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Students and teachers from the author's school in Rehoboth, Massachusetts.

# BEYOND STUDY UNITS AND ARTIFACTS: CULTURAL EDUCATION AS A WAY OF LIFE

**C**afeteria tray in hand, Josiah Nokwa\* maneuvered his way to a table of college students. Newly arrived in the United States from South Africa, he looked forward to making friends. He introduced himself. Hearing his accent, students began to ply him with questions about his homeland. He told them about his

country's political situation, the geography of his home town, about his school, his family, and even the personal journey that brought him to America. Happy to be cultivating new friends, he finished his meal after the others had left the table.

Looking for the same students at the next meal, he found no space at their table. He greeted them and joined another group. The scene repeated itself a number of times. Sharing this experience with me, he said he answered the many

BY JEANETTE BRYSON

\*A pseudonym.

## *Helping students feel comfortable about cultural differences is a challenge to the educational community.*

*has big eyes, but doesn't see a thing.*<sup>3</sup>

Students need to learn how to look at an event through the various *lenses* of the people affected. They need to be encouraged to share from their own perspective, while asking questions of the broader community. Being at ease with different cultures will better prepare them to function successfully in a shrinking world. Rather than merely learning how to *survive*, through a confluence of multiple experiences they will acquire the tools needed to *thrive*. Reflection helps these educational and cultural experiences become a way of life.

### **Reflection and Analysis**

In his book, *The Enlightened Eye*, Elliot Eisner presents four dimensions to aid in this learning process: *description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics*.<sup>4</sup> Most units of study in the school environment do no more than offer an account of what has happened—*description*. Sometimes the teacher explains the lesson's meaning by putting it into context, giving an accounting for the *event* studied. Interpretation requires far more. "To interpret is to explain, to unwrap, to explicate. It requires decoding the messages within the system."<sup>5</sup> Evaluating the experience means determining its significance—reflecting on the effect of the learn-

#### **Eisner's Critical Analysis Formula:**

- **Description**—an account of, visualization
- **Interpretation**—an account for, explanation of meaning
- **Evaluation**—discernment, appraising the experience
- **Thematics**—practical applications, connections

ences—required learning to get a grade, a temporary solution to a curriculum requirement. The end product? Students who can identify some facts about various groups of people—what they look like, where they live, and what kinds of products they export. Such students can say a few words in another language and answer questions on a test, but they have not seen through the eyes of the people studied. They have not applied their learning to their own lives. The person different from themselves is still a stranger.

**H**elping students feel comfortable about cultural differences is a challenge to the educational community. To see others as having value, students must have a secure sense of self and acknowledge their own views as valid. They need to learn to accept that other people have a right to do things in different ways. Whether studying an ethnic group or meeting a person, they must be able to see, interpret, evaluate, and apply what is positive and appropriate, using God's standards rather than their own as the measuring tool.

### **The Stranger Has Big Eyes**

The first step in moving from lecturing about facts to interactive learning is to provide an emotionally healthy environment. At the 1997 ASCD annual conference, Daniel Goleman, author of the best-seller *Emotional Intelligence*, referred to the many research studies showing that a person's IQ predicts only a small part of classroom performance—ranging from four to 20 percent. However, recent studies have shown that emotional intelligence predicts about 80 percent of a person's success in life.<sup>2</sup> Students must be self-confident, self-disciplined, and motivated in order to understand the feelings of others. The *climate* of the classroom must be conducive to shared learning. Each student must feel that his or her opinions are respected.

The second step is to teach students how to analyze their perceptions. Understanding that there are various lenses through which one can see the world means recognizing and accepting one's own lens as well as learning about other points of view.

An Asante proverb says, *The stranger*

questions because of his confidence that his turn to ask questions would come. It had not. The students had satisfied their curiosity without sharing of themselves. He was seeking friendship, but he felt like a cultural artifact.

James P. Spradley in his book *Participant Observer* defines cultural artifacts as "the things people shape or make from natural resources."<sup>1</sup> Josiah felt like an object, some *thing* dusted off with a fine-bristled brush and studied in order to gather information—a temporary curiosity.

Students around the world have thought it a great advantage to study in America, where many cultures come together. Yet, in the U.S., the educational system has so separated cultural units of study that people from other lands and ethnic groups become mere objects of curiosity.

Cultural units, international food fairs, world literature classes, language study, simulation activities, field trips, mission projects, and many other cultural activities are encapsulated learning experi-

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ing. Analysis is the basis for reflection because experiences vary. Some will be *non-educational*, mere exposure that has no effect on the life of the learner. Some will be *miseducational*, and misdirect the student. Others will become *educational experiences* that foster growth, nurture curiosity, and impact students' lives.<sup>6</sup>

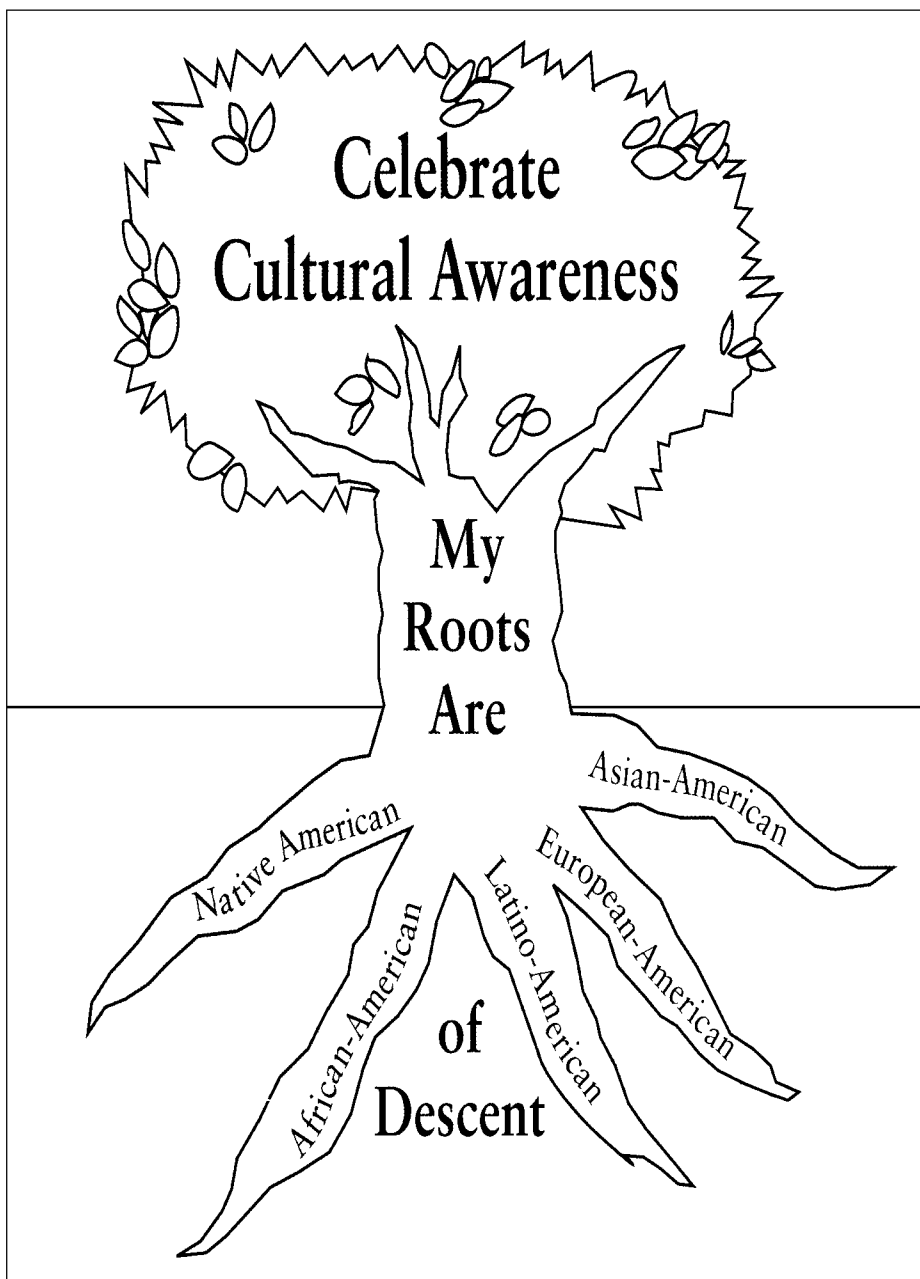
After students describe, interpret, and evaluate an experience or event, it is important for them to grasp a connecting concept: "The point of learning a lesson is that it influences our understanding or behavior; it has some practical applicability."<sup>7</sup>

If a school population is to become a

community of learners and establish its own culture—where respect and acceptance are a way of life, where no one remains a stranger—the program must involve staff, students, and community. Curriculum encompasses everything that happens, all of the learning opportunities provided by the school. The classroom teacher, instructional assistants, office staff, *everyone* in the school needs to become acquainted with and understand the value of every nuance of the educational process. Multicultural teaching and learning must become an immersion, not a quick cultural dip.

Catalogues carry a variety of simula-

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tions to meet the challenge of helping students understand how we nurture and see from our own set of values. These are excellent but often cost-prohibitive. However, you can create your own. For three years, at one academy where I taught English, the history teacher and I team-taught an introductory lesson for world history

### The Frog Pond

Cultural learning can take place even when teaching a unit on frogs. A class may read the text and fill out workbook pages or go on the Internet to learn more facts, see pictures of frogs, and even watch them at a museum. They may dissect a frog in science lab and thus gain a hands-on experience. But will they know what frogs are really like? Will they have heard the range of croaks? Will they know the different personalities? They need to observe frogs—real live frogs—in their natural habitat. They cannot be frogs, but they can have a working knowledge rather than *dry frog facts*.



and world literature classes. We adapted the following simulation, presented at a conference for the Adventist Student Personnel Association.

### **Mother Earth**

The students entered the modified classroom—candles burning; half of the desks on each side of the room, facing the center, three chairs in the open space, a single chair in the front of the room facing a table set with food and drink.

The history teacher entered and sat on a chair in front of the class. I entered and knelt beside him. He made a clicking sound. I got up and gave him food. He clicked again, and I got up and gave him drink. Finished, he held his fist to his chest and belched. We then walked around the room selecting three male students, who sat in the chairs in the center space. Next, selected three female students who served while the males repeated the process of eating, drinking, and belching. Then we selected a female to kneel on one side of the male teacher, while I knelt on the other side. He clicked, and the three of us walked out of the room.

Students wrote their observations in journals, then interpreted their impres-

sions during a class discussion. The journals usually included the following conclusions: *It is a male-dominated society; Women are subservient; The Chief chose a second wife; or The Chief selected one of the girls to be his concubine.* Most students were surprised to learn that the simulation reflected an imaginary culture based on the worship of Mother Earth. The ceremony they had just witnessed was the celebration of women in a female-dominant culture. On Mother Earth Day, the women feed the men to remind them of their dependence on women for life during the birthing process and in getting their daily food. The woman honored on that day is selected because she has the biggest feet of any female in the room—the best connection with the earth for the celebration of Mother Earth Day.

**T**he students evaluated the experience and reflected on how easy it is to use a limited lens to interpret experiences—to see but not understand. According to Koester and Lustig, in their book *Intercultural Competence*: “All cultures teach their members the ‘preferred’ ways to respond to the world, which are often labeled as ‘natural’ or ‘appropriate.’”

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***Students. . . need to be encouraged to share from their own perspective, while asking questions of the broader community.***

Thus, people generally perceive their own experiences, shaped by their own cultural forces, as natural, human, and universal. Judgments about what is ‘right’ or ‘natural’ create emotional responses to cultural differences that interfere with our ability to understand the symbols used by other cultures.”<sup>8</sup>

### **God’s Lenses**

We must help students learn to be open to (1) interpretations other than the one imposed by their own society and (2) experiences that stretch their comfort zone and enable them to grow. If students learn to recognize which lens has been selected and when to use a particular lens, they expand their knowledge and understanding. Stephen R. Covey advises us to examine the lens through which we see the world, as well as at the world we see. The lens we use shapes how we interpret the world.<sup>9</sup>

However, the process of selecting lenses needs refining. All cultures have positive and negative aspects. Not everything in every culture, experience, or person is positive or applicable to the educational experience. Students need to learn discernment, the art of using heavenly eye salve. From the beginning, God gave us standards for selecting the lens through which we are to view the world. He gave the Ten Commandments, non-negotiable standards for understanding love for God and for one another.

### **Suggested Guidelines for Developing the Christian Lens:**

- Studying the Bible (Psalm 119:105).
- Following the leading of the prophets (2 Chronicles 20:20).
- Studying research and counseling with others (Proverbs 11:14).

## ***Multicultural teaching and learning must become an immersion, not a quick cultural dip.***

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- Following the leading of the voice of duty (said to be the *voice of God*).
- Listening to an educated conscience (Proverbs 16:25).
- Looking for providential leadings (*Steps to Christ*, p. 70).
- Listening for the direct voice of God (Isaiah 30:18-21).

### **Classroom Climate—Cooperative Learning**

A number of school topics are subject to negotiable interpretations. In crowded classrooms, cooperative learning allows the instructor to set up a climate where each view is valued and the concept being studied is seen through different lenses, including those of the teacher. In this setting, class discussions and decision making can take place within the parameters of God's universal guidelines.

The tools needed for orchestrating the cultural learning process, whether studying negotiable or non-negotiable events and issues, are imbedded in cooperative learning. Studies continue to show that use of cooperative learning helps teachers integrate multiculturalism at many levels in the daily routine of the classroom and improves ethnic relations among students.<sup>10</sup> The steps in the process are clearly delineated in books such as *Models of Teaching*,<sup>11</sup> *Dimensions of Learning*,<sup>12</sup> and *Cooperative Learning*.

### **A Case Study**

Cooperative multicultural learning helps to ease cultural differences at Cedar Brook School in Rehoboth, Massachusetts, where I currently serve as principal. Students come from 20 countries, four major language backgrounds, and 28 cities. They see topics and events through a variety of lenses and are becoming a community of learners.

Little things make the difference: Different children stand at the front entrance

**Cooperative learning helps teachers integrate multiculturalism throughout the daily routine of the classroom and improves ethnic relationships among students.**

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**To teach students about discrimination, dot-less children could not join in games at recess.**

each morning and greet the students. Greeters include children from various locations. A visitor to the classrooms sees students working together in heterogeneous racial groups. Individual students translate for a student and/or a teacher. Learning centers provide opportunities for all children to interact.

As in other schools, students study famous people, events, and holidays from the perspective of different cultures. Students visit celebrations in different countries on the Internet. Guest speakers from a variety of countries make classroom presentations. Most of the 16 churches in the area participate in the annual international food fair: Picnic of the World.

**S**ome classes focus on languages. This past school year, students practiced counting, writing, reading, and pronouncing Chinese characters. They labeled common classroom equipment in Spanish; they practiced Swahili greetings and sayings. In one class, the students prepared a personal travel guide.

Cedar Brook is just one of many schools where students benefit from a multicultural learning environment. Here are ideas developed by its teachers to improve the classroom climate and develop an openness to other ways of thinking:

**Discrimination:** Teachers familiar with other countries develop units from their firsthand experiences. Lesson plans cross disciplines and include the following objectives: extending, searching, discovering, identifying, experimenting, exploring, assessing, and sharing. This past year, Debbie Knutson-Bezerra taught a unit on the Micronesian islands, including a socialization component on discrimination. At recess, she created two groups by randomly placing blue dots on half of the students. She told the dot-less students that the ones with dots could not join in any game at recess or use the playground equipment. (At another recess, the rest of the class wore the dots to allow them to experience discrimination.) During reflection time, the students evaluated their feelings about both roles. Discussions included relating the blue dots to old people, people from other cultures, exceptional people, etc. Students posed questions such as, "Are these people really that different from us? Do they have feelings, too?"

**Immigration:** In one classroom, a substitute teacher divided the students and had them participate in different cooperative learning activities. To review immigration, she taped up posters around the room with questions like "Why would someone immigrate to a different country? What are the steps in the process of immigrating to another country? What questions would you want to ask before immigrating to a different country? What is a settlement house? What is a ghetto?" Each group selected a scribe, a speaker, a research assistant, etc. The students would go to the first poster and write furiously for 90 seconds. With the clanging of the classroom bell, they were supposed to move to the next poster. However, many were so involved that they had to be reminded that the bell had rung!

**The Culture Tree:** Bulletin boards can be an important adjunct to the study of culture. The most effective ones are made by students, rather than purchased. A science teacher had her class draw a tree with roots and bare branches. After some discussion, they labeled the roots by geographic regions of the world and selected different-colored leaves to represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Each student then wrote his or her name on as many leaves as were needed to represent the cultures in their background, and stapled the different-colored leaves together. At the conclusion of the project, the tree was covered with leaves. (See page 32.)

### Conclusion

The ideas listed above offer a glimpse of what can be incorporated into the school environment to integrate cultural learning into the classroom. As students work together cooperatively, they will find many ways to understand and value the thinking of others.

The Christian school has an obligation to provide a safe environment for students to learn how to see others through the multiple lenses of various cultures. A balanced educational system will include a variety of learning experiences in which other people are valued and celebrated and a climate of mutual learning supports the process of developing skills for living in an inclusive culture. ✍

The staff whose ideas and lives make

## *The tools needed for orchestrating the cultural learning process . . . are imbedded in cooperative learning.*

Cedar Brook School possible: Ruth Ann Cottrell, Kiela DeOlivena, Nancy Kern, Alex and Debbie Knutson-Bezerra, David Lacy, Brenda Litalien, Maria Lopes, Karrie Proc, Joan Rollins, David Ubiera, Vilma ViPond, Sharon Wyrostek and many others like Laura Acker, Tim Dozier, Tina Shorey, and Laura Smith.

*Jeanette Bryson is Principal of Cedar Brook School in Rehoboth, Massachusetts. She is currently working on a doctorate in Leadership from the Department of Teaching and Learning at Andrews University. The author of articles, stories, and one book, Ms. Bryson has traveled in Europe, North America, Southern Asia, West Africa, and the West Indies. She has been employed by Adventist schools in four countries.*

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