

What Are Characteristics of a Culturally Pluralistic School?

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CREATING a learning environment in which all cultures contribute toward enhancing the experiences of every young person must be a primary goal if the school is to be successful. This goal is intricately allied with the goal of self-realization, that is, to exert every effort to help our young people accept each one's interdependence in an exciting community setting. When these components have been realized, then, we are indeed moving toward the development of a culturally pluralistic school. We are not seeking to create a Utopia. Cultural pluralism implies by its very definition the working toward positive utilization of the available human resources. The school then becomes a demonstration area. Our focus then turns toward identifying the characteristics of such a school.

Hanley Junior High School, in University City, Missouri, is our focal point. It is located in a rapidly changing community where dominance by one ethnic group has been challenged by new arrivals. "White flight" has emerged but community stability has also moved to the forefront. Maintaining a viable community is the generally accepted priority number one. In this setting, developing a school where cultural pluralism is a

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reality becomes a matter of survival. What then is to become the model that can best project utilization of our goals?

The model Figure 1 becomes operative when the following factors are carefully considered and applied:

1. *Behavior* implies the development of the rational powers of each child through the learning processes of skills which are both cognitive and affective.
2. *Person* implies stimulating growth through the recognition of individual dignity and potentials.
3. *Environment* includes creating a wholesome learning climate which is con-

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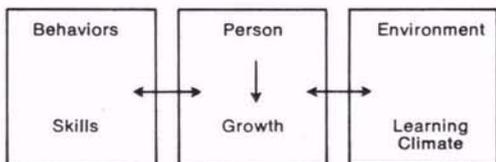


Figure 1. A Culturally Pluralistic Learning Model¹

ductive to openness, acceptance of self and others.

If this model is operational, we ought to be able to identify characteristics that will induce behaviors that when applied in the school environment, will produce positive growth in all persons in or associated with the school. We are not trying to reveal a simplified dream but are working toward achievement on a level that is both meaningful and manageable. The characteristics we develop must be appropriate for these mutually inclusive groups: staff, students, and other adults. Let's begin by assessing the school staff.

Persons Willing To Change

Over a period of six years, staff changes have resulted in retention of a nominal percentage of professionals committed to working in a culturally pluralistic environment. This enabled us to search for viable staff additions who were eager to operate in an open setting where problems are explored and alternatives are considered. In this school, the staff is directly involved in decision making. Every professional is a member of the steering committee and is entitled to make proposals to the group. Once the proposal is presented, debated, and approved, it becomes policy.

Commitment is exemplified by energetic persons willing to change. Teachers spend additional hours attending workshops that are self-analytical in nature, as well as those designed for curricular updating. Once a teacher develops instructional goals and learning objectives for the year, he or she is

¹ David C. Hunt and Edmund V. Sullivan. *Between Psychology and Behavior*. Hinsdale, Illinois: Dryden Press, 1974.

able to improve competencies through attending District Professional Growth Programs. Assistance in classroom implementation of these newly acquired facets of curriculum is available from administrators, curriculum associates, and department chairmen.

In bringing about change, the teacher draws upon the experiences of students, other adults, and self in striving to be responsive, creative, and impartial. Students meet with staff members at regular intervals to help evaluate current programs for both content and method. They are also taught how to develop curriculum. Many new offerings emerge as a result of this process.

In essence, each staff member becomes multidimensional. Individuals develop those elements necessary to promote a productive learning environment. Within this climate,

Knowing about the minority person's historical biography is important, but knowing him as he lives—how and why he thinks, behaves, and perceives as he does—is crucial to understanding and accepting the essence of his cultural identity.—Geneva Gay, Educational Leadership, December 1970

students become more accepted and are encouraged to participate in the instructional process.

A Pluralistic Student Body

Today's student body at Hanley is on the threshold of being a pluralistic society. Elements have been added from many socioeconomic areas, which include a variety of unique experiences. Given the opportunity, our young people are as creative as our adults, and adapt as the needs arise. Our student government is no longer a forum for the elite—it is made up by one elected and one selected student from each class unit. Meetings are open to all interested students.

This has resulted, for example, in accepting, as a project, the building of a school in Africa rather than conducting one of the traditional fund raising activities.

Students were actively involved in the successful campaign to increase the school tax levy, a two-thirds approval being needed. This documented our community's willingness to maintain quality education in a changing environment.

Students are encouraged to continue in their academic growth. Assisting peers in areas of general improvement is facilitated through the mathematics laboratory and the communications laboratory. Through our Child Development Program, students are able to be of service to our elementary school teachers and students. Within this setting, which is culturally pluralistic in scope, students have been able to transform the school environment by adding vivid art displays symbolic of youth in a changing society.

New programs have emerged because

they were student initiated and accepted by adults as viable additions to the existing curriculum. Two examples are: the Alternative Learning Program and the Human Relations Class. As the life styles of students in their learning environments begin to change, so do those of adults.

Parents and other adults accept the need to re-think some of the positions they have taken for granted that are now being challenged by the values inherent in a culturally pluralistic society. The functioning of the Parent Teachers Organization is moving from maintaining the status quo to being of vital assistance to the school. Parents assume active roles as volunteer assistants in the classroom, fulfilling functions compatible with current teaching and administrative demands. Parents are able to share their experiences and competencies with students, thus becoming acceptable models in today's school. This has been extended to include older adults as well.

Many students have been able to have contacts with adults and students whose heritage is different from their own. These contacts have enabled people to accept the contributions of a wide variety of individuals. Since staff, students, and other adults have interacted in the school setting, they are enabled to interpret the concept of school in the community. Here the effects of positive learning can be tested. Our expectation is not to change but to broaden understandings.

There are unlimited characteristics of a culturally pluralistic school. These can be as varied as the number of schools. Each school's uniqueness is a result of the composition of each community. The internalization of the characteristics is shown in many ways by the total society—students, school staff, and other adults.

A school that exerts continuing efforts toward creating an environment that is multi-ethnic in nature and culturally pluralistic in scope is one in which every member feels that he or she is an integral part of the community and is stimulated to respond to its never-ending demands. One is able to cope with the challenges of tomorrow by being prepared for today.

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