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Multicultural Issues in Outdoor Education. ERIC Digest.

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The 1990s saw the outdoor education community undergo a process of critical redefinition as it attempted to address multicultural education issues. As a result,

outdoor education has seen more diverse curriculum, program agendas, staff and leadership, boards of directors, and students.

This Digest offers a definition for multicultural education, reviews what we already know about multicultural diversity in outdoor education, poses new questions for researchers and practitioners, and offers some suggestions for enhancing students' experiences.

CONNECTING MULTICULTURAL AND OUTDOOR EDUCATION

Because the demographic makeup of the United States is changing, there are more opportunities to serve students from diverse cultural backgrounds. To be successful, it is important to develop an understanding of diverse student needs, attitudes toward the outdoors, and styles of learning as part of an overall effort to acknowledge and appreciate their various cultures (cf. Kielsmeier, 1989).

Burnett (1994) draws from the work of Banks, Sleeter, and Nieto to suggest a three-part typology of multicultural education: (1) content-oriented programs that focus on the curriculum to increase students' knowledge about different cultural groups, (2) student-oriented programs that work to increase academic achievement of certain groups, and (3) socially oriented programs that work toward increasing cultural and racial tolerance and reducing bias in schools and communities.

Outdoor activities lend themselves well to the last of these three program types--addressing social problems such as racial or ethnic bias. Bernardy (1995) suggests that the power of outdoor education resides in providing opportunities for diverse participants to cooperate to solve problems, exercise critical thinking skills, and develop communication within the group (cf. Wright, 1994).

Kennison (1995) suggests there is consistency between this approach and the goals of multicultural education:

* Teach children to respect one another's cultures and values.

* Help children learn to function successfully in a multicultural society.

* Develop a positive self-concept in children most affected by racism.

* Help children experience both the differences and similarities of culturally diverse people in positive ways.

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* Encourage children to experience people of diverse cultures working together as unique parts of a whole community. (Kendall as cited in Kennison, 1995)

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Underlying these goals is the concept of social justice. According to Washington (1998), social justice "recognizes the systematic oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism) based on social identity (race, gender, age, etc.) that determines a group's access to social power, privilege, resources and opportunities" (p. 20).

The multicultural challenge raises hard questions for outdoor education researchers and practitioners: What social justice issues can we address most powerfully through outdoor education experiences? How do we ensure that our endeavors are meaningful to all students, as well as fulfilling for practitioners and researchers? How will we go about creating more inclusive and multicultural curricula, leadership principles and practices, and management tools and techniques?

CALL FOR RESEARCH AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

A good place to begin research and development efforts in multicultural approaches to outdoor education would be in strengthening the collaboration among school practitioners (elementary, secondary, and postsecondary) and outdoor education researchers. Horwood (1996), writing about outdoor education in general, points out that although good research has been done (especially as evidenced in the thesis and dissertation literature), it rarely informs practice. Horwood urges an approach that would have

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theory exercised as dialogue with practice and less as prescription. Teachers and outdoor leaders need to be recruited as coinvestigators with researchers. Outdoor education research should be presented at teacher conferences, and schools and researchers should be invited to outdoor education gatherings. (p. 12)

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He urges research into new concepts and relationships as a way to address what he and other writers in the 1990s saw as the unraveling of the social, economic, and

environmental fabric in the context of a rapidly changing global culture and economy.

In light of these concerns, it is troubling that multiculturalism in outdoor education has received limited attention from researchers.

Multicultural pedagogies. Most of the research literature and training continue to be based on traditional models designed and taught by European American professionals and educators to primarily European American audiences (Rodriguez & Roberts, 1999; Warren, 1999). Multicultural issues have received less attention than gender in the literature (Warren, 1999; Roberts, 1996).

Although in recent years outdoor education has made progress in meeting the multicultural challenge, few researchers and practitioners have moved beyond a basic recognition of the need to be culturally inclusive. A more profound level of inclusiveness will take place when outdoor educators allow elements of diverse cultures to reshape basic concepts, theories, and practices of outdoor education (Ewert, 1996).

Outdoor education is beginning to see this level of change. For example, Goulet (1998) describes a Canadian teacher education program in which classes model methods of confronting racism with critical thinking. She notes barriers to such programs: lack of culturally appropriate materials, school and community resistance, and the need for personal and professional coping strategies. DeGraaf (1992) describes attempts at Camp Algonquin (Illinois) to bridge cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps among campers and between campers and staff.

Respectful and accurate cultural elements. Some observers have also questioned practitioners' understanding of cultural elements they include in programming. For example, Kennison (1995) wonders how many outdoor education programs present information that is historically accurate and respectful of Native Americans. She says there is a need to examine current instructional materials for negative stereotypes and historical distortions and to develop programs that are culturally inclusive. Other culture-based challenges include increasing awareness of opportunities to include multicultural elements in activities, increasing leaders' understanding and appreciation of participants' cultural values, and increasing understanding of traditional uses of outdoor and experiential learning by various ethnic and cultural groups (Magill & Chavez, 1993).

Outdoor environmental programs. Incorporating multiculturalism into outdoor education includes additional challenges related to environmentalism and the value placed on using nature as a classroom. With these challenges come opportunities to seek common ground. Outdoor education provides a unique forum for sharing environmental concern among diverse participant populations (Matthews, 1993; 1994). However, there remains much work to be done in this area. Wright (1994) calls for rigorous research and experimentation, along with creative programming and quality evaluation to

enhance multicultural outdoor education.

Impacts on diverse participants. There are other questions for researchers and practitioners to consider. For example, to what extent do minorities believe that outdoor programs are meaningful, interesting, and educational? What influence do outdoor education activities have on personal growth and social development? Are we making assumptions about the design and worth of outdoor education based on our experiences with European American students from predominantly suburban or urban settings?

HOW CAN WE BRING ABOUT CHANGE?

Kielsmeier (1989) notes that establishing multicultural collaborations will not be an issue of figuring out how to recruit "them" but an issue of organizational change to become culturally diverse. Such a move requires facing more hard questions, such as "How can we change first?" (p. 15).
The following 10 strategies and principles (Roberts & Gray, 1999) can be adapted for use in a variety of programs to help teachers, managers, directors, and outdoor leaders address issues of multiculturalism:

1. Hire and train teachers and leaders who understand cultural issues and are sensitive, knowledgeable, and ethnically competent.

2. Conduct an internal audit of racial/ethnic representativeness in staff-to-student ratios.

3. Operate a holistic recruitment and training program, and promote attention to cultural representation and understanding.

4. Actively recruit and train teachers and/or program staff from the populations and cultures the program serves.

5. Include in training modules activities to increase personal awareness of conscious and unconscious prejudices and assumptions leaders might hold.

6. Balance and accommodate different learning styles, and organize the curriculum to include goals of social awareness, knowledge of multiculturalism, and action-oriented behavior.

7. Give multiculturalism the same level of importance as a good safety briefing prior to a class going out into the field. Step "outside the box" of traditional outdoor education concepts and integrate a multicultural curriculum into the program.

8. Attend to social relations in the outdoors. Instruction should help participants recognize behaviors that emerge in group dynamics and improve interpersonal communications, without blaming or judging.

9. Use reflection and personal history/background as tools for experiential learning. Program instruction can begin using the participant's worldview and experience for dialogue and/or problem solving.

10. Allow contradictions and tensions to emerge. Often overlooked is the fear of leaders to allow tensions and personal anxiety within themselves or participants to materialize. Teachers and leaders should allow themselves to experience the discomfort as well as encourage participants to step out of personal comfort zones.

CONCLUSION

The traditional outdoor education community shows increased awareness of ethnic and cultural diversity. Yet the strategies offered in this Digest and by others offer even more chances for improvement. Inquiry into the questions raised here for researchers and practitioners could shed light on how to address persistently low minority participation in outdoor education despite genuine efforts at recruiting and training minorities. A commitment to change must include an examination of program practice and design to find ways to increase the appeal of outdoor education for diverse cultural groups.

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