

Multicultural Education

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Multicultural education is a "politically correct" term that sounds straightforward but has multiple interpretations. Though most people agree that we all live in the same world, we may not agree how we value or establish priorities regarding learning about one another's history, lifestyles, contributions, traditions and attitudes and how (or how much) our schools should reflect the world's diversity.

WHAT IS IT? WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Multicultural education means more than just a curriculum or environment in which different cultures are occasionally represented as special or unusual. For an educational environment to become truly multicultural, it must not take a tourist approach but rather incorporate diversity and acceptance of difference into the core curriculum. In a truly multicultural educational environment, attention is given not only to the community's identity and the books and materials being used but also to the degree to which bias and anti-bias attitudes are being actively pursued. In her landmark books, *Anti-Bias Curriculum* and *Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism*, Louise Derman-Sparks offers insight into helping children examine both their own worlds and the larger world with acceptance and tolerance. She suggests that if children are to learn to recognize social bias and to develop strategies to create changes, they must be taught how to do so. And if teachers and administrators are to accomplish this important teaching task, they must be comfortable talking about differences of all sorts, including racial tolerance (and intolerance), gender bias, adoptism, heterosexism and other forms of societal preference. For many, learning to discuss differences frankly is a difficult process which involves confronting their own prejudices and "isms" while learning how to address such issues in constructive and non-oppressive ways.

In the absence of a proactive approach, education will support the status quo. Ours is neither a color-blind nor a difference-blind society. The only antidote to bias is acknowledgment, confrontation, and change. Unless schools give children the tools to talk about bias, children will assume that their schools approve of the biases children perceive in the world. For children who are of color, a school's failure to discuss differences will imply that their school, in some sense, "approves" of bias against them. It is difficult for a child to succeed in an environment that is not supportive. For white children, the implication will be that bias and prejudice in okay and not something with which they need to concern themselves.

LOOKING AT YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

Focusing on race, but understanding that the same issues apply to other aspects of diversity, parents can begin by assessing their child's school (or potential school) by noticing the people who populate the school. Are there people of color in the school community? Are they adults or children or both? Are they in positions of relative power or status? If the school's student population is diverse, how do children of color fare? Are they successful? Who are the top students in the graduating classes? Who tends to transfer out or drop out? If the student population is not diverse, why not? What about staff? Is the school a place where people of color feel comfortable and are invited to participate and succeed? Is race and culture something the school administrators and staff are comfortable talking about? If they are not, how will they talk about these matters when issues come up for your child? Have they given thought to how they handle racial slurs at school or in their community? Exploring these kinds of questions will begin to tell you whether the school is committed to creating an environment that is truly multicultural, or whether the school's administration is simply paying lip service to the PC terminology of "multiculturalism."

WHOSE PERSPECTIVE MATTERS MOST?

Sometimes, when asked about their attitudes towards diversity, educators will point to particular holidays or "ethnic" study units that happen once a year or for a special occasion. If your child is Latino, for example, and the only element of curriculum offering information about a Latino tradition is a "cultural" festival on Cinco de Mayo acknowledging Mexico's symbolic victory over the French in 1862, but not their independence from Spain (as is sometimes assumed), the school's implicit message to its students is that there is no other meaningful history, literature, or cultural celebration in Latino culture. To create a curriculum that is more truly diverse does not mean that a school must celebrate all holidays for all cultures. Instead, it means that multicultural awareness must not be pushed to the periphery of the curriculum. To be relegated to limited sections and "special" occasions marginalizes race and culture and reflects only a token sampling of the wonderful array of educational activities necessary both for those who embrace these issues at the center of our lives and for those who simply need to be prepared to live in a diverse world. Children will understand that what's "important" is reflected in the books they are assigned to read (are the characters all European in background, Christian, born to their families, etc.?) and the history they are required to know and understand. Do the historical and social attitudes reflect a white American point of

view about complicated issues such as slavery, World War II, and Indian reservations? Or does the curriculum include at its center the views of all the people affected and involved, such as African American, Japanese American, and Native American people?

WHAT ALL CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW:

- **That Heroes come from every Race, Gender, and Ethnicity.** Help make sure your child's school includes literature, images and real life examples that embody this principle. Adopted children of color need heroic role models that reflect them.
- **That White middle-class America is not the measure against which all other lifestyles must be compared.** Don't tolerate an environment in which mainstream or "normal" means "white." Don't allow your child, or any other child, to be held out as the one "example" of their race. It's only with exposure that tolerance and understanding can develop.
- **That things happen in life without regard to Race and Ethnicity, yet Race and Ethnicity are a part of every situation.** Race matters. Period. We are a race-conscious society and our children deserve and need guidance to learn how to negotiate that reality. Our children also deserve to create their own dreams, and should have the opportunity to become who they want to be based on what is inside them, not what is outside. This freedom of opportunity will emerge only when we teach the broader truth and expand everyone's point of view, enabling tolerance and inclusion rather than judgment and exclusion. Supporting our children means holding both viewpoints together without over- or under-emphasizing either one.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Selecting Books for the Classroom and the School Library

Just as most of us are gratified to discover characters in books who resemble us, whether in appearance or attitude or background or circumstance, many adopted kids love books that include adoption and children of color love to encounter characters who resemble them in obvious or subtle ways. For children, finding stories whose characters resemble themselves can be an exhilarating and transformative event. And not only can books parallel our experience; they can lead us to worlds otherwise unknown, offering us insight into unfamiliar ways, introducing us to new points of view. By exposing our children to the endless varieties of human relationships, we teach them not only about accepting others but about accepting themselves as well. So, in seeking books, please consider those stories that differ from your family's experiences — of adoption history, cultural and racial identities, family life — as well as ones that echo and reflect it.

Give Kids the World to Call it Like it is

Children need to learn to recognize racism, adoptism (the belief that "real" families are genetically linked) and all other "isms." If adults make the effort to point out such biases when they come up in reading, on TV, in music, or at the movies, then children will learn to recognize biases themselves and will feel validated by adult recognition of stereotypes that may affect the children and their friends. Children can learn to ask questions like, "What is wrong with this story? Whose feelings would be hurt by this? Who is this not fair to? Who is doing what in the story? Why are they doing what they are doing? Who is solving the problem? Who is left out of the

story? Who is being described incorrectly?" And the most important question of all: "What can we do about it?"

WORK WITH THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Many of us find ourselves participating in schools that may not be doing everything right but that wish they were. As parents, you can lend support while offering administrators and staff the opportunity to look at themselves in the context of racial and cultural awareness so that they can begin to make changes in your child's curriculum. Staff often respond positively to parent-led fundraising drives to support opportunities for in-service education on these subjects. You can increase the exposure available to your child at school by making a gift to the school of books reflecting a wide range of cultural experiences as well as characters who just happen to be of color. Finally, offer to help your child's teacher plan curriculum that include aspects of your child's cultural heritage; talk to the teacher about making more than a one-time presentation. Find ways to incorporate your child's cultural heritage into the whole curriculum, using literature, social studies, field trips and guest speakers to create interesting experiences and deeper exposure.

GUIDELINES FOR HOLIDAY UNITS

"... and the truth shall set us free."

It's great to be an American — but our history is a mixed heritage, filled with pride but also with shame. Your child of color deserves to be introduced to both sides of every story, particularly the stories surrounding national holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas and Independence Day, which are generally celebrated throughout the country from a white, Christian perspective. If they are to become informed and critical thinkers, children must learn both sides, preparing them to stand up for what is right and to resist repeating or continuing the injustices of the past or present. Schools and parents must help them understand that although the truth is not always pretty, we are strengthened when we know the broader truth and can talk about it.

THANKSGIVING

Tell the story of Thanksgiving from the perspective of Native Americans as well as from that of European immigrants, as Louise Derman-Sparks suggests: "Suppose you live in a house you love. Every day, your parents tell you that the trees, streams, mountains, and animals around you are your brothers. They teach you never to harm any living thing. One day, some strange people who look nothing like you come from far away on big ships. They have long sticks called guns that kill your brothers, the animals. You are afraid but your parents invite them in because all living things are brothers. Mom and Dad teach the strange people how to grow food and how to live in your house until one day, the strange people make your family leave your house, taking it from you and keeping it for themselves. Every year after your family has left, the strange people have a big party in your house. They call it Thanksgiving, and it celebrates taking your home away from you. How does this make you feel?"

CHRISTMAS

Children should know that although Christmas is celebrated as a national holiday, it really reflects a Christian religious belief system, which excludes Jews, Native Americans and people of other non-Christian beliefs.

FOURTH OF JULY

Let your children know that one out of every five Americans was a slave in 1776 and that America's declaration of independence from England did not change their lives.