

# Multicultural Education for Elementary Students

By Minerva E. Straman

**T**he soccer game at recess today included boys and girls from at least five cultural groups. The children played together as friends with no hint that anyone didn't belong. After recess, coming down the hall of the school I saw three second-grade girls, each from a different part of the world. They were holding onto one another as they talked and laughed together.

Such fellowship and acceptance do not occur by accident. Many children come to school with definite, ingrained prejudices that they have caught from important people in their lives. The subtle remarks and innuendos of authority figures do not go unnoticed by the younger set. Attitudes are caught, not taught.

To ensure that students in Seventh-day Adventist schools develop tolerance and respect for people dissimilar from themselves requires that we as teachers must examine our own prejudices. We must realize that the example of our words and actions become guidelines for our pupils' attitudes and actions.

The elementary school experience is largely practical, hands-on, sight-based work. Children learn much more quickly and lastingly by seeing and doing what would otherwise be theoretical knowledge. Especially is this true in the early, impressionable years when the basic concepts of life and values are initiated. This article offers some practical examples of multicultural learning strategies that teachers may use at the elementary and middle-school levels.

## **Celebrate Your Own Heritage**

1. Be proud of your heritage. If your ancestors came from a different back-

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ground, you should be informed and talk about, as well as display, the positive aspects of this heritage. Point out facts about the country, the flag, the foods, and the traditions that have contributed to civilization.

In my own case, both of my parents came from Romania to Canada, where I was born and raised. They taught all six of their children the Romanian language—how to speak, understand, read, and write it. Some of the foods and traditions in my home and those of my siblings are derived from Romania, and in recent years, each of us has visited the country of our parents. As I have taught, I have been blessed with a wealth of information about my heritage that I have been able to share with my classes.

## **Bulletin Boards and Displays**

2. Make bulletin boards and showcase displays featuring a country or culture that is important to the students in the school. For example, if a number of the pupils have an Oriental background, then the parents and children may, with the guidance of the teacher, display their flags, costumes, souvenirs, and items that

depict their heritage. The people making the display might spend some time with the classes describing the items so that the students will better understand the particular customs and traditions the items represent.

Make a "Jesus Loves Me" bulletin board in the hallway of the school. Include these words as written in various parts of the world where there are Adventist schools. The children may research the various languages, write to overseas schools for assistance, or ask relatives to write the words in their ancestral language.

## **Prepare a Parade Float**

3. Volunteer a collective school/Pathfinder entry for the local Independence Day town parade (or other holiday when such celebrations occur). This could feature students who have costumes and national flags, along with a banner naming the country represented. Parents and local church members can be called upon to help the children to gather up the necessary items to become part of the parade.

## **Music**

4. Have different grades learn the same song in various languages and then sing it for the adult Sabbath school or church. Children can talk to musicians and other members of the community to obtain songs and music.

## **International Dinner**

5. Sponsor an annual international dinner and costume program for the community or church family. Have the

children ask parents, the home and school organization, church members, and others in the community to assist in cooking or donating the food. A school fair may feature international foods at appropriately decorated booths, thus fostering intercultural understanding and raising money at the same time.

### Scrapbooks

6. Have the children collect pictures and articles about a chosen culture or country and make a scrapbook, featuring the country's similarities and differences from other lands and cultures. Old *National Geographic* magazines make excellent resources for this type of activity. Preparation of the scrapbook can be integrated into various subjects: Students can compose brief written or oral essays and write letters to children in the country being featured (English); research information about the culture, climate, and people (social studies); decorate the scrapbook (art); investigate Adventist mission work among the people of the country (Bible); and include recipes for ethnic foods or photos of items they have created with wood, yarn, or other materials (practical arts).

Most communities contain people who are native to other parts of the world. They are great resources for interviews on cultural traditions, religious backgrounds, and related areas.

After the report, in the form of an interview, has been videotaped, the scrapbook and tape will become treasured mementos for each student.

### Pen Pals

7. Begin a pen pal project. I well remember as a child a social studies project in my multigrade middle-grade classroom. The teacher assigned us to choose two countries (one in the Northern, the other in the Southern Hemisphere). I chose England and Chile, writing to the American embassies in each of these countries, which directed me to various sources of information as well as to a school of similar size to ours.

As a result, I received the name of a girl in each country. We exchanged detailed, informative letters and became self-proclaimed members of our country's ambassadorial offices as we sent carefully researched answers to the many questions of our pen pals. We exchanged photos, postcards, and souvenirs that were characteristic of our homelands and had a fine time sharing our experiences.

For many years I continued to write to these two young women. To this day my interest and curiosity is revived when I hear news of the two countries that became special to me in my early school years. What a significant project in cultural awareness this was!

Over the years, as I have analyzed the impact of this assignment, I have realized the great possibilities that it holds for today's schools. Students in modern schools have the benefit of cameras, cassette tapes, and even videos that may be creatively used to portray the important features of their culture to other children they contact. This is especially true of Seventh-day Adventist schools and Sabbath schools, which have the benefit of mission stories early in the lives of the children.

### Resource Persons

8. Contact missionaries and student missionaries from the local church or area who have served in foreign countries. They can supply the names of children with whom students may relate. Third graders in our school have corresponded with their peers in a mission school in Pohnapei. What an opportunity for build-

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ing friendship and understanding in our multicultural Adventist society!

### Service Programs

9. Make service to others an important priority at school. Everyday, in the local paper, one finds photos and articles relating tragedies and misfortunes that involve children. This affords children and teachers an opportunity to help in many ways.

Greeting cards can be handmade and stored in the classroom for these occasions. The children may even undertake projects to raise the money for postage. They can address the envelopes, write a personal message, and see that the letters are mailed. (This offers the additional benefit of encouraging children to write legibly and accurately.)

When the children have finished their regular class work, they can use their time to make cards, read the newspaper to find appropriate items; then they can determine the kind of card that would be appropriate. A committee of children can be assigned on a rotating basis to take care of this responsibility.

### Visitation Groups

10. Form visitation groups to follow up

on some of the contacts that result from the card project. Parents, Pathfinders, and others can be encouraged to form teams for Sabbath afternoon visitation. Groups should look for concrete ways to help those in need, such as providing food baskets or clothing, arranging transportation to doctors' appointments or social-service organizations. These activities will provide lasting benefits for both the children and those they visit.

The book *Child Guidance* tells us that above any other agency, service for Christ's sake in the little things of everyday experience has power to mold the character and to direct the life into lines of unselfish ministry. To awaken this spirit, to encourage and rightly direct it, is the parents' and teacher's work. No more important work could be committed to them. The spirit of ministry is the spirit of heaven, and with every effort to develop and encourage it angels will co-operate.<sup>1</sup>

### Study Christ's Example

11. Help the children to find instances in the Bible of the methods Jesus used in dealing with different kinds of people. He is our perfect Example as we seek to treat others sensitively and lovingly.

We must help students to realize that Jesus died for each person—no matter what his or her shape, size, nationality, or handicap. At the foot of the cross, all people are equal. Christ would have died for just one person—no matter how unworthy. When we understand this truth, we are better able to understand and to fellowship with one another as He did.

We should seek to follow Jesus' example of care and concern. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ; He bestows unstinting love on each of us.

"Christ recognized no distinction or nationality or rank or creed.... Christ came to break down every wall of partition. He came to show that His gift of mercy and love is as unconfined as the air, the light, or the showers of rain that refresh the earth."<sup>2</sup>

As we pray and share ideas concerning the multicultural education of our students, the Lord will guide and direct us so that His methods are used and His love shines forth in everything we do. □

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### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1954), p. 296.

<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), vol. 9, p. 190.