

# Teaching for Tolerance and Understanding During the Japanese Internment: Lessons for Educators Today<sup>1</sup>

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There was thunderous applause and shouts of approval as Mary Koura stepped forward to receive her high school diploma. She was an honor student, who had been an active member of the school community throughout her four years at Mount Vernon High School. She was the yearbook editor, a member of the school orchestra, and a class officer during her sophomore, junior, and senior years.

For most students, receiving their high school diploma is a new beginning. This was not the case for Mary Koura who was 68 years old. According to her, receiving her diploma was something she thought would never happen. Japanese American students who were scheduled to graduate from high school on the West Coast of the United States in 1942 were not allowed to participate in their schools' graduation ceremonies.

Following the Japanese attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the nation was thrown into a state of fear and hysteria. While there was no evidence that persons of Japanese descent in the United States were involved in sabotage and espionage, there was concern that the Pacific coast could soon be under attack. Responding to those and other concerns, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 9066 on February 19, 1942. Executive Order 9066 resulted in more than 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry being either interned in relocation centers, drafted, or imprisoned.

By the time their graduation day arrived, Mary Koura and numerous other students of Japanese descent had been interned. Many of the students received their high school diplomas at informal ceremonies organized by their parents in their internment camps. But being excluded from her actual high school graduation ceremony haunted Mary Koura for the next fifty years.

In 1992, John Summers, a teacher at Mount Vernon High School told his students about Mary Koura. After learning about her story, the students insisted that she be invited to march at their graduation. Mary Koura's first reaction was concern that her presence might detract from the seniors' "big day." However, after being assured that this was what the seniors wanted, she agreed to go back to Mount Vernon and take part in the high school graduation ceremonies.

By participating in the graduating ceremony, Mary Koura taught the graduating seniors at Mount Vernon High School a valuable lesson about democracy and diversity. She taught them that the past is linked to the present and that people who were not viewed as an integral part of a nation's identity at one time could at another time be viewed as a unifying element of a school and community's identity. By inviting Mary Koura to participate in

their graduation ceremony, the students at Mount Vernon High School were in essence grappling with the tension between unity and diversity and taking action to reduce it. The action that the students took gave them an opportunity to demonstrate their willingness and understanding of their responsibility to be engaged citizens in a pluralistic democratic society.

The lessons that Mount Vernon High School students learned in 1992 about democracy and diversity are lessons that were missing from the school curriculum in 1942. Instead of critiquing Executive Order 9066 and engaging their fellow citizens in discussions that could highlight how and why the executive order undercut democratic values and institutions, most Americans responded to the executive order with a combination of fear, greed, silence, and uncritical acceptance.

Bainbridge Island, located near Seattle in Washington, was the first place in the United States from which the evacuation of people of Japanese descent occurred. There were about 227 people of Japanese descent on Bainbridge Island in 1942. About two thirds of the group were born in the United States and were US citizens. Of the remaining third, most were Japanese immigrants who had lived in the United States for over 30 years (Kitamota, 2002). Sadayoshi Omoto was born on Bainbridge Island and graduated from Bainbridge High School where he was class president in 1941. On March 30, 1942, as Sadayoshi Omoto waited to be taken to an internment camp he questioned the meaning of lessons about democracy, tolerance, and brotherhood, that he had been taught in his civics class. He wondered why these ideas about freedom, justice, and equality could be so disconnected from the reality of what was happening. Omoto reflected, "Only a day previous we were friends and classmates and now we were the enemy. Did President Roosevelt have the right to deny my Nisei classmates and me those rights guaranteed to all citizens?" (Omoto, 2001, p. 2).

Gena Clinton Ritchie, a student who lived on Bainbridge Island went to the ferry dock to say goodbye to her classmates. She described that day in a poem entitled "The Saddest Day of My Life." With the signing of Executive Order 9066, according to Ritchie, people who had been friends since first grade were transformed into "the Japs" (Banks, 2005). Frank Kitamoto was also at the ferry dock that fateful day in 1942. He thought about how the democratic values that he had been taught clashed with the reality that he and his friends and family members experienced when they were interned. He said, "As we marched down this road, we were in shock, [and] disbelief. We didn't know where we were going, we didn't know how long we would be away, we didn't know if we would ever come back. Heads of families had already

been taken away. It fell to the Nisei, all in their 20s to make family decisions. The tough New Jersey soldiers with their rifles, fixed bayonets, and funny sounding accents were carrying luggage for women, [and] carrying children. The soldiers had tears in their eyes that rolled down their cheeks” (Kitamoto, 2002, p. 1). Like Omoto, Kitamoto, and Ritchie, the young soldiers’ civics classes had also not prepared them for Executive Order 9066 and the day that, as soldiers in the US Army, they would be ordered to force US citizens from their homes.

The recollections of people who were witness to that tragic day on Bainbridge Island point out the extent to which the demands of balancing unity and diversity is a complex undertaking. In communities throughout the Western part of the United States, lessons about democracy, tolerance, and brotherhood were mediated by the reality of the Japanese internment. Students could not ignore the empty seats in their classrooms that only weeks before had been filled by Japanese American students. The empty seats carried a powerful though unspoken message about the fragility of democratic principles and values in the face of politically legitimized prejudice and intolerance.

### Mixed Messages to Students and Teachers

The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II at the same time that students were being taught about democracy, intolerance, and brotherhood is an example of the mixed messages that were given to students and teachers. Students in the Seattle School district, like students throughout the western part of the United States, had to grapple with those mixed messages.

Some Seattle educators were concerned about the negative attitudes that were being expressed toward Japanese Americans and encouraged their colleagues to maintain a tolerant attitude towards them and to encourage their students also to remain tolerant. Teachers at Washington Elementary School, under the leadership of their principal A. G. Sears, accepted that challenge and began to prepare their students for the day when the Japanese American students in their classes would be taken away. Washington Elementary School had a very multiethnic student body. It included David Foy, who was born in Canton, China; Michael Sidermann who was from Hamburg, Germany; and Judith Kahin, a Rabbi’s daughter from Munich, Germany. Thirty-three percent of the students at the school were Japanese Americans.

To prepare their students for what was coming, teachers asked their students to write compositions about how they felt about the Japanese evacuation. The students who were not Japanese American expressed regret about losing their friends and talked about how studious, punctual, and cooperative they had been. They also mentioned how their Japanese American classmates had served on the Seattle Junior Safety Patrol, made contributions to the American Red Cross and the Junior Red Cross, and participated in the War Bond Campaign and the Conservation Waste Paper, Tinfoil, and Metal Tube Drives. Japanese American students also wrote compositions. One student wrote about how hard it would be for her to leave the trees in her yard. Her grandfather had planted them in

1893. Another Japanese American student ended her composition with a prayer which read, “Please keep my family together for the duration, and then make it possible for me to come back to my school, my home, and my friends” (Mortenson, 1942, p. 7).

With people of Japanese descent interned and the nation at war, civics education in many schools throughout the country became a subject in which patriotism was equated with blind support for the United States and the demonization of America’s enemies. However, even during this time of great unrest and fear, there were educators who worked to reduce intergroup tensions and speak out against undemocratic actions. They continued to believe that schools could make a difference and that schools were one of the few places where young people could be taught to think critically and learn to distinguish fact from opinion and propaganda. Working with John E. Wade, the superintendent of schools in New York City, a number of “intergroup educators” composed of teachers, scholars, and social activists planned and implemented curricula to reduce prejudice. Commenting on the need for such curriculum, Wade said,

No longer can we afford to ignore or minimize the danger that will inevitably follow if prejudice is allowed to spread unchecked. Enemies of democracy at home and abroad neither minimize nor ignore it, but utilize every opportunity to widen the gap that exists between the racial, religious, and nationality groups in American life. Let us learn to bridge the gaps between groups and in so doing defeat the enemy and strengthen democracy. (Covello, 50/4)

The National Education Association (NEA), which had over 775,000 members at that time, maintained a similar position. They argued that schools should not teach students to hate the enemy. In a policy statement entitled “What the Schools should Teach in Wartime,” the NEA took the following stand.

We shall not attempt to state whether it is either desirable or necessary for a soldier in combat to be motivated by hatred and revenge. However, if such emotions are in fact necessary or desirable for soldiers, we believe their cultivation is a responsibility that should be assumed by the Army rather than by the schools. We especially deplore the cultivation of such traits among the younger children and others who are not likely to see military service. The spiritual casualties of war will be great enough and lasting enough without any help from the teaching profession. (Covello 50/4, MSS 40)

The war years were particularly challenging for educators who understood the irony of fighting Nazism abroad and addressing racial tensions at home.

### Democracy and Diversity in the 21st Century

The issues and groups have changed since World War II, but educators today continue to face the challenge of helping students

understand and develop the skills, knowledge, and habits of heart to be effective citizens in pluralistic democratic society. Balancing unity and diversity is a critical component of that challenge. Gandhi captured the essence of that challenge when he said, “The ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization” (Banks et. al, 2006).

From a historical perspective we know that it is possible to achieve unity without paying close attention to diversity. Achieving national unity had primacy during the war years. Unity was emphasized to the exclusion of diversity. People were encouraged to believe that loyalty to the nation, meant that you had to be 100% American. Ethnic, language, religious, and other differences were viewed with suspicion. While this kind of perspective may have given the illusion of unity, diversity didn't disappear. Both unity and diversity are important. Masking important elements of diversity is problematic. James A. Banks (2006) argues that unity without diversity results in hegemony and oppression, while diversity without unity leads to Balkanization and the fracturing of the commonwealth, which alone can secure human rights, equality, and justice. In pluralistic-democratic societies, it is important for young people to grapple with the idea of balancing unity and diversity because it will be a critical part of their ability to create nation-states that recognize and incorporate the diversity of their citizens and provide opportunities for diverse populations to embrace an overarching set of shared values, ideals, and goals to which all citizens are committed. Yet balancing unity and diversity is not a simple matter.

Unity and diversity are complex ideas that have multiple, contested, and often transitory meanings. Readers may wish to refer to *Democracy and Diversity*, a publication produced by the Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington in Seattle, for useful background information on the themes of unity and diversity, and to learn about other key concepts that can be used in civics, social studies, and other citizenship education classes to help students understand the complexity of citizenship in a pluralistic democratic nation-state. In *Democracy and Diversity* unity is defined in terms of the common bonds that are essential to the functioning of the nation-state. Diversity is defined as the internal differences within all nation-states that reflect variations in factors such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, disability, and sexual orientation.

Once one understands how unity and diversity can be defined it is easy to see why they are in tension. That tension is one of the reasons that the task of balancing unity and diversity is so complex. The tension between unity and diversity can most easily be seen in the conflict between appreciating diversity and the longing for unity. It is not uncommon for people to voice verbal support for diversity and to make positive comments about the contributions that members of different ethnic and racial groups have made to their society. People are generally very comfortable talking about women being able to fully participate in all avenues of our society. People are also very proud of the historic roots of religious freedom in the US. Popular television programs feature women and minori-

ties in leadership roles and characters who are gay. These are all examples that can be used to illustrate the extent to which diversity is accepted and appreciated in the United States. It is important to note, however, that these and similar examples have one thing in common. They allow people to appreciate diversity at a distance and often in the abstract. For many people diversity is much more difficult to live with on a daily basis—in their jobs, in their neighborhoods, and at school—than it is to talk about. Efforts to insure diversity in our institutions such as affirmative action and school bussing have been consistently and rigidly opposed. Our inability as a society to link our “talk” and our “walk” with respect to unity and diversity is a powerful example of the inability of some people to negotiate the tension between unity and diversity. This tension will only increase as the issues of diversity demand more from us.

As economic, linguistic, religious, racial, ethnic, and other variables in human diversity increase, the gap between our willingness to struggle with the difficult questions and issues involved in trying to balance unity and diversity will become even wider. The global flow of ideas, workers, executives, students, products, and services and the influence of powerful governments increasingly are giving rise to issues related to unity and diversity both globally and within nation-states. Continuous advances in transportation and communication mean that questions of diversity are likely to occur with increased frequency in the future. The United States, for example, is experiencing its highest level of immigration since the turn of the twentieth century. The number of US immigrants from 1991 to 1999 was almost identical to the number of immigrants who arrived in the US from 1901 to 1910. A major difference between the two groups of immigrants is that at the beginning of the twentieth century US immigrants were primarily from Italy, Russia, and other European nations. However, at the end of the century they came primarily from the Caribbean, Central America, South America, Mexico, and Asian nations such as China, India, and the Philippines. Policies and newly created laws related to immigration, such as building a 700-mile fence on the border between the US and Mexico with individuals who patrol the border to prevent Mexicans from illegally crossing into the United States, are not helping to resolve the tension between the appreciation of diversity and the longing for unity.

The tension between unity and diversity can, to some extent, be reduced when there is a clear, constant, and well-articulated commitment to democratic values such as *human rights*, *justice*, and *equality* by authorities such as parents, teachers, and school administrators as well as civic and political leaders. Such a commitment can serve as an on-going reminder of the overarching values that unify the nation, help secure the liberties of cultural, ethnic, language, and religious groups, and enable people from diverse groups to experience freedom, justice, and peace. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.” This powerful statement calls attention to the importance of both unity and diversity.

During the Japanese internment, there were very few individuals who spoke out in support of freedom, justice, equality, and human rights for their fellow citizens of Japanese descent. This occurred for many reasons. However, if more schools like Washington Elementary School taught students to see individuals who were defined as “the enemy” as fellow human beings, it would be a good beginning. The perspectives about democratic values that were taught in 1942 to students at Washington Elementary School amounted to a small step in one community to create an informed citizenry. By building on those ideas, teachers today can help students develop a deep appreciation of and a commitment to American Creed values and human rights. Walter Parker (Banks, et al., 2006) argues that “Citizens who understand the tension between unity and diversity and who have the skills and knowledge to act accordingly do not materialize from thin air; they are educated for it.”

Schools have an important role to play in helping to resolve the tension between unity and diversity. Teachers can help students understand that the American Creed values of freedom, justice, and equality are often pitted against other important cultural values and goals related to economic and physical security. Giving students the opportunity to grapple with real questions and issues that give prominence to the tension between diversity and unity can help them understand that there are no easy answers and that while they may not find immediate solutions they can help create an environment where the issues can continue to be explored and ultimately resolved. The issues that students grapple with can be local or national, and they can be historical or contemporary. Students can also engage in comparative analysis of those same issues by looking at how they are framed and addressed or not addressed in different nation-states. Students can investigate the meaning of concepts such as tolerance, justice, equality, respect, democracy, inclusion, human rights, race, patriotism, cosmopolitanism, democracy, and security. In doing so, they can raise questions about why the concepts were constructed and the various meanings associated with them. They can also investigate how different groups in society respond to the concepts. People of Japanese descent who were interned may have a very different understanding of how concepts such as evacuation, justice, and security were applied in World War II than people who supported Executive Order 9066. A somewhat similar current issue that illustrates the fundamental difference in perspective between people is the 700-mile fence that is being built on the US Mexican border. Many Anglos living in the US near the fence believe it will reduce illegal immigration and increase their security. Mexicans living on the other side of the border will tend to agree with Mexican president Vicente Fox who denounces the fence, saying it could make the border less secure. Understanding how concepts are used and the meanings that different groups attribute to them is important. Issues that divide our society can be difficult to understand when they are cloaked in terms that mystify and officiate important elements of the issue. It is hard to resolve an issue when you never get to discuss its most important elements.

The US population has surpassed the 300 million mark making it the third nation after China and India to reach that number. This

growth in population will have the effect of making diversity an even more a salient characteristic of U.S society in the future than it is today. In addition to increasing racial and ethnic diversity, demographers also project there will be a decline in household size, an increase in the number of women in the labor force, a larger number of people who speak a language other than English, and rising rates of child poverty (Smith, 2006). The changing demographic profile of the US population makes learning to balance unity and diversity less of an option and more of an imperative. The students at Mount Vernon High School illustrate that such learning is possible. By learning from history, recognizing the ways in which elements of history continue to be present in contemporary society, and taking action to right an old wrong, they gave us a glimpse of how schools can educate students who understand the unity-diversity tension and act accordingly.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The article is adapted from and includes excerpts from, *Improving Multicultural Education: Lessons From the Intergroup Education Movement*.