

A Study of the Cultural Perspectives of High School Administrators

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Abstract

An understanding of the multicultural perspective can impact the approach to education in our nation's schools. This study aims to establish the multicultural perspectives of administrators at Farmingdale High School. It will examine the underlying impressions, practices, and expectations at the foundation of multicultural education for this school. Four different administrators will be interviewed to offer data on their individual perspectives relative to the customs, values, and practices supported by the leadership of this school. An overall assessment will be made to establish how to be more progressive in establishing multicultural education.

A Study of the Cultural Perspectives of High School Administrators

An ethnographical study was conducted to understand the perspectives of high school administrators with regard to values and cultures at Farmingdale High School. This study conducts open-ended interviews to analyze how teaching staff understand perspectives about values in a school culture. Culture is developed over time, and school districts have a distinct culture and set of values that can be analyzed when relevant data are collected. School administrators are faced with the critical task of creating opportunities for the organization to collaborate and embrace racial and cultural equity when working in a school system. Banks' *Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform* (Banks, 2006, p.62) was applied as the guiding principles to assess the multicultural levels evident from the perspective of each of the respondents. Respondents A-D represented a high school principal, assistant principal, a director of guidance, and a director of social studies at Farmingdale High School. This is a high school of 1988 students located in Nassau County, New York. The school's ethnic make-up is categorized as 75% Caucasian; 17% Hispanic; 6% African American; and 2% Asian/Pacific Islander.

In order to examine the multicultural perspectives of each of the administrators, a series of interview questions found in *Interview Responses* (see Appendix B), were asked. Those responses were applied to the levels described in Banks' terms. Banks' *Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform* offers the following "Level 4-The Social Action Approach: Students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them; Level 3-The Transformation Approach: The structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups; Level 2-The Additive Approach: Content, concepts, themes, and perspectives are added

to the curriculum without changing its structure; Level 1- The Contributions Approach: Focuses on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements” (Banks, 2006, p.62). To analyze the overall perspectives of these administrators, data collected will be applied to Banks’ four levels to establish perspectives and consider progressive steps toward enhanced multicultural education for this school.

The research sought to assess school culture in Farmingdale High School from the perspective of four administrators. This data offers a view of where the school currently stands, as well as the steps or strategies to consider in moving forward toward a multicultural perspective. “If the school climate is multicultural, it is reflected in every aspect of the educational program. In addition to those areas already mentioned, assembly programs reflect multiculturalism in their content, as well as in the choice of speakers. Bulletin boards and displays reflect the diversity of the nation, even if the community is not rich in diversity” (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009, p.392). These examples unfortunately, are at times non-existent or not valued in schools perhaps because they are not thought about enough.

Respondents A-D as they referred to for the purpose of the study, offered similar perspectives related to the study. They all were asked to describe the level of diversity in the school. All but one respondent thought that the school was at least moderately diverse. Again, only one noted, “There is a low level of diversity in our school. It is difficult to compare without national averages but the level is similar to the typical or average suburban high school in the north east” (Respondent D, personal communication, July 25, 2012). These responses contribute evidence that the perspective of these administrators is that the school is for the most part diverse. Respondent D is reflecting on a comparison to suburban high schools found in the north east, and that may influence the discrepancy.

Banks' model is a tool to multicultural education in curriculum. The second question refers to curricular study (see Appendix B). "History classes and ELA classes are where students learn about the broader world. Social movements some challenges we have faced as a country, i.e. the Holocaust in 10th grade. No African American Studies or Holocaust class specifically though. So equity needs to be woven into the curriculum...unless and until all the adults in the building are culturally and socially competent than they are not fully committed" (Respondent A, personal communication, July 25, 2012). This notion of equity in the curriculum is also evident in the success of other successful high school programs. "These schools are, in many respects, anomalies in the current landscape of secondary education: All of them send 80 to 100 percent of their students to higher education, exhibiting college-going rates more than twice the state averages for the kinds of students they serve. Equally important, these schools engage students in intellectually stimulating, relevant, and personalized learning that empowers them to contribute to their communities and learn throughout their lives"(Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008, p.15). Additionally, one respondent also reflects on the inclusion of these studies in social studies, but suggests other areas as well. "As the Director of Social Studies, we certainly cover the major cultures and movements of disenfranchised peoples through the Global and US Curricula; however, I am not sure if we look to infuse those lessons into other curricular areas. As the Director of ESL, I can say that we work to actually acculturate our LEP students into the "dominant culture", however I believe we do so in a way that is respectful and inclusive of the places and cultures from which our LEP students hail from" (Respondent B, personal communication, July 25, 2012). Both of these responses reflect on the social studies classroom setting as a place to find study devoted to culture or race. Noteworthy is that their perspectives both value of an interdisciplinary approach to multicultural education.

The respondents were asked to reflect on the prevalent cultural characteristics of the school community. It has been noted that “As citizens of the global community, students should develop a deep understanding of the need to take action and make decisions that will enhance democracy and promote social justice and human rights in their cultural communities, nation, region, and the world” (Banks, 2009, p.108). This suggests that school communities with diverse cultural characteristics enhance the educational experiences of its students. The respondents agreed that this high school conforms to school spirit and pride from a cultural perspective. According to the Banks assessment this is only on the *Contributions* level of multicultural education (Banks, 2006, p.62).

Common practices and activities that this school participates in to celebrate diversity is a topic that the school lacked on a diverse level. Respondents all noted a time during the school year called Diversity Week, when assemblies are conducted, speakers are invited, and cultural customs are explored. However, this week did not occur this school year. In addition, Banks would consider this practice again on the *Contributions* level (Banks, 2006, p.62).

Administrators were asked whether diversity for Farmingdale High School was merely “on the surface” or if it “adds” to the school experience or curriculum. Two respondents believed that diversity was surface only, while two noted that diversity added to the school curriculum (see Appendix B). However, the two respondents who provided examples of diversity, offered examples from the *Contributions* level according to Banks’ levels (Banks, 2006, p.62).

Respondent A notes, “Programs like Rachel’s Challenge reaches actual students and diverse numbers of students. The school is more at the additive level and more than just “on the surface” (Respondent A, personal conversation, July 25, 2012). A program that is done once a year is not quite the *Additive* level described in the table (Banks, 2006, p.62). Respondent B

simply stated, “Our programs add to the experience and curriculum, not surface only” (Respondent B, personal conversation, July 25, 2012). No specific examples were provided to support this claim. It may be that in the perspective of this respondent, that multicultural diversity adds significantly to the experience based on what this particular administrator is accustomed to or identifies with.

More definitive declarations were made when these administrators searched for examples at levels three and four on Banks’ scale (Banks, 2006, p.62). None of them could cite examples of diversity that transform their school community. In fact Respondent A and C made specific recommendations where progress can be made. Respondent A states, “We need more diversity in all academic levels. We want to be able to challenge all of our students more” (Respondent A, personal conversation, July 25, 2012). Respondent C also notes, “Given that in my estimation most of the celebrations skew towards “on the surface” it is hard to be transformative or lead to social actions. I think that in the cases where small groups of students interact in an effort to make a more conscious effort to embrace diversity, we are able to approach a more transformative effect on the school community” (Respondent C, personal conversation, July 25, 2012). Whether the administrators are in support of multicultural competence in education or not, their responses indicate support for the multicultural perspective. They indeed value diversity and can identify shortcomings.

One of the most interesting findings exists in the suggested ways to include cultural traditions that are more inclusive or representative of the student body. Both respondents A and C believe that steps must be taken to provide opportunities to collaborate on multiculturalism. Respondent A suggests, “Remove the practices of the dominant culture, and if not, then celebrate them all. Analyze the curriculum and provide more opportunities to have ‘real conversations’

supporting coordinating objectives with arts and education” (Respondent A, personal conversation, July 25, 2012). Moreover, Respondent C also describes the need for intervention from the district leadership with, “Like any ‘action plan’, that would require several important steps. Firstly we would need to determine what our goals around diversity are as a school, district and community at large. I think it would then be prudent to do a ‘needs analysis’ survey based on where the district is and where stakeholders wish it to go” (Respondent C, personal conversation, July 25, 2010).

Suggestions or recommendations were also made when participants were asked if there was anything left to add. Two contrasting points of view were presented. Respondent A believes, “If there is equity in academic tracks then it’s fine. The function of ethnicity and level of education of the parents may be an underlying factor in staff such as guidance counselors, should be student advocates to look for those students whose parents don’t know or have higher expectations. More heterogeneous classes; the current system is to work with the system to challenge students to the same level of expectations as the Honors or Humanities students are exposed to daily. Everyone should be challenged to normalize...collaborate with principals to reach out to support staff” (Respondent A, personal conversation, July 25, 2012). This perspective hones in on the inequity that exists in a tracking system in many high school settings. The speaker suggests that the student ethnic background numbers are not reflected in a balanced sense across curricular areas. It is also suggested that more professionals within this school system continue to collaborate and develop strategies for multicultural change. However Respondent C points out that, “Multiculturalism is not done by having “days” designated to any particular group” (Respondent C, personal conversation, July 25, 2012). This statement could be

interpreted as insensitive or callous toward having a multicultural perspective. It also may be interpreted as acknowledgement for additional means to address a need to diversify.

While these findings offer varying perspectives to the level of multicultural education at Farmingdale High School, they also indicate the commonality that there is progress to be made. According to Banks' Levels of Multicultural Education, this school would be assessed at the *Contributions Level* (Banks, 2006, p.62). Some of the perspectives indicate the need for academic equity in addition to cultural diversity. Further research within this district could address whether expectations are to have school pride or an individual who adds individual culture to Farmingdale High School. Put another way, should students simply conform to the customs and values of the school community while ignoring the valuable perspective their culture will bring to the school community? Additional progress would be to establish consistent expectations with regard to culture. Administrators should be more uniformed in modeling and demonstrating social equity for staff and students to reflect those values. If multicultural education is valued in this school community, then the school could enhance its multicultural perspective in first recognizing the current level of cultural competence that exists.

References

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Appendix A

Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe the level of diversity in your school / district?
2. What amount of school curricular study is devoted to culture or race?
3. What are some of the most prevalent cultural characteristics of this school community?
4. Describe the ways in which the school or district celebrates diversity?
5. Would you say they are “on the surface” or do they “add” to the school experience and / or curriculum?
6. Do our inclusions of diversity “transform” our school community? Do they lead to some type of social action?
7. How can this school include cultural traditions that are more inclusive or representative?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not asked or that you think is important to mention?

Appendix B- Interview Responses

Interview Question 1: How would you describe the level of diversity in your school / district?	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	More diverse than my original thoughts of middle class Caucasian impression...more socioeconomic and racial diversity than I originally thought. Moderately diverse, based on a match with the general population on Long Island.
B	High level of diversity compared to other schools- Few are in the middle with 25% minority populations.
C	I think that it's greater than one might suspect. I do not mean by virtue of sheer numbers...we are still a "majority white" school, however, within the roughly 25% of "other" students, the kids come from a great variety of places and cultures. In other words, we have a great diversity of students from Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Caribbean.
D	There is a low level of diversity in our school. It is difficult to compare without considering national averages but the level is similar to the typical or average suburban high school in the north east.
Interview Question 2: What amount of school curricular study is devoted to culture or race?	
A	History classes and ELA classes are where students learn about the broader world. Social movements some challenges we have faced as a country, i.e. the Holocaust in 10 th grade. No African American Studies or Holocaust class specifically though. So equity needs to be woven into the curriculum...unless and until all the adults in the building are culturally and socially competent than they are not fully committed.
B	We don't have specific programs...other than Diversity Week- Culture of the building- Natural teaching and experiences of daily activities

C	As the Director of Social Studies, we certainly cover the major cultures and movements of disenfranchised peoples through the Global and US Curricula; however, I am not sure if we look to infuse those lessons into other curricular areas. As the Director of ESL, I can say that we work to actually acculturate our LEP students into the “dominant culture”, however I believe we do so in a way that is respectful and inclusive of the places and cultures from which our LEP students hail from.
D	Curricular studies devoted to culture and race take place primarily if not solely in classes that require those studies. For example, social studies curricula require cultural exploration, so the topic is covered there. However, there is little if any other cultural exploration found in other curricular studies except perhaps some literary units in E.L.A. or foreign languages.
Interview Question 3: What are some of the most prevalent cultural characteristics of this school community?	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	Community likes to socialize where food is shared. There is a strong sense of community service, i.e. volunteer firemen. Community members expect the same “pay it forward” practice. Continuity of this in family practice.
B	Acceptance in a broad sense- Religious; gender; all cultural aspects are present and accepted “They all interact in harmony.”
C	It seems as though a great deal of the culture of our school(s) is borrowed from the “dominant culture.” i.e. our winter concerts that include traditional “seasonal songs” that include songs that celebrate Christmas (and of course we throw in a Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel to ensure that we are being ‘diverse’.)
D	Typically, the most prevalent cultural characteristics surround school spirit. The school prides itself on being hard working in a tough and gritty sense; celebrating national pride and accomplishments; and of course being athletic. The culture of the school is hinged on success and achievement in athletics.

Interview Question 4: Describe the ways in which the school celebrates diversity?	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	Diversity week had gone on in the past (but not this year). Arts and education programs throughout the district-which constitutes the culture. The Odyssey of the Mind program; and C-STEP science outreach to minority students.
B	Diversity Week/ Clubs, i.e. Ambassadors' and Key Clubs address goals or charity dedicated to specific ethnicities or cultural causes...not any school based directed to specific ethnic or religious backgrounds.
C	We celebrate diversity through large, whole- school projects such as Foreign Language week and smaller projects such as our Ambassadors' Club students who visit Holocaust survivors.
D	Diversity is recognized similar to the politically correct expectations of the national character. With that being said, the district does not go far beyond the exploration or celebration of <u>all</u> cultures, nor are there systemic approaches to understanding cultural differences beyond what one would expect.
Interview Question 5: Would you say they are “on the surface” or do they “add” to the school experience and / or curriculum?	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	Programs like Rachel’s Challenge reaches actual students and diverse numbers of students. The school is more at the additive level and more than just “on the surface.”
B	Our programs add to the experience and curriculum, not surface only-
C	I think that our programs are often very much on the surface...that is not to say that there are not exceptions, there are; however, the majority of our celebrations of diversity skew towards the “on the surface” without making a real impact on the lives of students or teachers.

D	They are “on the surface” and typical of similar cultural studies of any other suburban high school on a basic level. Nothing thought-provoking or systemic is being practiced on a consistent basis. Students and staff have not been taken out of their “comfort zone” to learn or experience cultural differences.
Interview Question 6: Do our inclusions of diversity “transform” our school community? Do they lead to some type of social action?	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	We need more diversity in all academic levels. Want to be able to challenge all of our students more.
B	May not transform it/ No exclusive groups exist...all are multicultural- Diverse and universally accepted that people are different/ Not for the purpose of something else.
C	Given that in my estimation most of the celebrations skew towards “on the surface” it is hard to be transformative or lead to social actions. I think that in the cases where small groups of students interact in an effort to make a more conscious effort to embrace diversity, we are able to approach a more transformative effect on the school community.
D	No. They are thought provoking in the moment, but don’t transcend time or place for our students that would demonstrate change.
Interview Question 7: How can this school include cultural traditions that are more inclusive or representative?	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	Remove the practices of the dominant culture, and if not, then celebrate them all. Analyze the curriculum and provide more opportunities to have “real conversations” supporting coordinating objectives with arts and education. For example Indonesia and Java taught in the context of history; literature; and art. A place for diversity anywhere; coverage in Social Studies and ELA is suffice to address multicultural needs. Cultural

	competence means you need the ability to take someone else’s perspective.
B	If this is done specific groups may be on display- We work to make sure you are all Dalers- Everyone should be a F.H.S. student first not a Muslim/Lutheran who attends F.H.S./ Learn about cultural diversity through daily interaction.
C	Like any “action plan”, that would require several important steps. Firstly we would need to determine what our goals around diversity are as a school, district and community at large. I think it would then be prudent to do a “needs analysis” survey based on where the district is and where stakeholders wish it to go. From there I would establish a committee that would look at the issue through the eyes of students, parents, teachers and the community at large. From there, decisions around the ways in which diversity should be celebrated could best be decided on the local school level. I would see those questions would revolve around four main topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What is the district vision for the celebration of diversity? b. How should our schools celebrate diversity through whole school and small group activities? c. To what degree should diversity be a living part of our curriculum? d. What work should be done with all staff members to ensure that they are cognizant with the larger school mission around diversity.
D	Staff should be consistently involved in professional work that involves the study of other cultures in a broader sense. The district could account for all cultures represented and involve staff in enlightening activities related to this type of competence. Students could engage in cross-curricular learning activities not limited to Social Studies and ELA. Even if a lesson or a periodic allotment was devoted to multicultural study in any content area, that would be a great improvement. However, multicultural study needs to be valued by all members of the school community in order to be a feasible goal.
Interview Question 8: Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not asked or that you think is important to mention?	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	If there is equity in academic tracks then it’s fine. The function of ethnicity and level of education of the parents may be an underlying factor in staff such as guidance counselors, should be student advocates to look for those students whose parents don’t know or have higher expectations. More heterogeneous classes; the current system is to work with the system to challenge students to the same level of expectations as the Honors or Humanities students are exposed to daily. Everyone should be challenged to normalize...collaborate with principals to reach out to support staff.
B	Multiculturalism is not done by having “days” designated to any particular group.

C and D	Respondents C and D did not reply or have anything more to add.