

BRIDGING THE GAPS

The Need for Multicultural Education

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exist "outside of
awareness."*

By Janice Watson

It had been a grueling day. Mrs. Smith welcomed the opportunity to relax and unwind. Reviewing the events with her husband, she mentioned her concern about Luisa: "I know she's bright. She does well in class. But she has no confidence, no self-esteem. All quarter long I have tried to teach her to hold her head up, look me in the eye, and answer questions in a voice above a whisper. She doesn't stand up for herself on

the playground, and the others tease her. It seems hopeless. I feel so ineffective."

Across town, Mr. and Mrs. Ruiz are also concerned. "I don't know what has come over Luisa," Mrs. Ruiz says. "She has become very disrespectful. Ever since we moved her to that new school, she has begun to throw back her head and stare adults in the face as she talks to them. The modesty with which she used to talk has been replaced by a loud brazen voice. Do you think we should pull her out and send her to another school?"

Is Mrs. Smith wrong to expect Luisa to act differently? Are Mr. and Mrs. Ruiz wrong to be concerned about Luisa's change in behavior? The behavior Luisa has learned at home is essential for her effectiveness within her community. However, it differs from the behavior she will need to function effectively in the community of which Mrs. Smith and the school are a part. As a result, everyone involved experiences frustration, confusion, and misunderstanding. Both Luisa and Mrs. Smith—as well as the other teachers and students in their school—need to develop skills to help them cope with cultural conflicts.

When a student behaves in an unusual way, we often rationalize: "He comes from a different culture. Their customs are not the same as ours." In this context, the term *culture* refers to the "sum total of ways of living including values, beliefs, aesthetic standards, linguistic expression, patterns of thinking, behavioral norms, and styles of communication which a group of people has developed to assure its survival in a particular physical and human environment."¹

Culture determines the way in which we gather or obtain food, what items we consider edible, where we eat and with whom, the utensils we use to transport the food to our mouths, and much more. If you questioned a person about behaviors in his or her culture related to gathering and preparing food, most could accurately describe the processes. They have learned this aspect of culture from overt instruction.

Most aspects of culture however, exist "outside of awareness." Rarely taught overtly, they are extremely difficult for us to identify. For example,

What is appropriate nonverbal behavior in an elevator? Where do people stand? What direction do they face? When do they speak and about what? How late is late? Does it ever change? Under what circumstances and after how many minutes are you required to apologize profusely for being late?

Each of the preceding questions has a definitive answer within a given culture.² However, it may take a few minutes for you to arrive at these

answers—even though you probably adhere strictly to the rules the answers suggest. In most cases, very little deviation from these norms or cultural rules is permitted within the society. Failure to conform to social norms results in sanctions ranging from frowns and/or ridicule to ostracism from the other members of the society.

Social norms vary from culture to culture creating a real challenge for

anyone who must function in several cultures. Failure to recognize the concept of culture causes insensitivity. If we fail to develop the skills to deal with cultural differences we will experience extreme discomfort when confronted with these differences. Such discomfort and misunderstanding often manifest themselves in avoidance and possibly in prejudiced behavior. One of the most effective ways to prevent the tragedies and

fiascoes caused by ethnocentrism and lack of cultural awareness is to provide our children with multicultural education.

Definition

What do we mean by *multicultural education*? "Multicultural education is a structured process designed to foster understanding, acceptance, and constructive relations among people of many different cultures."³

Effective multicultural education helps students become aware of their own culture—both its strengths and weaknesses. It also encourages them to see the advantages of other cultures and to regard each culture with which they come into contact as a source of learning. As a result, they come to see their own culture as neither superior nor inferior to others.

As they become acquainted with and accept the different contributions of other cultures to their lives and to the world in which they live, the ethnocentrism common to all children and present in most adults achieves some perspective.

In addition to providing awareness of and sensitivity to other cultures, multicultural education prepares students to function among members of other cultures by providing communication skills that allow them to interact effectively with people from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

Need for Multicultural Education in SDA Schools

Several factors make multicultural education imperative for children in our schools. First, our organization has a philosophical and theological commitment to the equality and the brotherhood/sisterhood of all peoples regardless of race, color, language, or culture. Our church manual expresses this concept forcefully: "Nor was there to be among Christ's followers any preference of caste or nationality or race or color, for all men [and women] are of one blood, . . . 'All men [and women] are of one family by creation, and all are one through redemption.'"⁴

Even if our beliefs did not mandate intercultural interaction, the diversity of students in our classrooms and the increasingly multicultural makeup of the church would urge us in this

Inviting guests from the community to share their customs and traditions can help encourage positive attitudes and make children aware of people of other cultures.

direction. Within the church in North America, the most significant growth in church membership is among minorities.⁵ In the world church, the percentage of total church membership from developing countries increases consistently from year to year.⁶ In fact, the majority of our church members now live outside North America and Europe.

In addition to the ethnic mix of our church, the mobility of our membership makes it inevitable that our students will eventually come into contact with members of other ethnic groups and races. In fact, they may already be sharing a classroom with them! For decades our church has joked about the "Great Advent Movement," when referring to the tendency of our members to move to different locales. Over the course of their careers, church employees often receive a number of "calls," each of which may require moving hundreds or even thousands of miles. Lay members frequently move to pursue better employment, improved lifestyle, or more acceptable forms of education for their children. This upward and geographical mobility forces our children to adjust to new cultures and customs.

In order to reduce the prejudice and the racial/ethnic tensions that have arisen and/or intensified within our world and even within the Christian community, Seventh-day Adventist children must receive effective multicultural education.

Benefits of Multicultural Education

Students who receive multicultural education better understand their place in the world. They feel more secure and develop stronger and more positive self-concepts than do those bound to a narrow ethnocentric view of the world. Viewing the nations of the world as intertwined and interdependent makes it easier for students to see the importance of service to others.

Multicultural education also helps in training students to serve the church effectively. The skills they learn prepare them to interact with and to witness to people of diverse backgrounds. They become ambassadors who can defuse racial/ethnic tensions and promote harmony. Such students will make effective future missionaries, overseas workers, and church administrators.

For those students whose future

service lies outside of the church structure, the benefits of intercultural training will be apparent in the careers for which they will be prepared. Many major businesses, required by legislation or circumstance to operate in a multicultural context, find that they do not have personnel effectively trained to meet the challenge.

Another, and probably the most important benefit results from schools' functioning effectively as multicultural units. Such schools provide a witness to their communities of the benefits of Christianity in action. Multicultural education helps our schools demonstrate the Adventist

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concept of the ideal community: a "world family" where all members interact with understanding and sensitivity.

Our Task

But how do we develop this sensitivity in our youth? We must begin by developing our own intercultural competence as teachers. Since much of multicultural education derives from the example we set, teachers need to demonstrate a basic knowledge of the contributions of minority groups in our communities and in groups represented by students in our classrooms. What have members of these groups provided to the advancement of knowledge or to more effective interaction among peoples?

We must evaluate and adapt the materials we acquire and/or develop for classroom use to ensure their suitability and appropriateness for multicultural classrooms. Materials may reinforce negative stereotypes, misrepresent reality, or ignore the presence of members from other cultural groups. This fosters ethnocentrism and prejudice.

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How we deal with language in our schools often indicates to pupils our view of their culture. To teach students to be sensitive to other cultures, we must recognize and accept the languages or dialects spoken in their homes or communities.

Through our attitudes, materials, and interactions, we will assist students to maintain and extend their identification with and pride in their mother culture and, by extension, in other cultures with which they come in contact.

Developing multicultural awareness and sensitivity can be an exciting journey of discovery for both teacher and student. The articles in this issue of the JOURNAL offer some ideas to help you embark upon this journey with your students. □

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¹ David S. Hoopes and Margaret D. Pusch, "Definition of Terms," in *Multicultural Education: A Cross Cultural Training Approach*, Margaret Pusch

ed. (Yarmouth, Vt.: Intercultural Press, 1979), p. 3.

² In the majority culture in North America, acceptable behavior in an elevator requires that the passengers face the front of the elevator, where possible, and look at the door or the floor indicator. One may discuss the floor, the building, or the weather with strangers in the elevator although this is discouraged. Raising personal subjects is unacceptable.

The working unit of time differs from culture to culture. "The working unit for the Euro-American is the five-minute block. An individual can typically be two or three minutes late to a meeting without apologizing. After five minutes, however, a short apology is expected. Being 15 minutes late, representing three units of time, requires a lengthy, sincere apology, or perhaps a phone call in advance." —Richard W. Brislin, et al., *Intercultural Interactions: A Practical Guide* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1986), p. 272.

³ Hoopes and Pusch, p. 4.

⁴ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (1976), pp. 26, 27.

⁵ Carl George, "Challenges Facing Adventists," *Adventist Review* (January 5, 1989), pp. 17-19.

⁶ See *Harvest '90: 125th Annual Statistical Report—1987*, compiled by the General Conference of SDA Office of Archives and Statistics, Washington, D. C.

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riculum. The questions listed below suggest ways to determine whether students are becoming more culturally aware:

1. Are students "multiculturally literate"? Do they show in conversation that they understand the main characteristics of their own heritage as well as the heritage of others?
2. Do students from various cultures express feelings of self-worth? Do they participate fully in the life of the classroom and school? Do they make disparaging statements about themselves or their peers that reflect poor self-esteem? Are students ashamed of or uninformed about their own cultural backgrounds?
3. Do students demonstrate openness and tolerance for persons from other groups and cultures? Are they inclusive in their choice of friends? Do they try to make persons of other cultural groups feel comfortable in the classroom or on the playing field?
4. Do students stereotype or generalize? Can they distinguish between myths and factual information? Do they identify cultural bias and distortions?
5. Are students able to work cooperatively with others of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in performing a variety of tasks? Do they share their faith with others in the larger society who come from different backgrounds?

The tested curriculum in this case consists of information primarily gathered through observation, as opposed to standardized written tests. The answers

can be used to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum in promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Adventist education approaches a new millennium in a time of unprecedented social and cultural change. What better legacy could it give to rising generations of students than the ability to understand the many diverse cultures that constitute a rapidly shrinking world? The curriculum in Adventist schools must be continuously examined to ensure that every student becomes multiculturally sensitive and literate. With students prepared in this way, "how soon the message of a crucified, risen, and soon-coming Saviour might be carried to the whole world!"¹⁶ □

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¹ Kenneth Wood, "P.S. on John N. Andrews," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (March 20, 1975), p. 2.

² Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 269.

³ Paul S. Brantley, Benjamin Bandiola, E. Stanley Chace, Charles Felton, and Eloy Martinez, "Position Statement on Human Relations," adopted by the North American Division Curriculum Committee (Washington, D. C.: North American Division Office of Education, 1985).

⁴ California State Department of Education, *Guide for Multicultural Education Content and Context* (Sacramento, Calif., 1976), pp. 6, 8.

⁵ *Education*, p. 269.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

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customs attached to the second language helps the student to comprehend the nuances of particular words and phrases.

9. Ensure parental education. This does not mean that the teacher of a mainstream classroom must spend time outside of school hours to teach the target language to the parents of the student. It does mean that the parents should be informed of the complexities inherent in second language learning, so their expectations will be realistic and achievable. Visiting the parents in their home environment can be helpful if the teacher seeks to make the parents comfortable about the visit, and does not convey a demeaning attitude.

10. Be aware of the nonverbal com-