

## **Multicultural Education and Rural Schools**

(Summary of an article by Fred Yeo, Fall 1999, *Multicultural Education*)

In the past (and currently), multicultural education has been seen as applying more to minority students in urban and suburban settings than to white students in rural settings. Urban educators have long seen multicultural education as a way to address social tension and violence. For rural educators, there has been a tendency to argue that multicultural education is inapplicable to them because their communities (in their perception) are monocultural—their communities are small and everyone knows their place in its social structure. Little tension and violence exist. Recent census figures are now showing rural educators that their communities are changing and that the time for multicultural education may have come.

To support this statement, demographers are telling us that seeing diversity as a trend that's only affecting the nation's cities and metropolitan areas is a false perception. In fact, "There is a perception that rapid diversification is something that's taking place only in parts of the central cities and that is simply not true" (Rural Sociologist Society, 2001). The situation is that rural communities *are* becoming more diverse. They are finding themselves in situations with growing racial and/or ethnic minorities and with differences in culture including those that are religious, social, and linguistic.

There is anxiety among some rural educators about this situation because they feel that their schools are ill-equipped to accept and support multicultural education. Little guidance can be found in the educational literature. Educational research in rural schools in general is significantly lacking, and, more importantly, any research on multicultural education in rural schools is nonexistent. So in a time when specific answers are needed, there are not many to be found.

Rural educators can learn some things from their urban counterparts. Even though multicultural education has been around a long time in urban settings, all has not gone well. All too often multicultural education is a simplistic add-on to the curriculum, restricted to certain days or weeks during the school year, and dealing with cultural attributes such as food, dress, customs, etc. (and offered in a form to be memorized). The author argues that this form is not multicultural education, but more a form of ethnic geography. In its true sense, multicultural education is intended to change the status quo. It is a complex process of redefining education for all students—a way of understanding student and social institutions through coming to critically understand their personal, social, historical, and political context. Multicultural education not only must deal with what students learn, but how they learn, think, feel, interact, and believe. It's intent is to go well beyond culture to include community and/or regional understandings of race, class, and gender.

Some would argue that it is this more encompassing definition of multicultural education along with the denial of differences that lead to resistance to multicultural education on the part of many rural educators. It could be that there is an underlying anxiety (and fear) in many rural communities brought about by uncertainty and change due to changing demographics, increased poverty, and their changing work world of declining agricultural interests.

Dr. Yeo underscores the perceptions of other leading educators in emphasizing the importance of teachers (preservice and inservice) embracing multicultural education. They assert that teachers must understand the cultural context from which they come and be able to identify the cultural context of the schools in which they are teaching. A quote by Maxine Greene (1993), a noted educational philosopher, makes a critical point about the need to appreciate diversity within our classrooms. She

states, “There have always been newcomers in this country; there have always been strangers. There have always been young persons in our classrooms we did not, could not, see and hear.”