Problem Based Learning Project

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The Problem:

When teaching a culturally homogeneous school population, how can teachers prepare students to succeed in a multicultural country and world?

Parents send their children to private schools for many reasons, but often private schools attract students with similar backgrounds and values. Even public schools can be homogeneous—especially rural and some suburban schools. Ultimately, a school needs to prepare its students to be good, productive citizens. I am concerned that the insular setting of some private schools can hinder graduates from functioning and succeeding in a global society. I want to learn if teachers can impact the students' understanding of different cultures which impacts relationships with their future co-workers and customers. A student may succeed in the homogeneous school setting, but can he/she transfer that success to a multicultural world if he/she is prepared by that school?

The Inquiry:

I began my inquiry with the assistant principal of my school as she and I have discussed this very issue on numerous occasions. She shares the same religious affiliation with the students and their families; however, she is cognizant of the need to prepare our students to succeed in a multicultural society. Before I searched for scholarly sources, I wanted to find sources related to other stakeholders; therefore, I have included articles in my reference list about Jewish education, African American Orthodox Jews, and an LGBT school. I find that these sources shed some light on homogeneity and the issues that arise from “self-segregation.”
Lastly, I searched for professional and scholarly sources. As I searched for solutions to this problem, I found that most scholarly articles focused on culturally diverse schools. However, I think that the answer I seek may be found in Culturally Responsive Teaching. I realize that CRT is often utilized in multicultural settings, but my research of CRT included this description: “Culturally responsive education supports students in developing a lifelong appreciation for understanding and valuing cultural understanding in all settings of life” (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2011). Although a school may be culturally homogeneous, employing CRT can bridge the gap between that culture and the multiculturalism of society. Lastly, I found sources that address the problem more specifically. These sources include practical steps related to the role of the teacher in helping students to succeed in a global society.

Additional questions that arise from my search for sources include the following: How can the tenets of Culturally Responsive Teaching help prepare students for success in a multicultural world? In addition to offering a curriculum that explores various cultures, what day-to-day practices can teachers use to prepare students for a global society? How are businesses helping employees function in a multicultural setting? Can schools adopt these practices to prepare their students for future employment?

The Analysis/Synthesis

The reasons for self-segregation of school populations vary. Often certain groups of people want to preserve their heritage and pass it on to the next generation. This is certainly the case of the Orthodox Jewish community. However, that segregation in the name of preservation can hinder the younger generations’ chances of success in the global society. Gaynor (2009) states unequivocally that the problem lies with the adults in the community: “Adult fears about
assimilation, anti-Semitism, and inter-marriage lead to programs designed and funded by adults that impose rigid definitions of Jewish identity and learning on kids.” He goes on to surmise that “Adult fears about Jewish continuity also lead to the misguided notion that Jewish learning can only happen in exclusively Jewish environments” (2009). Therefore, a homogeneous Orthodox Jewish school certainly hinders the students’ exposure to multiculturalism and may prevent the development of student skills needed to succeed in a global society.

In fact, when students and their families have an opportunity to separate themselves from a multicultural learning environment, they not only deter themselves from learning how to deal with other students of different races, ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, gender, and sexual orientation, but also they deprive the larger student population of an opportunity to learn tolerance. In an opinion piece for the Huffington Post about an LGBT high school, Walkley (2012) states, “The message seems to be, ‘If you cannot accept us, we will form a separate space to learn.’ The bottom line being that public schools don’t have to teach tolerance because there are other options out there for students who don’t fit into the heteronormative status quo.” Therein lies the dilemma. Student populations that separate themselves must have a more difficult time preparing for re-entry into a multicultural society after graduation because they have not had to learn tolerance or acceptance of other people who have different beliefs, values, and views. However, even within a homogeneous population like the Orthodox Jews, there are sub-groups like African-American Orthodox Jews. These small but observably different sub-groups may face an even more difficult experience in a homogeneous school population that does not acknowledge cultural differences within its ranks. Lee (2010) states that this small but fervent subgroup faces name-calling, gawking, and other means of social separation from the larger group that allowed for their conversion in the first place. He quotes Yitzchak Jordan, a
black Orthodox rapper: “A black Orthodox Jewish kid is far less likely to grow into an Orthodox Jewish adult because you have a lot of racism in the school system, not so much institutionalized but more like social racism” (Lee, 2010). If a mostly homogeneous school can alienate one of its own, even when that subgroup has willingly adopted the practices and values of the main group, its graduates must experience difficulties as they choose their post-secondary paths in a multicultural society, due to their self-segregation. Subsequently, the question centers on what a classroom teacher can do to prepare these mostly homogeneously grouped students to succeed in a heterogeneous world.

One answer to this problem is to employ the techniques of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Oran (2011) says that “Culturally relevant pedagogy aims to ensure that educators acknowledge and honor the diverse viewpoints of their student population and refrain from promoting homogeneous perspectives as universal beliefs.” Teachers in homogeneous classrooms can extrapolate that they must not allow their students to simply accept their community’s values as the only value in the larger context of multiculturalism. The qualities that make good teachers in a general sense are the same qualities that can promote understanding and tolerance of diversity, even in homogeneous classroom. Oran (2011) and many others contends that “Diversity in the classroom encompasses many categories among them ethnicity, culture, learning needs and other issues.” Even when teaching a population of similar ethnic and socio-economic students, the teacher will need to differentiate instruction in order to meet the needs of the diverse learning styles and personalities: “Effective educators incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy to ensure that all students succeed” (Oran, 2011). According to Skora (as cited in Oran 2011), effective teachers must exhibit the qualities of listening with an open-mind and teaching their content with enthusiasm. Fillion (2007) echoes this opinion: “One of the ways a teacher in a homogeneous classroom can counter this trend is to practice teaching in a culturally responsible manner, motivated
by the most basic concepts of equality, acceptance, and social justice. I place this manner of teaching under the broader concept of multicultural education” (p. 4). With these broad statements in mind, a teacher of a homogeneous student body can implement more specific daily practices that allow students to gain skills for living in working in a global society. Stewart (2007) states that teachers cannot simply disseminate the facts of other cultures: “Rather our challenge is to hone students’ critical-thinking skills and to familiarize students with key concepts they can apply to new situations” (p. 10). If teachers can prepare their students to face a variety of problems with a desire to find solutions, then those students will have the wherewithal to interact successfully in this global world.

As experts in the field of education grapple with the issues related to cultural diversity, the business world seems to have a better understanding of creating a positive experience for all employees in a multicultural setting. Greenberg (2005) lists the advantages of workplace diversity: Increased adaptability, broader service range, variety of viewpoints, and more effective execution. Of course, these benefits do not come without exemplary planning on the part of the upper ranks of the business: “Attitudes toward diversity originate from the top and filter downward” (Greenberg, 2005). As schools and teachers prepare their students for the workforce, perhaps they can adopt certain business practices. Greenberg (2005) lists techniques for business to solve their cultural diversity issues, but these same solutions can relate to the classroom: Include all students in decision-making processes, promote the sharing of opinions and ideas, encourage diversity in leadership roles, and survey employees or students for feedback. The role of diversity is prevalent in business as globalization increases; therefore, businesses need schools to produce global leaders, no matter how homogeneous the school.

The ramifications of these findings on educational practices are many. First, a teacher who finds herself in a seemingly homogeneous classroom cannot assume that her students are all alike. No matter what the religious and cultural predominance, students still differ in family
backgrounds, learning styles, and viewpoints. Also, a teacher cannot dismiss the need to prepare her students for the global world. Future employers want employees who can understand and accept diversity in the workplace and among their customer base. As globalization impacts every aspect of a person’s life and technology brings people of the world closer together, students, parents, and communities must realize that even if they want to preserve their own heritage and beliefs, they must still have the skills to work with others of different cultures. No one is asking them to assimilate, but they must be willing to work with others in different capacities. A teacher of homogeneous students can do more than just teach a unit on “culture.” Daily practices can demonstrate how to work with others in many situations. Exposure to and teacher-led discussions of multicultural literature can allow students to experience what others experience. Teacher emphasis and modeling of justice, equality and acceptance can encourage adoption of these values by a homogeneous student body.

As a teacher of students who share the same religious and cultural background, I have often found it arduous to discuss the values and beliefs of other cultures. I have taught literature with a multicultural perspective, and I often experience success in terms of shaping my students’ views of acceptance and tolerance. However, I feel as if I am not doing enough. The findings actually reinforce many of the daily activities in my classroom that promote critical thinking, as well as equality and social justice in and out of the classroom. Perhaps these findings can be used to connect the business leaders in the community with the teachers in the school to help us incorporate the skills and qualities that they are looking for in their future employees. Also, the ideas presented here might be useful in creating a channel of communication between this school and other schools that are homogeneously populated. The main purpose of this connection
through technology would be to foster acceptance through discussion among diverse student bodies.

**Application**

Although the concepts of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are specific, teachers may have difficulty applying the techniques in their classrooms because often the information on CRP is too general. When the proponents or experts state, “It is with [CRP’s] repertoire of theories, skills, and practices that effective teachers are able to create environments conducive to achieving the goal of education. That goal is to facilitate the development of intelligent, life-long learners...” (Oran, 2011), classroom teachers may find that statements such as these are advantageous in theory but not as feasible in practice. Effective teachers may instinctively know what works and what does not in terms of preparing their students for a multicultural world, but to vocalize it and to plan for it is the difficulty. Therefore, specific application of CRP is needed.

As a result of this problem-based learning, I propose a dialogue with local, state, or even national businesses in which the homogeneous school and the business leaders discuss their shared outlook and goals for the current student body as they become the future employees. Although no longer the typical outcome, students should graduate from high school with abilities and skills that will allow them to succeed in an entry-level position with the chance to advance their careers through further experience and education. Business leaders can share their vision of and requirements for their perspective employees. Lead educators can share their techniques for creating life-long learners. In this dialogue, perhaps both parties can come to consensus concerning the preparation for these students. As a result of this dialogue, I also propose a partnership between local businesses and schools. In this scenario, multiple stakeholders can
find a voice in the education process, and perhaps, students will find more success as they transition from homogeneous to heterogeneous settings. This suggestion is not without its negative aspects: Allowing businesses to have a say and perhaps to fund school programs allows for vested interests that may not benefit the students’ well being. Checks and balances need to be put in place from the very initiation of the dialogue between educators and business leaders.

Classroom teachers and other stakeholders need to keep their students’ futures in the forefront when planning activities and assessments. Although not all schools will have a relationship with business leaders, teachers can learn to practice culturally responsive teaching. Perhaps this will be the only way that they can implore their homogeneous student bodies to develop the necessary skills to succeed in a multicultural country and world. In a practical manner, Warren (2002) tells teachers to find teachable moments in even the most contentious moments: When students heatedly debate topics related to multicultural issues, teachers in the spirit of CRP should guide the students in their thinking, allow the students to reflect on the issue, and above all not dismiss the debate. Perhaps these suggestions are most easily employed as teachers try to prepare their students for future discussions in the workplace. Lastly, most teachers know that the relationships they create and maintain with their students have a lasting impact on those students. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) state that “The teacher is an important significant other in the lives of students because of the amount of time spent in schools. Students need to know teachers care and teachers should recognize and respect their students for who they are as individuals and as members of a cultural group” (p. 77). Perhaps this statement above all will permit teachers to prepare students to succeed in a multicultural country and world when teaching a culturally homogeneous school population.
Authentic/Performance Assessment

As I discussed the premise of my PBL with a parent during Parent-Teacher Conferences, he provided this explanation for sending his daughter to a homogeneous school and this analogy for maintaining or improving a curriculum that prepares his daughter for a multicultural society: In agreement with Gaynor (2009), he is a parent who fears the loss of faith through the overexposure of views other than his Orthodox Jewish values and beliefs. However, he strongly feels that within the confines of the school day, the students should be exposed to the multicultural values of society, some of which will be congruent with his family’s religious beliefs and some of which will directly oppose those beliefs. His feelings are that he and other parents need to trust the expertise of the teachers to guide the students as they are exposed to worldly views. In his words, “The students need a little inoculation against those ideas that threaten our existence by knowing what those ideas are.” I found his views to be profound, and although I disagree with a number of the religious beliefs, as a teacher in this school, I must respect the community as a whole while I try to balance their education with their beliefs.

The conversations with this parent and with other stakeholders, including students, fellow teachers, and administrators, confirms that the application of a business-education partnership and the implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the classroom will help prepare students not only to be viable employees but also life-long learners. An open discussion between future employers and current educators will help to streamline the goals and practices of classroom teachers. Then classroom teachers can make the connection between best business practices and the tenets of CRP.
References


