

Personal Cultural History Exercise

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Many exercises and activities used in multicultural staff development workshops focus on teachers, mostly White, learning about cultures different from their own. They are presented histories and generalized characteristics of racial and cultural groups, such as "Asian Americans value family ties," which often serve only to reinforce old stereotypes or form new ones and to maintain a distance as the Other. Teachers, particularly Whites, are rarely asked to think about the histories of their own racial/ethnic groups or about their own racial and cultural identities and the experiences that shaped those identities. This exercise is an opportunity to explore their histories and identities. For teachers of color, who are frequently confronted with questions and challenges about their identities, this is a chance to examine their experiences from a critical perspective. The purposes of the Personal Cultural History exercise are to have the participants:

- recall and reflect on their earliest and most significant experiences of race, culture and difference;
- think about themselves as cultural beings whose lives have been influenced by various historical, social, political, economic and geographical circumstances;
- make connections between their own experiences and those of people different from themselves.

Although it is important to maintain the goal of having teachers reflect on their own racial and cultural identities, the specific wording of questions in the procedure may be altered to suit your participants the best way possible.

Ideal Number of Participants

10-15

Materials Needed

Large size newsprint; bright markers and crayons; masking tape.

Time

Two and a half to three hours, depending on number of participants; 15-20 minutes for drawing; the rest for presentation and discussion.

Procedure

1. Give each participant a sheet of newsprint. Ask all of them to answer the following questions using drawing, symbols and colors, rather than words.
 - What is your racial and ethnic identity?

- What is your earliest recollection of someone being excluded from your group based on race or culture?
- What is your earliest recollection of being different or excluded, based on race or culture, from those around you?

2. After the drawings are completed, discuss with the whole group the process of doing this exercise. How did it feel to think about and answer the questions? How did it feel to use a medium most are not accustomed to using? Next, ask each person to stand up with the drawing and tell his or her story in about ten minutes. Other listeners may ask only factual questions, such as the name of the town where the person lived and demographics of the community. When the person's turn is over, ask her or him to tape the drawing on the wall or some other appropriate place in the room where it can be seen by all.

3. After all have shared their histories, ask participants to analyze their collective experiences, drawing on such factors as geography, historical time period, race, class, religion and gender. Ask questions such as:

- What similarities and differences do you notice in everyone's experiences?
- What are some of the major forces –in families, communities, society, historical time period - that shaped each person's experiences?
- How did oppression, discrimination and prejudice affect the participants' lives?
- If they were not noticeably affected, why weren't they?
- In what ways were people privileged and disadvantaged? Why?
- What does it mean to be a person of Color in the United States?
- What does it mean to be a White person in the United States?

4. From this discussion ask participants to think about three levels at which social phenomena occur ~ individual/family (micro), community (meso) and institutional (macro) levels. Here use three concentric circles with micro at the center, then meso and finally macro, with arrows going from one to another that illustrate the relationship of one level to another. After explaining this concept, have them draw some conclusions about the dynamics of oppression at all three levels across racial and cultural groups. For example, many people identify school (an example of micro, the individual, coming together with meso, the community) as the place where they first noticed differences. At school they were made to feel inferior or insecure (or secure and superior) or watched another child treated that way, with the teacher being one of the main perpetrators of discrimination, prejudice and indifference. If this were the case, you would like to ask the group what role schools play in the dynamics of oppression. Similar analysis can be done on any other institution, such as the media, criminal justice, the government, religion and so forth.

Also have participants think about how communities, families and individuals resisted, countered and transformed oppressive actions and institutions. Ask questions such as:

- How did schools (and other institutions such as the media, religion, etc.) support and promote oppressive practices?
- How was what happened in one institution supported by others?
- What strategies did communities, families and individuals use to resist discrimination or organize on their own behalf?

5. Finally, ask the participants to think about how their personal experiences have shaped their conceptions of themselves as teachers. Ask questions such as:

- How, if at all, did your experiences influence your decision to become a teacher?
- How have your cultural and racial experiences influenced your view of yourself as a teacher?
- How have they shaped your views of your students who are from racial and cultural groups different from your own?

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