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Intercultural Understanding

Through mankind's great capacity for adaptation and specialization, each society has developed its own preferred behavioral patterns. Scientific advancement, especially in communication and space-age travel, has brought these varied societies into ever closer contact. While the diversity among societies is a credit to human flexibility and ingenuity, it has also presented the problem of living with a variety of value systems. It has produced, as Spradley and McCurdy state, a crisis in values.¹ Increasingly, one of the most pervasive characteristics of today's world is the tension, and even open conflict, among socio-cultural groups. In the future it seems that these problems may become even more pronounced and there is no reason to believe that Canadian society will be immune from this global trend.

The Canadian Consultative Council on Multiculturalism has stressed the important role which education must play in encouraging intercultural understanding in our pluralistic society and the Second Canadian Conference on Education has exhorted "all concerned with education to strive to develop a true and sympathetic understanding of all peoples and nations."² If schools are to meet the present and future needs of all who live under difficult societal conditions, social studies must place greater emphasis on assisting individuals to accept, cope with and benefit from cultural diversity. Are the schools meeting this challenge?

In Provincial curriculum guides, the broad objective, "understanding others who are culturally different," is frequently included. For example, the Ontario curriculum guide states that the child should "begin to understand and appreciate the points of view of

ethnic and cultural groups other than his or her own;” the Saskatchewan guide maintains that “respect for the rights and beliefs of other persons, people, and nations, both past and present”⁴ should be developed; the Alberta guide wants the student “to discover ways in which individuals, social groups and nations with similar or divergent cultures can cooperate for the welfare of mankind and yet maintain as much respect for one another’s cultural patterns as possible.”⁵ However, the development of specific programs to promote the desired understanding is limited. Aoki and Dahlie’s survey found that “the treatment of ethnic groups and multicultural issues is generally incidental within many program guides.”⁶

Elsewhere, specific programs within the social studies, designated variously as “cross-cultural,” “intercultural,” “multicultural,” “intergroup,” “ethnic,” and “peace education” have, as one of their objectives, the promotion of positive intergroup relations. These groups may be differentiated by characteristics such as nationality, religion, or race at the macrosocietal level, or by ethnicity, social, economic, or special interests at the microsocietal level. For the purpose of this paper, the broad term, “cultural group,” will be used to identify any group which might be the basis of study in the types of programs mentioned above.

mental development and intercultural understanding

Hilda Taba agrees that the schools have a responsibility for fostering intercultural understanding and prescribes the following course of action:

The development of cross-cultural sensitivity, whether with regard to other national cultures or in relation to subcultures within a nation, is one of the tasks of the school if it desires to prepare children to live in a vastly expanded world with interdependent heterogeneous cultures. . . . The first task in achieving this objective is perhaps to examine . . . not only new curriculum patterns and materials but also new ways of enhancing the capacity to put oneself into the shoes of the ‘other.’⁷

She considers both the patterns used in organizing the curriculum and a consideration of the learner’s thinking process to be influential factors.

Piaget and Weil state that, in developing children’s understanding of other countries and peoples, “the main problem is not to determine what must, or must not, be inculcated in the child; it is to discover how to develop that reciprocity in thought and action which is vital

to the attainment of impartiality and affective understanding.”⁸ To Piaget, understanding develops as the result of the learner’s open experience with appropriate learning activities. Again the importance of the interaction between the learner and the content of the situation is stressed. Thus, the challenge for schools committed to the objective of intercultural understanding would seem to rest in the construction and implementation of curricula which could stimulate the development of the relevant mental processes.

Understanding people from different cultures implies seeing from their cultural perspectives. This, Anderson believes, is achieved by “stepping into another’s shoes and in doing so [acquiring] an awareness of the commonality of human experience.”⁹ The mental ability involved in taking another’s perspective is best explained by social role-taking theory. According to Piaget, this role-taking ability is dependent upon the level of development of mental structures. The effects of these structures have been well-documented in children’s interactions with the physical world. The individual who can “conserve” is more capable of considering or dealing with more than one dimension than is the “non-conservor.” Piaget and others have shown that the same effects are evident when the child deals with social relationships. The egocentric child is unable to understand that others may have viewpoints or thoughts which are different from his or her own. The non-egocentric individual has the mental structures necessary for awareness of the viewpoints of others, and may eventually see and understand the thoughts and feelings of individuals or groups from a number of perspectives. Kohlberg,¹⁰ Hess and Torney,¹¹ and others have applied the developmental social role-taking theories of Piaget to study moral and political development in children. They have also found increasingly complex levels of taking the perspective of others. King¹² states that the intellectual growth and development required for intercultural education calls for the child to move from egocentric thinking to sociocentric thinking that includes the world as a global society.

Selman¹³ has differentiated Piaget’s social role-taking stages to show the development of more complex abilities to take the perspective of other people. The assumption is that higher stages represent more advanced capabilities for intercultural understanding. His scheme suggests the following social role-taking levels:

Stage 0 Egocentric Viewpoint (age range 3-6)

The child has a sense of differentiation between him/herself and other people but fails to distinguish between their social perspectives, thoughts and feelings and his/her own.

Stage 1 *Social Information Role-Taking (age range 6-8)*

The child is aware that other people have a social perspective based on their own reasoning which may or may not be similar to his/her own.

Stage 2 *Self-Reflective Role-Taking (age range 8-10)*

The child knows that each individual is aware of other people's perspectives and that this awareness influences his/her view of them and their view of each other. Putting him/herself in the place of others is a way of judging their intentions, purposes, and actions.

Stage 3 *Mutual Role-Taking (age range 10-12)*

The child realizes that both he/she and others can view each other mutually and simultaneously as subjects. He or she can view his/her and other people's viewpoints from a third perspective.

Stage 4 *Social and Conventional System Role-Taking (age range 12-15+)*

The young person realizes mutual perspective-taking does not always lead to complete understanding. Social conventions are seen as necessary because they are understood by all members of the group regardless of their position, role, or experience.

Thus, the level of mental development determines the individual's capability in taking different social perspectives, a necessary prerequisite for true intercultural understanding.

curriculum organizational patterns

These curriculum patterns organizing studies have been described by Banks¹⁴ and are found in one form or another in most intergroup studies programs. Banks' models describe the orientation of the ethnic group perspectives involved in each pattern. Focusing on cultural rather than ethnic studies, these patterns may be described as follows:

(1) *Monocultural Perspective*. In this model, all topics in the social studies are viewed from the viewpoint of the dominant cultural group, without acknowledging, or sometimes without realizing, that this is being done. Historical or social events and issues are interpreted,

analyzed, and evaluated in terms of the goals and values of the dominant group, regardless of the cultural background of the learners or the major participants in the event. In Canada, there may be two dominant group perspectives, the English-speaking or French-speaking, but in practice only one is presented depending upon the linguistic background of instruction. The excellent opportunity which exists to involve continually the two views of an officially bilingual country is not usually taken. Moreover, the perspectives of Canadian minority groups, such as the Inuit, Indian, Italian, Jewish, German or Greek, are ignored. The monocultural approach seems to assume a culturally superior group into which assimilation is seen as desirable, with homogeneity the goal.

In this framework, children, regardless of their cultural identity, are required to take only the perspective of the dominant cultural group. Clearly, this curriculum orientation does not challenge children of the dominant group to attempt to find other cultural interpretations and usually leaves them with the impression that the perspective with which they have been socialized is the only existing one. Regardless of children's cognitive ability to take different perspectives and, therefore, to understand the values and reasons behind behavioral patterns of culturally different people, they would not need to use more than *Stage 1*, social informational role-taking, skills. The only other viewpoints of which they would become aware would be those of people who are members of their own cultural group.

This approach would be of little value in developing intercultural understanding in dominant group children who are more than approximately eight years of age. However, the children who identify strongly with a particular minority cultural group would be expected to see events from the perspective of the dominant culture. They would be constantly taking the viewpoint of the members of another cultural group and would have to use *Stage 1* skills. Unfortunately, the purpose is usually not to teach these children to understand the dominant culture while retaining their own cultural perspective, but to have them accept the dominant perspective as their own — one more step toward the implicit or explicit goal of cultural assimilation. Nevertheless, minority group children's awareness of transcending cultural barriers would be increased; they would be exposed to values different from their own. Thus, their *Stage 1* skills would have far broader application than would be possible for dominant group children.

For the development of mutual intercultural understanding, the monocultural curriculum perspective has few inherent possibilities.

(2) *Cultural Additive Perspective*. In this model, the study of other cultural groups is added to the monocultural curriculum. In addition to the study of events and issues as seen by the dominant group, all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, study various groups existing within the total society, but from only the dominant perspective. This approach may give the impression that social studies is multicultural in nature and will create intercultural understanding. Usually, however, Canadian Indians, Inuits, or Hutterites, for example, are studied through the presentation of low level facts as exotic tribes of people and no attempt is made to understand these people by viewing their life patterns through their own eyes.

This curriculum pattern is a slight improvement on the monocultural model. Students of the dominant culture at least become more aware of the cultural diversity within the total society. However, unless challenged to do so, they do not take the role, and therefore the perspective, of other groups since the emphasis is on studying about them rather than on "stepping into their shoes." While students of the dominant group would still have little need, regardless of their capabilities, to use more than the *Stage 1* skills, those of the minority group would be required to view a third group or possibly their own group from the perspective of the dominant group. Study of a third group would require the use of role-taking skills similar to those at the self-reflective *Stage 2*, because this third group would be viewed from the dominant group perspective. If their own group were to be studied from the dominant group stance, the minority group children would be in a truly self-reflective *Stage 2* role-taking situation. The dominant cultural viewpoint would become a mirror by which they could gain self-understanding. Thus while the cultural additive perspective creates little opportunity for the dominant group members to develop intercultural understanding, it may help minority group students to heighten their self-understanding.

(3) *Multicultural Perspective*. In this model, historical or social events and issues are usually studied from the perspective of the several cultural groups involved in them. For example, the settling of Western Canada could be studied from the bias of English, French, Indian, German, Japanese, and Ukrainian groups. This approach assumes that cultural diversity is desirable and that harmony through equality and mutual respect is possible in a society such as Canada's. This same model can be used to study global issues.

According to research findings, children at ages 10-12 are capable of simultaneously viewing their own perspective and that of another cultural group from a third person's perspective. This enables them

to take a more objective position where they likely would be less influenced by affective factors which may be negative toward the other cultural group. Torney and Morris¹⁵ suggest that this is the age when intercultural studies may be most influential in developing understanding. Brown¹⁶ found that Canadian dominant group children at age 10 were more positive in their perceptions of minority group children, differentiated by racial and linguistic characteristics, than were similar 6 and 8 year old children. In *Stage 4*, the child has the same capabilities as in *Stage 3* but demonstrates a greater understanding of the effect of cultural influences in shaping the viewpoints of individual members. On the one hand, this awareness may have a positive influence in providing them with a deeper understanding of cultural group behavioral patterns; conversely, it may influence them to become more ethnocentric.

The structure of this approach presents the possibility of involving the learners at any of the stages of role-taking outlined, within an intercultural context. Of course the highest stage which they could utilize would, according to Piaget, be limited by the level of development of their mental operations. Hence egocentric, or *Stage 1*, children would benefit very little from the multicultural approach as they would be unable, until they achieved *Stage 2*, to see how others view them. It is at this self-reflective stage that true intercultural understanding begins to evolve. Children now realize that their values and behavioral patterns can be viewed and judged by others, and this awareness may lead them to modify their perceptions and attitudes toward other groups.

summary

In summary, this paper has outlined two types of influences on the development of intercultural understanding: one is the psychological, determined by the increasing development in the learner of complex mental operations necessary for role-taking; the other is the curriculum orientation which determines the cultural view, or views, through which issues and events in society are examined. When individuals who have the mental capability to understand other cultural viewpoints are not required to take different perspectives, the development of intercultural understanding is not promoted. Neither is true intercultural understanding achieved when individuals are asked to take perspectives of which they are incapable. In a multicultural society such as that of Canada, it is necessary to promote positive intergroup relationships. This *can* be done when children are chal-

lenged to use the maximum levels of role-taking ability possible for them, and is best achieved when the curriculum content involves the several different viewpoints of a multicultural perspective.

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