

An Empowering School Culture and Social Structure

This dimension of multicultural education involves restructuring the culture and organization of the school so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and gender groups will experience equality. This variable must be examined and addressed by the entire school staff including the principal and support staff. It involves an examination of the latent and manifest culture and organization of the school to determine the extent to which it fosters or hinders educational equity.

The four dimensions of multicultural education discussed above, content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, and an equity pedagogy—each deals with an aspect of a cultural or social system, the school. However, the school can also be conceptualized as one social system, which is larger than its interrelated parts, such as its formal and informal curriculum, teaching materials, counseling program, and teaching strategies. When conceptualized as a social system, the school is viewed as an institution that “includes a social structure of interrelated statuses and roles and the functioning of that structure in terms of patterns of actions and interactions” (Theodorson & Theodorson, 1969, p. 395). The school can also be conceptualized as a cultural system with a specific set of values, norms, shared meanings, and an identifiable ethos.

Among the variables that need to be examined in order to create a school culture that empowers students from diverse cultural groups are grouping practices (Wheelock, 1992), labeling practices, sports participation, and whether there are ethnic turfs that exist in the cafeteria or in other parts of the school (Tatum, 1997). The behavior of the school staff must also be examined in order to determine the subtle messages it gives the students about racial, ethnic, cultural, and social-class diversity. Testing practices, grouping practices, tracking, and gifted programs often contribute to ethnic and racial inequality within the school (Sapon-Shevin, 1994).

A number of school reformers have used a systems approach to reform the school in order to increase the academic achievement of low-income students and students of color. There are a number of advantages to approaching school reform from a holistic perspective. To implement any reform in a school effectively, such as effective prejudice reduction teaching, changes are required in a number of other school variables. Teachers, for example, need more knowledge and need to examine their racial and ethnic attitudes; consequently, they need more time as well as a variety of instructional materials. Many school reform efforts fail because the roles, norms, and ethos of the school do not change in ways that will make the institutionalization of the reforms possible.

The effective school reformers are one group of change agents that has approached school reform from a systems perspective. Brookover and Erickson (1975) developed a social-psychological theory of learning, which states that students internalize the conceptions of themselves that are institutionalized within the ethos and structures of the school. Related to Merton's (1968) self-fulfilling prophecy, this theory states that student academic achievement will increase if the adults within the school have high expectations for students, clearly identify the skills they wish them to learn, and teach those skills to them.

Research by Brookover and his colleagues (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979) indicates that schools populated by low-income students within the same school district vary greatly in student achievement levels. Consequently, Brookover attributes the differences to variations in the schools' social structures. He calls the schools in low-income areas that have high academic achievement improving schools. Other researchers, such as Edmonds (1986) and Lezotte (1993), call them effective schools (Levine & Lezotte, 1995).

Comer and his colleagues (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996) have developed a structural intervention model that involves changes in the social-psychological climate of the school. The teachers, principal, and other school professionals