

Instructional Priorities in a Culturally Pluralistic School

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SETTING instructional priorities for teaching in a culturally pluralistic school requires the development of multicultural objectives in *all* schools and for *all* children. We live in a culturally diverse society. *All* classrooms reflect this diversity to some degree. The overall goals of multicultural education include preparing children to understand, to value, and to live in our culturally rich and diverse society. If we are to accomplish such goals, it is imperative that priorities be established. Otherwise our efforts will be scattered and ineffective.

As I work at educating teachers to teach effectively, I am constantly reminded that before they can promote and convey concepts related to diversity, they need specific kinds of preparation. The model in Figure 1 has served as a guide for training programs directed both to students and to teachers. This model represents a major factor, indeed,

in the preparation of teachers for classroom instruction. Therefore, the model itself, together with its immediate implications, can be considered the first priority.

I. *Train teachers to teach successfully in a culturally pluralistic society.*

This priority not only concerns itself with preservice teachers but is applicable to teachers in service as well. The model can be applied in planning programs for training teachers, as well as in developing in-service training programs. The order of elements has been found important for attaining the most effective results.

Stage 1. Acquisition. It is crucial that teachers begin to examine the concept of *culture*—the beginning stage for most teachers. Culture in this context is defined as follows:

... all the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people. It is a body of common understandings. It is the sum total and the organization or arrangement of all the group's ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

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It also includes objects they make—the clothing, shelter, tools, weapons, implements, utensils, and so on. In this sense, of course, every people—however primitive—has a culture, and no individual can live without culture.¹

This stage allows for the exploration of an individual's own cultural make-up as well as that of others.

Stage 2. Development. The second stage is intended to make clear to teachers/students that, given a positive orientation and exposure to culture, the appropriate philosophical responses should develop. I maintain that teachers will only implement a multicultural curriculum if they perceive ethnic groups and cultural diversity favorably.² It is essential that a philosophy be developed that is consistent with the goals of multicultural education.

Stage 3. Involvement. At this point in the process, the teacher and the student are

¹ Ina Corinne Brown. *Understanding Other Cultures*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963. p. 3.

² Gwendolyn C. Baker. "Multicultural Training for Student Teachers." *Journal of Teacher Education* 24:306-307; Winter 1973.

in classroom situations where they are expected to learn content and interact in ways that are compatible with diversity.

II. Teach the United States ethnic and cultural experience.

Too often teachers will prepare and teach units and lessons on a particular country, such as Africa, Japan, or Mexico, and feel that they have implemented a multicultural experience. To teach international education is not necessarily to teach a multicultural experience. If a teacher begins with a study of Africa or Japan and goes on to show the relationship between Africa and Afro-Americans or Japan and Japanese-Americans living in the United States, then the experience may be considered multicultural. The ethnic experience in the United States is unique to this country. All ramifications of this experience must be taught.

Students must be exposed to cultures that may or may not include ethnic groups and must be helped to understand historical reactions to these various cultures. For example, the cultures of women or of certain religious groups transcend ethnicity, but the treatment these groups have received in the

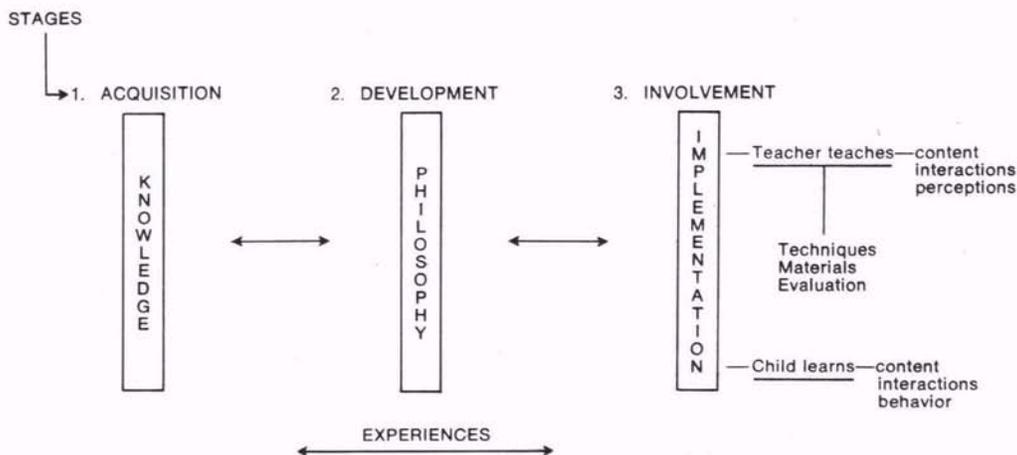


Figure 1. A Model for Training Teachers To Teach Multicultural Education

United States has been, in some respects, different from that of other countries. Racist behavior takes a form in the United States that is quite unlike discriminatory behavior elsewhere. Therefore, if we are teaching children to understand and value diversity, one of our priorities must be to reflect ethnic and cultural experiences in this country.

III. *Integrate ethnic and cultural content throughout the entire curriculum.*

This third priority is concerned with the organization of content. It is important for educators to realize that multicultural education involves far more than social studies. All subject areas can reflect appropriate content. In a "Methods for Multicultural Education" class that I teach, students frequently design relevant units and themes as an integral part of science, math, language arts, social studies, music, art, dance, and physical education. For example, dispelling myths and stereotypes about skin color, intelligence, nutrition, and the like can be approached objectively in science classes. Children need to experience various aspects of other cultures. Language arts can easily adopt this approach through integrated materials. All textbooks and tradebooks used should be multicultural in their verbal and pictorial content.

Learning about the various means of communication that are characteristic of specific cultures is helpful. Art is an area through which children of all ages can express what they have come to understand about other cultures.

As an overall strategy, creative expression in the arts should be closely connected with what is treated in other areas of the curriculum. In short, it is extremely important not to separate ethnic and cultural content from other parts of the curriculum. Separating the content can have the effect of perpetuating myths and stereotypes based on discriminatory practices rather than a genuine separatism based on uniqueness and diversity. The constant and central focus should be the understanding and valuing of diversity for the maintenance of our pluralistic society.

IV. *Make "individual differences" the basis for planning instructional techniques and classroom processes.*

The fourth and final priority is essential because it focuses upon each individual and expresses concern for the differences that exist between people. "Individual differences" refers to those mental abilities, physical characteristics, personality traits, cultural backgrounds, interests, motivations, behavioral and response mechanisms that make each person unique.³ If learning environments and experiences were truly planned around "the learner" rather than "groups of learners" only, multicultural education would be a reality in every classroom. Teachers in training will often ask how to teach certain groups of children. For example, in one of the mini-urban, field-based programs at the University of Michigan ("mini" because of school district size), students will often inquire as to "how they should teach black children."

My response is two-fold. First, become familiar with the black experience in the United States through the process outlined in the Priority I model. Second, consider each individual as a distinct, unique, and important human being. Once this is accomplished, the remaining task is relatively simple. The teacher or student teacher is then equipped to plan an appropriate process of instruction. It is crucial that children be allowed freedom to maintain their ethnicity and their cultural identities. It is essential that they be able to develop, both academically and socially, those capacities that enable people to function comfortably and well as citizens of their country.

The four priorities presented can provide ways through which the goals of education can become meaningful and relevant for all children. Multicultural education is a vital ingredient in the entire process of education and must be made an integral part of all learning experiences. □

³ Dolores E. Cross and Emilye Fields. "Influence of Individual Differences on Instructional Theories." In: Lindley J. Stiles, editor. *Theories for Teaching*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, Inc., 1974. p. 118.

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