

## A Closer Look at Multicultural Programming

According to Baez, “in the 1980s “diversity” became a buzzword in the academy, representing a movement advocating the appreciation and celebration of difference-- in culture, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation” (2002, p. 383). This need for advocacy led to the push for multicultural programming, a practice that involves developing events, programs, and activities in order to provide short term opportunities to explore the cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds of diverse groups of people and to promote diversity awareness and tolerance. These programs range from lectures, exhibits, guest speakers, ethnic food tasting dinners, culturally themed celebration nights, language acquisition, performing arts presentations of music and dancing, and much more.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Assumptions**

The greatest strength of multicultural programming is that it's programs bring attention to unique cultures and perspectives that may not been experienced otherwise. At the collegiate level, the office of Student Affairs organizes programs campus-wide to celebrate the diversity of the campus and it forms student life groups that focus on bringing together students of different cultures, religions, genders, races, and so on. At the elementary and middle school level, special cultural nights are organized to highlight and celebrate different cultures, emphasizing food and performing arts. Gorski states that the overall goals of such intercultural education are, “a facilitation of intercultural dialogue, an appreciation for diversity, and cultural exchange” (2008, p. 520). Programs at all levels have good intentions, but the question remains of whether good intentions are enough to truly promote diversity and tolerance and break down the barriers that stand in the way of equality and social justice

One significant limitation of multicultural programming is that the knowledge that the programs aim to teach is often generalized to all people of a culture and sometimes many different cultures are thrown into one group. For example, a celebration of Latin American culture may exhibit ethnic food and dance from a particular country in Latin America, but unless specifically stated, attendees may generalize a dance or a type of food to all Latin American people rather than a particular group of people *from* Latin America. Gorski describes his attendance at a Taco Night at his elementary school that intended to spread awareness of the Mexican culture. At the end of the night he remembers one unintentional lesson that he had learned was, “‘Mexican’ and ‘Guatemalan’ are synonymous, and by extension, all Latino people are the same, and by further extension, all Latino people are synonymous with tacos (as well as sombreros and dancing cucarachas)” (2008, p. 516). While some of what was experienced at the Taco Night applies to the Mexican culture, he left generalizing his experiences to *all* Latinos.

An additional limitation is that the programs are often organized by people who have little genuine knowledge about the culture they are attempting to bring awareness of and are rarely members of the group. Unfortunately, the powerful tend to facilitate and control the proceedings of an event and the people we need to hear from most, the actual people from a particular culture, do not get to express themselves in a way that will elicit change (Gorski, 2008, p. 521). If true knowledge about a particular culture will be acquired, it needs to come from an authentic source.

Asher raises the important question of, “how much of what we do in the multicultural teacher education classroom reflects an “illusory sense of forward movement”, and how much “real” progress are we making toward social transformation” (2007, p. 70)? Multicultural

programs often make the mistake of assuming that bringing awareness and experience of other cultures to students is enough to change perceptions and stereotypes. The Taco Night event mentioned above had good intentions of helping students gain an appreciation for Mexican culture, but in reality, he stated that he left knowing little more about the culture or its people, but rather the learned stereotypes that he had come to the event with were reinforced and highlighted more than ever (2008, p. 516). Unfortunately this is not uncommon because, “most of what passes for intercultural education practice, particularly in the US, accentuates rather than undermines existing social and political hierarchies” so the purpose of the event gets lost (Gorski, 2008, p. 516).

In addition, multicultural programmers assume that because hordes of students come to the program, learn about an issue or a culture, and become empowered, that they will leave and make a change in the world. For example, Razack discussed how audiences who viewed an eye-opening film about Rwanda left the cinema, “warmed by [their] own capacity to care”(2007, p. 382). He warns that such feelings have often, “blocked any movement” because we, “have too often felt, rather than thought” and such feelings rarely have led to change. While multicultural programming brings to light many difference and injustices, sometimes the programmers focus their attention on themselves and how they feel rather than on the people that are affected and what they can do to help.

### ***Re-imagining Multicultural Programming for an Ideal World***

First, multicultural programs in an ideal world would present genuine and authentic knowledge about a culture from the perspective and voices of real people from the culture. Such authentic education should start inside of the classroom so that when students attend a special

event devoted to a cultural group, they come with a genuine knowledge base from which to build upon. Kumashiro suggests that the curriculum of a school should include specific units on different cultures, preferably those that exist in the school district, and should, “integrate lessons and topics about [these cultures] throughout the curriculum” in different subject areas throughout the year (2000, p. 32). With an appropriate knowledge bank, students can make educated inferences and connections to better understand themselves and the many cultures that make up our society and are celebrated at special events.

Second, these re-imagined programs would work to help students unlearn prevalent stereotypes that have been instilled in them through society, family, and media (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 37). Multicultural programs could generate discussion about what stereotypes exist for a particular culture and students can brainstorm ways in which they can re-socialize themselves and reconstruct society’s perceptions for long term change (Gorski, 2008, p. 519), (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 34). In addition, teachers and program advisors need to not only teach students about different cultures, but they must provide an atmosphere for which students can learn to discuss not only differences, but also similarities of and between cultural groups. Teacher led discussions can ask students about what and who they think is normal and what and who they believe is different and in a category outside of “normal”(Kumashiro, 2000, p. 36). Such discussion will help students to uncover perceptions and biases that they may not have realized they held. Students can learn that, “if we are not battling explicitly against the prevailing social order” we may be, in fact, supporting it (Gorski, 2008, p. 517). Silence is just as dangerous as action.

Lastly, ideal multicultural programs should force students to not only examine another cultures, but also examine themselves and how their culture and personal biases and privileges

affect others. Zylstra raises important questions that should be answered by all. First, “what are the issues of justice you are committed to”? Students could examine this question in order to reveal areas from which they could expend themselves further in order to ensure that these issues are addressed by classmates daily. Second, “what issues of justice are you ignorant about, lazy toward, or perhaps silent about because of it’s benefit to you?” (Zylstra, 2007, p. 376). Students who are uncomfortable answering such questions at first could write their answers in a journal. Students need to acknowledge their own shortcomings in order to understand how they help and hinder the ability to elicit change in society and in their school. Only then will they understand that change, “requires [people] to extend beyond inclusive words to bold actions that reveal our willingness to take risks on behalf of our commitments” (Zylstra, 2007, p. 385).

### ***Critical Reflection***

While the above suggestions for implementing multicultural programs in an ideal world would transform the concept of these programs, there are several struggles and limitations with engaging or enacting such a practice in my current professional context in a public middle school. First, discussion of racial and cultural inequalities and stereotypes is limited at this level because many students are unaware that these problems exist. Talking about racism, stereotypes, and diversity in the classroom can be dangerous because it might actually strengthen the idea that there are differences and highlight the students who are outside of the norm of society (Kumashiro, 2000). In addition, Solomon interviewed a principal that noted how, “so many of the racist incidents that happen can be ascribed to parent attitudes and the racist comments they hear in their homes” (2002, p. 188). Such programs may challenge what students are being taught in the home and create home-school tensions between students, teachers, and parents.

Second, dominant and privileged groups that are in power like programs such as Taco Night because they avoid the real issue of racism by keeping the promotion of diversity at a superficial level. Unfortunately because of this issue, those with power will seek to prevent the implementation of a program that will actually address such issues and challenge their privilege and authority (Gorski, 2008, p. 519). In addition, community members, parents, teachers, and administrators may not feel comfortable examining such issues because it may force them to examine their own racial biases and privileges. People are often reluctant to discuss such issues for fear that the status quo will be interrupted. For example, a program that was administered at one school found parents pressuring the administrators to maintain the status quo because, "racial, social class, and other forms of bigotry were pervasive" in the community (Solomon, 2002, p.188).

In the end, it is evident that multicultural programs truly mean well, but often fall short of reaching the goals that they seek to accomplish. There are many times that programs unknowingly promote the opposite of what they believe they are promoting and enhancing. In order to ensure that multicultural programs are successful in promoting the ideals of cultural diversity and tolerance, organizations must closely examine their methods and plan in a way that will provide knowledge, challenge stereotypes, and encourage self-examination in order to bring about long term change. Baez emphasizes that, "only through an education that emphasized diversity could individuals understand the world, recognize inequalities, and gain the tools needed to remedy those inequalities" (2002, p. 383-384). If not handled carefully, diversity will continue to be a difference that does not really make a difference (Stoller, 2011).

## References

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