Using a school-wide diversity program to promote tolerance

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USING A SCHOOL-WIDE DIVERSITY PROGRAM
TO PROMOTE TOLERANCE

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes the existing literature on diversity programs that teach tolerance at the secondary school level. It presents a rational for school counselors to include a diversity program as part of their comprehensive guidance program. In short, schools and communities that were once homogenous are increasingly becoming more diverse. Through a successful diversity program, students will experience personal growth and learn to become citizens of changing local communities as well as the global community.
As communities and schools across the country become increasingly diverse, there is a need for programming for school-aged students that addresses the issue of diversity. No longer do students graduate from homogenous high schools, enter colleges and universities where they are mirror images of each other and the societal beliefs and attitudes are a common strand that connects everyone. The demographic make-up of American schools is changing and will become progressively more diverse in the decades ahead (Hansen, 2002). Schools need to address this change in order to better prepare students for a diverse world.

Wittmer (1992) estimated that by 2056, very few Americans will be able to trace their descent to Europe. Instead, the average United States citizen will trace his or her descent to Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Pacific Islands. Assuming this to be true, schools must implement changes that focus on preventing conflicts that stem from intolerance to diversity. A significant change involves the school counselor creating a program that focuses on teaching tolerance and valuing diversity. This diversity program should be a major part of any elementary, middle, or high school’s comprehensive guidance program, according to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the Iowa Department of Education.

Delaine (2000) recognized that children are very similar to adults in their negative reaction to new people or ideas, an issue that was addressed years ago by the State of Iowa Department of Public Instruction (1983) and the American
School Counselor Association (1999). A pamphlet released by the State of Iowa
Department of Public Instruction (1983) outlined the rationale and philosophy of
multicultural education. Twenty years later, we still endorse the same principles.

It is also important that students see the contributions and perspectives of
the disabled, other races and cultural groups, and the other sex reflected in
the school environment. Students who are not exposed to other groups
through direct contact or indirectly through their educational program
often develop an inflated sense of self or group superiority (the “we did it
all” syndrome). This can lead to patronizing attitudes toward other
groups. School environment and programming play an important role in
developing healthy intergroup and interpersonal attitudes and relations.

ASCA took the diversity issue one step farther by including the school
counselor. This organization stated, “School counselors take action to ensure
students of culturally diverse backgrounds have access to appropriate services and
opportunities promoting the individual’s maximum development”
(www.schoolcounselor.org). This language clearly lays the responsibility of
diversity programming on the school counselor.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate the need for a diversity program that
teaches tolerance at the secondary school level. Preparing students for encounters
with diverse citizens and cultures will enrich their life experience and promote appreciation of differences.

A Review of the Diversity Literature

Much of the literature on using diversity programs to promote tolerance focuses on instruction and curriculum. Researchers suggested that multiculturalism extends into Social Studies, Science, and English classrooms (Aminy & Neophytos-Richardson, 2002; Byrd, 1995; Titus, 1997; Titus, 1998). Teaching the American Creed in the classroom, which consists of Democratic values such as human rights, freedom, equality, justice, and dignity for all people (Myrdal, 1944), increases the chance that students will begin to understand and accept each other (Titus, 1998; Titus, 1997).

Some debate focuses on whether schools should promote tolerance. Burwood and Wyeth (1998) raised this issue. Although they supported the promotion of tolerance in schools, they identified specific considerations and implications for this type of programming. First, Burwood and Wyeth discussed the promotion of tolerance as a means to allow and respect people’s autonomy. According to them, without autonomy, human nature withers. Through this avenue, students “are provided with a range of beliefs and practices from which to choose and the intellectual and moral skills to make informed rational choices” (p. 467).

Second, the process of promoting tolerance encourages debate that in turn allows the truth to come out. The foundation of this point of view is based on the
notion that there is merit in all beliefs and practices (Burwood & Wyeth, 1998).

An open-minded individual with respect for others’ views and beliefs allows for the possibility that his or her beliefs may be wrong. In this sense, the toleration of different beliefs and views becomes a process by which the truth flourishes.

Finally, promoting tolerance develops students who do not tolerate everything, but disapprove of fewer things. According to Burwood and Wyeth (1998), students should tolerate homosexuality and religious differences, but not child molestation. Moral education becomes the critical component in teaching tolerance. Without a firm grasp of what is morally right and morally wrong, students learn moral indifference, a concept schools should not promote.

The Purpose of Diversity Training

The purpose of diversity training is to encourage students to be sensitive to other cultures. Promoting sensitivity addresses the need to prepare students for a pluralistic nation. Students need the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to function not only in their own communities and culture, but also in communities that reflect opposing beliefs and values. Additionally, to a greater extent, students must acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to become effective citizens in the global community (Banks, 2001).

Nieto (1996) declared that the process of developing students who are sensitive to diversity involves three steps. First, students need to learn more about people who are different from them. This is achieved in part by reading books that
examine diverse issues, visiting neighborhoods and restaurants on the "other" side of town, and being involved in activities that emphasize pluralism. For students in homogenous communities, this means traveling to new parts of the state or country and stepping outside of their comfort zones.

Second, students must confront their own racist beliefs and biases. For many adolescents, this is a difficult and painful task. The journey through this stage involves identifying personal beliefs and values, becoming aware of others' beliefs and values, and replacing negative attitudes toward people from other cultures with positive ones.

Finally, the transformation to becoming a culturally sensitive student requires seeing reality from a variety of perspectives. The challenge in this stage is understanding that there may be more than one right answer to any given question. Once again, many students struggle with this notion because it contradicts everything that is taught in a formal educational setting.

_Teaching Tolerance_

Promoting tolerance through diversity training is necessary to facilitate self-growth in all students. Vogt (1997) provided the rationale of promoting tolerance by stating, "tolerance involves skills and understanding necessary for individuals to function in modern diverse society" (p. 24). Furthermore, the ability of American society to evolve depends on citizens' ability to cope with diversity and the conflicts that arise as a result of its existence.
A well-constructed diversity program teaches tolerance. It is important to note that tolerance is defined by Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (Mish, 1993) as “sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one’s own” (p. 1241). Thus, promoting tolerance involves examining one’s own attitudes.

Diversity

To fully comprehend the concept of a diversity program, one must understand the definition of diversity. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (Mish, 1993) offered this definition: “the condition of being diverse; variety” (p. 339). Diversity reaches well beyond race religion, ethnicity, and gender. It includes communication style, learning style, educational background, income, geographic location, mental and physical ability, and family (Wellner, 2000). Diversity, although not always cultural or ethnic, exists in all communities and schools.

Stages of Diversity Progression

Meuleners (2001) identified three stages of diversity progression: recognition, tolerance, and celebration. Recognition, the first stage, is the process of making contact with others who are different than us. Generally, people who live and work in homogenous environments react negatively to identifiable differences. People who are stuck in the recognition stage are often racist and suffer from a lack of information.
When humans experience something new, the brain searches through its memory bank to find similar experiences. Information from similar experiences is then used to fill in the gaps. Thus, to make sense of a new experience, misinformation is mixed with new information to create a complete picture that is understandable to the person.

The other reason people are stuck in the recognition stage is fear. For many people, it is natural to be afraid of things that they do not understand. In time, the fear that exists turns to anger and hatred. Once this happens, it becomes very difficult for someone to change his or her views.

The second stage in Meuleners’ (2001) model is tolerance. The key to progressing into this stage is education. As stated previously, misinformation keeps people locked in the first stage. Replacing the misinformation with facts leads to tolerance, according to Meuleners. Asking questions and learning more about the unknown reduces fear and allows people to accept the information as reality.

The third and final stage is celebration. In this stage, people are attentive to and praise the qualities in others. Much of the celebration is a result of the realization that people work together to create more than they could working alone. Individual differences are accepted and each person’s unique talent is utilized.
Diversity Program

A well-developed diversity program takes into consideration Meuleners' three stages of diversity progression. One example is the program on diversity and tolerance developed by Dr. Tamara Baker (1996). Originally, the program was developed for college students to help them create solutions to diversity-related problems at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. However, the content of the curriculum contains activities that are developmentally appropriate for high school students.

Dr. Baker (1996) identified three goals of her program. The first goal is designed to promote discussion among students so that they can identify and take pride in their unique differences. A secondary purpose within the first goal is to educate others in the group about issues and concern that they may not be familiar with. This goal is a reflection of the first stage Meuleners (2001) presents in his progression of diversity model.

The second goal of Baker's (1996) diversity and tolerance program is to put the responsibility of seeking, establishing, and encouraging unity in the hands of the students. She accomplishes this by forming groups where members are encouraged to generate ideas to reduce conflict and appreciate differences.

The final goal, according to Baker (1996), is to create an environment where students are comfortable discussing differences and engaging in personal growth. No longer will adults or authority figures force "diversity" on to students.
Instead, consistent with Meuleners’ third stage, students will initiate sharing and experience a synergetic environment.

Role of the Counselor in Promoting Tolerance to Diversity

The counselor’s role throughout the process of teaching tolerance to diversity involves consulting with teachers and administrators to ensure that instruction and curriculum promotes multiculturalism, serving as the coordinator of the school-wide diversity program, and facilitating small groups and classroom guidance. While each of these functions is a separate task, they are also interrelated.

Consulting

The first role of the counselor in teaching tolerance and diversity is consulting with teachers and administrators to ensure that instruction and curriculum promotes multiculturalism. While the counselor does not usually have the authority in a school district to determine instruction and curriculum, he or she can use school inservice time to educate the staff and administration about the benefits of incorporating diversity and tolerance into lesson plans. Teaching tolerance and diversity need to be a part of the curriculum, taught through groups as well as in the classroom. An abundance of literature exists, especially in professional education journals that offer blueprints on how to include diversity and tolerance in math, science, social studies, and English.
Coordinating

In the role of coordinator, the counselor is responsible for coordinating the entire diversity program. One part of management involves evaluating the issues students will be discussing to ensure that the material is developmentally appropriate, meaning the students involved possess the intellectual ability to understand all points of view. Obviously, juniors and seniors are more prepared to engage in discussions that require a certain level of education than are freshmen and sophomores. For example, students who have taken World History and Literature classes that focus on writings from other cultures have a better understanding of different cultural perspectives than do younger high school students who have not been exposed to traditional junior and senior courses.

In addition to evaluating the issues students will be discussing, the counselor must establish time during the school day that students can meet as part of the group counseling component of the diversity program. To do this, the counselor must have an understanding of the school schedule as well as what classes students can miss without hurting their grade or grade point average. Generally, math and science courses are the classes students have the most difficulty making up.

Finally, the counselor must coordinate experiences that foster sensitivity to diversity. Regardless of the experience, there must be an educational component to the activity and learning should occur. For example, if the counselor is
working with students to gain a greater appreciation of African-American history, students must learn about the plight of African-Americans. Coordinating a field trip to an African-American museum or inviting an African-American individual who lived through the civil right's movement to speak are two examples of introducing students to the Africa-American perspective.

**Facilitating**

*Small groups.* Forming well-structured small groups is critical to promoting tolerance to diversity because it provides a means to which students can identify their core set of values. This is necessary to achieve the goal of the second stage of becoming a multicultural student as defined by Nieto (1996) – confronting students' own racist beliefs and biases. To achieve success in this stage, the counselor must exercise the sixteen-core group skills identified by Gladding (1999), such as encouraging participation of group members, attending to and acknowledge group member behavior, imparting information in the group when necessary, helping group members attribute meaning to the experience, and helping group members to integrate and apply learning.

As the facilitator of a group, the counselor establishes a friendly and relaxed atmosphere from the beginning. A large piece of that is establishing ground rules that promote meaningful discussion. Group participants help determine ground rules as this experience will convey the message that the group belongs to the participants.
In addition to establishing ground rules, the facilitator is an active listener, asks open-ended questions, draws out quiet participants, and summarizes discussion. New and experienced school counselors possess these skills as each of the skills is utilized during any group experience. Some skills are defined as basic counseling skills.

The group experience is enhanced for participants if they have time to think and reflect. Reflection time is important so that students can digest and begin to understand how their point of view parallels or differs from other group members’ point of view. In addition, the facilitator keeps discussion on track and allows participants to respond to another’s comments and questions. A well facilitated group encourages participants to engage in dialogue with each other, not with the leader.

As participants begin to share their views on the topic of focus, inevitably some disagreement will exist. The facilitator helps students explore the disagreements rather than ignore them. Participants are encouraged to share their opinions, even if they may offend other group members. That being said, the leader will not allow put-downs, name-calling, labeling, or personal attacks.

Finally, to accomplish the goal of exploring disagreement, the facilitator may have to ask difficult questions. While the members should not view the leader as the expert, the facilitator should call attention to points of view that have not been
mentioned or considered. The goal is to bring all points of view under scrutiny, not to promote any one idea.

The group arrangement provides an arena to discuss issues related to diversity and tolerance. Continuously bringing up situations that students find themselves in gives opportunities for them to share their experience. Situations like alcohol and drug usage, dating and relationships, racial and ethnic tensions, and violence in schools and community provide an avenue for students to learn more about themselves and others. It also introduces them to different points of view, the origin of diversity.

While there are many appropriate small group activities, two are discussed in this paper. The first activity is designed to help students understand and identify their belief and value system. Using six core values: honesty, integrity, respect for self, respect for others, responsibility, and courtesy, group members prioritize the importance of each value. After students have individually prioritized the aforementioned values, they share their list with the group. The discussion that follows helps members identify their core values as well as learn about the degree of diversity that exists in the group.

(http://students.resa.net/stoutcomputerclass/CoreValuesAct1definitionsSmall.htm)

The second activity is targeted at gaining a better understanding of each student’s tolerance level. Students are given a list of statements and are asked whether they agree or disagree with each statement. A couple of examples are “I
would prefer to socialize with people of my ethnicity or race rather than with individuals from different ethnicities or races," and "I would rather work for a male than for a female supervisor" (Richardson and Norman, 1997). The statements are designed to bring out opinions that students have on various issues related to diversity. Ultimately, these opinions are a reflection of each student’s value system.

After the students rate the statements on a scale from one to five, they add their scores and find a total. Students then use the interpretation to gain a better understanding of what their score means in terms of their tolerance level. Finally, the facilitator leads the group through statement and discuss share with the group how they rated each statement. This discussion is extremely valuable as students hear other views and opinions. While a consensus is not necessary, it is important that students recognize where they stand on each issue.

As students process the activity through a discussion of issues related to race, religion, language, immigration, and so forth, it is important the counselor make a mental note of the misinformation that exists. It then becomes the counselor’s role to educate students about the facts. As previously mentioned in Meuleners’ model, education becomes the key to the second stage in diversity progression.

Classroom guidance. Facilitating classroom guidance is another important role of the counselor and is an ideal time to promote diversity and tolerance. In addition to encouraging school staff to include diversity and tolerance into lesson
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planning, the counselor can use classroom guidance to reinforce diversity and tolerance. One activity obtained from
(http://www.askasia.org/teachers/InstructionalResources/LessonPlans/Global/LP
global3.htm) helps students explore values and expectations of their own culture through questioning, learn about the customs and values of other cultures, and compare differences in cultures. The activity should be scheduled over the course of two class periods. In addition, students will need access to an almanac, encyclopedia, or the internet.

In small groups, students are asked to plan an imaginary trip to another country. To assist them, the counselor provides students with a handout that identifies parts of everyday life that may be different. For example, students research how people greet each other, how children are disciplined at home, dress codes, attitudes toward drinking and gambling, and the normal pattern of work and school. To better understand the cultural differences, students are asked to address the questions from an American perspective first. Then, use an almanac, encyclopedia, or the internet to research the way of life for another country.

The final part of this activity involves students comparing and contrasting their own culture with that of another country’s. Students are asked to share their findings with their class. In this way students are educated about the different cultures that exist around the world.
The second activity the counselor can facilitate during classroom guidance involves students defining who they are as well as examining stereotypes (http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/education/multi/activities/circlesofself.html). These two tasks are identified by Baker (1996) as being important to a diversity and tolerance program.

For this activity, students write their names in the center of a circle. Next, students draw smaller circles around the center circle, filling in each with a dimension of their identity they consider to be among the most important in defining themselves. Following this step, students share in small groups times they felt good about being associated with one of the identifiers. Students also share times that it was painful to be associated with one of the identity dimensions they chose.

After students have shared their feelings about their association with various identifiers, they are asked to share a stereotype they have heard about one dimension of their identity that fails to describe them accurately. This step is important because students examine and confront existing negative stereotypes. Finally, students are asked to brainstorm ways to eliminate stereotypes. Often students conclude that an education piece is a critical part of eliminating stereotypes.
Challenges

One of the most difficult challenges of promoting acceptance, tolerance, and ultimately celebrating diversity is related to social development. Johnson and Smith (1993), in reviewing a study of high school students’ racial attitudes concluded, “peers discouraged intergroup contact and students’ perceptions of other racial groups had hardened” (p. 23). These findings are consistent with what school counselors know about social development and the impact peers have on young adolescents. It is very difficult reach the level of change with high school students because their attitudes and values are being etched into their permanent belief system.

Although it is a challenge to crack their belief system, adolescents are at a point in their cognitive development that allows them to discuss stereotyping (Johnson & Smith, 1993). Discussing stereotypes in a group setting whose members are fourteen to eighteen years old requires skilled counselor techniques and a stable environment.

Promoting tolerance of diversity is especially difficult because individuals are not innately tolerant (Avery, Sullivan, & Wood, 1997). Tolerance, as a result of diversity programming, must become a choice that students make. For students that do not welcome diversity with open arms, it may take a great deal of time before they are able to make tolerance their choice.
Conclusion

Promoting tolerance through a school-wide diversity program is an important part of a comprehensive guidance program. Students who participate in a diversity program will take steps both forward and backward throughout the process of becoming more tolerant and accepting of others. The process begins by first encouraging students to learn more about themselves. Students need to identify their values and beliefs before learning about others.

Second, students participate in activities that promote learning about other people and their shared similarities or differences. In this step, students begin to recognize the attitudes and beliefs that make each person unique. In this stage, students also become educated about others, breaking stereotypes that make forming positive relationships nearly impossible.

Finally, students acknowledge and accept the differences that exist between each of us. The celebration stage is the desired result of any diversity program. Students who attain this level have a greater respect for themselves and for others. Students also recognize that people should not be judged based on their appearance or background but on their contributions to society. A society composed of people with this attitude is an improvement over the world where we currently live.
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