A HUMAN RELATIONS APPROACH TO MULTICULTURALISM IN K-12 SCHOOLS

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Selected Issues and Strategies

By

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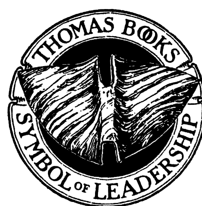

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I dedicate this book to Charlie Hollar. He was caring, competent, and committed advocate for a top-quality education for all students.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The dominant stories in American history consist largely of tales of people in search of social systems and human relationships that would allow them to advance as far as their abilities and efforts permit–with no artificial barriers based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, or socioeconomic status. The struggle for that kind of equality is as old as civilization itself. In the United States, the public schools have been regarded as the principal instrument through which this democratic ideal would be achieved. Explicit in this book is my belief that it is not enough to say that we Americans live in culturally diverse and stratified communities in which educational opportunities are not distributed fairly; nor is it enough to iterate that most educational opportunities are not based solely on students' academic abilities. Elementary and secondary school personnel must be involved in abating these problems.

Although this book is written primarily for students interested in pursuing careers as elementary or secondary school teachers, it should also be of value to experienced teachers, as well as school administrators, counselors, parents, and policy makers. I focus mainly on human relations concepts that pertain to cultural pluralism in elementary and secondary schools. This book is not meant to be read passively by teachers and teacher candidates; it is intended to be a dialogue that encourages discussion and, when possible, action. Explicit throughout each chapter is my belief that *how* teachers teach a course matters as much as *what* is taught. The former is the *process* of teaching, while the latter is the course *content.* Students who are enrolled in classes taught by effective teachers learn more than course content; they learn about themselves, their classmates, and their teachers. They also learn about people who live in pluralistic communities other than their own.

Each chapter is written to achieve four major objectives: (1) to discuss several key societal factors that positively or negatively affect the quality of instruction students receive in elementary and secondary schools; (2) to discuss selected racial and ethnic groups' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize teaching personnel, students, and parents; (3) to present seminal

research studies and their implications for educating elementary and secondary school students; and (4) to provide practical suggestions for abating or preventing selected human relations problems in elementary and secondary schools.

As human relations practitioners, teachers ought to induce constructive behavior change in themselves and their students. All agents of change try to alter the internal structures of socially dysfunctional groups. This sometimes requires the reorganization or redistribution of power and privileges in classrooms by making them more equitable. The most effective teachers teach problem-solving skills to students so that they can solve as many of their own problems as possible. Behavior change processes can be divided into two categories: those changes that increase frustration tolerance in students, and those that provide relief to specific problems.

The following aspects of this book should be particularly noted: (1) I discuss numerous educational reforms that served America well in the past but must be altered or abandoned to fit the current local, national, and international educational imperatives. (2) Drawing on seminal literatures and research studies relevant to the academic discipline of human relations, I discuss a wide variety of issues, problems, and strategies for change that pertain to elementary and secondary schools. This approach offers readers balanced views of the challenges affecting administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and parents. (3) I employ a scaffolding, or spiral, approach: many of the topics that are discussed in early chapters are covered again in later ones, albeit sometimes in repetitive ways. This gives breadth and emphases to those topics. Scaffolding is in harmony with the psychological principle that that cognitive growth and learning are continuous. The process of moving circuitously from one topic to another may be disconcerting to individuals who prefer book chapters to flow linearly and sequentially from one topic to another. But social problems are seldom created or solved linearly and sequentially. (4) Special attention is given to the effects of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and family income on elementary and secondary school students and their parents and teachers.

There have been many positive changes in elementary and secondary school education since I was a student in the 1930s and 1940s. To say otherwise would be inaccurate and disingenuous. But long after those early years of my education, the pernicious isms–racism, sexism, and classism, to mention a few pressing problems–that characterized my early years as a teacher still have a negative impact on students in and outside their schools. The French proverb *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (The more things change, the more they stay the same) captures the essence of several educational paradoxes confronting American elementary and secondary school

personnel. To illustrate the veracity of that French proverb, I have drawn heavily on educational data of the 1960s and 1970s, midpoints between my own elementary and secondary school years in the 1930s and 1940s and the present.

Thus, I look backward and ask the reader to look around her or his community today and compare and contrast progress, or lack of it, in terms of abating racism, sexism, classism, and other human relations problems in our nation's K-12 schools. Not every important problem is discussed in this book. But I have tried to include enough human relations problems to convey the depth and essence of cultural pluralism. No book, including this one, completely discusses the full range of topics that comprise cultural pluralism in elementary and secondary schools. My book is meant to complement and supplement other textbooks that are used in university courses that focus on human relations-related topics. The titles of those courses are Multicultural Education, Cultural Diversity, and Human Relations in Education, to mention a few of them.

The reader has the task of determining which research studies cited in my book and other books have been superseded by current research, and which ones have been corroborated. That is, which of the selected human relations problems of the past are still with us today? For some teachers, this book will be an introduction to several pressing cultural pluralism problems they may have to deal with; for others, it will be a cogent review of several problems that they have actually dealt with.

I am grateful to the hundreds of undergraduate and graduate education majors who, during more than four decades, listened to my lectures on human relations issues in education and gave me valuable feedback about what was most helpful to them. Also, I am grateful to the university professors who gave me their opinions of the manuscript: Yvonne RB-Banks, Northwestern College (MN); Rochelle Brock, Indiana University-Northwest; Rapheal C. Heaggans, Niagara University (NY); Fred Hammond III, University of Central Oklahoma; Joy Russell, Eastern Illinois University; Jeanne Mather, University of Science and Arts (OK); Lucretia Scoufos, Southeastern Oklahoma State University; Rose Gilmore-Skepple, Eastern Kentucky University; José E. Vega, University of Wisconsin-River Falls; and Dwight C. Watson, University of Northern Iowa. I am indebted for their feedback. I have included in this book many of their helpful suggestions, several of the students' vignettes, and a few of their written stories. The shortcomings in this book are mine and not my students or colleagues.

I would be remiss if I did not give special thanks to several persons who gave me the encouragement and assistance that I needed to write this book. My daughter Lisa Gaye Henderson, a special education teacher in a Dallas

public school, periodically reminded me of my promise to write another book for teachers that focused on human relations issues. After I began writing the manuscript, Lisa patiently put up with my numerous requests for her to stop whatever she was doing so that she could read and critique several versions of the manuscript. Three of Lisa's elementary school colleagues–Diana Hodges, Pamela Wurster, and Sandra Butters–also critiqued portions of the book. Butters, a retired Dallas public school teacher, critiqued the entire preliminary draft of the book. Rosemary Wetherold did a superb job of helping me to refine the final draft.

As always, my wife, Barbara, was the soul force behind this project.

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A HUMAN RELATIONS APPROACH TO MULTICULTURALISM IN K-12 SCHOOLS

Chapter 1

CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATORS

In the United States, approximately 120,000 elementary and secondary (K-12) schools employ more than three million teaching personnel. Those personnel are responsible for the education of more than fifty million students who are remarkable in their diversity–nonwhites and whites, immigrants and citizens, and the extremely poor to the extremely rich. The overarching challenge for the teaching personnel in every school is to provide each generation of students with a top-quality education. Accomplishing that depends to a great extent on the commitment and abilities of all school personnel, but most particularly it depends on teachers.

Not every well-thought-out teaching performance is equally successful, but every unsuccessful performance is equally disappointing. Well-trained, highly motivated, caring, and creative teachers–human relations-oriented teachers–do not obsess over their students' shortcomings. Nor do they lament the height of the barriers that make it difficult for some students to learn course content. Instead, these teachers work harder and they do not hide behind the failed initiatives. They have a "can do" approach to teaching that is carried out through a myriad of human relationships.

RELATIONSHIPS IN TEACHING

To be effective, teachers must overcome numerous challenges, and not all of those challenges are in the classroom. Many of the challenges involve establishing effective interpersonal relationships with other

school personnel. Another major challenge for teachers is to adjust to wholesale changes in the racial and economic compositions of their school's student body. For example, large numbers of ethnic minority families are leaving the big cities and moving to the suburbs; others are moving to smaller communities in the South and the Southwest. Nonetheless, most of our nation's schools are racially segregated learning environments. Demographic changes are occurring so rapidly that it is difficult for teachers and administrators to fully understand them and to make appropriate school adjustments and build on solid relationships. It often takes a full school year or longer for some school personnel to clearly grasp the implications of their school's demographic changes and the cultural and social class contexts in which they are embedded.

In the 2009–2010 school year, 43 percent of the Latino students and 38 percent of the black students attended schools where fewer than 10 percent of their classmates were white. And more than 14 percent of the Latino and black students attended schools where less than 1 percent of their classmates were white. The majority of the Latino and black students were from poverty-stricken social environments. There was an overlap between schools that had high numbers of Latino and black students and also high numbers of very low-income students. The typical Latino or black student attended a school where about two-thirds of the student population were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Also, many of these students were highly mobile. Not much has changed since 2009–2010.

It is extremely difficult for school districts to provide highly mobile students with seamless and adequate learning experiences. The biggest losers are students from low-income families who move from school to school, whether within the same school district or between districts, several times during a school year. In innumerable schools that serve a large number of these students, the probability that all of them will complete all of their coursework in the school where they initially enrolled is slight. But not all mobility problems involve students from low-income families. Students from affluent families also are becoming more mobile as their parents move from job to job. Before we become maudlin about this trend, it is important to remember that countless children whose parents are employed in careers that require periodic relocations, such as jobs in international organizations or in

the U.S. military, do quite well even though they may attend several different schools.

All teachers participate in four major kinds of relationships: (1) their relationships to America's pluralistic students, (2) their relationships to the teaching profession, (3) their relationships with staff members in the schools where they work, and (4) their relationships with the parents in the communities where they work.

Pluralism in the American Society

Cultural pluralism means many things, including understanding and appreciating all cultures that are in a society; cooperation among various cultures' civic and economic institutions; peaceful coexistence of peoples who have diverse lifestyles (folkways, languages, religions, and so forth); and the autonomy of each subculture to determine its own destiny. The concept of cultural pluralism was developed by Horace Kallen in an article published in *The Nation* titled "Democracy versus the Melting Pot: A Study of American Nationality" (February 25, 1915). His thesis focused on cultural diversity and its coexistence between various Anglo-Saxon European peoples and cultures. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the concept of cultural pluralism was expanded to include all peoples and cultures. The acceptance of cultural pluralism as a major principle in K-12 education does not require schools to melt away cultural differences. Instead, it requires them to openly affirm racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic pluralism as being valuable resources that are worthy of preserving and enhancing.

While the life patterns and basic cultural beliefs of all cultures have certain common elements, cultures also possess significant differences in their native languages, customs, values, religions, and folk beliefs. Respecting cultural differences, providing opportunities for all students to learn school subjects, and preparing students to realize their economic potentials are now recognized by many educators as the top-priority goals of our elementary and secondary schools. However, embracing diversity in schools is only the first step in fostering pluralism. All schools ought to actively promote and prize diversity. After all, cultural pluralism is an aspect of our national heritage. It is well documented that the United States is a nation created by migrants,

immigrants, and slaves (Henderson & Olasiji, 1995; Henderson, Spigner-Littles, & Millhouse 2006).

Subgroups in the American culture whose members share unique cultural heritages that are passed to each successive generation are known as "ethnic groups." Social scientists tell us that ethnic groups are generally identified by their distinctive patterns of family life, language, religion, and other customs that set them apart from other groups. Above all else, members of ethnic groups have a sense of common identity. While "ethnicity" is often used to mean race, that term extends beyond race. Each ethnic group, including those mentioned in this book, has enriched our society with its own particular music, food, customs, and dress. And each of them has a long history of building and protecting our nation. It usually takes two or more generations for the members of a new immigrant group to become so sufficiently absorbed into the mainstream U.S. culture that some of them lose their separate ethnic identities.

Many ethnic groups–mainly nonwhite groups–have never achieved full assimilation. Almost all nonwhite groups still maintain vestiges their native country's cultural beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Indeed, for many Americans, the United States is more like a salad or a gumbo created from various cultural ingredients. Initially, mainstream U.S. culture was created through assimilation in a mythical melting pot of Western European cultures. Throughout the following years, a growing number of people of color have happily assimilated into the mainstream American society; others are happy to be left out of it; and still others are unhappy because they have been left out. It is this mixing and matching of peoples' cultures and aspirations that have made our nation unique in a world of culturally diverse nations. Even with its shortcomings the United States is the global benchmark of cultural diversity. Teachers in America's schools have a chance to experience a broad range of such diversity.

Time, Place, and Circumstances

The various roles and relationships of teachers are influenced by time, place, and circumstances. During the first half of the twentieth century, the citizenship development role of school teachers consisted mainly of preparing students to live in a national society with a dominant monoculture–that is, white and middle class. Because the rapid-