning and self-esteem within the African American population, the intergroup education movement was intended to reach many groups, whites included. Proponents of the intergroup movement worked to minimize ethnic and racial differences and promote fair treatment for all people.

During the 1960s, a renewed interest in ethnic studies emerged emphasizing ethnic attachment, pride, and empowerment for minority students. They resurrected the work of earlier ethnic scholars in the United States and reprinted as much of it as they could. Additionally, a wealth of new writings describing the experiences of various ethnic groups were published during the 1960s and 70s. These works tended to expose victimization by institutional racism and discrimination, and they became catalysts to the creation of separate courses and programs in America’s institutions of higher education. Like the intergroup education movement, this second ethnic studies movement included Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and Asian Americans. The ethnic studies courses and programs at American colleges and universities provided students with the histories, cultures, and contributions of specific groups with the intent of promoting intergroup or interracial understanding and reducing, perhaps even eliminating, damaging stereotypes. In reality, however, course attendance was often limited to members of the group being studied and thus did little to promote cultural diversity nationwide. The limited success eventually led educators to the realization that students from the majority group needed to be included in ethnic studies courses. The inclusion of the majority group in this curricular effort marked the ascendancy of the current multicultural education movement.

Multicultural education is a movement that was developed to combat prejudice and promote fair treatment through curricular and instructional efforts. It was intended to provide ideas for building relationships across race and ethnic differences and was used when tensions flared or circumstances warranted its use. Thus, in rural areas where cultural differences are not in conflict, multicultural education, as once intended, is not necessarily a relevant curriculum choice. This rings true in rural schools based on the research by Ayalon (1993), Harmon (2001), McCray, Wright, and Beachum (2004), and Yeo (1999) as discussed earlier. Multicultural education must be inclusive of the many cultures, yet far too often it is perceived as a race or language matter without consideration to other characteristics that represent diversity. Gay (2001) has argued that although there are many different ways to approach the concept, experts in multicultural education agree that it “is a set of beliefs and explanations that recognizes and values the importance of ethnic and cultural diversity in shaping lifestyles, social experiences, personal identities, and educational opportunities of individuals, groups, and nations” (p. 28). Multicultural education is an educational movement without boundaries. It is not limited only to those who appear different or who speak another language, but inclusive of all cultures. For Multiculturalism
to become reality in rural homogenous populated schools, culture and cultural understanding must be recognized and integrated in the school day.

Cultural Understanding in Rural Schools

Culture includes patterns of thought, behavior, language, customs, institutions, and material objects unique to a group (Hoover, Klingner, Baca, & Patton, 2008). Yeo (1999) contends that understanding the concept of culture is crucial when proposing an understanding of multicultural education in relation to rural schools. In essence, understanding “culture” is critical to support the notion that multicultural education has a place in rural schools. A limited understanding can lead to the perception that multicultural education is strictly a race or language matter, and therefore, not relevant for classrooms with students who look and sound alike. Pang (2005) also believes that understanding the elements of culture is an essential first step to implementing multicultural education in any classroom. Far too often the term of culture in a classroom refers to something “far and away” rather than a concept to be realized within one’s own family and community.

Understanding culture is best learned by understanding one’s own culture and for rural students, learning about their rural culture provides opportunities for them to see themselves as multi-cultural persons and rural as part of the cultural diversity represented in the United States. It provides them with a sense of pride and belonging in the wider picture of American living. Teaching culture then becomes a starting point for students to understand the diversity that represents every individual, not just those who may enter the school building with a different skin color or first language. This offers insight to the dilemma of finding a fit for multicultural education in rural schools, especially for schools that are seemingly without diversity. Although a tall order for teachers to incorporate into their instruction these days, cultural understanding is an important starting point for teaching and learning as well as a basis for understanding the complexities of participating in a democratic pluralistic society.

Teaching about Culture

Culture is Shared

It is shared values and traits, beliefs and customs, ways of thinking and of knowing, and even shared ways of speaking. Most Americans can identify a southerner, for instance, or a New Jerseyite, a Minnesotan, a Californian, etc. Moreover, groups of people in different regions share a common vocabulary in addition to a common dialect. People living in rural America share a common language that is different than the language of urban America. Individuals in the same line of work share a common vocabulary that might not be understood by many outside of the profession. Teenagers share a common vocabulary that often leaves older generations powerless to comprehend. The shared quality of culture extends to all aspects of life—from what we say, to how we say it.

Culture is Learned

Its knowledge, values and beliefs are learned. It is not innate or something that comes naturally as a result of being born into a certain family, region, or religion. Culture is usually acquired quite unbeknownst to the individual. From the moment of birth, for example, an infant begins, albeit very slowly, to learn the knowledge, values, and beliefs of the parents as well as the hospital employees—nurses and doctors. The infant continues picking up cultural clues that provide a road map prescribing appropriate behaviors. Culture is learned experientially through direct contact with other members. In some cases, the knowledge, values, and beliefs have been passed on from generation to generation. Language, religious beliefs, attitudes toward nature and toward others, a work ethic, attention to time, and other components of the human condition are all examples of learned traits within a culture.

Culture is Adaptable

It is capable of change and able to adapt to new circumstances. During World War II, for example, cultural views regarding women’s roles in society changed drastically. With the men off to fight on the battlefields of Europe and Asia, working women, especially those who became employed in war-related industries, were readily accepted by members of the culture. While many women returned to the role of housewife following the war, cultural views related to women working outside the home were permanently altered by our need to adapt to the exigencies of war.

Culture is Dynamic

Culture is changing continuously, though sometimes at an exceedingly slow rate. At other times, however, the beliefs, values and traits of a culture can change very quickly. September 11, 2001, no doubt a day that will be remembered for generations to come, presents an example of the dynamic nature of culture. As a people, we became patriotic almost overnight. Billboards and signs, normally displaying advertising for consumers, changed to boldly display the words, God Bless America. Flags flew everywhere and even the local gas stations and mini-marts offered red, white, and blue ribbons to customers to display patriotism. Churches of all denominations held religious services with attendance rates doubling, even tripling. Feelings of empathy for the victims who had perished did not seem enough. People began donating money, and food, and many even donated their time and energy in the cleanup
efforts. For a time, the culture—the values, beliefs, and traits—changed very rapidly as a result of the horrendous occurrences on that day. People came together with shared values of patriotism and generosity. Culture is a dynamic system.

**Culture is Membership**

Everyone is a member of several different groups. Consider the various relationships or responsibilities one maintains. Memberships to different cultural groups do not carry the same weight, nor do they remain at the same level of importance over time. Some memberships are more important to an individual than others. Typical of culture, our memberships are continually adapting to environmental conditions and available resources. And, too, our memberships are dynamic in that one group membership might become very strong while another loses intensity. In other words, some associations with groups are short-lived while others remain strong over time. And, membership in one group always affects membership in another group, sometimes negatively. Teachers are encouraged to consider each student as a complex mixture of many subgroups which is a far more accurate description of a person or group than a larger generalization (Pang, 2005).

**Culture is Persuasive**

Our memberships in various groups do not exist independently. The values, beliefs, and traits of one group may sometimes conflict with those in another membership. Take for example students and their memberships to family and school. The behavior expectations of student groups are often at odds with those of parents, causing students to learn to live in two worlds. It is difficult to resist the persuasive power of culture to prescribe one’s behaviors.

Cultural understanding is an important starting point for teaching and learning yet within the realm of multiculturalism, there have developed many different theories and educational approaches. It has been thought of as an educational approach that provides opportunities for students of color to gain self-acceptance and find role models to emulate. Multicultural education has also been considered a method to expose White students to differences so that a spirit of acceptance, perhaps even respect, is attained and violence is eliminated. Still others perceive multicultural education as a movement that promotes critical and collective decision-making that leads to action for the betterment of all. Simply put, multicultural education means different things to different people.

Some of the different approaches to multicultural education were categorized by Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (Sleeter & Grant, 1994). From their research emerged five multicultural education approaches which for the purpose of this article are intended to serve as guideposts and goals for developing and sustaining a thoughtful and inclusive multicultural focus for rural schools.

**Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different**

The first approach is referred to as teaching the exceptional and culturally different. The goal is to provide curriculum and instruction that helps students assimilate the norms of the majority culture. This approach focuses on either developing programs or adapting instruction to help students who fall outside the “norm” acquire the knowledge and skills to fit into the dominant culture and become productive citizens.

Teaching the exceptional and culturally different approach is supported by two different types of educators: those who see minority students as deficient and those who see them as merely different. In the deficiency orientation, differences are viewed as shortcomings that need to be fixed so that the students are a better fit for the school, the classroom, the curriculum, and the teacher’s preferred teaching style. Followers of this view believe that deficiencies in the home life or in the student’s physiological and mental endowments require remediation. In this perspective, cultural diversity is viewed as a problem rather than a resource. Subsequently, teachers may have lower expectations for culturally diverse students and blame the victims, the students, for school failure. According to Sleeter and Grant (1994), “teachers who believe that some children do not come to school able to learn often give up on them or have low expectations for them” (p. 49). A burst of teacher expectancy studies during the 1970s and 80s provided evidence for this assertion.

The second notable approach to multicultural education is the human relations approach. The goals of human relations courses are “to promote positive feelings among students and reduce stereotyping, thus promoting unity and tolerance in a society composed of different people” (Sleeter & Grant, p. 85). Teachers using this approach attempt to help students recognize a common humanity and respect individual differences. According to Sleeter and Grant (1994), the human relations approach is “aimed mainly at the affective level—at attitudes and feelings people have about themselves and others” (p. 87). Therefore, integrating multicultural content becomes important so that students can see themselves in the curriculum and find role models to emulate. Advocates of this approach believe that it is equally as important that White majority students learn about other cultures so that they, too, recognize their responsibilities in a multicultural democratic society.

**Single-Group Approach**

The goal of the single-group approach is to assist students in recognizing and understanding why inequality exists between oppressed groups and the dominant culture and to encourage students to work toward social change to eliminate oppression. Separate units or specific courses set
the stage for presenting a curriculum consisting of the history, contributions, and struggles of a particular oppressed group. As was the case with early ethnic studies courses, the modern day single-studies courses seek to empower oppressed groups by providing accurate information about the groups and, more importantly, focusing on the effects of past and present discrimination on the group.

Proponents of this approach believe that democracy will be represented in our educational systems when the provision of multiple perspectives becomes standard practice in curriculum development. Visibility and representation of oppressed or marginalized groups in classroom materials not only provides students with new knowledge about the group, it also lays the groundwork for recognizing and confronting the negative effects, past and present, of stereotyping, cultural and institutionalized bias, prejudice, and discrimination.

The Holistic Multicultural Education Approach

Based on the premise that unfair practices and inequitable distribution of power exists which prohibits some groups from gaining access to opportunities, the holistic multicultural education approach seeks to empower schools by restructuring the organization and culture to promote equity. More specifically, they seek to restructure the school to promote the academic achievement and emotional growth of culturally diverse students.

This approach supports the belief that the teaching of values and beliefs for a multicultural society is a matter of changing the entire school ethos: curriculum, instruction, values, behaviors, and anything else that will affect the “feel” of the school. They argue that education is value-laden in that students learn what is, as well as what is not, valued by what they are exposed to, how long they are exposed to it, and whether or not it gets tested. Therefore, students hearing about diverse cultures or exposed to culturally diverse materials only on occasion learn that multicultural understanding is not important. On the other hand, and equally as important, students from marginalized groups who are not afforded equal opportunities to learn aspects of the majority culture fail to attain the knowledge and skills required to function effectively in society. Consequently, the voices of all, including the majority as well as the marginalized groups, must be granted a platform that extends throughout the curriculum and allows all perspectives to be heard and understood.

Education that is Multicultural and Social Reconstructionist

The goal of this approach is to deal directly with social justice by addressing oppression and structural inequality based on race, social class, gender, and disability. The assumption is that real change is not possible unless those directly affected are meaningfully involved in creating the change. Advocates for this approach believe that “individuals need to learn to organize and work collectively in order to bring about social changes that are larger than individuals” (Sleeter & Grant, 1994, p. 213).

Although many of the practices are very similar to those described in other approaches, education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist seeks to incorporate practices throughout the entire system so that students acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to begin constructing a society free of oppression and inequality.

Conclusion

Multicultural education, as experts claim, is good for everyone because it seeks to promote respect for differences in a society composed of different people. Yet, those opposing multicultural education claim that besides dividing the nation and taking the emphasis away from “relevant” school subjects, it promotes liberal ideologies over conservative values (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004). That multicultural education intends to promote one belief, or value over another is a damming misconception that fails to recognize the essence of multiculturalism which is to promote understanding and respect for differences. Then, too, in defense of rural schools, it is a huge oversight on those promoting multiculturalism to limit the rural perspective which, by the way, includes a long tradition of conservatism that is deserving of respect, too. So, where do we go from here?

Multiculturalism in rural schools has to be more than the assimilation of the exceptional and culturally different into America’s mainstream or dominant culture. It must take into account rural history, as well as the values and traditions of rural people. This is the culture that has eschewed rural life and created the unjust circumstances that currently define it. It has to be more than raising teacher consciousness regarding feelings and self-concept of students, though this is critical to a student’s ability to learn. And, it has to be more than a study of single groups since rural America is infinitely diverse as evidenced by the rising poverty rates and the increasing numbers of immigrants employed in low-pay, low skill jobs in rural America.

Multicultural education in America’s rural schools must be about understanding the different ways different groups experience and make sense of the world and then applying that knowledge to the circumstances that surround these schools. It must begin with issues and perspectives that surround their own communities in relationship to a global community. Poverty, increasing presence of corporate America, loss of revenue, loss of local businesses, and consolidation loom on the horizon for many rural communities. These community issues need to be studied in courses from social studies to mathematics for students to develop an understanding of how their own communities are
connected to a global community.

Multicultural education must also be pervasive, not only throughout the school but the community because of the very connectedness of rural communities to their schools. Students in rural schools need to see themselves as part of multiculturalism, respected and valued for the diversity they bring to the table. Finally, there must be responsibility on the part of those who look through metropolitan-colored lenses at what it means to be rural. Multicultural education will not find a place in rural education unless rural is found in multiculturalism.

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