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Self-Esteem, Empathy, and Equity:
Integrating Multicultural Tolerance and Peace Education Techniques into Public Schools

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In *Educational Psychology*, Jeanne Ormrod and Eric and Lynley Anderman (2016) identify the importance of teaching multicultural studies in public education settings to help create “a culturally inclusive classroom environment” (p. 106). They assert that:

> [a]ny multicultural education program must include such democratic ideals as human dignity, equality, justice, and appreciation of diverse viewpoints. . . . We better prepare students to function effectively in a democratic society when we help them understand that virtually every nation includes numerous cultures and that such diversity provides a richness of ideas and perspectives that will inevitably yield a more creative, productive society overall (Ormrod, Anderman & Anderman, 2016, p. 110).

Not only should educators promote cultural inclusion and diversity education at all grade levels (perhaps especially at primary levels), I believe multicultural education must include a focus on kindness and peace studies. Fundamentally, diversity education is already deeply concerned with kindness and peace. When multicultural educators write about helping students learn self-esteem, empathy, and equity these essential tools can build multicultural tolerance, but they also foster peace (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2010, p. 41). To learn self-esteem is to learn to be kind to one’s self; to learn empathy is to learn to be kind to one’s immediate neighbor; and to learn about social equity is to learn how to be kind to all neighbors, locally and globally. The result is peace.

There is, however, some confusion about what constitutes multicultural education. In 1990, educators tied “multicultural education [to] improved academic learning,” and yet “most multicultural learning activities consist[ed] of discrete lessons organized around particular [holiday] events,” and “most multicultural materials [were] concentrated in the field of social studies” (Webb, 1990). Nevertheless, even in 1990, Webb identified the importance of multicultural education as a means “to defuse intergroup tensions and conflicts”—promoting peace.
Pamela and Iris Tiedt (2010) also write that “many multicultural programs have been criticized for [taking] superficial approach[es], often called ‘heroes and holidays,’ or ‘food and festivals’” methods (p. 25). Tiedt and Tiedt (2010) support alternative curricula approaches that integrate multicultural teaching, from the earliest grades. They believe:

- to be effective in developing cultural competence, true multicultural education must: (a) Illuminate the nature of power and privilege exercised by the dominant group and show how it impacts other groups; (b) provide flexible learning environments that will support all students; (c) integrate multicultural concepts into all subjects, all grades, for all students; (d) uncover and confront biases, prejudices, and stereotypes; (e) encourage student efforts as learners through high expectations; (f) organize curriculum to provide extensive opportunities for students to work with diverse others and engage in learning conversations; (g) defy assumptions of passivity in oppressed groups, for example, by showing enslaved Africans actively revolting against their conditions; and (h) demonstrate the malleability of culture, for example, by bringing the story of Native Americans from the past into the present. (p. 26)

The teaching model that Tiedt and Tiedt (2010) promote is called the “3E Model for Multicultural Education,” based on esteem, empathy, and equity (p. 41). Tiedt and Tiedt (2010) are emphatic that students need to be taught both appreciation of their own culture as well as an appreciation of other cultures, from early years. Instead of simply nodding to cultural differences through celebrating holidays of various countries, Tiedt and Tiedt write about creating thematic units across subject areas that stimulate (a) self-awareness of one’s own culture; (b) real learning about diverse cultures; and (c) understanding and identification of social injustices.

Compassionate “attitudes must grow slowly as the result of small incidents, repeated acts of kindness, and carefully designed instruction over a period of years” (p. 42). From such integrated multicultural teaching, peaceful conflict resolution might ensue.

Yet, currently, violence permeates American culture. In her 2015 master’s thesis (p. 4), Rita Reis quotes Harris and Morrison in defining a ‘culture of violence’ as:

‘street crimes, domestic violence, ethnic hatred, environmental destruction, violent media that captures the imagination of children, poor people struggling to
survive in structurally violent societies that deny economic and social security . . .
families and schools [that use] authoritarian tactics to resolve disputes, teaching young people to use force when faced with conflict.’ (Harris, Morrison, 2003, p. 10)

This depiction reveals the wide range of violence that American (and international) children are exposed to, on a daily basis. Domestic violence, violence in the streets, violence in the school yard, violence online—conflict is everywhere. In the current media age, kids only have to turn on TV or log onto a cell phone or tablet to discover conflicts in the news or being displayed by a myriad of YouTube videos and digital games that show violence as funny or desirable or necessary.

In everyday practice, how can teachers and school districts begin to counteract such a prevalence of violence and the attitude that violence is an acceptable means for conflict resolution? The Nemours Foundation/ KidsHealth organization (2016) has several practical suggestions. Their PDFs are great resources for teachers as well as students. These PDFs present age-level appropriate conflict situations and then identify ways of responding. There are also KidsHealth handouts teachers can use to try to practice identification of conflict, talking about it, and coming up with nonviolent solutions. Other online sources include Caltha Crowe’s article (2009) on coaching children about everyday conflict. Playworks offers similar conflict resolution techniques for young children (2016). All these (and other) resources generally regard the identification of feelings as the first step toward resolving conflict. Getting learners to become self-aware about how they feel seems a universal first step toward resolution. Bridging the awareness from self to other, i.e., becoming conscious that other people also have needs and wants—that is, encouraging empathy—is the next step. Even for adults, Karen Armstrong (2011) reflects “in the global economy and the electronic age, national boundaries are becoming increasingly irrelevant; we can no longer simply draw a line in the sand between ‘us’ and
Once awareness is raised about our own feelings and those of others, the teacher’s challenge becomes figuring out how to help children learn to peacefully and respectfully solve problems.

Maria Montessori, Italian innovative educator, was an avid proponent of including peace studies in classroom environments. She is quoted as saying: “Averting war is the work of politicians; establishing peace is the work of education” (NAMC blog, 2007). By encouraging learners to study a “global view of life and humanity’s part in it,” from ages three through twelve, Montessori educators hope to help students “begin to realize that they are not separate from the rest of the world, but are an integral part of creating a harmonious world” (NAMC blog, 2007).

I believe even public schools can play an important role in globalizing subject matter and encouraging students toward mindful, peaceful choices. Schools can do this by building awareness in kids about: (a) consciousness of their own selves (how they feel and how they are situated within global space); (b) the need for empathy; and (c) how to choose personal actions toward social justice and equity. In a 2015 article in the Atlantic, author Lauren Davis describes a Bronx school in which meditation and mindfulness techniques are being taught to students who have previously dropped out of NYC public high schools. Using five-minute mindfulness exercises like “counting breaths and focusing on the sensations of breathing to [help students visualize] thoughts and feelings,” the teacher helps students “train their attention, quiet their thoughts, and regulate their emotions” (Davis, 2015). Additionally, according to Davis (2015), mindfulness techniques can be quite useful means for working with students who have various behavioral issues: “Mindfulness is widely considered effective as a treatment for children and adolescents with aggression, ADHD, or anxiety.”
I believe that mindfulness, as well as other alternative conflict resolution techniques, could be readily incorporated into multicultural thematic units in public schools. When kids are encouraged to study and appreciate their own cultural background, when they learn about the diverse backgrounds of classmates or of people around the world, and when they begin to identify injustice and talk about social justice, these are practical ways to apply Tiedt and Tiedt’s esteem, empathy, and equity model. Bringing peace into the classroom by encouraging students to become aware of their breathing and to get in touch with their emotions so they can self-regulate are practical ways for building self-awareness and including peace studies techniques in classrooms. According to a 1999 UNICEF working paper, “peace education is most effective when the skills of peace and conflict resolution are learned actively and are modeled by the school environment in which they are taught” (Fountain, pp. 1999, pp. 16-17).

Besides the above approaches, school libraries could add picture books (and older, juvenile-level books) that teach diversity, tolerance, kindness, and conflict resolution. I especially appreciate the Thich Nhat Hanh children’s book Is Nothing Something? In this book, Thay, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, very directly and poignantly answers questions about kindness and mindfulness that kids have brought to him. He says: “Children can practice being kind and gentle by walking and breathing mindfully. . . . If we want more peace in the world, we can start by taking care of the misunderstandings in ourselves” (Hanh, 2014, p. 11, p. 15).

At a June 2015 event in Batesville, Mississippi (home of the Magnolia Grove Buddhist Monastery), I attended a retreat on mindfulness specifically designed for teachers. The idea was to gather instructors (from all grade and subject levels, across the country) who wanted to help reduce violence and conflict in their classrooms and their communities. These teachers (including me) came together in small groups to discuss conflict resolution techniques and to talk about applying mindfulness and meditation in school environments. Various videos were shown
to the entire group that presented children in large urban schools being taught meditation and mindful breathing to stop daily violence and disruptive behaviors often found in their schools (and homes). The techniques worked. Also discussed was information about Philadelphia’s Center for Mindfulness and Wellness, which has brought Project Mindful Cares into urban educational, church, and home arenas (Project Mindful Cares, 2016). As a result of this retreat experience, and as a result of research into multiculturalism and peace studies, I have come to believe that schools can change our culture of violence: (a) by integrating multicultural curricula across subject areas, at all elementary and secondary levels; and (b) by introducing mindfulness and conflict resolution techniques into all secondary school grades.

It is the responsibility of educators to more fully integrate multiculturalism into school curricula, and I believe this should be done using cross-disciplinary thematic units that follow Tiedt and Tiedt’s (2010) esteem, empathy, and equity model. I also think including mindfulness training in schools might help children slow down and breathe before reacting in conflictive ways. I hope that simple choices like obtaining more library books on diversity, tolerance, peace, and kindness topics, as well as instituting better in-class focus on conflict resolution and peace studies might shift our social landscape from being a culture of violence toward becoming a culture of peace. Like Ormand, Anderman, and Anderman (2016), I want to live in a world where “human dignity, equality, justice, and appreciation of diverse viewpoints”—i.e., tolerance, kindness, and peace—are the predominant paradigms (p. 110).
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