A Multicultural Grassroots Effort to Reduce Ethnic & Racial Social Distance among Middle School Students

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Introduction

Raising tolerance for people of different ethnic and racial groups is the goal of the Multicultural Mosaic program, a grass-roots multicultural education effort initiated by a small group of middle school teachers in a private school in the northeast. After years of enjoying the comforts of a modern, but European-based, curriculum, these teachers took the initiative to pursue an ambitious transformation of their entire school's approach to pedagogy.

Not only would the English teachers introduce new texts by foreign authors and the social studies teachers introduce new materials on the history of non-Western cultures, but also the teachers of mathematics and physical education would integrate specific foreign cultures to their teaching in the classroom and on the playground. Extracurricular activities, many of which rely upon the support of parents and volunteers, would be changed also to reflect specific themes in the multicultural movement at the school.

The motivation to inspire young people to appreciate ethnic and racial diversity is not uncommon among elementary and middle school teachers, and research on large multicultural education initiatives is plentiful (for examples, see Houlette, et al., 2004; Sheets, 2009; Zimmerman, Aberle, & Krafchick, 2005). Thus, it is an enigma that American education researchers, such as Bigler (2005) and Paluck and Green (2009), have found promise in very few of the many pedagogical techniques reviewed in the literature.

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Studies in other industrialized nations, such as Peck, Sears, and Donaldson's (2008) review of diversity in education in Canada, and Pedersen, Walker, and Wise's (2005) research on multiculturalism in Australian schools, indicate that verifiable success stories in multicultural education are few in number.

With these challenges clear at the outset, and without a budget for needed expenses, the creators of the Multicultural Mosaic sought a unique "homemade" approach that they hoped would resonate with their student body that was mostly Caucasian but growing in its proportion of Asians and Hispanics. Their strategy was to draw from their own expertise—enhanced by cooperative forms of professional development and information sharing—and the cultural pride and enthusiasm of the families who send their children to the school. Over a 24-month period, the teachers performed their own research on effective ways of infusing multiculturalism into their curriculum and they engaged in regular forms of peer discourse on diverse pedagogies. They also sought advice from volunteer professional consultants and parents in the school community.

The result of their efforts was the establishment of a five-year implementation plan that called for school-wide, year-long celebrations and curricular foci for several broad categorizations of the ethnic and racial groups that were represented in their student population. In the first year, they would focus on Asian cultures. This would be followed successively by years devoted to European cultures, Hispanic cultures, African-American cultures, and Middle Eastern cultures. During each academic year, the teachers would deliver age-appropriate material on the geography, history, and customs of the people who identify with these ethnic and racial groups. They would also seek funds from the school, its Home School Association, and its Father's Club to obtain books and multi-media,

hire guest speakers, and organize cultural trips.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of the first year of the Multicultural Mosaic program on the attitudes and beliefs of the middle school students toward people of different ethnic and racial groups. The research incorporated a pretest/post-test design, measuring feelings of cultural universality and diversity and social distance among the students. Participation in the surveys was voluntary and students were required to obtain parental consent.

The goal of the study was to determine whether participation in the Multicultural Mosaic among the middle school students was associated with greater feelings of closeness and understanding of people from different ethnic and racial groups.

Theoretical Framework

Early forms of ethnic and racial prejudice may first become internalized in children between the ages of five and ten (Piaget, 1932). While children of this age typically perceive members of their own group as being good, it is common for them to view members of other groups in negative ways. It is also during this time that children become accustomed to making distinctions between in-groups and out-groups. By extension, young people may feel at ease in the presence of in-group members and uncomfortable around out-group members (Bergen, 2001).

These developments typically occur as children first learn to depend upon their cognitive capabilities and become comfortable with abstract reasoning (Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006). Socializing institutions such as elementary and middle schools may be poised to reduce these prejudices when they embark upon multicultural initiatives, but research shows that they are rarely successful in accomplishing significant or sustained

behavioral and attitudinal changes with traditional intervention models.

Social and behavioral aspects of the context for academic learning are crucial in the middle school years because it is at this stage of life that adolescents begin to engage more frequently in psychosocial tasks, such as affiliating with peers. Such developments create certain challenges in the classroom that can become exacerbated when they are mixed with feelings of ethnic and racial prejudice.

These factors make middle school teachers well positioned, and perhaps well motivated, to influence their students' levels of self-confidence and their ability to establish meaningful relationships with their peers. By engaging in efforts to reduce stereotyping and prejudice, teachers can improve their learning environments in ways that are both empathetic and humane. One method of accomplishing this goal is through the introduction of multicultural pedagogies.

Banks (1989) describes the interest in multicultural education in the United States as a byproduct of the Civil Rights Movement. From this perspective, it is understandable why many multicultural education programs place an emphasis on equality and academic achievement in learning opportunities. Multicultural education also owes its origins to the 20th century influx of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian populations, most notably among school-aged children, making most American schools and organizations more ethnically and racially diverse (Ponterotto, et al., 2006). Accordingly, multicultural education programs may be aimed at raising ethnic and racial tolerance, as well as a relative awareness of cultural diversity.

Popular forms of multicultural education for young people include add-on programs focusing on foreign cultures (Banks, 1989); counter-stereotype learning activities (Bigler, 2005); diversity training (Wynn, Hart, Wilburn, Weaver & Wilburn, 2008); retreats or off-site gatherings (Batiuk, Boland, & Wilcox, 2004; Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2003); classroom-based interventions (Houlette, et al., 2004); experiential activities (McNeill, 2001; Roate & Schmidt, 2009); and counseling curriculums (Torres, Ottens, & Johnson, 1997; Zimmerman, Aberle, & Krafchick, 2005).

Bigler's (2005) review of multicultural curricula is one of the most extensive and widely cited in the literature. In this study, Bigler found that role modeling, counterstereotyping, curricula transformation, and multicultural lesson planning approaches are all prone to producing small, non-significant effects that tend to be short in duration. Tests of their effectiveness are also found to be typically unsystematic and limited in their scope. In a more extensive review of prejudice reduction analyses, Paluck and Green (2009) drew similar conclusions. Paluck and Green's analysis of 985 studies (30% unpublished) indicates that there is hardly any existing evidence explaining why prejudice reduction interventions should be successful or what conditions are essential for them to become effective.

So how can a school-wide multicultural education program become a success? Many proponents of multiculturalism contend that teachers must become involved in the lives of their students in order for them to become capable of devising a culturally diverse pedagogy (Gay, 2002; Sheets, 2009; Vilegas & Lucas, 2002). According to Pedersen (2003), an effective strategy for teaching students to abandon prejudice is one that combines interventions with broad training and educational models that take a comprehensive approach to the problem, including students, teachers and parents.

Alternatively, interventions conducted without support from the wider school community have frequently been met with limited success in changing attitudes (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; Balcazar, Tandon & Kaplan, 2001; Persson & Musher-Eizenman, 2003; Slavin & Cooper, 1999). Richards, Brown and Forde (2007) also place a high value on the role played by the teachers in changing attitudes, but stress that a school-wide commitment to diversity is a necessity.

Thus, the decision to make the Multicultural Mosaic a school-wide effort is grounded in a best practices approach, despite the questionable track record that existing multicultural initiatives have been shown to possess. But in order to change general attitudes among children, a broad approach to delegitimizing stereotypes and reducing prejudice was needed. The teachers who developed the Multicultural Mosaic sought to accomplish this goal by not only infusing multicultural material, but also by encouraging feelings of tolerance toward others, and teaching the merits of accepting the universality of culture.

They also contrived to let the students and their families become active participants in the process by securing their involvement in the curricular and extra-curricular activities in the classroom and in the school. In these ways, the teachers sought not only to teach the students about their own cultural diversity, but also to experience it with them, in an effort to instill the value of understanding about others.

Methods

Participants

At the research site, a sample of 74 students was drawn from 6th to 8th grade classes, representing 68% of the student population in these grades. The racial and ethnic background of the total enrollment of the school, based on 2008-09 data, was 63% Caucasian/White, 16% Asian, 11% Hispanic, 4% African American, and 5% as either "Native American Indian" or "Multiracial." Table 1 shows the grade, gender, and race/ethnicity for the students participating in the research study.

Selection criteria included (1) signed consent and assent forms by the legal guardian and by the student and (2) responses to both the pre-test and post-test surveys. Consent forms were sent home with all students during the first week of school of the 2009-10 academic year. 72 of the 74 participants completed both pre-test and post-test surveys; the other two students completed the pre-test surveys but did not complete the post-test surveys, thus data from these two students were not analyzed. All subjects were informed that they would undergo a pre-test and post-evaluation concerning their attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors regarding diversity, and their willingness to participate in social

Table 1
Demographic Data for Study Participants

Grade		Gender		Race/Ethnicity	
6th	17	Male	34	Caucasian/White	54
7th	29	Female	40	Asian	15
8th	28			African-American	3
				Native American Indian	1
				Other/Multiracial	1

contacts of varying degrees of closeness with members of diverse social groups.

Curriculum and Instruction

The Multicultural Mosaic was designed to provide students with multicultural education modules throughout their typical curriculum (i.e., English/language arts, social studies, mathematics, etc). The goal of these multicultural education modules was to increase student awareness of different cultures, and to induce greater feelings of closeness and understanding of people from different ethnic and racial groups.

In addition, the teachers sought to involve the students and their families in the development of the curricular and extra-curricular features of the program. Examples of their efforts include: asking multi-lingual students to speak at school gatherings in their native language; assigning projects that enable students to introduce elements of their own culture to the class; holding extra-curricular dining events featuring foods prepared by families from different cultural groups; and organizing a school-wide historic reenactment of the European migration into Ellis Island.

A steering committee, made up of the educators who developed the multicultural education modules, met regularly to discuss implementation of the multicultural modules throughout the curriculum and to ensure fidelity across the entire middle school. The steering committee also made themselves available to the middle school teachers responsible for implementing the multicultural education modules, and kept a binder with lesson plans used to provide multicultural education during the typical curriculum. The binder was kept in the faculty conference room, and was available at all times for perusal and additions.

Statistical Analysis

A demographic data survey was developed by the primary investigators in order to ascertain grade, gender, and ethnicity of study participants. Two well-validated measures were used to assess the impact of the multicultural mosaic on the attitudes and beliefs of the middle school students toward people of different ethnic and racial groups.

The *Middle School Social Distance Scale* (Batiuk, et al., 2004), based on the well-known and oft-used Bogardus Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1925, 1933, 1947, 1958, 1967; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005) asks middle school-aged children to indicate the degree of their willingness to accept a member of a certain ethnic group into their own personal relationships. Follow-up studies conducted by other researchers (Kleg & Yamamoto, 1998; Owen, Eisner, & McFaul, 1981; Sakuragi, 2008) suggest acceptable reliability and validity of the Bogardus Scale. The Middle School version of the Social Distance Scale asks participants to indicate the closest level of relationship the participant is willing to have with each target group by choosing a number from 1 through 7: 1=best friends, 2=eat lunch with, 3=sit beside in class, 4=say hi only, 5=member of homeroom only, 6=member of school only, 7=exclude them.

The higher the score, the greater social distance the individual wishes to have with that particular group. Whereas Batiuk, et al. (2004) switched the groups from ethnicities and races to the names of adolescent cliques (e.g. cheerleaders and jocks), we used 16 ethnicities and races (and one religious group) that appeared on the most recent national Bogardus Social Distance study (Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005). The groups were selected because they represent a sampling of the cultures that the Multicultural Mosaic intended to bring focus upon. The mean for all groups is also reported as the average level of social distance that the respondents felt toward all groups.

The *Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale-Short Form* (M-GUDS-S), developed by Fuertes, Miville, Mohr, Sedlacek, and Gretchen (2000), is a 15-item version of the long-form M-GUDS (Miville, et al., 1999). Both the short and long forms measure Universal-Diverse Orientation (UDO), or one's ability to realize that people of other cultures are both similar and different from one another. For the M-GUDS-S survey, participants read statements such as: "It is very important that a friend agrees with me on most issues," and rated their agreement with each statement on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6).

The M-GUDS-S provides a Total Score for UDO and three subscales that evaluate the affective, behavioral, and cognitive components of UDO (Fuertes et al., 2000). The affective subscale assesses Comfort with Differences. Items on this subscale include statements such as: "Getting to know someone of another race is generally an uncomfortable experience for me," and "It's really hard for me to feel close to a person from another race."

The behavioral subscale for Diversity of Contact evaluates the level of interaction with diverse people and activities. Items on this subscale include statements such as: "I would like to join an organization that emphasizes getting to know people from different countries," and "I often listen to music of other cultures." The cognitive subscale for Relativistic Appreciation looks at one's appreciation of similarities and differences across individuals, and the ways that these differences affect one's own development. Items on this subscale include statements such as: "Knowing how a person differs from me greatly enhances our friendship," and "I can best understand someone after I get to know how he/she is both similar and different from me."

Reverse coding on the Comfort with Differences subscale is optional, but it was necessary in this study in order to obtain a meaningful Total M-GUDS score. Fuertes, et al. (2000) reported that the correlation between the short and long forms of the M-GUDS was .77 (p < .001), suggesting significant overlap and shared variance between the forms.

Participants were administered the above measures concurrently both one week before the onset of the Multicultural Mosaic Curriculum (pretest) and one week after its completion (posttest). Internal consistency reliability was calculated for both administrations of the M-GUDS. At pretest, reliability coefficients ranged from .60 (Relativistic Appreciation subscale) to .84 (M-GUDS-S Total Score), and at posttest, reliability coefficients ranged from .56 (Relativistic Appreciation) to .79 (MGUDS-S Total Score). Data from the M-GUDS and the Middle School Social Distance Scale was analyzed via repeated measures ANOVA. The threshold for statistical significance was set at p < .05; actual p-values are reported in the next section for clarity. SPSS PASW 18.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) was used for all quantitative analyses.

Results

The Middle School Social Distance Scale was used to measure the social distance that the middle school students felt between themselves and members of fifteen different ethnic and racial groups, and one religious group. Most of the groups were selected because of their inclusion among the broad cultural categories that the Multicultural Mosaic was intended to focus upon: Asians, Europeans, Hispanics, African Americans, and Middle Eastern cultures.

Muslims, the only religious group, were also included because of a finding on

the most recent national social distance study, indicating that they and Arabs belong to cultural groups toward which Americans feel the most social distance (Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005).

The results of the Middle School Social Distance Scale are displayed in Table 2. At the time of the pretest, the middle school students felt closest to Americans (mean=1.08, sd=.33), followed by the Vietnemese (mean=1.49, sd=.86), the Dutch (mean=1.56, sd=1.11), Koreans (mean=1.68, sd=1.06), African Americans (mean=1.78, sd=1.40), and Muslims (mean=1.94, sd=1.38). At the time of the post-test, the students reported closer feelings to all of these groups, with the exception of Americans (mean=1.10, sd=.30) to which they reported an insignificant increase in distance. Social distance toward the Vietnemese had declined

(mean=1.36, sd=.91), as did that toward the Dutch (mean=1.44, sd=.98), Koreans (mean=1.56, sd=1.07), African Americans (mean=1.58, sd=1.11) and Muslims (mean=1.63, sd=1.17). Only the decrease in social distance felt toward Muslims was significant at the .05 level.

The middle third of the groups also showed lower levels of social distance. At the pretest, this group was headed by Cubans (mean=1.97, sd=1.33), and followed by the Germans (mean=2.01, sd=1.40), Arabs (mean=2.14, sd=1.49), the Chinese (mean=2.19, sd=1.48), Puerto Ricans (mean=2.25, 1.63) and the Japanese (mean=2.25, sd=1.54). At posttest, all of the means had declined. Closest among these groups was still the Cubans (mean=1.69, sd=1.10), followed by the Germans (mean=1.86, sd=1.47). Puerto Ricans (mean=1.94, 1.44) advanced above

Arabs (mean=1.96, sd=1.37) and the Chinese (mean=2.00, sd=1.41), while the Japanese (mean=2.03, sd=1.57) remained at the bottom of this group. Among these declines in social distance, only that held toward Muslims had declined significantly (p<.05).

The lower tier of the cultural groups was led by the British (mean=2.39, sd=1.76), followed by the French (mean=2.44, sd=1.63), Indians (mean=2.58, sd=1.69) and Mexicans (mean=2.60, sd=1.81). At posttest, all of these distance scores had declined, although none of the changes were significant at the .05 level. The British remained at the top of this group, (mean=2.22, sd=1.75), followed by the French (mean=2.31, sd=1.82), Indians (mean=2.40, sd=1.63) and Mexicans (mean=2.32, sd=1.60).

The average level of social distance felt toward all of the cultural groups declined at the .05 significance level (pretest mean=2.02, sd=1.81 to posttest=1.84, sd=1.50). The gap between the Americans (the group most in favor) and Mexicans (the group least in favor) was 1.52 at pretest and 1.22 at posttest, indicating that the students made a smaller distinction in their acceptance levels for the two groups at the extremes.

The results of the M-GUDS tests are displayed in Table 3. The M-GUDS subscales and the Total M-GUDS-S also showed changes in the middle school students' attitudes towards people of different cultures in the expected direction. The desire for diversity of contact increased from a mean of 20.63 (sd=4.90) at pretest to 20.97 at post-test (sd=4.62). The mean for the relativistic appreciation for oneself and others increased from a mean of 23.24 (sd=3.35) to 24.03 at post-test (sd=3.16).

The level of comfort with difference increased from a mean of 24.65 (sd=4.03) to 24.88 (sd=3.59) and the total M-GUDS score increased from a mean of 68.51 (sd=9.82) to 69.88 (sd=8.74). The change in the score for relativistic appreciation of oneself and others was at the .05 level. All of the other changes were statistically insignificant. Tests were also conducted to determine the differences in attitudes by race, gender and academic class level. No significant differences were observed.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine the impact of The Multicultural Mosaic, a multicultural education program that is unique due to its school and community

Table 2
Pre-test and Post-test Middle School Social Distance Ratings and T-Scores (N=74)

	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	Difference in Means	t-score
American	1.08 (.33)	1.10 (.30)	+ .02	- .38
Vietnemese	1.49 (.86)	1.36 (.91)	- .13	1.04
Dutch	1.56 (1.11)	1.44 (.98)	- .12	.94
Korean	1.68 (1.06)	1.56 (1.07)	- .12	.95
African American	1.78 (1.40)	1.58 (1.11)	- .20	1.31
Muslim	1.94 (1.38)	1.63 (1.17)	- .31	2.01*
Cuban	1.97 (1.33)	1.69 (1.10)	- .29	2.00*
German	2.01 (1.40)	1.86 (1.47)	- .15	1.02
Arab	2.14 (1.49)	1.96 (1.37)	- .18	.87
Chinese	2.19 (1.48)	2.00 (1.41)	- .19	1.15
Puerto Rican	2.25 (1.63)	1.94 (1.44)	- .31	1.74
Japanese	2.25 (1.54)	2.03 (1.57)	- .22	1.30
British	2.39 (1.76)	2.22 (1.75)	- .17	.95
French	2.44 (1.63)	2.31 (1.82)	- .13	.60
Indian	2.58 (1.69)	2.40 (1.63)	- .18	.99
Mexican	2.60 (1.81)	2.32 (1.60)	- .28	1.49
All Groups	2.02 (1.81)	1.84 (1.50)	- .18	2.17*

Note. The Middle School Social Distance scale is from Batiuk, et al. (2004). The pretest and posttest mean scores range from 1 to 7. Students were administered the following question: "According to my first feelings (reactions), I would willingly admit members of each group into the following classifications: 1=best friends, 2=eat lunch with, 3=sit beside in class, 4=say hi only, 5=member of homeroom only, 6=member of school only, 7=exclude them."

* p < .05

Table 3
Pre-test and Post-test Scores
for the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale and T-Scores (N=74)

	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Difference in Means	t-score
Diversity of Contact	20.63 (4.09)	20.97 (4.62)	+ .34	- .75
Relativistic Appreciation	23.24 (3.35)	24.03 (3.16)	+ .79	-2.10*
Comfort With Difference	24.65 (4.03)	24.88 (3.59)	+ .33	- .53
Total M-GUDS-S	68.51 (9.82)	69.88 (8.74)	+ 1.37	-1.65

Note. The Miville Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale Short Form is from Fuertes et al. (2000). The range for the three sub-scales is 5 to 30. The range for the Total M-GUDS-S is 15 to 90. Higher scores represent greater levels of diversity of contact, relativistic appreciation and comfort with difference.

* p < .05

wide approach and its sustained emphasis on specific ethnic and racial groups in its curricula and programming.

Pre-curriculum and post-curriculum surveys assessed feelings of cultural universality and diversity and social distance among the students. Several significant and non-significant changes were observed from pre- to posttest, indicating increased feelings of cultural universality, greater acceptance of diversity, and decreased social distance among middle school students exposed to the curriculum. Statistically significant differences were observed from pre- to posttest in students' mean perceived closeness to members of 16 different racial and ethnic groups. Upon posttest, students felt closer to members of diverse racial and ethnic groups.

Most changes from pre-test to post-test in students' Universal-Diverse Orientation did not approach statistical significance; this would seem to corroborate findings by American education researchers (Bigler, 2005; Paluck & Green, 2009) indicating the minimal impact of multicultural education programs on student attitudes. Although the total score and scores on subscales assessing appreciation of, and desire to participate in, diverse social and cultural activities and ability to feel comfortable with diverse individuals were all increased from pretest to posttest, these changes were not significant. However, a statistically significant increase was seen from pretest to posttest in students' recognition of similarities and differences between people and the impact of these on self-understanding and personal growth.

Several limitations of this study must be discussed. First, the multicultural education program and study was conducted only at one private school in the Northeastern United States. Expanding the study to publically funded schools and/or more than one private school would have permitted increased participation, and would have given the obtained results greater external validity.

Second, the private school where the curriculum was taught and the study occurred has a particular ethnic composition—predominantly White and Asian (together comprising over 80 percent of the student population). The stereotypes regarding these groups represent a particular learning environment in which children and adolescents' prejudices have developed. These prejudices are distinct from those of children growing up in a predominantly Asian community and school or in a context that includes only

Caucasian and African-American children. This context likely affected the content and method of delivery of the curriculum, its effectiveness, and the generalizability of the obtained results.

Despite these limitations, this study of the impact of the Multicultural Mosaic contributes to the dialogue on the impact of multicultural education on middle school student attitudes. The results suggest that a "wrap-around" multicultural curricula can be developed, standardized and implemented across different schools with diverse student populations. Further research is needed to look at the role of cognitive mediators of ethnic and racial prejudice in middle school students.

We are currently piloting a trait malleability intervention that may enhance the effects of the multicultural pedagogy ongoing at the school. By teaching this perspective to middle school students as part of a multicultural education curriculum, it is anticipated that they will experience reductions, over and above the impact of a multicultural curriculum alone, in their feelings of ethnic and racial prejudice, improvements in the quality of their intercultural interactions and increases in their feelings of belonging to the school community.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that there is value in multicultural education modules that are fully integrated into typical middle school academic curricula. One can argue that these changes are certainly "significant" to the teachers and administrators of the private school where the study occurred, even though they do not meet scientific criteria for significance. Any decrease in the distance that students feel between themselves and diverse others can have the effect of improving school climate.

Elementary and middle school children are quite vulnerable to society's teachings about prejudice, but they are also highly receptive to a skilled approach to the teaching of prejudice reduction and elimination. Multicultural curricula and extra-curricular programming in schools, therefore, possesses potential for reducing prejudice toward out-groups and promoting positive awareness of diversity through "transformative learning" experiences. Additional research is needed to determine whether the effects of programs of this kind can be sustained over time, or enhanced by other pedagogical interventions.

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