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# Changing "The Way Things Are Done Around Here"

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*Through the Human Rights Education Program, teachers in Long Island's predominantly white, middle-class Shoreham-Wading River School District are teaching their students to see past the confines of their own cultural experiences.*

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Many teachers and students take their culture for granted, giving it little thought—it's "just the way things are done around here." Our challenge as educators is first to help ourselves and our students become conscious of our culture—to be able to step outside of ourselves and look at the habitual norms, values, and practices that make up our culture—and to appreciate it. The second task is to see that "our way of doing things" is not the only, or the right, way and to understand that others have their own ways. Such cultural consciousness helps us to value our culture without seeing it as normative, and to respect a variety of cultural experiences.

This is a particular challenge for the many school districts, like the Shoreham-Wading River School District in Long Island, that are predominantly white, middle class and Christian, where prevailing practices reinforce majority group experience.

At Shoreham-Wading River, we are attempting to affect staff and student attitudes, curriculum materials, awareness of cultural diversity, and power relationships so that those personal

beliefs and institutional characteristics that have systematically denied some children equal opportunity can be changed. Majority group member students can come to see how their cultural group perspective can help justify the status quo, rationalize inequality, and implicitly teach that change isn't needed. These perspec-

tives are what we are attempting to alter through the Human Rights Education Program in the Shoreham-Wading River School District.

## Human Rights Education

At Shoreham-Wading River, we plan staff development and classroom instruction to focus on these many dimensions of human experience—race/ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, physical ability, sexual orientation. Since culture is reflected in interaction and communication patterns as well as knowledge, staff development and classroom instruction focus on providing alternative patterns for student interaction. Our multicultural program, therefore, attends to process and content, affective and



*Shoreham students join friends from a Japanese-American school in a sing-along.*

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cognitive learning, and to interrelated aspects of culture (see Schniedewind and Davidson 1983).

The Human Rights Education Program seeks to create educational settings that (1) encourage students to understand and appreciate human diversity and (2) teach them the processes of constructive, cooperative human interaction and learning. The three focus areas of our program are: 1) Education for Diversity and Social Responsibility; 2) Cooperative Learning and Cooperative Educational Practices; and 3) Conflict Management/Resolution and Peace Education. All components of the program emphasize not only practical classroom strategies, but also teacher awareness of the philosophical, ethical, and social dimensions of the issues addressed.

The program was developed under the auspices of the Human Rights Curriculum Committee, a committee composed primarily of teachers, chaired by the Middle School Assistant Principal (see Pardo et al. 1988, for background). Our consultant gives summer and year-long inservice courses in human rights education. She follows up courses by working with teachers in curriculum planning and classroom implementation and, in some cases, by offering support groups

during the school year. Superintendent David Jackson gave the program new impetus last year when he wrote an open letter to students, staff, and community members after he found racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic graffiti in a high school bathroom. He reaffirmed the importance of understanding difference and urged both education and action to deal with the discrimination.

### **Program Components**

We offer eight distinct, inservice courses under three focus areas. The three courses under the "Education for Diversity and Social Responsibility" focus area are Promoting Race and Sex Equity in Teaching and Learning, Appreciating Diversity, and Teaching for Social Responsibility. These courses enable teachers to ask "Whose culture?" by encouraging them to look at their own and their students' cultural and social identities to understand better how these contexts shaped their lives. They then examine the common U.S. culture to understand both how it has been shaped by a complex interplay of diverse cultures and how its dominant institutions and values perpetuate inequality. They analyze curriculum materials, classroom practices, and schoolwide norms and also explore opportunities for social responsibility and change.

The courses under the "Cooperative Learning and Cooperative Educational Practices" focus area—Introduction to Cooperative Learning, Advanced Cooperative Learning, and Implementing Cooperative Learning—and the courses under the "Conflict Management/Resolution and Peace Education" focus area—Conflict Managers' Training Program and Conflict Resolution and Conflict Management for the Classroom—deal

with particular educational processes that enable diverse students to learn and live together. Cooperative learning necessitates that students work together toward common goals; in the process they come to value each others' unique experiences and contributions. Conflict resolution strategies enable teachers and students to welcome conflict—inevitable when difference is acknowledged—as an opportunity to increase interpersonal understanding and implement creative problem-solving. Some of the teachers who use conflict resolution approaches in their classrooms also participate in the Peacemaker Programs in two elementary schools and a Conflict Managers Program at the Middle School where they train students as peer mediators to facilitate solutions to student conflicts.

In practice we have found how important all the focus areas are to creating multicultural learning environments and how interconnected they are. For example, educators practicing mediation in Conflict Managers Training must listen carefully, paraphrase, and understand the feelings and points of view of those who are in conflict. Most teachers find such perspective-taking difficult, but this kind of practice is vital to understanding others' cultures. In mediation training, teachers come to see conflict not as a matter of right and wrong, but as a problem to be solved. They learn that a creative resolution can often be found when each party owns responsibility for the conflict and listens to the other. Understanding that all cultures share responsibility for problems militates against "blaming the victim" and helps people look systematically for each group's responsibilities for difficulties and conflicts.

The program emphasizes not only practical strategies for implementing

# The Legacy of Columbus: Teaching Resources Available

An abundance of materials is available to help teachers teach about the quincentennial of Columbus's voyage to the Americas. Two of these include *Rethinking Columbus*, a 96-page special issue of the *Rethinking Schools* newsmagazine, published in collaboration with the Network of Educators on Central America, and *Columbus: Encounter, Discovery, and Beyond*, one of IBM's major new educational programs.

*Rethinking Columbus* presents the Native American perspective on Columbus's voyages. Here is an unapologetically negative view of Columbus. "Our goal," states the introduction, "was not to idealize native people and demonize Europeans, or present a depressing litany of victimization. We wanted to encourage a deeper understanding of the European invasion's consequences, honor the rich legacy of resistance to the injustices it created, and convey some appreciation for the diverse cultures of the original inhabitants of the hemisphere."

*Rethinking Columbus* contains more than 50 essays, poems, interviews, and articles such as:

- "Columbus and Native Americans in the Classroom,"
- "Talking Back to Columbus:

Teaching for Justice and Hope,"

- "Why I'm Not Thankful for Thanksgiving,"

- "Myths That Bind Us: Stereotypes in Children's Literature."

Seven pages of resources, including an annotated bibliography and a four-page teaching guide are also included.

The price for single copies of *Rethinking Columbus* is \$4.00 plus \$2.00 postage, but prices fall if you order in bulk. For more information, contact:

*Rethinking Schools*  
1001 E. Keefe Ave.,  
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*Columbus: Encounter, Discovery, and Beyond*, exploits the capabilities of IBM's interactive multimedia and CD ROM technologies to bring presentations alive with text, photographs, music, sound, graphics, and video. The recommended configuration for the educational programs include an IBM Personal System/2 Model 57 SX or higher, a CD ROM drive, and a videodisc player.

Hollywood filmmaker and graphic artist Robert Abel produced *Columbus* for IBM. *Columbus* brings 60 of the world's leading authorities on Columbus and his times together

in a program that can be used for any grade, elementary through college. The content is presented in 10 chapters: "Discovery," "Columbus—The Man & His Vision," "The Voyages," "The World in 1492," "Money & Power," "Changing Views of the World," "Changing Views of Humankind," "The Renaissance," "The New World," and "Storylines."

Students can use a computer mouse to access a chapter through pull-down menus. They may pause in the midst of a textual presentation and pull down an on-screen "windowed video" explanation of a particular word or phrase. They can also branch from a quick overview of a subject to an in-depth treatment of that and ancillary subjects. For example, in the "Renaissance" chapter, a student can access a "Creators" subchapter, then study such Renaissance luminaries as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.

*Columbus* will begin shipping in June 1992. The license fee is \$2,000 with IBM's educational discount. For more information, contact:

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cooperatively structured learning groups in the classrooms, but also reflection about competition and cooperation as ideas and values that influence our lives, our schools, and society. Teachers read Alfie Kohn's *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* to become more conscious of the ways competition influences our cultures. We discuss how many females and people of

color hold cooperative values and prefer cooperative interaction patterns, and how the competition institutionalized in schools is, in fact, discriminatory (Banks 1989, Belenky et al. 1986, Nelsin and Kagan 1972). By raising these broader questions educators understand the importance of providing cooperative processes for multicultural education.

## Stages of Cultural Consciousness

James Banks wisely cautions that multicultural education is not something one does and is finished with but is, in fact, an ongoing process (Banks, 1989). At Shoreham-Wading River, it is the ongoing reflectiveness of teachers constantly asking of themselves and their students "Whose culture?" that sustains this approach to education. Below are examples repre-

## After reading an early English settler's account of sailing to and settling in America, students write the same story from a Native American perspective.

senting stages of cultural awareness and change, at both the personal and institutional levels, that typify our approach to multicultural education.

### Stage One: The Normative Nature of Culture

The first stage of cultural consciousness is development of students' awareness of the normative nature of culture. This includes both an appreciation of their own culture and an awareness of the reality that there are "other ways of doing things."

With pride, a 4th grade teacher tells her students, "I'm Italian and I can't be neutral!" When she relates her personal experiences and opinions with her students, as she often does, she describes them as her biases or her perspectives. This teacher not only shares something she appreciates about her own cultural background, but also models the importance of naming her view of the world as one of many.

As an initial step of a cross-school exchange, 6th-grade students from Shoreham's predominantly white, homogeneous Middle School write to pen pals in a New York City school where over 40 ethnic groups and nationalities are represented.

Shoreham students ask themselves, "What do we take pride in that we want to share with others from different cultural backgrounds?" In describing themselves in their letters to the New York City students, they begin a year-long process of cultural consciousness-raising.

In preparation for the exchange, 6th graders play a cross-cultural simulation game to sensitize them to what's helpful and what hinders cross-cultural understanding and interaction. Twice this past year, they visited the New York City school to spend a day, and twice the city students visited them in Long Island. This process helped some Shoreham students dispel the stereotypes they had previously held about "city kids."

The Middle School's Community Service Program also develops cultural consciousness. To prepare students for community service projects in local daycare programs, nursing homes, and schools for the handicapped where they will work with diverse populations, teachers discuss issues of communication with people of different ages with various racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds. All 7th graders in the Middle School are now taking a three-week course, "Cultural Awareness," an institutional commitment to exposing students to the mosaic of life experience.

Throughout the grades, literature plays an important role. Teachers and librarians receive the excellent catalogue from "Everyone's Kids Books" (1990) for ideas of multicultural, nonsexist books to enrich their classroom literature programs. In elementary and middle school book talks, students read books with characters of diverse ages and cultures. Several American literature classes have diversified their readings so as to include such culturally rich novels as *Women*

*Warrior*, *The Breadgivers*, and *The Bluest Eye*. With older students, emphasis on how cultural and institutional discrimination affects the characters is an important theme. In these ways, we try to highlight how our common U.S. culture has emerged from a synthesis of cultural components of many peoples in our society. This is important in validating Shoreham students whose cultural experience is not legitimized in school because the population is almost exclusively white and Christian.

### Stage Two: Critical Awareness

In addition to cultural consciousness, our approach to multicultural education aims to help students critically analyze ways in which the dominant culture perpetuates inequality and maintains the status quo. For example, students in an 11th grade American Literature class identified the many Native American geographical names that we take for granted. They discussed the mark native peoples' languages made on our language and, at the same time, how the cultures of native peoples have been erased from our collective cultural awareness. After they read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the students were moved and angered not only by the treatment of native people but also by the fact that they had never before been exposed to this aspect of America's history. Developing critical awareness of such omissions continued to be a course theme.

Students examine the ideal of the American Dream and then, also, its realities. For example, after reading an early English settler's account of sailing to and settling in America, students write the same story from a Native American perspective. They come to see that it is people who write

history and literature from their own cultural perspectives.

In one 4th grade, the teacher talks explicitly with her class about why the historical, cultural, political experiences of people of color and whites, women and men, and members of all class, ethnic, and religious backgrounds will be woven into their year-long studies. She explains why ideally there should be no need for Black History Month or Women's History Month because the labor, voices, and traditions of all Americans have shaped our shared culture. She further explains, though, that our textbooks, the media, holidays, and traditions often fail to reflect fully this diversity and she helps students analyze these institutional "shapers of culture" for bias. When students find information on our multicultural heritage that is not available in the books, they are taught to explain it as "missing pages." The ongoing discovery of "missing pages" continues to heighten students' critical awareness of whose culture is represented most consistently in texts, books, magazines, and the media. The book *Open Minds to Equality* (Schniedewind and Davidson 1983) offers teachers lessons for further developing such critical awareness.

The children in the elementary school Conflict Managers Program decided they wanted to name their peer mediation programs "Peacemakers Programs." They don't see themselves so much as "managers" of conflict as people helping others find peaceful ways to solve their problems. As part of their biweekly meetings with the coordinator of the program, peer mediators keep peace journals.

One boy asked, "Why is it so much easier for girls to write these journals and boys are more comfortable with monsters, violence, or war?" This question led to a wonderfully rich

nature/nurture discussion in which students analyzed how the sex role socialization in the prevailing U.S. culture encourages certain interests, ideas, and emotional responses in girls and others in boys. Reflection on their experience with nonviolent conflict resolution and its broader implications for peacemaking led students to a heightened critical awareness of the gendered nature of dominant cultural values and practices.

By reading Kohn's (1986) *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, teachers reflect on the ways in which competition shapes U.S. culture. Teachers have also used activities from Schniedewind and Davidson's (1987) *Cooperative Learning, Cooperative Lives*, a resource that helps students develop a critical awareness of the effects of competition and to explore cooperative alternatives to it. For example, teachers ask students to talk about the difference in their own experience in school when learning competitively and when learning cooperatively. They examine the benefits

and costs of each approach. Often they go on to urge more cooperative classroom processes. They examine literature for examples of competition and cooperation and discuss their respective effects on characters and events. In social studies, they hypothesize about the difference in historical experiences—like war—and their outcomes if cooperative values and practices rather than competitive ones had held sway. They discuss these questions in regard to their futures.

### **Stage Three: Things Can Be Different**

The third stage in our multiculturalism program is a focus on change. On a personal and a schoolwide level, students learn that things can be different. Small, but important, changes occur in the classroom. One foreign language teacher reports that she no longer hears complaints about who's assigned to which cooperative group in her classroom. Students know they're expected to work



Middle School Community Service volunteer Daniel Hahn shares an elder's memories at the Woodhaven Adult Home. Students in the program also visit daycare facilities and schools for the handicapped.

constructively with everyone and have learned to value others through the process of the group's work.

Complaints based on gender, race, or any other aspect of diversity are gone.

After elementary students listened to a particularly moving story read at a Peacemakers meeting, there was silence. Then a boy asked, "How many of us cried during that story?" and alone he raised his hand. After he had challenged gender norms in such a way, many other girls and boys raised their hands as well. Such small, courageous acts whittle away at the mythologies of the prevailing U.S. culture.

Peacemakers are asked to share conflict situations that can be used for mediation practice. At first, they share non-threatening situations, like cutting in line or having a ball taken. As trust in the group builds, however, they begin to suggest those tougher issues related to difference, like dealing with racial slurs and physical disabilities. As students work through these sorts of conflicts in a safe setting, they develop the skills and intentionality to act differently outside.

A primary teacher made a conventional independent activity into a cooperative one by developing "story starters" that cooperative groups of students had to finish. For example, "Pam is a student who uses a wheelchair and wants to play ball with others at recess. What can be done?" In later discussion, the teacher helped students apply their learnings from these scenarios to comparable sorts of situations in their lives.

Traditional school practices have also come into the focus of the human rights education program. In one elementary school, all 4th and 5th graders participate in a school play. This past year, students put on Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*. Teachers from a Human Rights Education summer course asked students to analyze the unjust school situation in

the play and the approaches to change reflected there. They then discussed with children ways to make changes in other systems that aren't fair. The children went on to research leaders of various cultural groups—Native Americans, African Americans, women—who have sought to change unfair systems. The play, a wonderfully cooperative experience itself, became the impetus for a broader understanding of social change.

Another 4th grade class was paired this year with a 2nd grade class. (Cross-grade activities in and of themselves challenge school norms regarding interage relationships.) One project was a Martin Luther King celebration. Fourth graders discussed the civil rights movement and then did research with their 2nd grade partners. When a 2nd grader asked, "Do you mean there were white people in that civil rights march?" the 4th grader could answer affirmatively and explain why. While learning about a potent example of an interracial struggle for social justice, students themselves were challenging the cultural norms of their school, feeling mutually empowered when they presented an interage show based on their learnings.

Christine Sleeter (1991) argues that student empowerment and multicultural education are inextricably linked. We aim toward such empowerment in Shoreham-Wading River. In a community that reflects the dominant culture, empowerment necessitates social responsibility. This year, we began a new inservice course, "Teaching for Social Responsibility," in which teachers reflect on approaches to encourage student social consciousness and social activism. We are hopeful that such action will not only empower students individually and collectively but will challenge the prevailing feeling among many

majority group students that change isn't necessary. In all our efforts, we hope to make "the ways things are done around here" much more socially responsible. □

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