

## **Celebrating Diversity: Leading the Way in the 21<sup>st</sup> Millennium**

Paper Presented at American Association of Teaching & Curriculum

October 9, 1999 / Orlando, FL

Abridged Version

As America takes a leap into the new millennium, educators will be entering the new millennium at a time when the ability to educate a diverse group of students is not only a desirable skill, but also an essential one. If teachers believe that their job is to teach ALL students, then they will begin with “Celebrating Diversity,” rather than denying its mere existence.

A major group of students, in schools, will contribute significantly to the diversity of the population. These are students with varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Today’s teachers must learn about individual student’s cultural mannerisms and must find ways to honor and accommodate them. They may also need to help their students acquire the English language and learn about customs, beliefs, and traditions that may be outside personal experiences of the teachers and students. Cultural diversity is probably one major element on which teachers should concentrate because it has a substantial influence on how students approach the learning process. Teachers in today’s classrooms will have to deal with a wide variety of ethnic groups, including Asian-Americans, Hispanics, Native-Americans, African-Americans, Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

If Multicultural Education is believed to be “in the worth and dignity of humanity,” a greater responsibility is placed on all educators for upholding the values of democracy and helping students be better citizens of this free nation. Immigrants are flocking to this nation of freedom from all corners of the world with the hope to have a better living, religious freedom, and civil rights. Schools are the mirror of the society at

large, and the principles of citizenship practiced in today's schools will be demonstrated in tomorrow's leaders.

James Banks (1993) purports that multicultural education consists of goals that help students to know, care, and act in ways that foster a cultural democratic society. Teachers play a dominant role in implementing multicultural education as schools are in the best position to prevent and reduce prejudice. Thus, teachers "must model, not just the acceptance of diversity, but also embracing of it" (Pate, 1992).

Cultural differences are real and cannot be ignored. As America prides itself in being a democratic nation, teachers need to hold strong to this ideal and accept each child as an individual with his/her unique culture and ethnicity. Each ethnic group strives to maintain its identity adding color and beauty to the rich diversity of this nation. Teachers need to strive to maintain this identity in their classrooms by trying to include and accept every student without attempting to change their cultural identity.

With the great number of immigrants moving to the United States it is becoming even more challenging for teachers to be sensitive or knowledgeable of all cultures. Unless the cultural groups themselves do not strive to be recognized, they may go unnoticed in the hustle and bustle of the busy American life. The efforts of the Native American, African-American, Hispanic or the Jewish cultural groups have contributed greatly in cultural awareness of these students in schools.

In the hope of helping teachers better understand the diverse cultures of their students a model of Cross-Cultural Experiential Learning was introduced as a part of a doctoral dissertation in the College of Education at the University of Central Florida. The model known as the ISLAM model (Immersion, Survival, Learning, Acceptance, and

Modification) was used to train pre-service and in-service teachers in a diverse cultural school (Qadri, 1994).

The Muslim Academy of Central Florida located in Orlando, Florida was used as a model school to train teachers in cross-cultural experiential learning. The Academy consists of grades Pre-K to 8, and caters to the needs of students from nearly twenty different countries. Muslims in the United States are representatives of a variety of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. They come from different parts of the world like Pakistan, India, Trinidad, Bangladesh, Europe, and many other Middle Eastern and North African countries including Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and Syria. The number of Muslims in the United States is now estimated to be more than six million.

The Muslim Academy was chosen mainly for the following reasons:

To represent a culture totally different than the American norm

To enable American teachers to have cross-cultural experiential learning in multicultural education

To combat racism and stereotyping of the many subgroups of Muslims

To establish a relationship between theory and practice by developing a relationship between the professors of the College of Education, the student's pre-service and in-service teachers in the Academy, and the research based on site management for the total success of the multicultural program.

To see the strong impact of religion on cultural diversity.

Islam to the Muslims is not just a religion to be worshipped on a particular day of the week, but to put that information into practice. At a period in politics when the Middle East is a focal point and the so-called Islamic Fundamentalist is seen as a threat to the West, it is well timed to put the educational jargon about cultural diversity in practice. Not too long ago it was Japan, and then Russia, and now it is the Middle East. It is crucial to note the affect of the political relationship on the acceptance of cultural diversity.

Muslims are usually misunderstood as Arabs, when all Arabs may not necessarily be Muslims, and all Muslims not Arabs. Students in the public school are ridiculed for wearing the headscarf (hijab), or not mixing freely with the opposite sex, and for demonstrating their cultural identity. As the media coverage includes more and more on the Muslims or the Middle East, it is vital that multicultural programs include this minority group as well. Moreover, Islam or the Middle East is an important part of the Middle School and High School Social Studies, World History, and World Religions Curriculum.

A Muslim's culture is largely based on the principles of Islam; for example, dress code of dietary needs have to be within the guidelines of Islam. This is one main culture that may require the sensitivity of such subjects as Health Education, Physical Education, Life Management, etc. Muslims follow their religion as a way of life and are required to follow the Islamic guidelines to preserve their cultural identity.

Non-Muslim teachers working in a totally different cultural environment can successfully pass through the different stages of the ISLAM model to see the multicultural and professional growth in them. Every act and behavior is an act of

worship to please the creator Allah. Dating and sexual contact, outside of marriage, is strictly prohibited in Islam. In the words of Saliba and Tomah (1957), “The general characteristics of Islamic Education, however, is that it is neither purely religious, as was the case with the Israelites, nor purely secular, as was the case with the Romans, but both at the same time.” Many verses are to be found in the Quran and in the Sunnah (example of the prophet), which indicate that education aims at the realization of happiness in this world and the next. As explained by Haneef, “Regardless of how much time may pass and to what extent, the habits and living patterns of people may change, the principles of Islam... may not be ‘altered’, ‘modernized’, ‘reformed’, or in any way made comfortable to the desires of the people since they come from the Lord of the people, not for their pleasure convenience, but for their permanent well being and utmost good” (P. 86).

The Muslim Academy is unique in the sense that one of its goals is to prepare the Muslim children to be better citizens of the United States and to learn the intercultural skills in order to bridge the gap between the minority Muslim community and the larger community. In addition to the values of diversity, patience, self-respect, honesty, and modesty, the core values of the multicultural education, the very small well-disciplined class sizes give an extra opportunity to student teachers to face the greater challenges of the large and diverse public school classrooms.

Hence the Muslim Academy is a meeting place for beginning teachers who are willing to learn about diversity; in-service teachers who are presenting themselves as role models of multicultural education; and UCF College professors who through their mentoring and teaching aim to blend theory into practice. The ISLAM model is

a result of a dissertation entitled Cross-Cultural Experiential Learning Practices for Training Teachers in Multicultural Education.