



Implementing Christian Multicultural Education

From the moment Manuel¹ stepped into his new classroom, he knew it was going to be a tough year. He looked different in many ways. His parents were not wealthy, so he did not have the most stylish clothing. Because he was a member of a different ethnic group than his classmates and had a “peculiar” way of speaking, this made him conspicuous. Not once did anyone initiate interaction with him except for the teacher—who simply introduced Manuel to the class on the day he arrived and told him to make himself comfortable. No one, including the teacher, understood why it was hard for Manuel to raise his hand in class before speaking, and he was often ignored, or worse, laughed at, when he did speak up.

Manuel’s classmates had trouble relating to him because his culture seemed so different from theirs. In their eyes—and even in the view of the teacher—he

was an impoverished, intellectually deficient student who could not keep up with the academic requirements of the curriculum. In reality, Manuel was one of the brightest students in the class, but his struggle to be accepted interfered with his achievement.

His parents could not understand why Manuel did not perform well at his new school. The institution boasted of its facilities and high-quality academics, and before enrolling there, Manuel had been a well-liked student who ranked at the top of his class. Now that he no longer earned straight A’s, he felt socially inferior and unmotivated.

In this article, we will define multicultural education, explore the spiritual mandate to incorporate multicultural education in Adventist classrooms, explain how children develop multicultural understandings, and finally describe classroom applications grounded in developmental theory that teachers can implement right away.

The Purpose of Education

We believe that an important goal of education at all levels is self-actualization—to achieve one’s full potential.² Multicultural education fosters self-actualization by teaching critical and organized thinking and encouraging students to adopt a receptive attitude that leads them to respect themselves and others. But, as Seventh-day Adventist educators, we want our students to go beyond self-actualization to God-actualization—achieving the Creator’s lofty goal for His children, which is “higher than the highest human thought can reach.”³

Jesus modeled multicultural education through His deliberate interactions with diverse people. He invited disciples and welcomed followers from different backgrounds and cultures (fishermen, tax collectors, Jewish ac-

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tivists, Roman officials, Samaritans, and well-to-do women). Before Jesus commissioned His followers to take the gospel to all the world, He educated them to challenge unexamined values and prejudices.

Ellen White notes that education goes beyond traditional textbooks to a biblical framework that reflects the purpose of Christian teaching—character development: “to restore the image of Christ in those placed under [the teacher’s] care.”⁴ Like Daniel and Moses, God calls on us to glorify Him and to bless humanity—to “help ourselves and others onward in the way to life.”⁵ Although the latter is not an explicit goal of multicultural education, the fundamental principles are similar.

Multicultural proponents believe that by modeling and encouraging critical thinking and participating in experiences with people from a variety of cultural groups, students develop the skills and community values necessary to effectively function in a diverse world and to promote equality. In a Christian school, multicultural education moves beyond textbooks to accomplish the heavenly purpose for each student—God-actualization!

There is an urgent need for multicultural training for teachers and implementation of multicultural education in schools at all levels because the population of most countries is becoming more diverse. The basic princi-

ples of multicultural education are recognition, appreciation, and respect for others. Multicultural education requires a process of deliberate commitment to foster inclusiveness.⁶ Although multicultural education can be implemented in nations with a variety of governmental structures, the congruity between the ideals of democracy and multiculturalism make this approach more likely to be embraced in a democratic system than in authoritarian systems of government.

Multicultural education needs to be more comprehensive than merely including racial/ethnic content in school curricula. The employees in each institution—administrators, teachers, and support staff—must make a commitment to ensure that all students—regardless of class, gender, race, culture, or worldview—have equal academic opportunities. This means eliminating all forms of discrimination, including educational practices that diminish (perhaps unintentionally) the value of a group, or present material that emphasizes the contributions of only one group.⁷ (In this article, we limit our focus to race and ethnicity, but multicultural education also deals with issues related to gender, socioeconomic status, disability, religion, etc.)

Multicultural Education: Character Development

Three aspects of human development are targeted by multicultural education: developing a sense of achievement in all students, promoting positive intergroup attitudes, and instilling in each person a sense of worth associated with his or her heritage. Successful achievement of these goals inevitably involves the development of personal identity, appreciation of diversity, and critical thinking and analytical skills.⁸ When students experience isolation, alienation, and hostility at school, they fail to gain the skills, ethics, and knowledge necessary to succeed in society,⁹ which perpetuates negative stereotypes of minority groups and results in a great loss of human potential.

Multicultural education not only empowers students in marginalized groups, but also helps those in more favored populations. This liberating process occurs when teachers encourage students to better understand themselves and to develop empathy for others by viewing themselves and the world from various perspectives.¹⁰

Teachers promote critical thinking by incorporating different perspectives in classroom curricula and by helping students see how race, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status affect the experiences of individuals in minority and majority groups. Critical thinking skills are strengthened as students learn to step outside of their individual experiences to achieve greater understanding and a transformation of their personal beliefs and values.¹¹ The resulting cognitive skills are an important foundation in developing effective and engaged citizens with a commitment to promote social justice.¹²

When students grasp the variation in others’ experiences, struggles, and successes, and realize that other groups have made significant contributions to society, they are more likely to form friendships with students from diverse backgrounds and to appreciate similarities and differences between themselves and others. Positive personal interactions diminish stereotypes and discrimination, thereby promoting a

sense of self-worth and self-identity, as well as more receptive attitudes.¹³

Multicultural *misunderstanding* results from a development process with four phases: (1) *Undifferentiated*: Prior to age 3, children ascribe little meaning to racial cues. (2) *Ethnic awareness*: About age 3, children begin to attribute symbolic meaning to physical differences. (3) *Ethnic preference*: Gradually, children develop a preference for their own group. (4) *Ethnic prejudice*: Focus shifts to rejection of other groups.

While the final stage is not inevitable, three factors increase the chances that children will shift from ethnic preference to prejudice: (1) when ethnic prejudices are reinforced at home, in the community, and/or in the broader society, (2) when the social environment promotes rivalry between groups, and (3) when the dominant group perceives its social standing or status as under attack. Although prejudice is unlikely to occur before 7 or 8 years of age, children are still influenced by earlier experiences and observations. Therefore, in order to promote effective multicultural under-

standing, early and deliberate action are essential.¹⁴

One study revealed that when social studies materials for black 4-year-olds portrayed people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, the children developed significantly more positive attitudes toward both blacks and whites during the 30-day study, compared to peers who were not exposed to the multiethnic materials.¹⁵ In another study, researchers divided 3rd graders into two groups whose status was based on the color of their armbands (orange or green), which were worn for an entire day.¹⁶ Two weeks later, children in the experimental groups (who had experienced prejudice on the basis of an uncontrollable, arbitrary feature) were less prejudiced about whom to associate with in a real-life situation. The authors concluded the change in attitudes resulted from the students' experience of discrimination, which increased their empathy with minority groups and reduced prejudicial attitudes.

These studies illustrate that (1) racism and prejudice can exist even in young children, (2) youngsters recognize the importance of membership in a group perceived as having positive features, and (3) teaching multicultural understanding at a young age can reduce racism and prejudice.

Suggested Classroom Interventions

Teachers and professors thus can play an important role in promoting the development of positive attitudes by providing opportunities for cross-cultural interactions. For instance, when learning about indigenous groups (e.g., Native Americans or Aborigines), the teacher can schedule a field trip to a nearby indigenous community so that students can meet and interact with members of the group and learn about their history. Videos and guest appearances can promote intercultural understanding.

Six types of interventions can be instituted at all levels (primary through tertiary) in order to overcome social,



instructional, student, and teacher barriers to multicultural harmony:

1. Communicate high expectations for every student,
2. Provide interracial cooperative learning opportunities in the classroom,
3. Recognize differences and encourage discussions that explore different groups' experiences while pointing out the underlying similarities among groups in physiological and psychological needs that are met by diverse beliefs and behaviors,
4. Establish a warm and welcoming school environment that genuinely values diversity,
5. Develop students' critical thinking skills by having them explore different points of view, and
6. Use instructional materials that portray people from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

The first two strategies are fairly self-explanatory, but examples of the last four are suggested below:

To build meaningful interactions and mutual respect, highlight similarities between members of different groups rather than focusing on differences. Recognizing that all human beings have certain needs that must be met in order to reach God's ideal for humankind, help students understand that every person needs the following: sustenance of life (eating, sleeping, breathing), safety from physical danger, love, and to be respected and valued as an individual. Only by recognizing that as human beings we all have the same needs will students begin to see out-group members as individuals worthy of care and respect and come to appreciate differences without being judgmental.

For all students, but especially those in primary school, the following activity can be used to strengthen their commitment to stand up with and for others. Discussions about ways people are discriminated against will help students understand the realities of life. However, to stimulate moral *action*, it is helpful to ask them to reflect on the following question: "What do I do if I notice this happening?"

Dramatic plays that deal with the heritage and lifestyles of ethnic groups have been shown to reduce prejudice by helping students gain greater knowledge about specific ethnic cultures.

Encounters that reveal prejudice (e.g., in the media, in the classroom, on the playground) can be used as learning opportunities. After such an incident, have students sit in a circle and review the "-isms" (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism). Allow time for them to recall occasions when they witnessed some type of injustice or oppression, and what action they took. Follow up with discussions about what helped them to intervene (or prevented them from speaking up), and schedule role plays or discussion illustrating ways to take action against oppressive statements and behaviors.

One expert¹⁷ suggests that teachers train students to use a three-element response:

1. When students hear a prejudicial comment (or observe an oppressive behavior), they should respond in a way that preserves the dignity and self-respect of the person making the statement. For example, "I know that you're a really good person and wouldn't want to hurt anyone. . . ."

2. Next, they should challenge the behavior or prejudicial statement. For example, "but I'm really uncomfortable with jokes about [Native Americans]."

3. Finally, they should provide factual information to counter inaccurate statements. For example, "And it's also not true that they get everything paid for by the government and that they're all lazy and alcoholics."

To help establish a warm and wel-

coming school environment that genuinely values diversity, teachers can educate students about different ethnic cultures. Dramatic plays that deal with the heritage and lifestyles of ethnic groups have been shown to reduce prejudice by helping students gain greater knowledge about specific ethnic cultures.¹⁸ Books such as the American Girl History Mystery series and the Mysteries Through Time series provide engaging stories that promote multicultural understanding, and enhance personal identity development and self-esteem for girls (e.g., *Trouble at Fort La Pointe*).¹⁹

Role plays have also been found to be effective in the educational process because they are highly motivating and allow students to put themselves in situations they have not experienced. This approach can be used to teach simple communication skills, to help students recognize their tendencies toward stereotyping, and to teach them better ways to interact with others. In the process, students can explore strong emotions and personal blocks.²⁰ Role plays can be used in history, literature, and even religion courses to help students better understand the past and present, to increase their awareness of their influence on others, as well as to encourage them to consider diverse viewpoints. It is especially important to debrief the students after the role play sessions to discuss emotional reactions

and prevent misunderstandings (sometimes children don't learn what we thought they would learn).

The following strategies can help to reduce prejudice and promote multicultural understanding: (1) Incorporate materials into the curriculum that present positive and realistic depictions of diverse groups in a natural and consistent way; (2) use films, DVDs, children's books, recordings, and other types of materials that include diverse viewpoints and show characters from a variety of backgrounds making positive contributions; and (3) through verbal and non-verbal cues, communicate positive definitions for "loaded words" like *black*, *brown*, *immigrant*, and *foreigner*.²¹

As educators, *what* we teach and *how* we teach have a tremendous impact on our students. Particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels, questions like "Whose intellectual tradition is taught?" "Whose definition of a field shapes a syllabus?" and "Whose experience shapes situations presumed in a course?" are crucial for policy makers and teachers to tackle.²²

Here is a suggested model for an inclusive curriculum:

1. Begin the lesson by focusing on the dominant culture and academic perspectives.

2. Shift toward the contributions of other groups to add a broader and more inclusive perspective.

3. Promote consideration of an "outsider's point of view" (based on the experiences of people from minority groups) through critical analysis of alternative perspectives; and finally,

4. Conclude by showing the similarities and common ground found in different perspectives.²³

For example, a lesson about the exploration and settlement of the Americas would be told quite differently from the indigenous people's point of view as compared to the standard story of conquest and settlement by Europeans/white Americans, although both groups use the past (history) to make sense of the present, and to shape the future. This process brings different perspectives to the classroom and fosters mutually respectful engagement.

Other possibilities: Integrate real-life issues or stories into the curriculum and use literature to supplement textbooks. For example, educators can choose a current political issue that might affect a community, and use news articles writ-

ten from different perspectives to promote empathic and critical thinking about multiple viewpoints (e.g., Israel and Palestine). Or, if the class is studying World War II, students may gain greater empathy if textbook material is supplemented with personal narratives of the wartime experiences of people from various ethnic groups.

When confronting sensitive topics, some students will find it difficult to identify with viewpoints dissimilar from theirs or may feel uncomfortable discussing those issues. Discussions from multiple perspectives may stimulate strong emotions based on experiences of oppression. Experts recommend responding to these challenges by promoting open discussions about racial issues, and emphasizing confidentiality, empathy, and open-mindedness. It is critical that as teachers we encourage and promote a safe and welcoming environment in class. We must thoughtfully consider our students' characteristics, emotional reactivity, and life experiences as we choose curriculum materials and guide class discussions.

Table 1²⁴ provides a sample multicultural lesson curriculum celebrating diversity. While the focus is on ethnic

Table 1. Sample Multicultural Lesson Curriculum to Teach Diversity in All Subjects

Key Concept	Ethnic diversity
Organizing Generalization	Most societies are ethnically diverse.
Intermediate-Level Generalizations	Ethnic diversity is an important characteristic of the United States.
Lower-Level Generalizations	<i>Social Studies:</i> The new wave of immigration to the United States since the 1960s has increased ethnic diversity within the nation. Discuss demographic changes in different parts of the country.
	<i>Music:</i> Ethnic diversity in the United States is reflected in its folk, gospel, and popular music.
	<i>Science:</i> The diverse physical characteristics of the people in the United States reinforce ethnic diversity. Highlight examples of individuals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds who have made significant contributions to science.
	<i>Mathematics:</i> Mathematical notations and systems in the United States reflect the contributions of many different ethnic, racial, and cultural groups. Cite examples.

diversity, similarities among groups should be highlighted to avoid the attitude that “different is bad.” For example, (1) the majority of individuals from different backgrounds and ethnicity who immigrate to the United States (including European Americans) come in search of a better life, freedom, and liberty; (2) music is a universal language—people from different groups use music to express themselves and share experiences; (3) celebrating important family and community events is common to every culture; and so on.

Conclusion: Multicultural Education and Democratic Education

As the population of most nations becomes more and more diverse, Seventh-day Adventist schools and institutions also reflect this diversity in their classrooms. Although implementing a multicultural school environment and curriculum requires time and commitment, the end product—self-actualized and God-actualized students who understand the value of all people as being equally loved and respected children of God—makes the effort worthwhile.

In fact, this is *why* we are teachers. Youth like Manuel in the opening vignette, as well as his classmates, will grow toward actualization when teachers

- take deliberate steps to include all students in classroom activities;
 - expose students to multiple perspectives that require them to employ critical thinking skills;
 - point out significant contributions made by a variety of people groups;
 - employ materials that display positive images of people from diverse groups;
 - directly comment on similarities in fundamental psychological and physiological needs among all people in spite of variations in how different groups meet those needs;
 - train students to stand against prejudicial statements and actions by giving specific guidance on words and actions to use; and
 - model genuine care and appreciation for diverse people and perspectives.
- Acknowledging the need for multi-



cultural training and implementing multicultural strategies will help ensure a well-rounded education for all students and a brighter future for our community and society. ✍

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membership to women, who comprise the majority of the church's membership and could contribute richly to church, school, and administrative boards at all levels. Ensuring that they receive appropriate training to fill these roles will help ensure a more appropriate balance, thereby illustrating our belief in the equality of all people in Jesus Christ.⁸ Cindy Tutsch, in her book, *Ellen White on Leadership*,⁹ describes the "clarion call" that "is threaded throughout [Mrs. White's] counsels to educators, administrators, parents, and pastors" for the restoration of God's image in humanity. She notes that Ellen White's progressive social voice and her egalitarian views of leadership caused her to reject personal attributes, including gender, as "predictors or limitations to God's leadership calling."

Two Seventh-day Adventist emphases have far-reaching implications for recognizing and developing the gifts and talents of every young person: the belief that all our children shall be taught of the Lord,¹⁰ and the current focus on revival and reformation. These require that the church recognize and empower all, male and female, to answer God's call to service, no matter where it may lead.

Park asserts that "Galilee in Jesus' time was a place where various Mediterranean cultures intersected. From [the dominant] religious perspective, Galileans were seen as impure and suspect. The Galilean Jesus represents the dislocated who live in liminal space and for whom he envisions new life."¹¹ We must catch that vision for new life in 21st-century Adventism as well.

Truly, Adventist education must be available to all of our children and youth, and genuine revival and reformation must include organizations as well as individuals. When we consciously endeavor to empower all to fulfill their God-given potential in the ministry to which God calls them, He can bless without restraint and will empower the church to finish His work.—Ella Louise Smith Simmons.

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