

Connecting Diverse Youth:
Results From Inspiring Multicultural Understanding (I M U) Focus Group Interview with
Educators

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This paper represents the opinions of the author and does not represent the views of I M U, its Executive Director or other members of the organization.

Abstract

In an effort to better understand how multiculturalism can be taught effectively to youth, I M U and the present researcher conducted a focus group interview with a group of high school teachers. Six teachers from the high school where I M U has implemented its pilot programs provided their opinions and ideas based on their experience in working with diverse youth. Participants' discussion was recorded and moderated to fit the list of predetermined questions into the ninety-minutes timeframe. The recorded audio was transcribed and then analyzed to find emerging themes. The findings from the analysis demonstrate that teachers observe signs of students' interest in learning about different cultures and in changing situations of conflict, specially those that exist in the students' community and day-to-day life. However, the teachers also pointed out that the process of acquiring multicultural competency is complex and not short. Moreover, keeping a high school teenager truly engaged in a school activity for a continuous period of time is not an easy task. Based on these findings, the author recommending that to effectively engage students in multicultural learning I M U's programs should be diverse in tasks and focus on multicultural issues rooted in the students' daily life while yielding some decision-making power to the students.

Introduction

Inspiring Multicultural Understanding (I M U) is a start-up nonprofit based in the Bay Area that envisions a world community where we express our true selves and celebrate each other across language and culture. I M U believes that such world can be achieved by equipping young people with cultural competencies, effective communication and leadership skills.

As I M U approaches its third year of existence, it enters a new stage of redefining visions and strategies and team development to achieve its mission. At this point, I M U has developed and piloted two curricula for high school students. One is a curriculum for after school clubs and the other is for formal school classes. It is within this context that I M U conducted a study to examine the pilot programs in order to refine its content, structure, and strategies.

In the first step of this study, I M U has collected participant students' feedback on the pilot curricula by means of satisfaction surveys administered at the end of the regular school course and the after school program. A key issue for the revision of the pilot curricula identified from these surveys was their attractiveness to students in addition to the initial and constant concerns on issues of effectiveness and efficiency.

Thus, as the next step I M U seeks to better understand how multiculturalism can be taught comprehensively in an attractive way to students. This report presents the results of the group interview conducted with teachers from the school where the pilot programs were implemented. The report explores the issues around effectively teaching multiculturalism and I start with a brief review of the existing literature in the following section.

Learning to live together

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26. (1948). United Nations.

Diverse approaches

Many have contributed in the fight for the right to equal education for all regardless of racial, ethnic, cultural, social class, religious and linguistic backgrounds. In this process, varied philosophies and approaches to assure such right have been developed. *Multicultural education*, one of these efforts, was originally developed in response to the civil rights movements in the United States in the 1960s. In her analysis of strategies for diverse schools Menkart explains, “just as there are many interpretations of the civil rights movement, so there are many interpretations of multicultural education” (Menkart, 1993). Acknowledging the diversity of the term, however, here we present a definition of multicultural education that we find particularly helpful in examining classroom practices and curriculum. Banks defines multicultural education as an education that helps “students to develop the knowledge, skill, and attitudes needed to participate in reflective civic action” to prepare them for a pluralistic democratic society (Banks, 1995).

On the other hand, those who criticize multicultural education to only produce acceptance and tolerance advocate for an *intercultural education*. UNESCO defines intercultural education as a highly dynamic concept that creates “understanding of, respect for and dialogue between the different cultural groups (UNESCO 2006, 8).

Despite this distinction, both terms envision a diverse world where we live together regardless of our differences.

Similarly, *peace education* has also been developed as an educational approach to overcome differences. Peace education is comparable to multicultural education in the breadth that the term encompasses. Educators practice peace education without calling it by name. Peace education can take different forms such as: Education for Conflict Resolution; Global Education; Critical Pedagogy; Education for Liberation and Empowerment; Social Justice Education; Environmental Education; Life Skills Education; Disarmament and Development Education. Harris and Morrison (2003) provide a comprehensive explanation of the philosophy and process of peace education. According to the authors, peace education teaches “how to solve the problems caused by violence” (Harris and Morrison, 2003, p.10). Ultimately, it transforms the “social structure and the patterns of thought that have created it” (Reardon, 1988) by creating a culture of peace.

Various educational perspectives and approaches to overcoming differences and conflicts rooted in these differences exist. In the same way, there is much discussion on how to effectively teach our youth the values and skills advocated by scholars. The next section reviews the literature addressing the question of teaching multicultural education.

Teaching our youth

Much of the literature agrees that in order to effectively teach diverse students about diversity, the teacher needs to be proficient in cross-cultural learning. Generally, this proficiency has been called *cross-cultural competency* or *cultural competency*.

Gudykunst and Kim define a cross-culturally competent person as someone who is “not limited but (is) open to growth beyond the psychological parameters of only one culture ... accepts and appreciates the differences that lie between people of different cultures” (1984, p. 230). Moreover, Bennett adds that cross-culture competence includes “appropriate understanding, attitudes, and social action skills” to combat all forms of prejudice and discrimination (Bennett, 1995).

However, in multicultural teacher education, MacAllister and Irvine criticizes previous studies and practices for not adequately developing cross-cultural competence within teachers. They claim that one reason for this lack of success is the poor examination of process-oriented models of cross-cultural competence development that has been used mostly in the field of psychology (MacAllister and Irvine, 2000). The process-oriented models offer descriptions of stages or strata of how people change their behavior and attitude towards cultural competence. As a result of their analysis of three different process-oriented models, considered to be applicable for teacher development, MacAllister and Irvine conclude that in teacher education, instructors should consider the readiness of their learners in order to provide the appropriate support depending on the learners' developmental level of cross-cultural competence. This is crucial to avoid resistance, discourage, stereotyping and other negative feelings on the part of the learner (MacAllister and Irvine, 2000).

Similarly focusing on teacher professional development, another work calls for culturally responsive teaching (Rothstein-Fish and Trumbull, 2008). The authors argue that such teaching can be fostered by providing teachers “access to a theoretical framework that is both easy to grasp and immediately useful for understanding arguably

the most important distinctions among cultures” (Rothstein-Fish and Trumbull, 2008, p. 8).

Regardless of the method used to instruct teachers, the main goal of multicultural teacher education is to equip teachers with the means necessary to be effective with their culturally diverse students. However, there is less focus in the literature on the developmental process of youth in acquiring such competency. The hidden assumption seems to be that students would reach cross-cultural competency by learning from their teachers in the same way that the teachers learned to be culturally competent.

Acknowledging that youth are at different stages of identity development and socialization compared to adults, it is plausible to believe that the learning of cultural competency of youth might require different approaches than those applied for adults. For example, Menkart notes that “some students, especially adolescents, may not want to be singled out as the in-house expert on their cultures and nationalities” (1993). This behavior might be explained by the identity crises experienced by adolescents (Erikson, 1968) who come to confront the question: “Who am I?” Furthermore, Padilla (2006) reminds that such crises might be more problematic for those youth that are in a family, school and community context where multiple values, beliefs and behaviors are practiced. Especially those who belong to a group of lower social prestige might have a strong desire to construct their own identities free from the biases imposed by their parents, teachers and peers. Padilla quotes an adolescent: “I ain’t none of that shit. I’m not the man’s thing to play with. I am who I am. That’s it” (2006, p. 472).

This interview study tries to shed light on this poorly investigated issue of how to effectively equip youth with cultural competency. In the following section I describe the procedures of the study.

Methods and Data

To address the research question—How can multiculturalism be taught comprehensively and attractively to students?—a qualitative method of focus group interview was selected since it allows for inductive data analysis to identify the themes and perspectives at play in the practices of education of diverse youth (Merriam 2002; Creswell 2009).

I M U conducted the group interview with high school teachers during the early summer of 2011 as part of the curriculum development research. The interview was designed to learn from teachers' professional experiences of working with diverse youth as well as to get their perspectives on the curriculum design of I M U's educational program for youth.

Focus group interview

A focus group interview was chosen as a best method to capture meaningful insights about the topic of interest. In comparison to quantitative surveys, the interview format allows the facilitator to probe the participants thinking in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the idea. And in comparison to one-on-one interviews, in the focus group interview participants are prompted from others' ideas and bring forth ideas that might not had have been captured in isolation. However, the conclusions are not suited

for making generalizations to a larger population because of the small sample size and the non-random selection of participants used in the focus group interview.

Recruitment of participants

Teachers of a high school for recent immigrants with additional experience with peace or social justice education composed the group of participants. I M U selected this group because I M U has piloted its programs in this school for two years and the teachers have a strong commitment to peace, social justice and multicultural education, in addition to being aware of and very supportive of I M U pilots. Based on their prior experience with young adults and multicultural curriculum, teachers are able to provide unique views about issues around teaching multiculturalism to youth.

Twelve teachers received an invitation letter in electronic and hard copy form delivered by a member of I M U who is also a teaching staff at the school. Teachers had six days to respond with their interest in participating in the focus group meeting. The six participants who accepted the invitation were reminded about the meeting the Friday before the meeting and the day prior to it via email.

Meeting Procedures

The meeting was tape recorded and notes taken to record description of participants' reactions and meeting atmosphere.

A volunteer moderator facilitated the discussion using the previously agreed upon list of questions and protocol (Appendix).

Data Analysis

The data consists of the transcript of the group interview and notes of observation from the observer and moderator. The researcher analyzed the data through a coding process. This process consisted of highlighting major issues, identifying emerging themes, labeling and categorizing the data. These themes, labels and categories then yield interpretations that address the interview questions and the broader research question. The following section describes these findings.

Findings

Teachers' experiences with multicultural, peace and social justice education

Participants' answers about their experiences with education of issues around peace, multiculturalism and social justice did not yield immediate responses. After some time to think, participants were able to find connections with their experiences and pedagogies. Two participants discussed the specific organizational contexts within which they addressed peace, multicultural and/or social justice education, while the other three participants discussed the way in which they infuse multicultural curriculum into their everyday practice. The experiences presented ranged from undergraduate studies, work with non-profit organizations and in classroom teaching.

Answers revolved around the ideal form that an education about peace, multiculturalism and social justice would have. Participants spoke about more effort to include students' perspective and experiences in the course curriculum in order to promote understanding, and more effort to connect content and activities to students'

daily life in order to create a meaningful impact and change in the attitude and behavior of the students.

“(I felt the need for)... some other more internal work and basing it less on jumping to this big high level like work. ‘We are gonna go testify at their resources board and argue for better policies’ and which is very incredible to see and help students do and the.. I think felt like very powerful agents of change for that period of time but then, um, I think there were sometimes was a disconnect between the day to day ...”

The answers also expressed the difficulty of incorporating such elements into their work while also suggesting that such efforts are innate to their work as educators.

“ I feel like those two things are like everything we do.. but also like nothing that we do purposely or anything that I do in my work purposely. I feel like it’s the heart and what’s underneath. ...”

Definitions of multicultural and peace education

The discussion about the definition of multicultural education centered on the definition of culture. In other words, participants tried to define the content to be learned and taught in multicultural education. The analysis of the discussion resulted in a definition of multicultural education as presented below.

Multicultural education is the teaching and learning about various cultures. However, culture should not be simplified to the more visual symbols such as food, clothes, dances, music, language, flags and celebrations. Culture is more than symbols. Culture is what defines a person’s identity in society such as ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, religion and sexual orientation. Therefore, in essence, multicultural education should be the learning about the various identities and stories that people hold including the subcultures or minority cultures within any mainstream or majority culture.

“I think the, the difference is defining the people versus the culture. It’s like stop making that separation. I think that a lot of people love like the culture, like love learning new cultures, new food, new music, new dances, things like that but really .. while they embrace the culture they hold that distance from people.”

“I think about as culture there is also like within a particular ... sub culture. ... let’s say American culture, which you know that means a whole lot of different things but there is looking at, you know, like, different age groups.., genders.., um like, .. religious identities.., or um sexual orientations .., so there’s, there’s all this other aspect of culture that, um, traditionally people don't .. think about when they, you know, think about like teaching, learning about someone’s culture”

In discussing about peace education, respondents were inspired by what they had seen in the work of I M U. Their responses created the following definition of peace education.

Peace education centers on learning about the other, about the past and present and the conflicts that happen between different individuals and groups of people. Students learn how to communicate in order to transmit and understand their emotions and differences. Eventually, students can overcome the fear towards the different other since this fear can be a trigger to conflicts.

(Participant is talking about her impression on I M U’s program)
“I felt this fundamental piece of starting to be very, very conscious of your own needs, or emotional reactions and then also through that recognizing others’ emotional needs and reactions and having that be this sort of touch stone for, why you would communicate in a certain way and react in a certain way and think also that is such a huge piece when we see others who we don't understand or we don't, we have associations with”

Fostering a “deep” connection across differences

Instances described by participants during this segment of the focus group provide insight into the cultivation of a “deep” connection among culturally diverse youth. The meaning of “deep” was not precisely defined when the question was asked (see protocol in

appendix). The interpretation of what “deep” entails was left for the participants to make. However, the use of this adjective was meaningful in that it pushed the teachers to think about the difficulties in developing a connection among students. Participants’ stories illustrate the hardships of fostering the connection among diverse students, the different levels of connection that can occur and factors that can promote connections. Below, I describe the story told by the teachers on “deeply” connecting students.

Creating a “deep” or any sort of connection between diverse students is not an easy task. Students tend to stay within their comfort zone and be around peers that are similar to them. Teachers see this as a normal (although not desired) behavior as expressed in comments such as the two below.

(Participant is talking about the friendship between students from different countries.)

“... they became friends and normally that didn't happen. Normally, kids.. um.. stuck with their.. language groups.”

On the other hand, teachers also acknowledge this behavior as having harmful effects by preventing students from learning about each other and resulting in dislike, conflicts and bullying. One teacher explained:

“I think, like, two students who maybe don't like each other at all and um.. and a lot of that probably comes from not knowing each other”

Overcoming this hurdle of differences and developing connections requires time and space. When provided with the opportunity, diverse students have worked together and shared their stories. Through these interactions, with time, students were able to get to know each other better and develop understanding, empathy and respect for each other.

These opportunities (to work together for a common goal or just to learn about each other) could happen casually from a natural curiosity. It could also be an opportunity purposely set by the teacher that would create an environment of need to learn about each other. An example brought by one teacher was making a class rule to “make new friends.” Another teacher explained a different case about two girls.

“... they had the space to.. kinda just to get to know each other. Because they would come into my classroom before school started and sometimes they would eat breakfast and sort of hang out and.. um.. through that and working on.. projects together.. um.. that they became friends”

However, connections can develop in different levels and the connection in one level does not necessary mean that students were connected in other levels. Teachers have seen different levels of connection between students. Based on the discussion I identified three different levels that I would like to call: academic level, social level and associational (shared past or present experience) level. When students have connected academically, they would work together across their differences to accomplish the assignments. When students have connected socially, they would eat together or hang out between classes enjoying a shared social life. In contrast to these former two levels, the associational level is a less interactive connection. Students connected by association would share a common past or present experience that results in a feeling of sympathy for each other.

As exemplified in the following comments, teachers describe the different levels of student connection or lack of connection. The first teacher explains an example where students were academically connected but lacked connection on other levels. The second

teacher describes an instance where students connected on the associational level while they were resolving a conflict with each other.

“... when academically, they were all, like, very connected, and knew, knew that they were each others’ resources and, like, you would see them just do this amazing .. kinda stick together and, like, find each other when there was something hard or, you know. ... I think they recognized how strong she was intellectually, um.. but on the flip side I think .. there was a real lack of support for them to get deeper into the questions about difference and, um.. and how painful it was ‘cos there was a lot of also, like, when they were, like, making fun of her accent ... it was kinda of this, like, constant joke and it was really hard for her, like, socially although these were her friends”

“... there are two girls who really don't like each other, who had a fight in the past ... it came out that both of them had lost their mothers really early and they were both sitting at the table with a distant family member that they were just getting to know. Um, and sort of looking across the table and realizing like ‘Wow, you have, you have the same pain that I have. And, and I don't like you’. And being able to sort of like compartmentalize the dislike and, and set it aside for a second and be like, ‘I have deep, deep sympathy for that, for that experience and understanding of it’.”

Other factors facilitating the development of connections among diverse students that can be identified from participants’ answers are:

- Small group or community
- Frequency (the more the better, incorporate as an every day activity)
- Both structured and ad hoc opportunities for connections
- Space to explicitly discuss differences and diversity

To be culturally competent

The discussion about the meaning of cultural competency built on the previous question of how diverse students can be “deeply” connected. Answers from participants complemented each other in describing the necessary skills and the learning process of how to be culturally competent.

A person who is able to interact and communicate with others about the differences among them without putting each other at risk of being harmed by judgments can be said to be culturally competent. This person would also be able to code switch and successfully adapt to different cultural settings in a genuine way.

One stage that a person goes through to acquire such quality is to learn about yourself and accept who you are. We can learn about our identity by exploring ourselves within the groups of people (similar and different from you) and society at large that we are part of. This self-exploration should not be limited to exploring the various identities we have. It should explore the discomfort that we have when we are among those who are different from us and nurture the openness to be uncomfortable. Furthermore, the self-exploration should extend to examining our position within the power structure that exists in our society. This knowledge is essential in order to be able to communicate to others about yourself.

A different stage in the road for cultural competency is learning to learn about those who are different from us. We all have an inborn curiosity to learn about the other. However, as we grow, we are taught how to see the others in a certain way that is usually contextualized within social/cultural norms. Therefore, we need to learn to deconstruct previously acquired knowledge, be humble in admitting that we know nothing and just listen to the other's story. These two stages do not necessary form a linear process and a person could move between them in the process of being culturally competent.

Empathy towards the other

The discussion around the question of how to foster lasting empathy among diverse youth resembled the discussion about the factors that create a “deep” connection between students in the sense that time and intentional intervention were indicated as important elements. The responses provided reflected on the educational model of participants’ high school as a successful example of a program that has nurtured empathy among its diverse students.

“(in our school) there’s intentional work towards all our norms about working together in a group, having different roles, you know, who is gonna bring what to the table and you have this goal and you are making t-shirt, or you are making a farm, or you’re.. Like, it’s very like.., you know.. Or you are interviewing each other, you know.. ”

Empathy for the other can be developed through the exploration of similarities and differences. It is easier to start with similarities since people tend to be more comfortable talking about similarities than differences. In order to explore their differences safely, people need to have a certain knowledge and understanding of each other. For this empathy to be deep and lasting, it is necessary to assure frequent interaction with the same group of students for a certain period of time. Moreover, they should constantly engage in activities where they can explore similarities and differences.

One teacher noted about the students in their school:

“I just see this, like, group of a hundred kids that have been with us for so long and a lot of them were .. in this class and, like, the learning now that they share as a .. as a group of kids, like, .. I think we can start really pushing them because they have all these similar experiences and then we can start pushing like (...) really exploring their differences and really exploring (...) the more ... difficult topics that we could never have done ah.. without them knowing and understanding each other first.”

However, simply spending time together in a class or in a certain activity does not mean that students will naturally explore their similarities and differences. Neither it will

do teaching them through a textbook (for instance, lecturing about oppression). An intentional intervention by the educator is necessary to unify the diverse students under a common goal and engage them in an action that connects theory to tasks in their daily lives.

Furthermore, a successful program structure should allow students to spend time and work together in a context outside the classroom. This enables students to explore qualities that can not be observed in a regular class. Learning beyond the classroom can support empathy development and provide opportunities for students to see each other in different leadership roles.

“I think it’s imperative to, um.. get kids outside of the classroom because (...) allows them to develop, like, different sides of themselves and um to explore empathy, differences, similarities in much different contexts.”

“We saw students who academically really struggle and don't feel strong, like, with their identity .. but staying out, like, they were the leaders in at the farmers market and making the pizza, and like, as small as that is ... totally incredible, you know, to sort of break some of those .. school based things where you get enrapt about.”

Gaining students’ buy-in

Through the examination of their experiences with students and their perspectives on I M U’s after school program in their school, participants indicated several methods and strategies that can help in creating student buy-in into a program.

- Student leadership: choice and decision making (with teacher guidance)
- Student responsibility: organize and conduct tasks (with teacher guidance and allowing students to make mistakes)
- Action oriented and community level problem solving
- Unstructured time for fun and socializing
- Effective and attractive advertisement of the program
- Concrete and hands on tasks with immediate results
- Motivation to commitment in regular attendance (grades?)

Implications and recommendations

How can multiculturalism be taught comprehensively and attractively to students?

There is much agreement between the interviewed teachers' perceptions and the literature on what an education about multiculturalism should include as content. An effective curriculum includes learning about identities and cultures of your own and others, an examination of conflict and inequality, and the learning about the means to address problems in society. There is also agreement that learning is a gradual process that is not necessarily linear.

Adding to the existing literature, teachers' responses and our findings provide important insights on how youth, particularly high school students, develop cultural competency, empathy and a "deep" connection among their diverse peers. Teachers observe the hunger of high school students to be part of activities for change in their communities and their interest to connect with those who are different. On the other hand, teachers also note that students find it hard to commit to activities regularly and that while students may connect with their peers on one level they may still be disconnected on another level. This inconsistency may be an expression of the search for an identity experienced by many adolescents.

The findings from the focus group interview offer practical strategies to address the unique needs of youth. Content recommendations include adopting topics that are rooted in students' day-to-day reality and the needs of the local and school community. Moreover, participants recommend a progression from a focus on similarities to more controversial or uncomfortable issues of differences, and the judgments we make about those differences.

Structural recommendation emphasizes working with a defined group of students during some length of time. Cultural competency, empathy and a “deep” connection are not something learned and achieved in one day or on one occasion. There needs to be a structure that allows students to both take on more tasks and take over the decision-making process. There also needs to be sustainability and consistency within the organization in providing continuous assistance to the students. Moreover, it is necessary to have an ongoing commitment from the student group to be part of the program for its duration. However, as students’ interests change rapidly, the program should make the effort to assure students’ continuous interest. Some suggestions are to add unstructured fun time, as well as learning through hands on and concrete tasks.

A final recommendation identifies topics for further studies. Many participants repeatedly offered SFIHS as a model school with a special, multicultural environment that encourages connection and empathy among its diverse students. Therefore, a study of the educational model of this high school shall bring further understanding of youth behavior and attitude in a multicultural environment. In addition, unquestionably, a study that examines students’ own perspectives on the issue is needed. Furthermore, future investigation of the question of how to impact not only the students participating in the program but also the larger youth community is needed for the development of a successful educational program.

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Appendix

Focus group questions:

1. (Ask all participants to respond) Tell us about your experience with peace education, multicultural education, social justice or other...

No probes

2. How do you define multicultural education?

Probes:

- Discrimination?
- Understanding?
- Celebrate different cultures?

3. How do you define peace education?

Probes:

- conflict resolution
- educational standards
- history/war (past)
- nonviolence

4. (Ask all participants to respond) Could you describe an occasion where young people from different cultural groups were able to connect deeply (intellectually and emotionally) with one another?

Probes:

- were interacting across groups with excitement and enthusiasm?
- What was the topic/particulars of the activity?
- Why do you think that happened?

7. What does it mean to be culturally competent?

Probe:

What does a person need to know to get along well with others of different cultures and to work well with others?

- skills
- competencies

8. What can make a lasting impact in developing a young person's empathy for "the other"? (i.e. internalizing empathy)

Possible examples:

- a program that promotes these connections regularly and over time
- program that promotes any kinds of connection across difference
- program that promotes sharing of similarities across difference
- program that promotes sharing of differences

9. If you were to introduce a new education program for youth, what would you do to assure students' continuous buy-in and attendance?

Probes:

- how would you maximize student motivation to regularly participate?
- when have you seen students most engaged and excited about curriculum? What were they doing?
- are there programs that you know that are especially successful in creating student buy in and which program features may have supported student ownership?

10. Would anyone like to make any additional comments?