

# LEADERSHIP FOR MULTICULTURAL EXPERIENCES

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**L**EADERSHIP is the very basis upon which progress is founded. Without it effective change and reforms cannot take place. Leadership involving multicultural situations is especially significant in that it calls for an acceptance and recognition of ethnic and cultural differences. Acceptance and recognition to the point at which the differences are viewed as just that—differences—rather than deficiencies.

This kind of leadership involves a sense of personal commitment to bridging a chasm heretofore thought of as being unbridgeable. Some writers (Banks, 1970, 1972; Gay, 1973) feel that this sensitivity to differences can be attained by closely examining the attitudes and dispositions previously held with the idea of clarifying and giving new form to these behaviors. As teachers of children, how we project ourselves has a tremendous effect on how we lead children toward learning to live with themselves and others who are different.

The contributions teachers make to the development of children are very important parts of the educative process. The way they present themselves and the opportunities they provide, as seen by the students, have strong impact in themselves (Purkey, 1970). Leadership to this end is a real necessity.

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*Leadership for multicultural situations calls for personal commitment and great sensitivity to the value of differences. It also asks much of all who try to work together in a cooperative project such as the one described in this article.*

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Where must leadership happen? Leadership is multiphasic in nature and must happen at all levels of the total educative structure. In support of this theory, Loving (1972) contends that Americans are a rational group of people. He further states that, "Because we are rational we recognize that it is through curriculum that we must help the young people of America to understand the concepts of America. . . . As leaders in education, as curriculum developers, and supervisors of the process of learning, we have a responsibility to bring about the educational change in a realistic manner" (pp. 46-47).

Our schools are in the unique position of being able to bring into focus new leadership in the cultural domain. Schools house persons of every nationality and station in life. Persons whose heritages are as diversi-

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fied as the very colors of their skins. Indeed, we are a society of ethnically pluralistic people, and this fact is clearly reflected in our schools.

Donald G. Shockley (1975) speaks of overcoming the hindrances to ethnic pluralism by affirming the belief that this nation is composed of groups as well as individuals. He calls for a positive celebration of differences thereby clearing the way for multicultural acceptance. Loving (1972, p. 51) seems to be in agreement with Shockley when he says, ". . . the school has a responsibility, a responsibility to help children and young adults to understand the sub-cultures, to understand that these are all humans, that there are strengths involved in being part of any one or combination of sub-cultures."

Multiphasic leadership dedicated to effecting important and overdue reforms can assure that the curriculum is specifically designed to assist minority students in developing more positive images of themselves; and to help all students respect and accept ethnic and cultural differences as a part of the fabric of our society.

## Exploring Cultures

A Planning Committee at the Beechwood Elementary School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, felt that children should be continuously allowed to explore their own heritage as well as the cultures of other persons. This philosophy permeates the school, from the ABC's of Black History in kindergarten to the study of cultural anthropology in the sixth grade.

As a culmination of the celebration of Black History Week, students, parents, and teachers were encouraged to dress as their African progenitors had dressed. Although some of the teachers came from different ethnic backgrounds, they respected the heritage of the students by also dressing in African attire for the celebration. By their actions, these teachers said to the students, "I respect your heritage. I am different but have no inhibitions to wearing what you wear. I appreciate you because you appreciate you."

How important is leadership? It is im-



portant enough to overcome the obstacles brought about by a lack of understanding on the part of those unable to cope with this type of different experience. Likewise, it is important enough to aid children in learning to appreciate themselves and have pride in their race. As succinctly stated by Noar (1972), pride in one's self and one's race is the basis of a positive self-concept, without which a child is unable to find his or her identity and to function effectively.

Outside the home, who can better align himself or herself with a child than the teacher? Banks (1972) concludes that the most important variable in the learning environment of children is the teacher and, as such, the attitudes and expectations of the teacher have a profound effect on how children perceive, how well they learn, what they believe and how they feel about themselves.

At Beechwood School, a major effort was made to expand the quality of experiences that point up the diversity of our country. This involved an educational tour by a group of ten- and eleven-year-old children. Their teachers encouraged them to believe that they could travel some 2,381 miles between their home and Washington, D.C., and visit biomes other than their native one.



This bronze statue, visited by the students of Beechwood Elementary School, was sculpted by Robert Berks. The Bethune legacy to black people includes love, respect, hope, and responsibility.

To celebrate Black History Week, students, parents, and teachers were encouraged to dress in African attire.



As the class members began to plan and work for the trip, they were filled with much excitement and many doubts. Some students did not really believe that they could accomplish their goal. To them Washington, D.C., was a faraway, awesome, and powerful place. Each sixth grade class before them had taken a trip but none so far away as Washington, D.C. One class had spent a weekend in Texas to tour the Houston Space Center. Another class had flown to New Orleans, toured the French Quarter, and traveled by boat on the Mississippi River. And now their teachers were telling them that they would go to Washington, D.C. A major problem was financing this large undertaking in a manner that would be educational and non-disruptive to the operation of the school. Yet, more important, there was the task of instilling in the pupils a belief in themselves and their ability to accomplish a goal even when the goal seemed unobtainable.

### All Persons Are Involved

Leadership, to be effective and have depth of meaning, must involve every level of the educational setting. The children, their

parents, other teachers at the school, and the community at large were involved in this endeavor; this attempt to enhance the lives of children by making them deeply aware of their heritage in a multicultural society. The result was a lesson in determination and culture. Determination, because this venture called for dependability, dedication, planning, contacting businesses and people in the community, and learning new skills and crafts. The term culture is used because the professionally guided tour carried the pupils to many museums, monuments, and memorials of the many different communities they observed.

In class, they read and sang about the Smoky Mountains, the Piedmont, and the Shenandoah Valley. Seeing these places brought the songs to their lips again. In preparation for the trip they viewed films about the Smithsonian, the White House, and other sites to be visited. Thus prepared, they took tours of Arlington and the Washington Mall area. They learned, as they viewed its treasures, that they too owned the White House. Cedar Hill introduced them to Frederick Douglass, that outstanding 19th century Black man of many interests. Mount Vernon and a boat ride on the Potomac River gave them a view of a culture from the 18th century. At the Museum of African Art the creative heritage of Africa was presented. Mary McLeod Bethune's legacy extolling Peace, Progress, Brotherhood, and Love took

on new meaning as they visited her statue in Lincoln Park.

These and many other experiences helped the children to begin to focus on and to understand that America's many different hues must, of necessity, complement each other. Like the colors of the rainbow, each distinctive, with properties of its own, blending into one beautiful multicolored arch, so must be our America.

## Leadership at All Levels

Leadership must happen at all levels and in every walk of the child's life, particularly in those areas where he or she would not get this exposure were it not for the school. Leadership is important to the end that two teachers deemed it expedient to extend themselves and accompany their students on an extensive educational tour. Each child at Beechwood Elementary School could not have these travel experiences. Yet, through a multiethnically-oriented curriculum with leadership involving multicultural situations, all children can develop an appreciation for themselves and others who are different and human. Children must be taught so that they will readily recognize their worth as individuals and the worth of others, no matter from which culture they come. Quality leadership dedicated to attaining multicultural acceptance and recognition must be our goal.

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