

TEACHING FOR DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Teachers are faced with an overwhelming challenge to prepare students from diverse cultural backgrounds to live in a rapidly interactive changing world. The basic approach to this problematic is that teaching for diversity is not possible without social justice. They are integral.

Teaching for diversity and social justice involves differences among people. Although differences among individuals exist, diversity usually refers to group differences. Yet it has become clear that intragroup differences exist. Not everyone in the same group has the same values. We need to understand diversity because it focuses attention on conflict among and within groups.

Diversity is at the heart of education. Curriculum should be inclusive of diverse groups and not centered on any single group. Culture is the values and practices that describe the content and structure of intellectual, emotional and social development among members of a particular group.

The interaction of language and culture is central to socialization. It brings one into acceptable cultural patterns that distinguish one community from another. Language shapes one's cultural and personal identity. Language and being are integral. Different languages are the embodiment of different social realities. To be able to understand what someone says one must understand the social context of the language. To be able to work with students of diverse backgrounds teachers must first feel comfortable with their own culture. Not only that teachers must understand the cultural setting in which the school is located.

The idea is to help students understand and affirm cultural differences while realizing that individuals across cultures have similarities. Students have individual differences even though they appear to be from the same group. They embody different historical backgrounds, religions and styles of living. These experiences determine how each and every person views things.

Now let us turn to social justice, which speaks to the care of those persons in a society who are not as advantaged as others. Meaningful change in the world today requires a universal social consciousness. It requires a willingness to bring to student's awareness cultural differences and inequalities. Culture differences have strength and value and schools should be the expression of human responsibilities and respect for differences. Cultural differences are the inexhaustible richness of the human being. Each culture has something to offer, as does each person.

Social justice and social responsibility can be treated as synonymous concepts. Social responsibility requires that needs take priority over claims that derive from a stratified system of role distribution in society. Justice demands equality and fairness in all private transactions, wages and property ownership and an equal opportunity for all to participate in public benefits generated by society as a whole such as social security, health care and education.

Education for justice is education for collaboration, cooperation and community. The way to approach this is to cultivate within ourselves tolerance and acceptance that teach us to live with that which is different.

Students are unique individuals who embody different strengths and weakness. Teachers must remember that all students can benefit from instruction. Those of special needs can benefit from instruction tailored to their unique characteristics.

Teachers must remember that teaching for diversity and social justice takes careful notice that instructional decisions will be affected not only by the characteristics that each student brings to the classroom but at one and the same by the teacher's personality, compassion thoughtfulness and care.

Changes in the structure of society must accompany changes in attitudes. To have an impact on the world and bring about change teachers must embody that change. As Gandhi says, we must be the change we wish to see in the world.