

## **Diversity by Kirk Widra M.Ed.**

### **Introduction**

The following paper outlines strategies that teachers can use to handle issues of race and ethnicity in a diverse classroom.

### **About Strategies and Diversity**

There are many possible “strategies” for handling race and ethnicity in a diverse classroom, but true change comes from a change in perception which in turn changes culture. The challenge that multicultural education faces is how to help students from diverse groups mediate between their home, community, and the school culture. Students should acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively in each cultural setting. They should also be competent to function within and across other micro-cultures in their society, within the national macro-culture, and within the world community (Banks & Banks, 2007, pg.8). Perhaps the best overarching hope for true cultural change of perception in addressing the issues of race and ethnicity lies in the ideas found in Invitational Education.

Invitational Education is a theory of practice designed by William Purkey to create a total school environment that intentionally summons people in schools to realize their full potential. It addresses the global nature of schools, the entire gestalt. Its purpose is to make schooling a more exciting, satisfying and enriching experience for everyone involved in the educative process. Its method is to offer a guiding theory, a common language of improvement, and a practical means to accomplish its stated purpose (<http://eric.ed.gov>). This approach to education offers the opportunity for diverse cultures to come together and share what they have to offer in a clearly defined framework. It is vital that all students, parents, and teachers and staff feel that they are an important part of achieving the goals set forth by the school and education itself --and perhaps most importantly that it is in fact something that can be understood and accomplished-- as they are in many ways the “practical means” by which Invitational Education is fostered and sustained.

Invitational Education theory is guided by four propositions trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality. The propositions are further framed by the perceptual tradition and the self-concept theory. Invitational Education’s strength is found in these two points and positions itself well to directly address issues of race and ethnicity. Invitational Education believes that people are not influenced by events so much as by their perceptions of events. The perceptual tradition asserts the following,

- Each person considers, constructs, interprets, and then acts.
- Individuals view the world through personal and cultural filters.
- Behavior is based on individual perceptions.
- Perceptions are learned, so they can be reflected on and changed.

(<http://www.invitationaleducation.net>). Self-concept is also another important issue that is addressed by Invitational Education. Self- concept is defined as the picture people construct of who they are and how they fit into their perceived world. This point addresses the core issue that faces minorities in schools today. Research indicates that children come to school with many negative attitudes toward and misconceptions about different racial and ethnic groups. Research also indicates that lessons, units, and teaching materials that include content about different racial conditions can help students to develop more positive intergroup attitudes if certain conditions exist in the teaching situation (Banks & Banks, 2007, pg.21). To aid in creating and maintaining these conditions Invitational Education offers educators a way to identify if their actions are helping or hindering the development of an inviting environment by providing a common language. Invitational Education identifies actions and environments as intentionally disinviting, unintentionally disinviting, intentionally inviting, and the highest

level, the plus factor. Everyone functions at each level from time to time, but it is the level at which one typically functions that determines one's approach to life and one's success in personal and professional living. Invitational Education offers a concrete, practical, and successful way to accomplish the goal of education in our global multicultural community.

### **Implementing these strategies**

Employing several of these ideas within a diverse ethnic and socioeconomic population found in urban landscapes and surrounding areas across the country may prove highly beneficial. Due to the varied landscape today within education the level of preparedness of the students today ranges from functionally illiterate to gifted which presents several significant challenges. It is often a balancing act for many educators to present information in such a way as not to exclude the challenged students but not limit the more academically advanced students. In response to this educators could implement a student-mentoring program where they pair the more advanced students with the challenged ones. They are required to both write a reaction paper on their respective understanding of an assigned project. Then they are asked to compare their ideas and observations with each other and the class. Through this process the faculty and support staff guide their students to the realization that no two people see things in exactly the same way. They are then challenged to find an agreed upon way of discussing and defining the problem and then the subsequent plan to solve it. In some instances, students can be provided with a tool that frames this process more clearly. One such example comes in the form of an acronym that spells out DESIGN. D for define the problem, E for evaluate the issues, S for select a course of action, I for illustrate your idea verbally or visually, G for generate several possible ideas or solutions, N for note whether it is successful or not based on the definition of the problem and tweak or redefine as needed.

### **How effective are these methods?**

Initially many educators may find when they ask students to potentially reveal their ignorance to the class they meet with resistance. For that reason educators must begin with showing the students' projects they themselves have worked on that have been incorrectly defined and discuss with the students the reality of perceptions and miscommunications. They also must share with them their own feelings of inadequacy and fear. Despite this it is must be made known to the students many times one needs to rely on their skills (and faith) to readdress the problem at hand and see the project through to completion. Educators must be willing to share their experiences good, bad, or indifferent if they hope to create a sense of community needed with the students. Many teachers hide their fears of being fraudulent or concerns about not being thoroughly versed in their given subject matter. They should share that with their students, with in reason of course, and let them know they are human they make mistakes and their views aren't always right or appropriate to the situation. In doing so the hope is to develop more of an inviting rapport with students and let them know that learning is an ongoing process that has meaning and value. By modeling the behaviors they wish to instill they encourage them to share their experiences with each other and the class with more authenticity and that aids in building their self-image and ultimately their character.

Educators must not be naïve enough to think that this approach will work with everyone, but still be optimistic enough to see that it challenges the students' perception of the process if even for a moment. The hope is that students begin to see education is about self-realization, is sustainable, and has value. In doing so educators invite students to take that into their other classes and indeed their lives in the greater hope that they will gradually change society.

### **References**

Banks, James A., & Banks Cherry A. McGee (2007). *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives Sixth Edition*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley

Perky, William (2007). Invitational Education Abstract. Retrieved October 30, 2008 from <http://eric.ed.gov>

Invitational Education What is it?: Retrieved October 30, 2008 from <http://www.invitationaleducation.net>

### **\*Reflections on Diversity**

The preceding paper was chosen for how it relates to the greater whole of the body of work being assembled for the portfolio with regard to how leadership models can be used in the development of substantive change within school culture in addressing the issue of diversity. As previously mentioned, it is no secret that schools today are facing challenges like never before and that the need for leadership is now an imperative due to NCLB and alike legislation. Effective leadership is only possible when all the stakeholders are invited to take part in the defining of the school. Sadly the issue of diversity is typically more an issue of selectivity, which leads schools to exhibit all manner of disinviting behaviors that do little to further the creation of a positive school culture. Schools must take special care, with the help of strong leadership, to educate themselves on the culture within their own institutions, enter the invitational approach.

When diversity is viewed as the thing that threatens us rather than the thing that makes us stronger we by default are being disinviting. Diversity need not be divisive in fact it offers educators the greatest opportunity to aid their students in learning and growing. Educators must be aware of their actions and how that reflects on the culture of the school and by extension society. The objective is to allow students to feel and function as equals, perhaps for the first time, and begin to take a sense of pride in themselves and others who share in that equality. This is a difficult balance to strike and delicate to maintain. Educators must lead by example and create a culture around learning and civic responsibility where all stakeholders are treated fairly and equally but also must make their students aware of the realities they are likely to confront in their lives. This is indeed a challenge but it is education's duty to prepare students for this reality and to instill in them the desire for change, as Gorton and Alston remark, "power that is manifested through other people instead of over people" is the only way we will create true substantive change.

### **Reference**

Gorton, R. A., & Alston, J. A. (2009). School leadership and administration: Important concepts, case studies, & simulations (8th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

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