Multicultural Teachers

Stories in Instructing Diverse Students

By ANNABELLE LOPEZ

American educators are being challenged to train an increasingly diverse student body. Due to changing demographics, the proportions of students from different groups will change radically in the near future. Close to one-third of the U.S. population today is nonwhite. But in most of the major cities, whites have become the minority and other races are now a majority.[1] "As of 1999," report Bauer and Shea, "European American students are the minority in the 25 largest school districts in the United States."[2] As a result, many "racial and cultural tensions have emerged in schools across the nation."[3]

What does this increasing diversity mean for teachers? Because teaching primarily involves communication, teachers and students trying to communicate from very different perspectives, worldviews, and life experiences will face a variety of challenges.

As James Williard Zackrison stated in his study on multiculturalism and the Adventist Church in North America, "cultural differences produce problems of communication, comprehension, disposition toward flexibility or rigidity in attitudes, group mores, sociology and cross-cultural training."[4]

The Seventh-day Adventist Church takes seriously Jesus' command to take the gospel to all the world. Education has played an important part in evangelism, and Adventist schools have been established in almost every part of the world. Because of the diversity of these schools, they provide a natural laboratory for teachers to experience the challenges of multicultural education.

Garcia's studies and observations show that in effective multicultural schools, teachers believe in the importance of communication between home and school and hold high expectations for their students.[5] Strategies like thematic instruction and small-group collaboration help diverse students achieve academically.

Students with limited English proficiency are more successful if both their native language and English are used for instruction.[6] By working together in cooperative groups, they tend to participate in more complex discourse and thereby not only learn English, but also have a higher level of achievement.

Low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority are barriers to learning. Strategies that help to increase student achievement also empower students and improve self-image.

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Teacher Survey

As part of my graduate study, I sent out questionnaires to all K-8 teachers in the North American Division (NAD) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church during the 1997-1998 school year.[7] Seventy percent of the 1,780 teachers responded. Their schools have diverse populations, with about 100 countries represented. Seventy-one percent of the teachers said that their classes contained students who were ethnically different from themselves. Twenty percent said they had no experience teaching in culturally diverse classrooms, nine percent had about a year of experience, 22 percent had two to four years, and 49 percent had had five or more years.

When teachers were asked whether they were interested in learning more about multicultural teaching strategies, 28 percent were very interested, 61 percent were somewhat interested, and 11 percent were not interested.

Survey respondents said lan-

guage issues (38.5 percent) were their greatest challenge in teaching diverse students. Being sensitive to students' needs (20 percent) came second, difficulties in dealing with parents (18 percent) was third, and learning barriers (17.5 percent) ranked fourth. About six percent of the teachers claimed not to have any challenges in this area.

Multicultural Experiences

In addition to the quantitative data, I also recorded teachers' stories and personal experiences. Such stories "develop cross-cultural understanding, help teachers to be heard, reveal the nurturing dimension of the teaching role, characterize important changes in our professional lives, and encourage more reflective practice."[8] Telling, retelling, interpreting, and reinterpreting their own stories and those of others are ways teachers connect with "present concerns and future goals," according to Mary Renck Jalongo.[9]

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Reflecting on what they have done can help teachers improve their present and future practices. Susan Karrer calls a teacher's reflective thinking the "active process of reconstructing or recapturing the events and emotions of a situation in a search to bring new facts and understandings to light."[10] By sharing my own experience and the experiences of others, I hope to inspire others to share their experience and wisdom.

Twenty-three years ago, when I began teaching, my training had prepared me for a one-grade, one-nationality classroom. But an international school was seeking teachers, so I applied to teach a multigrade classroom with grades 1 through 6. My 20 students that first year represented 10 nationalities. I faced overwhelming challenges and had no one but God to turn to for help.

My lack of cultural awareness sometimes caused misunderstandings. Once I was teaching a 1st- and 2nd-grade class in which most students did not speak English fluently. To improve their language skills, I used a lot of illustrations and examples. One day in English class, I was teaching a lesson on antonyms. "The opposite of *up* is *down*," I said. "The opposite of *in* is *out*." To illustrate, I placed two children by the door to show the meaning of in and *out*, and the meaning of "opposites." I was excited because this seemed to be working well, and I could use the students to illustrate the concept. I called two students up front to demonstrate *tall* and *short*. Then I saw two girls who were best friends—an African-American and a Caucasian. I called them to the front and said, "Christy's skin is dark, and Kathy's skin is light." I said, "The opposite of *black* is ______?" Then I waited until the children responded, "*White*." The lesson ended, and I forgot about it.

A few days later, a parent visited my classroom. He complained about my comparing his child to somebody else's. He implied that I was calling attention to his child's color. I told this father that I had no ill intentions and that I was not even calling attention to race—that the whole context of the lesson had been

antonyms. He replied, "We do not want you to do that again." That was my introduction to an understanding of racial issues in North America. To this African-American father, my choice of activity was a cause for concern. Because I was so naive, I did not realize that the activity would offend anyone.

Group Collaboration Strategies

Throughout my teaching career, I have enjoyed helping students learn through collaboration in group presentations. Before coming to the United States from the Philippines 10 years ago, I did not realize that research showed this technique to be a powerful learning experience for multicultural students. I use cooperative learning in my classes, and collaboration outside of class time to encourage students to interact more frequently, using dramas, choir rehearsals, field trips, and picnic outings.

Dimensions of Multicultural Education

James Banks suggests five dimensions that must combine to create a comprehensive multicultural education: (1) content integration, (2) knowledge construction process, (3) equity pedagogy, (4) prejudice reduction, and (5) an empowering school culture and social structure.[11]

Content integration happens when "teachers use examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations and theories in their subject area or discipline."[12] When dealing with money in math class, for example, I use examples such as dollars (U.S.), pesos (Philippines), yen (Japanese), won (Korea), and other monetary units familiar to my students.

Teachers can also try to make connections across cultural lines by using illustrations that most students are likely to understand and appreciate. In talking about whole numbers and fractions, I use the biblical concept of the Trinity. I say, "Although there are three Persons in the Godhead, they are one in purpose: 3/3 = 1." In music class, we discuss worship and praise. I point out the word "*Alleluia*" in songs and psalms, a word that most of my students seem to understand. I ask them: "How do you say 'Praise the Lord' in your language?" If they cannot translate it word for word, I just ask them to fit the words into a musical score (4/4 time). Students responded enthusiastically, pleased that their language and culture has been celebrated in class.

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To accomplish the "knowledge construction process," I help my students use reflective thinking to investigate ways that biases influence how they learn and construct knowledge. An example of one bias is students' perception that they can get by without mastering English. I use brainstorming activities in the classroom to help them discover reasons why it may or may not be important to learn English. Then we discuss their suggestions and reasons.

I also use out-of-school events as a motivation for cultural-social interaction among students and with the community. Through these activities, I have been able to help the students investigate and understand one another's frames of reference, cultural assumptions, and biases, regardless of the topic in which they are studying and constructing knowledge.[13] These are valuable learning experiences for the students, especially those who do not speak English.

Challenges in Diverse Adventist Classrooms

As part of the research for my dissertation, I asked Adventist teachers to tell me about their experiences in multicultural classrooms. The stories I have chosen reflect the three areas that the teachers in my survey considered most challenging. By sharing these stories, I hope that other teachers may be able to identify with the experiences and find some applications for their own classrooms.

Language Differences

Teachers who speak a language different from that of their students' families encounter communication barriers and must adopt appropriate strategies to overcome them. I interviewed one such teacher, Evelyn,[14] who described the challenge of teaching a Chinese student who could not speak English. She had to keep his attention and help him to master the 4th-grade classwork. "If a child is naughty, I have some things I can work with. If he's not motivated, generally I can do something to get a little motivation happening. But here's somebody I cannot work one-on-one with. This particular boy was not language oriented, so every step of the way was very hard," she said.

Evelyn felt frustrated because she found it difficult to provide what Banks terms "equity pedagogy," which calls for educators to adapt their teaching to ensure the academic success of every student, including those from different cultures and language groups.[15] In attempting to overcome the language barrier, Evelyn adapted to the child's needs by using

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gestures and other types of non-verbal communication to show her concern and encourage him to cooperate. Other teachers have used picture books and translation dictionaries and English-language videos with subtitles in the child's language.

Cultural Sensitivity

Teachers with diverse classrooms need to understand the cultures of their students. This will enable them to choose teaching methods and illustrations to which students can relate and that do not offend students or parents. This will require some research on the various cultures, as well as good home/school communication. Sometimes, teachers will need to ask for advice from parents and church members about the best approach to use. Where language is a problem, they may have to ask someone to sit in on parent/teacher conferences to translate and help families understand school policies, rules, and academic expectations.

Teachers who are concerned about being culturally sensitive show respect and tolerance for students' different experiences, feelings, and personalities. One teacher described how she made the school year better for a culturally different child. A mother complained that her child had been ostracized because of her background, native country, and accent. Since the 6th-grade curriculum included the study of other countries, the teacher redoubled her efforts to help the children see that a different culture could be just as good as theirs and perhaps better in some ways.[16] To reduce prejudice, she divided the class into groups. Each group was asked to choose a country and invite someone to make a presentation in class. The girl's group chose her country and invited her mother to speak. The mother brought some artifacts and told stories about the country's people and their ways. This presentation heightened the students' awareness and helped them become more accepting of one another's differences. The taunting diminished, and the year became a more positive one for the girl.

Rita, another teacher I interviewed, improved her cultural sensitivity after an experience with the mother of one of her students. She told how she reduced prejudice: "On the first day of school, I allowed everyone to choose a desk. One child chose to sit in the front. One day, when the mother came to pick her up at the end of the day, she was seated way in the back. She accused me of being prejudiced." This experience alerted Rita to watch for any signals from parents indicating a perception of bias. By reflecting on this experience, Rita has been able to modify her practices, addressing them from the parents' point of view. Instead of ignoring a situation, she tries to keep an open mind and show her willingness to listen to those who have a concern.

Survey respondents said language issues . . . were their greatest challenge.

Parent/Teacher Expectations

Positive family/school relationships are very important to children's academic success. Maintaining an open and understanding relationship with parents may be particularly challenging in multicultural teaching situations.

Susan has taught several students from diverse cultures. She described how challenging it was for her to meet the different expectations of parents and to communicate with them. She mentioned having to deal with "expectations of Asian parents that I'm not demanding enough from their children." On the other hand, she has faced the "expectation of Latino parents that I'm demanding too much from their youngsters." It is important, at the beginning of the school year, for teachers to spell out, in writing, their expectations of parents and students. This can help minimize misunderstandings and miscommunications. Keeping the lines of communication open throughout the year will also help to ensure good home/school relationships and academic achievement.

But what if parents do not speak the language used in the classroom? How can teachers keep them informed about events, missing assignments, and necessary paperwork? If someone at school speaks the parents' language, he or she can assist the teacher in writing a form letter in that language for the teacher to send home. Or the teacher can give the message to an older sibling to deliver to the parents.

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Awareness and Empowerment

"An empowering school culture and social structure" is the fifth dimension that Banks suggests for improving multicultural education. Teachers must be alert to what is going on around them, continually examining their grouping and labeling practices, sports participation, disproportionality in achievement, and the interaction between the staff and the students across ethnic and racial lines. This will ensure that the school culture "empowers students from diverse racial, ethnic and cultural groups."[17] Teachers can make this happen by constantly reflecting on their behavior—being aware of their own thinking and planning strategies that will empower all of their students and help them succeed.

Discussing different cultures and encouraging respect for and Christlike behavior toward every child, regardless of skin color or country of origin, will help students learn to live in a multicultural society.

Summary

Teachers in Adventist schools encounter a number of challenges in teaching culturally diverse students. Many of them have experimented with and found strategies to make their classrooms places of success for their students. Because "no one set of descriptions or prescriptions will suffice for all students of a given cultural background,"[18] educators must have a repertoire of teaching strategies that they can adapt to reach culturally diverse students. When teachers implement Banks' dimensions for a comprehensive multicultural education, they will create classrooms where students achieve both academic and interpersonal success.

Students will encounter cultural diversity throughout their lives. In preparation, schools can have them participate in school and community affairs, study about cultural issues, and learn to "identify examples of stereotyped thinking and prejudice in real life and in literature."[19] They will then not only be able to "identify a strong sense of their own self-esteem and express the need and right of all other persons to similar feelings of self-esteem," but also appreciate their own cultures and recognize the influences that have shaped their thinking and behavior.[20] ✐

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3. Mary Dilg, *Race and Culture in the Classroom: Teaching and Learning Through Multicultural Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), p. 2.

4. James Williard Zackrison, *Multiethnic/Multicultural Ministry in the 1990s With Special Emphasis on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America*. Doctoral Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1992.

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10. Susan J. Karrer, *Teacher Thinking and the Change Process: A Qualitative Study of Experienced Teachers Learning and Implementing New Models of Teaching*. Doctoral Dissertation, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1996, p. 13.

11. James A. Banks, *Multiethnic Education: Theory and Practice* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 8-16.

12. Ibid., p. 9.

13. Ibid.

14. All names of teachers in this article have been changed.

15. Banks, p. 13.

16. Ibid., p. 12.

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19. Pamela L. Tiedt and Iris M. Tiedt, *Multicultural Teaching: A Handbook of Activities, Information, and Resources* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), p. 20.

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