

CASE 1

Bringing Diversity Into a Less Diverse Environment

Prereading Focus Points: The teacher investigates possible ways to expand his planned/designed curriculum by incorporating multicultural themes/topics. The direct implications of the taught curriculum derive from the identification and selection of instructional methods designed to promote student interest in these themes/topics, particularly given the circumstances of the teaching context and its larger community. Consequently, the teacher also ponders the issue of the transfer of multiculturalism-focused knowledge and skills into the community. One specific area of interest is community support and family involvement as a means to validate the choice for the multicultural themes/topics.

Level: High school

Content Area: Social studies

Setting: Rural

Spotlight on . . . Inclusion of multicultural themes/topics in the curriculum

Key Terms: Tolerance; stereotypes

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE TEACHER

Jared has been a high school social studies teacher for 6 years, all of which were spent in two different small, rural school districts in two Midwestern states. He graduated from a university in the same region of the country in December 1999 with a secondary education degree, a major in history, and a minor in social studies.

Jared entered college as a history major and during his sophomore year decided to pursue a teaching career. He was unsure about that decision until he entered his internship, and from that point on he knew he had made the correct decision. During his career he has taught U.S. history, world history, American government, world geography, integrated social studies, sociology, and psychology. In addition to teaching, he serves as a coach for girls' volleyball and boys' track and field.

Jared's current school, Hillside Senior High School, is located in a small town in the northeast corner of a Midwestern state. The school serves approximately 400 students, grades 10 through 12. It is a homogenous culture, as less than 1% of the student population is considered minority. The students are Caucasian, either Catholic or Baptist. Class size varies, with the average about 25 students per class. At this time, the graduation rate is 90%, including students who graduated from alternative forms of education.

The town itself could be classified as relatively self-sufficient. There is a small business sector in town and a local hospital. The majority of workers are either farmers or manual laborers. As a result, the majority of students come from working-class families, with little post-high school education. The number of single-parent households is quite high, and drug and alcohol abuse is a rampant problem among high school students. The community seems to be welcoming of those of similar heritage, but the same may not be said as far as ethnic minorities are concerned. Although it is predominately dormant, Jared has been informed that there is a local Ku Klux Klan chapter in the county. However, the neighboring community is renowned for its ethnic diversity, representing Mexican American, Jewish, and many Eastern European cultures.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE CURRICULUM

The state does not have a standardized curriculum, which allows individual school districts to develop their own curricula. That seems to promote curriculum development designed to flexibly meet student needs. Yet, with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in place, the reality is centered on accountability requirements expected to be met by the use of the State Test for Education Development (STED).

The school administration places a heavy emphasis on STED scores. The community judges the effectiveness of the school and teachers on the results of the test. As a result, the curriculum has become goal-oriented. School board policy mandates that all teachers should post their lesson plans online. Additionally, all teachers have to document how those lessons meet curricular requirements. In Jared's first year teaching at Hillside, the district purchased

new textbooks for the social studies department. The textbooks that were chosen aligned with the national benchmarks. The rationale for this decision was that these textbooks would prepare students for the STED.

However, the district intentionally developed the social studies curriculum to focus on big ideas, such as citizenship, technology, reading comprehension, writing skills, and communication. The curriculum allows for flexibility in terms of when and how these big ideas will be taught. For example, in 11th-grade U.S. history, Jared focuses primarily on the 20th century and the development of modern America. The other history teacher spends much more time on the late 19th century. Those two classes are not aligned chronologically, but they still follow the guidelines of the planned/designed curriculum.

PROBLEM

As a social studies teacher, Jared needs to provide opportunities for his students to discuss the wealth of diversity and its consequent impact on the American culture. Considering the wide range of microcultures that make up our diverse American culture in the 21st century (Banks, 2004), Jared thinks it is his responsibility to prepare students for responsible citizenship, with a focus on multiculturalism. Under these circumstances, it would be a matter of identifying ways in which to effectively teach diversity and the contributions of minority groups to the American society in an isolated, homogenous community. The building blocks to knowledge do not exist as his students possess little to no background experience with ethnic, religious, racial, or sexual minorities. The town is a relatively isolated community; consequently, mass media may be its only source of information related to such minority groups. Furthermore, the town does not have any educational resources to institute a multicultural curriculum. Finally, Jared is faced with the dilemma of altering the curriculum in a manner that might not directly meet the demands of the STED or NCLB.

PROBING QUESTIONS

1. How might multiculturalism be incorporated into the planned/designed curriculum in ways that appeal to both students and the community?
2. How might the students' families be included in teaching tolerance and challenging stereotypes so as not to create tension between school and home?

Tolerance is the ability to accept ideas, viewpoints, perspectives, or practices different from one's own.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

1. According to Banks (2004), the teacher must feel comfortable and knowledgeable in order to motivate students. Therefore, Jared has to be cognizant of the multicultural construction of American society in an attempt to justify to the administration and parents the importance and relevance of multicultural education in the community.

One of the flaws of the planned/designed curriculum is that it does not present contributions of minority groups in a cohesive, integrated manner. Banks (2004) uses the example of only mentioning African Americans during Black History Month. Hillside's social studies textbook falls into this trap by highlighting only one minority per chapter. Instead, by presenting curriculum in a flexible manner that implies high levels of student interactions with the curriculum materials, Jared could help students understand that culture is a combination of all ethnic groups. For example, if Jared's students were to do a reverse study of the history of popular music, they could see all the contributions made over the past century. They could start

Stereotypes are labels or categories applied to individuals identifying as belonging to a particular group, thus leading to isolation or discrimination.

with today's popular music—rap, country and western, and rock—and trace their developments back to turn-of-the-century jazz in the South. Students would understand that many ethnic groups have contributed to the popular music they know and like today and that modern-day rap and country and western are related. Once students have grasped this concept, they could investigate the origins of other multicultural aspects of the American culture.

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2. Sparking students' interest in multiculturalism would be closely tied to integrating their families into the curriculum. Most of the students feel the issue has nothing to do with them. Jared needs to create awareness- and empathy-building activities to help them understand the complex issues of diversity and tolerance. For instance, he could create situations where each student is a minority based on any number of features such as hair, eyes, clothes, or height. Based on these trait-based groups, students would interact with one another (across groups) in ways that are not as inclusive as they are used to, thus giving them an idea of exclusion and its affective toll on individuals. In parallel, students would be engaged in designing interviewing protocols involving their family members, from which they can complete a family genealogy. Students would discover their ethnic heritage, after which they would research their ethnicity and discover how their ancestors were treated by society. The final step would then be to find out about the various contributions

their culture made to the United States. Thus they would discover the active role their families played in the fabric of American culture and learn from each other. In an attempt to extend the impact of this multicultural awareness-raising activity, students could share their findings, in a format chosen by each one of them, with a live audience made up of family and community members, thus allowing for an exchange of ideas after the student presentations.

Once Jared is able to implement and evaluate these changes to his planned/designed curriculum, his next task would have to involve the school's other social studies teacher in initiating preliminary talks about expanding the process he uses. Along the way, school administration would have to be informed as a way to seek assistance in identifying resources that would render these schoolwide efforts effective. As findings emerge from the whole process, Jared and his colleagues could investigate appropriate ways in which to disseminate relevant information to the larger community. For example, the school could host a multicultural fair as part of the school year opening ceremonies.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

By restructuring his planned/designed curriculum to include aspects related to multiculturalism, Jared hopes to achieve three main goals. First, students' motivation and interest would increase by their investigation and research into their own heritage, intertwining family, community, and the greater American culture. Second, once students have gained an understanding of their role in society, they would recognize that the United States is a multicultural nation and all groups influence the shared culture. This would lead to increased tolerance, as well as the knowledge that the U.S. culture is continually evolving with the influence of diversity. Finally, over time and by constant involvement in school activities, the viewpoints of the community would change and become more accepting, as stereotypes would be gradually broken down.

POINTS TO PONDER . . .

Imagine you are teaching in a small community where there is not a lot of diversity. How would you initiate any conversation with your colleagues and/or school administration about a prospective plan of action designed to increase awareness and develop knowledge about multiculturalism? What would you do to accommodate these efforts by curricular changes that you could make? How would you engage the larger community in the process?

QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

Given the fact that there is no curriculum mandated by the state, how would you be able to support Jared's efforts to infuse multiculturalism into the social studies curriculum? How would you coordinate appropriate plans to engage the community in raising awareness about diversity in a rather homogeneous environment? What type of rewards system would you create to sustain such collaborative work done in your school?

IN-CLASS ACTIVITY

Form groups that have at least one person teaching social studies (this would be a preferred composition). In these groups, discuss the elements of an action plan that Jared could use to inform the district about his efforts to enhance his curriculum with activities and materials designed to increase student and community awareness about diversity. Create a T-chart outlining some of the problems (on one side of the T) as well as facilitators (on the other side of the T) Jared might encounter in his efforts to initiate a bottom-up approach to curriculum development at the level of his school district.

REFERENCE

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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