

## MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

# A Spiritual Imperative

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**T**he Seventh-day Adventist Church is commissioned to preach the gospel to the world and

make disciples of new believers. By extension, the worldwide Adventist school system has been appointed and ordained by God to educate and equip young people for His service in all professions, disciplines, careers, and vocations.

Ever since Pentecost, Christ's church has offered the world's best example of individuals from many people groups worshipping, living, and learning together. Multiculturalism is, in fact, a core doctrine of the gospel as reflected in the Great Commission. For many Adventist educators the "rainbow complexion" of their classes is proof that Christ's followers have the potential to become the church triumphant.

However, for some Adventist educators the internationalizing of Adventism is a cause for concern. They are frightened that

somehow the 27 fundamental beliefs of the Adventist Church will be compromised if these doctrines are expressed and practiced in non-Western ways. In fact, the rich diversity of Adventism confirms the divine integrity of the church's doctrines. As believers from new people groups join the global

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Adventist family, they accept our doctrines and make them meaningful within their own cultural experiences. Indeed, the globalization of the gospel is seen by some Adventist theologians as the highest mission of the church.

We therefore have a spiritual imperative to make our curricula reflect the multicultural mix of Seventh-day Adventist schools. This means that educators must learn and consistently practice cross-cultural communication skills. In their effort to deliver a quality education to all students, Spirit-filled educators must get beyond their personal "comfort zones" and strive to meet their students more than halfway.

### **Know Thyself**

To relate successfully to a diverse student population, educators must learn more about their own cultural and racial identities. Unfortunately, many teachers consider themselves just "plain Americans" or "native Nigerians." In reality, there is no such person. Every American's background and heritage are from someplace other than America, and every Nigerian comes from a

unique local tribe or group. Celebrating one's own cultural ancestry is essential before one can join in the celebration of another's culture.

This cultural appreciation must embrace both the infamous and the glorious aspects of one's birth or adopted community. Germans must not accept the Holocaust as the sum total of German identity, and Jews must remember more than the Holocaust. The great cultural richness and extreme cultural poverty of both cultures must receive equal consideration.

This inclusive attitude prevents a teacher from standing in judgment on the failures and successes of other people groups. There can be no genuine cross-cultural communication unless educators accept the fact that each culture is as inhuman and as benevolent as every other.

### **Tell Me What Is Good About Me**

Often educators need to make special efforts to teach students about their own cultures. Because many learners come from broken or dysfunctional homes or are geographically removed from their ancestral cultures, teachers must help them to discover the positive dimensions of their original family groups.

For example, American teachers of U.S.-born Korean students must take special care to incorporate instructional units on Korean literature, art, history, and famous leaders. Likewise, teachers responsible for educating the physically challenged must constantly inform these students about individuals like Stevie Wonder and Helen Keller, who have made world-class contributions despite their physical limitations.

### **The Universal Language of Love**

Because cross-cultural communication can be an explosive minefield of misunderstanding, educators must apply several universal rules for multicultural relations:

#### **Rule 1: Smile, Smile, Smile**

A smile that begins in the heart and flows

through one's mouth and eyes is universally accepted as a sign of approval and friendliness. Students of all ages and cultures are powerless to resist the self-esteem directed at them from a genuine smile. The teacher who does not smile readily and often becomes a mere reporter of facts and figures.

#### **Rule 2: Please Look at Me**

It is impossible for students to learn from someone who does not like them. Students can tell if they are liked by the way an educa-

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tor maintains eye contact with them.

When teachers refuse to hold proper eye contact with a student, they send one of several messages: (a) you are ugly, (b) I am afraid of you, (c) I don't have time for you, (d) I don't believe in you, or (e) you are not worthy.

It has been well documented that maintaining eye contact means different things in different cultures. However, a teacher can tell if students are actively learning by closely observing their eyes and body language.

#### **Rule 3: My Name Is . . .**

Since the giving of names is an important ritual in all people groups, educators need to learn the correct pronunciation of each student's name. The student's name is an essential component of his or her identity. It announces that this child is different from every other person on the planet. To call a student by name is a public statement that confirms the child's value and assigns him or

her a special place of importance and recognition.

Carefully studying and practicing the pronunciation of a difficult name is one of the highest forms of respect and self-esteem building an educator can provide.

#### **Rule 4: Touch but Don't Break**

With the increasing frequency of physical assault charges, many teachers have grown wary about touching students. However, a sincere and non-suggestive touch can communicate a great deal of positive self-esteem and encouragement.

A large amount of healthy hugging and touching is desirable between elementary teachers and students. As students mature, touching must be limited to handshakes and other formalized and accepted ways of touching. Regardless of the student's age, race, sex, culture or background, a properly understood touch always communicates warmth, acceptance, and respect.

#### **Rule 5: It's My Turn**

Because the classroom can be a very competitive environment, teachers of multicultural students must systematically schedule brief periods of private time with each student. This time can be used to ask about the student's family, hobbies, interests, or opinions. The more informal these private moments, the more special the student feels.

These "moments of insight" can occur on the way to the cafeteria or playground or before or after class. Teachers who interact with their students in non-school settings such as worship, work details, and recreation have unlimited opportunities to build lifelong friendships. Almost any moment when the teacher has the student's attention is an excellent time to build his or her self-esteem and sense of well-being.

#### **Rule 6: What I Meant to Say**

Every student comes to the classroom from a cultural setting in which he or she communicates effectively. Some educators insist on correcting a student's speech pat-

terns without understanding that the languages spoken and written in the classroom are considered by some linguists to be a second or foreign language to the student.

Students can quickly learn to speak “correctly” if they are not demeaned or made to feel incompetent. The teacher’s principal responsibility in a multicultural classroom is to help students express their meaning in one, two, or more languages, if necessary. One of these languages should, of course, be the language of the classroom.

### **Rule 7: Clothing Is Identity**

Students often dress in eccentric ways to communicate messages to their peers. The tilt of a hat or the way one’s jeans are worn are often stylized symbols of position, power, rank, or group affiliation. Teachers must encourage the wearing of clean and modest clothing while recognizing that many students believe they have little or no significance without the freedom to make fashion statements. This understanding is even more crucial in times when ethnic clothing is trendy and widely worn.

### **It’s Easy If You Try**

Providing wholesome multicultural learning environments is a simple process if

the educator realizes the spiritual imperative to make each student feel wanted, appreciated, respected, and valued. Moreover, educators who get beyond their cultural “comfort zones” will discover many opportunities to present the required content in new and exciting ways. Teachers who encourage multiculturalism will soon discover that learning takes place almost automatically be-

cause students always eagerly learn any curriculum for teachers they like. ☞

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