

An Examination of Multiculturalism in a Small Coeducational Catholic High School in Nassau

County

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Abstract

School A High School is a small coeducational Catholic High School in Nassau County. This research paper examines the cultural diversity, and lack thereof, in the curriculum, activities and student body. Certain issues are exclusive to Catholic schools and although the student body is not as diverse as its public school counterparts, it is the obligation of the Catholic school to educate its students to be socially aware of these differences. The school attempts to accept as many students from various backgrounds as possible to form a culturally diverse environment in an effort to mirror the world in which we live. Clubs and activities are offered to appeal to all students. As educators we must focus on the real world needs of today's students, as their world will require them to construct knowledge based on their own diverse experiences. To ensure an environment that is truly culturally diverse, the paper asks several questions. It will also suggest areas that should be improved to provide for a more culturally diverse school.

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School A High School is a coeducational Catholic High School located in Nassau County, New York. School A offers a college preparatory, value-centered Catholic education to approximately 450 students in grades 9 to 12 drawing from a broad geographic area, encompassing more than 64 communities and 58 public school districts in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties. 424 students were enrollment as of October 1, 2011. The ethnic breakdown is as follows: 49 Black or African American (28 Male, 21Female); 9 Asian (6 Male, 3 Female), 32 Hispanic or Latino (18 Male, 14 Female); 332 White (206 Male, 126 Female); and 2 Multi-Racial (1Male, 1Female). Students are recognized as individuals with diverse skills and needs, who will grow, develop and achieve their optimum potential when encouraged and challenged. Each student is treated equally regardless of his or her background. Students are expected to excel with a curriculum designed to challenge the learning potential of each student. In his book, *Cultural Diversity in Catholic Schools: Challenges and Opportunities for Catholic Educators* (1996), Shane P. Martin outlines questions for administrators of Catholic schools to ensure an environment that is truly culturally diverse. These questions are:

- ❖ What is the school culture in the school? Do all students feel welcomed and valued in the school? Does everyone feel that he or she has a place to connect?
- ❖ Do our school activities and extracurricular activities foster cultural diversity and also build community? Is there tension among different ethnic groups? How do I deal with this?
- ❖ Do hiring practices reflect the diversity of the school and the community? Do students have adequate role models?

- ❖ Do admissions policies reflect the diversity of the community? Do ethnic minority students feel that they are welcome to apply at the school? Are there special issues for the recruitment and retention of ethnic minority students (language, issues, immigration issues, etc.)? Do admissions brochures and do their related materials reflect acceptance of cultural differences?
- ❖ Is adequate counseling provided for all students? Does the school provide counselors who are culturally sensitive and competent for ethnic minority students?
- ❖ What is the school's relationship with the local community? Do all families and parents feel comfortable and welcome at school events? Are there language or cultural differences that keep parents from responding to the school?
- ❖ Are opportunities provided for teacher training in cultural diversity? How committed is the school to providing outgoing professional development in the areas of culturally sensitive instruction, multicultural education, cooperative learning?
- ❖ Is there a forum to discuss issues of cultural diversity on the campus and to evaluate the school's progress in this area? (1996, p.59-60)

Martin asks, "What role can Catholic educators play in an important national discussion – diversity in our schools? What aspects of Catholic educational practice should be affirmed and identified as models; what elements of our practice need to be evaluated and challenged in order to better serve our mission?"(1996, p.viii).

The Mission Statement of School A High School is written with the intent to have all students feel welcomed and valued in the school. The school attempts to accept as many students from various backgrounds to form a culturally diverse environment in an effort to mirror the world in which we live. The mission statement was adopted April 15th, 1994, and is

prominently displayed in the halls of the school as well as the calendar and handbook. The statement is as follows:

“Let it be known that the mission of School A High School is to educate young people in a community dedicated to Gospel values and Catholic teachings. Ministering to students of diverse abilities, School A High School strives to achieve wholeness through personal holiness, academic excellence, and social responsibility. The pride of this community is its celebration of a student's growth and individuality.” As it is so important for students to “see themselves” in some way in the school culture, the culture of the school is periodically examined to see if there is diversity within. As Martin points out, both the explicit and hidden curriculum needs to be looked at. The hidden curriculum consists of the values, beliefs and messages given to students in the non-instructional areas.

- What is the hidden curriculum in the classrooms?
- In the school?
- What is the school environment like for ethnic minority students?
- What kinds of things are put on the walls of the school and classrooms (1996, pp. 24-25)?

Most of the posters in the halls represent all walks of life, the library offers a collection of contemporary literature, and the assigned summer reading books are culturally diverse. The banners that hang in the physical education complex are from both boys' and girls' athletic teams. The website shows a fair cross section of the population of the students who attend as well as photo albums that show all the various clubs and activities with the students participating.

Another part of the non-instructional areas are clubs and activities which are offered to

appeal to all students and include, but are not limited to: Irish American Club; World Cultures Club; Student Council; Interact; Model United Nations; Philosophy; Friends of Rachel Club (Tolerance); and the Catholic Club. Many of these clubs connect with the local community beyond the parish. Working with Parish Outreach, which services the needs of the community, these clubs are geared towards service and awareness of others at the school and local levels as well as the global community. The Interact Club devotes its time to feeding the homeless and raising funds for children with special needs including autism. The Catholic Club collects food at Thanksgiving and runs a toy drive at Christmas. Student Council and the Friends of Rachel Club focus on the school community. Building an environment of tolerance and unity are the goals of the clubs. The Multicultural and Irish Clubs work with the World Culture Department and host a week of “awareness” which includes food and dress from all countries. At one time there was an African American Club but there was a lack of interest and the club was disbanded. This situation was not exclusive to that club as discontinuing a club is protocol for any club when there is a lack of interest.

Social action skills are imperative to multicultural education. Bennett talks about including in skills sets knowledge, attitude and those skills needed to help resolve major problems that threaten the future of the planet and the well being of humanity (2003, p. 404). In Catholic schools, a moral responsibility exists to include social action in the culture as compassionate human beings. A lack of this social action as a goal of multicultural education negates the education (Bennett, 2003, p. 404).

Although there does not appear to be obvious tensions between the various cultural groups, it has become evident recently that the African American and Haitians students have removed from themselves from the mainstream population, which is a problem. There are only a

handful of Latino and Asian students in the school and they are fully immersed in the culture of the school. Perhaps as that number is so small there is no opportunity for a subculture. Going forward consideration will be taken to set up a forum to discuss issues of cultural diversity on the campus and to evaluate the school's progress in this area (Martin, pp. 59-60, 1996).

As Martin suggests, it is important for all stakeholders to have the experience of working with ethnically diverse faculty, staff and administrators. An ideal situation would be one where the ethnic makeup of the faculty and staff would reflect the population of the community (1996, p. 26). At School A High School this is not the case as the faculty and administration are all white with the exception of one Cuban female Spanish teacher. The faculty is almost an even split male to female.

School A High School accepts students based on an entrance exam that is administered to all eighth grade students who wish to attend a Catholic high school. The results of the test are distributed to the principals of the Catholic high schools in the Diocese of Rockville Centre and the data available consists of results from the standardized test. The results do not indicate race or gender, thereby eliminating discrimination and forcing a diverse student body to the extent of the applicant pool. However, there are academic criteria for acceptance. One of the main reasons for the lack of diversity is finance. At \$9,000 a year for tuition, many families cannot afford a Catholic education. Although scholarships are available, the limited amount will never allow for the "minority" to be anywhere near the "majority" or even large minority.

The curriculum that is offered follows the New York State Board of Regents and is, therefore, as culturally diverse as mandated by NYS. Additionally, College level, Advanced Placement, and Honors Courses are offered. At School AHS, there is awareness that technology

has introduced the students to living in a global world and it is vastly different from what we have known. As educators we must focus on the real world needs of today's students, as their world will require them to construct knowledge based on their own diverse experiences. A great challenge to those students who are not white or are from low socioeconomic classes, will be copying in the white, dominant culture (Kremer, 2003, p. 3). To meet these needs and challenges, beginning with the 2012-2013 Virtual High School courses will be offered enabling students to choose courses that address limitless diverse topics. The opening of a new Science/Technology building will include a Distance Learning classroom so that students may be exposed to their peers from all over the world in every discipline. Also currently offered are various programs in the Fine Arts as well as athletics, permitting students to participate at a level consistent with their interests and abilities.

As assignments in the classrooms are following the NYS curriculum, perhaps consideration can be given to look outside the set curriculum and present a more constructivist approach to learning. Martin suggests that in history courses students can research their family background and make a family tree, write a family history or complete a historical family interview project. If possible, a trip to Ellis Island could be arranged, as most of the students in School AHS are descendants of Europeans that traveled through Ellis Island. In English, students can write from their experience about topics that come from their culture and their world. In Math, teachers can create projects that examine the number of immigrants from a particular country in a longitudinal study and chart the percentage of those immigrants who live below the poverty line in the United States (1996, pp. 23-24).

In regards to providing adequate counseling for all children by a counselor who is culturally sensitive and competent for ethnic minority students, the current social worker is very

much in tuned with the needs of the students of all cultures despite the fact that she is a white female. Professional development is a priority in her duties so that she may be kept abreast of all current affairs affecting the diversity of the school and the social issues facing our students. However, unfortunately opportunities are rarely provided for teacher training in cultural diversity. Although the administration is morally committed to providing ongoing professional development in the areas of culturally sensitive instruction, multicultural education, and cooperative learning, it has not been given a priority by the faculty in the last several years.

Martin states, “The issue of cultural diversity and education is an extremely important and timely topic-particularly for Catholic schools-yet it is a complicated and a difficult topic for educators to address. Catholic schools have done an excellent job in building community, and this has made a notable difference in dealing with cultural diversity. There are still, however, several challenges and invitations presented to us that we need to address and that we can address. We can do so much given our potential” (1996, p. 4).

References

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