On the fringes of most school environments is a shadow population of students whose motivation and achievement are stymied and who are not being well served by U.S. public schools. Too often, such students are viewed as being different from the “regular” students. These outsiders are not seen as productive members of the learning community, and little attention is given to either their needs or their assets. The number of students who are not succeeding in the classrooms must be made visible so the students who fall in the margins thrive as well as those in the mainstream.

Sometimes students are marginalized in subtle ways. Do any of the following statements sound familiar?

- LaMar is such a social and active child. If he would calm down, talk less, and stay out of trouble, he would be a good student. He might be able to be a leader if only he would conform.

- Mai Lee is one of my brightest students, but she has priorities other than school. Her focus appears to be the Hmong community dance group she belongs to. She puts more effort into dancing and performing than into achieving in school.

- Hector shows some promise and wants to become a doctor. He’ll never make it because his grades in math and science are less than desirable. He seldom comes to class, and when he does, he is not prepared. The other Hispanic kids seem to be struggling too.

- Thunder’s performance is inconsistent. He makes a D as easily as he makes an A. His projects are excellent when he feels motivated, but he does poorly on tests and he seems lazy and uncooperative.

Such attitudes come in many guises, but the common perception that students would not have academic issues if they would just try harder, pay attention, and listen is a deterrent to recognizing potential, promise, and untapped abilities in some students. The solution is not that simple. Often self-esteem and self-concept issues, identity issues, classroom climate, curriculum and instruction, peer pressure and relationships, and family concerns all inhibit students’ motivation and achievement, leading to students who become “in-school dropouts” who are disillusioned or disenchanted with school. Focusing on students without considering their life circumstances provides only a partial picture and results in piecemeal, futile attempts at intervention.

Focusing on students’ perceived deficits makes them seem less desirable, less salvageable, than other students. But students who underachieve are not born lazy or unmotivated—they often learn to underachieve. I have observed that many students have keen insight, an ability to note inconsistencies, and a sensi-
tivity to social injustice that make them aware of the contradictions between their academic learning and their lived experiences and of discrimination on the basis of race and class in schools and the larger society. These contradictions can dishearten students and wreak havoc on their desire to participate in a system that they perceive as unjust, especially culturally diverse students who are especially aware of race and class discrimination.

**In Need of a Mirror**
My Latino, Asian, American Indian, Arab, and biracial students have taught me that they have a developing sense of racial and ethnic identity and need to see their own experiences reflected back to them. Most adolescents ask, Who am I? Who am I now? Who was I before? Who will I become? The answer depends on who the world around them says that they are, which is partly determined by how their culture is represented in the cultural images around them. Adolescents who do not have this type of mirroring—or have a mirror that reflects only negative images—are at a disadvantage.

A curriculum that respects and incorporates culture helps students develop the ability to make reflective personal and public decisions. The curriculum should be conceptual and interdisciplinary and should be based on higher levels of knowledge. Its focus should be on helping students master key concepts—such as race, racism, prejudice, and discrimination—that highlight major themes in the experiences of ethnic and cultural groups in U.S. history. Key concepts to consider include:

- Conflict exists among different generations and subgroups within ethnic groups. These conflicts are evident in values, goals, and methods of protest.
- Cultural diversity is exhibited in a wide range among and within various ethnic groups. Group identification is influenced by such factors as skin color, social class, and personal experiences.
- Values may differ from mainstream U.S. citizens, despite cultural assimilation.
- Social protest occurs in movements that have emerged to develop pride, shape new identities, gain political power, and shatter stereotypes. The intensity, scope, and type of movements have varied widely from group to group and have been influenced by the unique histories, values, cultures, and lifestyles of ethnic groups.
- As ethnic groups become more assimilated, they abandon some elements of their traditional cultures. Later generations often reclaim aspects of their cultural heritage.

**Effective Multicultural Curricula**
Multicultural curricula must be conceptually broad and the depiction of racial and ethnic groups must be balanced. For example, no

The number of students who are not succeeding in the classrooms must be made visible so the students who fall in the margins thrive as well as those in the mainstream.
group should be characterized only in terms of victim or aggressor, rather all groups should be acknowledged for the cultures they have created, their complexities, and their contributions to the world. It is necessary to teach students about such concepts as prejudice, discrimination, and racism as well as protest, empowerment, and interracial cooperation to portray a full and accurate view of the experiences of culturally diverse groups in the United States.

Various academic fields and disciplines offer a wide range of concepts for a multicultural curriculum. When selecting concepts to organize lessons, educators should determine whether the concept helps explain some significant aspect of the history, culture, and contemporary experiences of the culturally diverse population in the United States. If it does, care should be taken to ensure that the concept is interdisciplinary—that it is capable of encompassing facts, generalizations, and examples from several disciplines and areas. For example, during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, people used not only politics but also literature, music, dance, the visual arts, and language to reflect their changing attitudes. Students must examine each of these disciplines to fully understand the Black protest in the 1960s. Concepts must also acknowledge the differences that exist within culturally diverse groups.

Educators must also ensure that the concept is developmentally appropriate. For example, it is easier to understand discrimination at a younger age than it is to grasp institutionalized racism, in part because almost every child has been the victim of some kind of discrimination. Students of all ages benefit from concrete examples, such as similarities and differences, open-ended stories, and role-playing situations that can make concepts real and meaningful. Whenever possible, teachers should integrate the realities of students’ lives, experiences, and cultures into the classroom while validating and affirming students’ identities.

Overall, a sound multicultural curriculum should help all students, from majority and minority groups alike, break out of their cultural and ethnic enclaves and learn that there are many ways to live and survive. Education should help students learn how to live with people who speak a different language or dialect, eat different foods, and value things that others do not value. In most societies, the social significance of race is much more important than the presumed physical differences among groups. Values and related lifestyles constitute their essence, not chow mien, basket weaving, sombreros, or soul food.

When planning a multicultural unit, the first step is to decide which key concepts to use to organize the unit. The concepts should be capable of encompassing a wide range of data and information. After selecting the organizing concepts, the teacher must choose key generalizations for each concept: a universal one that applies to all cultures, times, and people, as well as an intermediate one that applies to a particular nation, subculture, or time period. For example:

- **Key concept: cultural assimilation**
- **Universal generalization:** whenever a minority ethnic group comes into contact with the dominant culture, it is usually expected to acquire the culture and values of the dominant culture.
- **Intermediate-level generalization:** in the United States, ethnic minority groups are expected to acquire the culture and values of the mainstream culture.

Once the groups to be included have been selected—it is not neces-
necessary or desirable to include every U.S. ethnic group in the unit—the teacher must formulate low-level generalizations that explain how the specific groups relate to the key concepts. Then the teacher can write strategies and identify teaching materials that will enable students to compare the experiences of different groups. Clearly stated objectives should encompass both cognition (i.e., mastery of knowledge) and affect (i.e., student attitudes and values). Students’ understanding can be assessed through traditional and nontraditional measures.

Preparing Teachers

Teachers are the most important variable in the multicultural curriculum. Their attitudes about racial or ethnic groups must be acknowledged and addressed before they attempt to teach ethnic lessons. They may have to unlearn facts and interpretations that they learned in school and add new learning to achieve a personal transformation in their attitudes and conceptual understanding. Sensitive and knowledgeable teachers can teach any concept effectively, regardless of their own race or ethnicity. Whenever possible, however, students should be exposed to the points of view and perceptions of members of various ethnic groups.

The following guidelines are designed to help teachers better integrate content about culturally diverse groups into the school curriculum:

- Be alert to racism in curricular materials and student behavior. Understand the possible controversial nature of the required curriculum and develop clear objectives to enhance student knowledge.
- Choose teaching materials carefully to ensure that they do not contain blatant stereotypes of ethnic groups.
- Prepare yourself with the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and skills to teach lessons about the experiences of culturally diverse groups in the United States.
- Acknowledge your own racial attitudes and behavior. Be aware of the statements you make in the classroom.
- Get in touch with your own cultural heritage and share it with your students.
- Ensure that your classroom conveys positive images of all groups.
- Be sensitive to the racial attitudes of your students and do not accept the belief that kids do not "see color." Even very young children are aware of racial differences.
- Use trade books, films, videotapes, and recordings to supplement the textbook treatment of groups and to present an ethnic perspective. Show experiences of what it is like to be a person of color in the United States.
- Be sensitive to the developmental levels of your students when you select concepts, content, and activities related to cultural groups.
- Be aware of how you interact with students. Believe each student can be successful and help him or her succeed.
- Keep in mind that most parents are very interested in their child’s education, although the parents may be alienated from the school. Try to gain parental support and make parents partners in the education of their children.
- Use cooperative learning techniques and group work to promote racial integration in the classroom.
- Ensure that school play and pageant participants, cheerleading squads, dance teams, school publication staffs, and other formal and informal groups are racially integrated and that all cultural groups have equal status in school performances and presentations. If White students fill all leading or leadership roles in a multiracial school, a clear message is sent.

The Challenge

Principals face challenges: They must continue to demand greater levels of achievement from students and themselves. They must question what they are doing and not be satisfied to just be better than most. This means that principals must shake things up a bit. For some, that will not be comfortable. It may induce fear. It may even seem like outright blasphemy. Maya Angelou (2006) expressed it succinctly:

We cannot change the past, but we can change our attitude toward it. Uproot guilt and plant forgiveness. Tear our arrogance and seed humility. Exchange love for hate, thereby making the present comfortable and the future promising.

Principals must emphasize communication and involvement and accept that to address the needs of all students, what they are currently doing might need to change.

REFERENCES


Darlene Leiding [drdleiding@comcast.com] is the principal of Oh Day Aki, a K–12 charter school, in Minneapolis, MN. She is the author of Racial Bias in the Classroom: Can Teachers Reach All Children? (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).