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Theory in Action

Improving the Future of Multicultural Relations

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Introduction

The history of the United States includes great victories, but also countless failures and mistakes. Among the biggest mistakes this country has made are undeniably the issues of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. Unfortunately, these issues have inevitably tarnish the domestic image of America, and have left many Americans with feelings of hatred, animosity, vengeance, shame, and guilt among other negative feelings. Yet, America continues to be the place where people of different cultures still wish to come and work towards the American dream. One of the qualities, which I believe have made America a successful country and a leader among nations is the ability of American people to rise above from their mistakes and failures and move forward towards the future embracing positivism and using the knowledge of their mistakes to shape a better tomorrow. The Multicultural and Special Populations course has given me the opportunity to engage in dynamic and respectful discussions related to diversity, social justice, privilege, power, and difference with peers who are of different races and cultures. The readings and discussions have been excellent tools to put into perspective the problems of the past, and the ongoing issues that continue to ail us as a nation. That said, I still believe that America can rise above these issues and take a leadership role in the world by giving a good example of multiculturalism and diversity, in the same way we have bled, fought, and died in togetherness for democracy. I believe that it is possible for our nation to find a new paradigm that will encourage relegated groups to participate fully in American society, as well as having people of all cultures engaging in supportive cross-cultural encounters in an effort to generate ongoing positive and sustaining engagements among member of all races to share pleasant experiences amongst each other and counsel and encourage each other to succeed.

Foundation of the Plan

Pearson and Bader, explain that the “reasons why people change are to resolve emotional discomforts, to avoid greater pain, and to become fulfilled and more fully functioning.” When I observe the interactions among multicultural young people in my community I believe that our country has great potential. Without any intention to ignore the past, I feel that in order to move forward, it is important to focus on the future. Continuing to dwell on, nor being oblivious to the past will improve the future of multicultural relations in this country. However, learning how to generate ongoing engagements within a multicultural environment will. Consequently, the purpose of this action plan is to help develop multiculturalism in high school classrooms by:

1. Facilitating the understanding of cultural differences from a popular cultural perspective, reducing stereotypes by gaining an understating that all people share a universal human experience which makes them different, but also equal in an ever evolving heterogeneous society.
 - a. The goal is to help students reflect on their individual identities and share with their multicultural peers who they are, and what makes them special. In addition they will also share why they feel that their classmates are special.
2. Promoting positive relationships, and developing support systems within multicultural teams to help students prepare for their future.
 - a. The goal is for student to prepare a vision statement for their future, and share this vision with their multicultural classmates. By sharing their vision, they will be able to counsel each other and help each other meet their visions of the future by brainstorming the commitments needed to align and successfully achieve their individual visions.

3. Identifying the human relations skills needed for effective engagements with others in a multicultural society.
 - a. The goal is for students to identify, implement and practice human relation skills.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this plan is based on my assumption that lack of purposeful reflection, human relations skills, and multicultural relationship building are key components that have been lacking in American schools. Even in culturally diverse school environments, segregation can be often observed. The plan strives to achieve students' knowledge of themselves and each other, increase students' interpersonal and human relations skills, and boost students' need for each other as human beings to be able to thrive in a multicultural society. The plan also builds upon Sleeter and Grant's dimension of Human Relations because it "promotes positive relationships among groups by eradicating stereotypes and encouraging tolerance and unity" (Sleeter and Grant, 1998).

Plan of Action

There are many ways to prepare for a multicultural training program or class. I would begin by conducting a comprehensive assessment to gain a vast understating of the level of diversity of school, if the school employees and serves a diverse population, and if it has diverse training materials to offer its students. I would research if the school district has any limitations or barriers that limit training on valuing different races, genders, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion and class. I would request to have meetings to speak with as many teachers, counselors, school Directors in order to gather ideas of any multicultural situation in the school.

In a recent study conducted by researchers at Bryn Mawr College, and published at the College Student Journal, “a significant minority of survey respondent 23% described their workshop leaders as “self-taught.” “Those responsible for organizing workshops, practical experience appears to be valued over academic or professional background.” Therefore, I would begin by engaging in a process of self-study and self-reflection by becoming involved in reading groups related to topics, stories, and biographies of different cultures. I would research independent book stores and public libraries for books written by authors of diverse multicultural groups. I would also keep up with subscriptions and read online or print magazines of diverse multicultural groups. For example, Asia Week, Ebony, Native People Magazine, Little India, Latino Perspectives Magazine, Ability Magazine, and Advocate Magazine. This research is imperative because “As professors we need to support an informed understanding and skillful use of race based epistemologies” (Scheurich & Young, 1997). These media sources are excellent tools not only to build multicultural competencies but they also provide a wealth of information concerning the social roles, and beliefs of the culture being researched.

I would seek counsel from my educational mentors and professors for advice and suggestions. I would research online workshops and or attend some in my area if available. In addition, I feel that such endeavor requires not only myself as a facilitator of the plan, but also a multicultural team willing to partner with me in a commitment to execute the program effectively. Teachers, scholars, psychologists, counselors, writers, professionals in the community of different cultural background that have healthy and positive contributions should be invited as guest speakers, and moderators, are observes of the dynamics of the program. These observers primarily teachers are extremely important as they are faces that the students will see every day after the training, thus they will have a major role in the sustainability of the plan.

Finally, “fostering diversity and multiculturalism in higher education classrooms means constructively managing the emotions that accompany this territory” (Baumgartner & Bailey, 2008). Thus, I would make sure to provide a syllabus with detailed explanations of the activities involved in each module, in an effort to emotionally prepare students for the range of emotions they may experience by participating in any of the modules. The implementation period of the plan which consist of 3 modules can be offered in the course of 3 months, one module per month.

Module 1

Focus: Understanding Cultural Difference

Activity: The Making of Identity Cards

Appropriate Audience: High School Students and Young Adults

Allocated Time: Approximately 2 hours

Identity cards are a great tool that helps students reflect on the factors that shape who they are as individuals. The process of making identity cards can be used to deepen students' understanding of themselves and each other. Sharing their identities with their multicultural peers can help students build relationships and breakdown stereotypes. In this way, identity cards can be used as an effective classroom and community-building tool.

1. Before creating identity cards it is useful to have students brainstorm categories they consider when asking themselves the question, "Who am I?"
 - a. Categories can include their role as a family member, community member, etc.
 - b. Background (religion, race, nationality, hometown, or place of birth). It is important to encourage students who are of mixed races to expand in the multiplicity of their identities. Nieto (----), mentions Hybridity as another way of understanding culture. Therefore, in this part of the activity, it is important to mention to students that there are many other identities besides race and ethnicity which in addition to mixed races, also include: gender, sexual orientation, geographic location among other identities that are part of their individuality.

- c. Encourage students to separate their identities into two different categories. The first category being their internal identities and the second their external identities. Student can either write a word to represent the category or make a drawing of what they feel the identity represents.
2. On an unnamed 5x8 index card, students answer the question? Who am I? They can do so by answering the lists on categories A & B above. On the reverse side of the card, they are asked to list two categories of internal and external identities.
3. As students finish, the cards are placed in a box. When all the students have finished, the cards are re-distributed and each student picks a card different than their own and tries to guess who the person is.

This lesson meets the objects of the plan, because most of the time it is difficult to guess which identity card belongs to which student. Often students realize how they use stereotypes identify the owner of the card. In the process of searching for the owner of each card, students also realize the similar identities they share even within their vast differences all the while having fun in the process of guessing who is who?

Module 2

Focus: Promoting Positive Relationships and Developing Support Systems

Activity: Preparation of a vision statement

Appropriate Audience: Teenagers and young adults

Allocated time: Approximately 2 hours

The activity begins with an introduction and an explanation of the purpose of the activity, which is to create a vision statement. It is important to convey that a vision statement is an excellent tool to define a set of individual commitments, and helps to specify internal ways of being rather than external acts. A vision statement can be an inspiration to achieve the best a person can become, and it helps people to move through life with a sense of direction.

1. Students should be given a focus for their vision. In this case it can be a personal vision or a professional vision.
2. Students should be encouraged to write a vision that is positive and passionate. Preparing an example of such vision can come in handy.
3. Students should understand that their vision should align with their personal commitments to achieve the vision.
4. After every student has written their vision, students should be arranged in small multicultural groups. Students will read their visions to their group, and they will help each other by providing suggestions on how to align the commitments necessary for each to achieve their vision.

5. The suggestions should read along the lines of: “I believe that you will be successful if you do_____. I feel you will achieve your vision by doing_____.”
It is important to explain that this is not an exercise to critique the vision, nor to amend the vision, only to provide suggestions for how to achieve it.
6. Each student will note the ideas of their multicultural partners. These ideas serve to help each student to achieve their vision using the suggestions given from different multicultural perspectives.

The beauty of this activity is that students are able to keep their vision statements, and revise their vision accordingly as their life changes. In turn, they will also have to build relationships with those who have given them suggestions of how to align commitments with their vision. The process of revising a vision and providing suggestions to align the commitments is an individual group activity that can occur outside of the classroom. It can happen in the different places where the students’ meet, over the phone, by email, in a chat forum or any other means of communication. The key is for the students to help others meet their vision. This is an excellent activity to build multicultural relationships, and the need for students to find in one another a mentor and a friend who can help them to meet their life’s vision. What a change will it be if in time we could witness a student of one race or identity, achieving his or her vision and attributing the success to peers of a different cultures?

Module 3

Focus: Human Relations Skills

Activity: Reflection and Role Playing

Appropriate Audience: Teenagers and Young Adults

Allocated Time: 2 hours

The activity begins with an introduction to the class and a brief explanation of the importance of human relations skills for multicultural relations.

1. I would ask students to think of people they know who they believe have good people skills. After, I would ask them to brainstorm one-word characteristics of the people they thought about, and would write on the board what they say in a list format. The list should include some or most of the following words: honest, flexible, cooperative, sensitive, self-confident, responsible, mature, dependable, mindful, supportive, and a person of integrity, cheerful, hard-working, enthusiastic etc. If students are not able to come up with some or more of the words listed, then I would make sure to add the words to the list.
2. I would ask students if there are any words on the list they do not understand, and if so, I would encourage the class to discuss their meaning appropriately by prompting students to provide the meanings as a group.
3. I would ask students to describe which of the words on the list they believe could help them achieve a successful relationship with a peer who has a different cultural identity than they do, and explain why?

4. I would give students some alone time to reflect on the list and to rate themselves from one to five. One meaning they never do it, and 5 meaning that they always do it.
Students do not share their answers with the class.
5. After their personal reflections, students can be either divided into small groups of 3 to 4 or remain together in a round circle discussion to share their answers to the following questions:
 - a. What are your feelings about this human relations activity?
 - b. Give an example of how you exhibit any one of those skills on a daily basis.
 - c. Give an example of a characteristic of a person who is culturally different from you that have made a difference in your life. Explain why you have appreciated the person or the characteristic of that person.
6. Finally, students will be asked to form groups (trying to keep groups culturally diverse) and prepare a human relations scene, then role playing the scene for the rest of the class.
Humor should be highly encouraged!

Meeting the Aforementioned Goals

The understanding of cultural difference, the promotion of positive relationships and the development of human relations skills helps to promote equity and diversity by learning the importance of self-reflection and the sharing of identities and cultures. The workforce and communities of the future will represent a broad range of genders, age, and ethnic differences. It is critical for young people to be aware of the evolving diversity of the country, and that learning to appreciate the differences, and practicing human relation skills in their daily life are key elements for success that lead to a higher quality of life, by resolving emotional discomforts, avoiding painful situations, and becoming fulfilled and fully functioning members of society. The process is much harder than it seems. It is not always easy to be flexible to the ideologies of others, and often, “embedded emotions can create explosive pitfalls in classroom environments” (Le Doux, 1996). Considering the countries’ history it is difficult to completely forget the past and move forward. Yet, it is imperative to understand that the lack of at least making an effort will inevitably lead to further pain and suffering for all.

Limitations of the Plan

I feel that one of the main limitations, of this plan is that it does not involve open discussions nor teachings of the historical events of the country, nor the social roles that any particular race played and continues to play in America. One may argue that the plan fails to expose White privilege, and fails to encourage talks of racism, discrimination or social justice. I, instead would argue that based on my own experience, “anger and fear” do nothing but “derail diversity discussions and release hormones that affect learning and memory” (Le Doux, 1996). “Recognizing the spectrum of emotions that are part of every classroom: anxiety, excitement,

fear, anger, apathy, shame, guilt and joy” (Le Doux, 1996). I rather focus on the positive points that personal reflection, sharing, integration, relationship building, and the developing of human relations skills can provide to future generations.

Obstacles and Sustainability

Some of the common obstacles that I also foresee for this plan is time, and the potential need of training the teachers of these students for plan sustainability. High school students are so involved with many activities, homework, after school programs, preparing for college examination and interviews that time constraints are an issue. I would offer a sign-up sheet to provide the plan during school time, but also on a weekend morning or a weekday evening, in this way I can ensure maximum attendance. I believe it is important to keep files of all of my research, and develop an online mailing list that I can use to keep teachers involved and informed of interesting cultural publications, and books related to diversity and social justice. Also, starting a teacher’s book club where any teacher interested can meet once per month to discuss interesting article and books written by culturally diverse authors, in order to build cultural competence and continue to support the sustainability of the plan by making sure that student are engaging with each other and putting into practice the modules taught. In addition, this can also serve to help teachers include interesting literature and activities in their daily lesson plans. I would make it a point to follow-up with students, by providing mini-online workshops and live chat-room multicultural discussions making sure to provide a fun and emotionally safe forum.

Assessing the Plan

I would evaluate the plan's effectiveness by conducting surveys, and interviews with both students, faculty and invited guests in attendance. If a problem were to arise during the implementation of the plan, I would address the specifics to understand how to reduce or eliminate a re-occurrences. I would make sure to incorporate immediate changes in the plan based on any observations and suggestions related to the effectiveness of the training.

Conclusions

Discussions, training and courses related to diversity and social change, and justice can be all consuming, for all involved. Facilitators of learning, teachers and students alike are all human beings involved in a process of reflection of themselves, their lives, their families and their ancestors. Often emotions run deep into the soul of anyone involved in discussions of this nature, and more often than not feelings of hopelessness creep to overwhelm all parties with a voice that says "We will never get this problem fixed." But, we must hang on to the hope that human being were made with the ability to love and change, and so we must keep trying, we must keep pushing, we must keep fighting for a world in which everyone can live with at least some degree of harmony that increases as we continue to practice are innate abilities of human relations.

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