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Educating American Students for Life in a Global Society

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Progress in travel, technology, and other domains has contributed to the breaking down of barriers between countries and allowed for the development of an increasingly global society. International cooperation and competition are now pervasive in areas as diverse as business, science, arts, politics, and athletics. Educating students to navigate among cultures in these and other endeavors is crucial if they are to be safe and competitive in a global society. There is, however, widespread concern that American students do not know enough about the rest of the world, including its religions, cultures, and languages, to succeed in it.

In the wake of September 11, this concern has increased and has been transformed into specific educational initiatives. For example, on October 25, 2001, President Bush announced the formation of the Friendship Through Education consortium to promote communication between U.S. elementary school students and those in Islamic countries. The main forms of communication include e-mail exchanges between students at partnered schools and "laws of life" essays in which students describe the rules and principles by which they live.[1] More recently, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill became a center of controversy after mandating that all fall 2002 freshmen read sections of the Koran and commentary in Michael Sells' book *Approaching the Qur'an*, write a paper in response, and participate in group discussions, with the goal of promoting understanding of Islam.

These and other efforts raise the question of how educators should prepare American students for life in a global society. Key efforts to date have included attempts to promote acceptance and awareness of different cultures, enhance communication skills, and reduce prejudice and discrimination. In addition, there is renewed emphasis on having American students help children in other societies learn more about the United States and its peoples.

Four Approaches

Four main types of education initiatives have been designed to meet these goals: (1) teaching geography, comparative religion, world studies, foreign languages, current events, history, and related subjects within the classroom curriculum; (2) implementing targeted interventions within schools to promote tolerance and cultural understanding; (3) giving families from diverse backgrounds opportunities to share their cultural heritage with other families and students in schools; and (4) hosting exchange students in American schools, offering study abroad programs for American students, and facilitating other forms of direct contact between students from different cultures.

Although a plethora of such initiatives has been implemented—and there are many classroom resources such as videos, maps, and lesson plans available to teach about cultures and facilitate direct contact across cultures—a critical question is how effective these initiatives are in promoting tolerance, understanding, and other skills to prepare students for life in a global society. Research evaluating the success of these initiatives is sorely lacking. However, studies of prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination within the United States can inform our understanding of these problems internationally.

Children in the United States are regularly exposed to diversity and multicultural curricula. Eighty-one percent of U.S. colleges and universities have offered diversity workshops,[2] and diversity education is also popular in primary and secondary education. Most multicultural curriculum interventions introduce holidays, ideas, songs, and stories from other cultures using videos, books, and other media. Other commonly used efforts include discussion of attitudes toward particular cultural groups and practice in mitigating conflict between groups, often

using films, skits, and other hands-on activities to reinforce the lessons.[3] The duration of these interventions varies considerably from as little as a single fifteen-minute session[4] to over fifteen minutes each day for seven months.[5] Despite variations in the content and scope, when the effects of such programs are evaluated, they are often disappointing.[6] Indeed, well-intentioned programs may backfire; children often show more biases *after* interventions than before, especially if these interventions focus on eliminating rather than appreciating cultural differences.[7] Furthermore, diversity training is often mandated, but research into the effects of being pressured into behaving in particular ways has demonstrated that people often resist forced attempts at change.[8] Although researchers have demonstrated that changes in knowledge or attitudes are not always accompanied by changes in behavior,[9] most interventions focus on increasing students' knowledge about different cultural groups and improving attitudes toward them rather than changing behavior, which is ultimately likely to be more important for interactions among cultural groups. These findings are sobering and indicate that careful consideration is needed before implementing multicultural interventions.

What Works?

What, then, are characteristics of interventions that appear to promote crosscultural understanding and acceptance as opposed to exacerbating biases and prejudices? Two key elements emerge from the research: (1) increasing children's sense of familiarity with "others"[10] and (2) having positive contacts with others.[11] Merely increasing contact across different social groups may not decrease hostility, because the contact may reinforce previously held stereotypes or negative views.

To improve relations between groups, the contact should provide equal status to members of each group and encourage cooperation across groups to attain mutually beneficial goals.[12] Research to develop *Sesame Street* episodes dealing with race relations is informative in understanding approaches that might work well with young children in school settings. This research has demonstrated the importance of depicting friendships between children of different races (e.g., children playing together, eating together, having a good time together) but also the importance of showing parents of the children approving of their interaction.[13]

Students can have explicit biases, which can most effectively be overcome by heightened awareness of and active work to overcome them, and implicit biases, which are best overcome by positive interactions with members of different groups.[14] Recognizing one's own biases appears central to reducing them; denial or lack of awareness acts as an impediment to intervention efforts.[15]

Two strategies may help reduce biases. The first includes interventions that emphasize categories of people that cross cultural boundaries—for example, team tasks in which a multicultural group of boys competes against a multicultural group of girls. A second strategy focuses on finding differences among individuals within a cultural group and similarities among individuals in different cultural groups.[16] From an intervention perspective, some research has shown that it is necessary to teach students to recognize and appreciate group differences as well as to treat others as unique individuals.[17] These strategies are applicable across a range of settings, including schools, where they could be used to promote tolerance and cultural understanding and where they can provide families from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to share their cultural heritage. Most evaluations of these strategies to date have focused on individuals' self-reported attitude changes over short periods of time, so it will be important in the future to evaluate long-term changes in attitudes and behaviors effected by these interventions.

Other initiatives, such as bilingual education, that focus primarily on knowledge of academic subjects can also have incidental effects on the reduction of prejudice and stereotyping.[18] Furthermore, in contrast to previous decades in which only those students with the resources to study abroad could interact directly with people from other countries, technology now imparts this ability to many more students who can use e-mail and video

conferencing to communicate across large distances. This direct contact incorporates the first criteria for a successful intervention to promote cultural understanding—increasing familiarity—and has the potential to incorporate the second criteria—positive interactions (although there is little research yet on the staying power of friendships between e-mail pen-pals).

Global Education Motivators, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that has close ties with the United Nations, provides a number of educational resources and advocates their use to "(1) develop leaders for roles in world affairs; (2) spark interest in the diverse heritage of individuals and nations; (3) promote foreign language proficiency; (4) meet the challenges of our technological world; (5) nurture positive attitudes towards people of other cultures as a way of advancing the cause of peace in our world; (6) increase global literacy; and (7) help prepare hundreds of millions of school children to function successfully in the 21st century."[19]

Policy Questions

For policy makers, the first question that lies ahead is how to rigorously evaluate programs in schools that aim to meet these goals. A second question is how to implement demonstrably successful programs across a wider range of schools. The third question is how to sustain ongoing monitoring and revision of these programs to ensure their continued and long-term success. Good intentions are not enough, as demonstrated in research showing increased biases after particular multicultural interventions. Using programs with empirically demonstrated efficacy as the basis for courses, targeted interventions, and direct contact with children from different cultures is an essential part of preparing American students for life in a global society.

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