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ABSTRACT

U.S. society is diverse, consisting of individuals who may differ in culture, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, exceptionality, and age. Optimum learning for all students can occur only in an environment that supports and encourages such diversity. Multicultural education addresses the challenges of recognizing diversity and providing equal opportunity in the schools. Socioeconomic status influences the way learners feel about themselves, the way teachers and peers perceive them, and the ways they interact with their families and society. Ethnicity is an individual's identification with his or her nation or people of origin. Religion is an important influence in the lives of many people, and powerful religious groups can influence everything from national policy to curriculum and textbook content. Language is another important influence on life, as humans communicate through language, and language shapes thought. Gender is another important factor in all human interaction, including classroom interaction. The presence of individuals with exceptionalities, both the gifted and the disabled, necessarily affect classroom teaching. Age is yet another social factor influencing education. There is a critical need for additional research involving interactions between teachers and students in the socially diverse classroom. Research demonstrates that teacher intervention can facilitate student empowerment by building self-esteem, motivation, and communication. (Contains 38 references). (SG)

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**Learner-Centered Psychological Principles:  
SOCIAL FACTORS IN LEARNING**

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## Learner-Centered Psychological Principles:

### SOCIAL FACTORS IN LEARNING

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#### Diversity

*"Learning is facilitated by social interactions and communication with others in a variety of flexible, diverse (cross-age, culture, family background, etc.), and adaptive instructional settings. " (American Psychological Association, 1991, Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: Guidelines for School Redesign and Reform)*

We live in a diverse society, a society comprised of individuals who may differ in culture, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, exceptionality, and age. All of these factors are operative within the educational environment, influencing the ways learners relate to material and experiences and their interaction and communication with others.

Traditional education in the United States has focused upon the majority--a macroculture stemming from a western European tradition and dominated by the values of Caucasian, middle-class society (Shade, 1989). But optimum learning for all students can only be achieved in an environment which supports and encourages diversity. Students cannot be expected to discover personal meaning in learning when they must conform to an instructional agenda which may not be relevant to them. If we are to enhance the affective nature of learning by making learning meaningful at the individual level, the instructional setting must be flexible and adaptive, providing an opportunity for a variety of experiences and interactions which encourage divergent thinking and promote respect for individual differences.

## *Culture*

Culture is defined as "standards and definitions used by members of a human community to organize their experiences" (Shade, 1989, p. 16). Perceptions, judgements, and actions are influenced by culture. Individuals learn to function within a specific society through culture. Culture is learned through two parallel processes: *Enculturation*, the acquisition of a culture's characteristics including language; and *Socialization*, the process of learning to function as a member of a society by assuming social and occupational roles and adhering to expected rules of behavior. These processes begin at birth and continue throughout an individual's life.

Culture in the United States is a particularly complex phenomenon which is constantly changing. As members of a macroculture, there are certain universal cultural traits and values which we share. Life in American society tends to be dominated by those traits and values, but they may not be endorsed equally by all members of the macroculture. Functioning within the macroculture are a number of groups called microcultures. Microcultures may be determined by such factors as ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, socioeconomic level, language, geographical region, place of residence (for example, rural, urban, or suburban), and exceptionalities. Cultural identity stems from the interaction of the microcultures and the macroculture within which an individual functions. An individual may choose to identify more strongly with some microcultures than with others. For example, some individuals identify strongly with a particular ethnic group while others place more emphasis upon religious affiliation (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986).

Cultural heritage is often confused with biological heritage. But cultural heritage is learned and is not necessarily based on the individual's biological heritage. "The culture in which one is born becomes unimportant unless one is also socialized in the same culture" (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986, p. 9). Teachers sometimes make the mistake of assuming that students who share certain physical characteristics share a

common culture as well, but this is not the case. Skin color, for example, is not an indication of cultural identity. Black students may identify themselves as Afro-American, black American, Jamaican-American, Panamanian-American, or Puerto Rican. Students within the same ethnic group may differ in regard to such characteristics as religion, life-style, values, socioeconomic status, and social class. The teacher who assumes that students who look alike, think alike (and learn alike) makes a grave error.

Effective teaching involves the ability to interact with students in a meaningful way and to utilize both verbal and non-verbal communication effectively. This becomes a tremendous challenge when the different microcultures present in a classroom are considered. A group of students who appear to be homogeneous may represent a variety of different traits and values. Challenges to the educator are manifold: Materials and instruction must be adapted to meet the needs of individual learners. Diversity must be encouraged, but, at the same time, each student must be made to feel that he/she is a welcome member of the class.

Multicultural education is an approach addressing the challenges of recognizing cultural diversity and of providing equal opportunity in schools. The term is relatively new, but the concepts behind this approach can be traced to the 1920s when educators/researchers became interested in ethnic studies. The goals of multicultural education are to help students develop: (a) positive self concept and self understanding, (b) respect for and understanding of others, including cultural groups in the United States and in other countries, (c) the ability to perceive and understand diverse cultural and national values and behaviors, (d) the ability to make decisions and take effective action based on a multicultural perspective, (e) the ability to approach issues with open minds, and (f) freedom from stereotyping, pride in self and respect for all people. (Gollnick & Chinn, p. 20)

Culture is an important factor in human learning and behavior, but since it often functions in conjunction with other human aspects such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status and religion, it can be difficult to isolate as a variable. The research agenda is clear, however. Culture is an important aspect of society and a factor in effective education which cannot be overlooked. Cultural identity must be considered as a factor distinct from biological heritage, a factor which has important implications for designing appropriate curriculum, instruction, materials, and learning environments for learners in a diverse and ever-changing society.

### ***Socioeconomic Status***

Socioeconomic status influences the way learners feel about themselves, the way they are perceived by their teachers and their peers, and the ways they interact with their family and society. It is a measurement of a family's financial standing and social prestige (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986; Shade, 1989) and is based on six interrelated determinants:

1. income--the amount of money earned in wages or salaries each year
2. wealth--includes savings, insurance, stocks, and property
3. occupation--income and prestige associated with an individual's job
4. education--the best predictor of occupational prestige
5. prestige--an individual's status within the community, affecting interpersonal relations and influence
6. power--ability to control resources that influence their lives and the lives of others.

Student performance is related to teacher expectations. As educators, we are familiar with the idea of the "self fulfilling prophecy"--When teachers set high expectations for certain students, they tend to focus more time and attention on those students, thus facilitating higher achievement. Conversely, teachers often set lower expectations for those students they perceive as being "less able," resulting in the

teachers having less direct interaction with those students, asking them fewer questions, and assigning fewer responsibilities within the classroom environment (both academic and social). Teachers' expectations of and judgements about students are often influenced by socioeconomic status: Children of lower socioeconomic status are often perceived as having less ability (Rist, 1970; Shade, 1989).

Higher dropout rates are reported for children from families with low socioeconomic status. This factor also accounts (in part) for the higher dropout rates observed for minorities. "When controls are added for socioeconomic status, racial differences in school dropout rates are greatly diminished. . ." (Dryfoos, 1990, p. 90).

It can be difficult for a person from a low socioeconomic background to function within the traditional academic environment. Communication and interaction with peers and teachers may be biased by stereotyped perceptions of the economically disadvantaged student. Researchers must continue to seek effective ways to neutralize the detrimental effects of this factor within the classroom.

### *Ethnicity*

Ethnicity is an individual's identification with her or his family's nation (or people) of origin. "Race" is sometimes used interchangeably with "ethnicity," but the term "race" was developed by anthropologists to describe the physical characteristics of world peoples and does not carry the social implications that "ethnicity" does.

Members of different races may share the same ethnicity.

Ethnic groups with fewer members than the dominant or majority group in a society are minorities. The amount of social, economic, and political power that a minority group carries largely determines whether that minority group is an "oppressed" minority--a group occupying a subordinate position in society. Oppressed minorities do not enjoy the same benefits from society as the majority (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986).

In the United States, non-white skin color is associated with many minority groups, especially oppressed minorities. Minority populations in the United States are increasing. It is estimated that by the year 2010, one-third of the national population will be non-white and that minority students will comprise the majority in schools in more than fifty major U.S. cities (Suzuki, 1987).

Ethnic identity is linked with self-esteem. Students who are provided with more information about their ethnicity tend to have higher self-esteem than those who are not as well informed about their ethnic heritage. This is particularly true when the information comes from parents as well as the school (Parko, 1991; Phinney & Nakayama, 1991; Shade, 1989).

Much of the research in social factors in education evolved from an interest in providing equal educational opportunities for minority groups. However, definitions of "equal" tended to vary widely. Some early work from the 1920s and 1930s demonstrates interest in changing negative racial attitudes (Mitchell, 1990), but programs addressing minority needs were not implemented on a large scale until the 1960s when sweeping social change brought about by ethnic movements forced educators to consider the needs of oppressed minorities (Banks, 1977; Williams, 1977). Early programs tended to advocate assimilation, a process in which minorities are absorbed into the dominant group. Two popular theories of assimilation in the United States were "Anglo-Conformity" theory which dictated that minorities take on the "behavior and values" of the majority (Gordon, 1964, p. 85) and the "Melting Pot" theory which predicted that a new American culture would evolve from a blending together of diverse peoples (Rodriguez, 1983). But many groups are unwilling to relinquish their ethnic identity to the majority. More recent investigations are turning away from assimilation theory, acknowledging ethnic diversity within the United States and the right of individuals to maintain their ethnicity (Suzuki, 1987).

Recent trends, such as multicultural education, acknowledge and value diversity. Such programs focus upon adapting curriculum, instruction, and the educational environment to the needs of the learner instead of forcing the learner to conform to standards which may be artificial and irrelevant. Proponents of multicultural education cite such benefits as increased self-esteem and cultural understanding (Ecker, 1990), but educators and researchers have yet to discover a panacea--Ethnic minorities have many educational needs which are not being addressed adequately in the classroom. A number of problems have been observed in school districts where multicultural programs were implemented. Some multicultural programs have been shown to have limited effectiveness. Investigations suggest that multicultural education is often perceived as being for minority groups instead of being for all children. School districts with limited or no minority enrollment generally do not provide opportunities for students to explore ethnic differences (Mitchell, 1990; Verma, 1989). Some critics assert that what is commonly promoted as "multicultural" education evades serious issues such as racism by focusing on more benign topics (Mitchell, 1990).

The college/university setting has the potential to provide a model of effective education within a climate of cultural and ethnic diversity, but, in most institutions, this potential has not been realized. Many institutions continue to ignore changes in society and hold to expectations and ideals which may not be realistic or relevant to many faculty and students (Takaki, 1991).

Additional research is needed before these problems can be resolved, particularly in the college and university setting. In order to achieve educational equity for all ethnic groups, educators and researchers must be willing to go beyond traditional ideas about education and the function of the schools within society.

## *Religion*

Religion is an important influence in the lives of many people. An individual's religious beliefs may affect many aspects of thought and behavior. Individuals who are not affiliated with a religion still fall under its influence. Religious groups can command a great deal of social and political power, influencing everything from national policy to curriculum and textbooks.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution forbids establishment of a state religion and provides for free exercise of religious beliefs, but in education, the separation of church and state often becomes clouded. Holiday observance in most schools is based on Protestant traditions such as Christmas and Easter. Sex education may not be allowed in communities dominated by conservative religious bodies, and textbooks and other materials may fall under close scrutiny to ensure that students are not exposed to anything which may compromise their beliefs. Religious groups have exerted great political pressure over such issues as school prayer, tuition tax credits for parents who enroll their children in private schools, and censorship of educational materials (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986).

Separation of church and state should not establish a conflict between religion and government--they are both important components of American society. But it should ensure that these two social aspects function in complementary, but independent ways. Religion should not be completely eliminated from the curriculum, but it should be approached in a manner that enables students to appreciate the religious diversity present in the United States and in their classroom. Both educators and students must learn to avoid religious stereotyping and to respect the religious beliefs of others. Individuals' religious beliefs must be considered in the planning of relevant and effective curriculum.

Much of the work that has been carried out in the area of education for a diverse society has focused upon ethnicity and race, but religion is an important

microculture which influences many aspects of life, including education. Research is needed to pinpoint strategies and solutions for reconciling conflicts and concerns brought about by religious diversity and by the attempts of the religious majority within a community to impose religious practices upon minorities. Descriptions of model programs which promote awareness of and respect for religious diversity within the school and the community could be especially useful. These model programs could provide direction for future research.

### *Language*

Humans communicate through language. It enables us to pass information to others and to organize and relate to our environment. Language shapes (and in some cases, limits) our thoughts. English is the primary language spoken in the United States, but it is certainly not the only language. A number of different languages are spoken in our diverse society and a number of distinctive dialects are spoken within each of those languages. It has been estimated that non-English and nonstandard English-speaking individuals in the United States number in the tens of millions (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986). Not all language is spoken: Non-verbal communication is another important consideration and a source of great diversity in our society. Posture, proximity, eye contact, and gestures are all elements of communication and language which vary among different ethnic groups and cultural orientations.

Language is not inherently "good" or "bad." Each language or dialect evolved as a way for people to communicate within a particular time, place, and cultural environment. Since all languages enable the speaker to express her/himself effectively, all languages have validity. But effective verbal and nonverbal communication in one microculture may not transfer to another microculture or to the macroculture. In society, speakers whose language differs from the mainstream are often subjected to suspicion, ridicule, and stereotyping. Language is an important component of social

behavior and interaction--an inappropriate response or a word or phrase used in the wrong context can be perceived as rude, vulgar, or ignorant.

It is important for educators to acknowledge the psychological and social ramifications of language when interacting with students. Language is a very personal component of a student's cultural identity and sense of self. An individual's language is shaped by patterns of speech and behavior observed since birth and is a reflection of family and community. A student's "self concept is wrapped up in his or her language. . . . criticizing a child's language is criticizing his world. . ." (Caraway, 1986, p. 179). In the classroom, the student speaking non-standard English, or using a dialect different from the mainstream may be perceived by the teacher as being less academically able than other students and by peers as being strange and not "fitting in" with the group. In other words, the student is faced with a choice--either abandon the language of her/his family (which equates with abandoning her/his cultural identity) and blend in with the group, or remain an "outsider" in the classroom (Studstill, 1985; Williams, 1991).

Children are very adaptable, and many individuals become bilingual or bidialectal in order to function effectively within different microcultures such as home and school. The teacher must not assume, however, that all students will attempt to take on the language of the macroculture. This is especially true of situations where the non-standard English speaker has a strong peer group within the school environment. Fear of peer rejection may prompt some students to persist in using non-standard English even when criticized or punished by the teacher (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986).

A number of important and controversial research topics are suggested by issues involving language in education. Even the term "standard English" is somewhat misleading. The term appears frequently in the literature, but "standard English" is not really standard and varies in accent and dialect within different communities and

geographic regions. Bilingual education programs have been implemented throughout the United States, but these programs differ in method and intent. In some situations, these programs are used as a strategy for phasing the native language out and phasing English in, but in other situations bilingual programs endeavor to teach pride in one's own cultural heritage in addition to basic English language skills. Bilingual education has been linked to empowerment and is cited as "an important factor in ethnic communities shedding their minority status by sharing power with the dominant group" (Ruiz, 1991, p. 217). Self-esteem is an important consideration in bilingual education, but a solid research base does not exist. Additional research is needed, particularly in areas concerning increasing and measuring the bilingual student's self-esteem (Inn, 1981; Kester, 1989).

There is much controversy about the use of African American Language (AAL) as an educational tool. Some educators feel that use of AAL is inappropriate because it is, in effect, teaching incorrect or ungrammatical language forms. Some argue that use of AAL is discriminatory because it represents a lowering of standards for minority students and also deprives those students of language skills which are essential for effective interaction within the mainstream of American society. Others maintain that use of AAL facilitates learning of language skills because speakers of African American Language are more comfortable with AAL than with other language forms. Use of AAL in the classroom has been advocated because it allows students to maintain linkages with their cultural heritage, and because it enhances student self-esteem, self-concept, and motivation (Williams, 1991).

The rich diversity of our society is reflected in the diversity of language and dialect in use in the United States. Continued research is needed to ascertain the most psychologically and instructionally sound ways to equip students with essential literacy skills, while, at the same time, encouraging them to embrace the richness of their own heritage and to respect the heritage of others as reflected in language.

## *Gender*

Gender differences are an important factor in all facets of human interaction. The terms "female" and "male" designate two microcultures which are very evident in social, psychological and academic components of the school environment. Gender identity is generally established in the first years of life. It is taught in the way parents and other individuals interact with a child and is manifested in personality attributes, intellectual performance, and occupational preferences (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986).

Differential behaviors are typically observed (and often encouraged) in the classroom. Males tend to be more verbally and physically aggressive while females tend to be quieter and more submissive. In both the home and classroom, behavior that is expected and encouraged for one gender may be discouraged strongly in another. The double standards of behavior imposed upon different genders by society are myriad. For example, phrases such "Boys will be boys" are often used to justify aggressive and/or disruptive behavior in males while the same behavior from a female would elicit disapproval and punishment. Males who do not prefer to participate in athletics and rough behavior may be scorned by their peers as a "sissy" but females can become "tomboys" and win a certain degree of acceptance with their male peers without losing status with the other females in their class. It is acceptable in American society for females to dress in a manner that is traditionally associated with male roles (slacks, jeans, "T" shirts, etc.), but it is not considered appropriate for males to dress in traditional female attire (such as skirts, dresses, etc.).

Differential performance for females and males has also been observed on a number of academic tasks (e.g., Cooke, 1983, Mussen, 1983). Research often tends to follow the dictates of society--earlier studies usually attributed differences to superior male aptitude. For example, a 1958 study of sex differences concluded that ". . . two factors account for sex differences in . . . performance of our subjects. The first is the superior mathematical aptitude of the male subjects. The second is that males more

effectively than females combine this aptitude with a conceptual approach to social and objective stimuli. . ." (Bieri, Bradburn, & Galinsky, p. 11).

Later studies tended to explore social explanations for gender differences in academic performance. Some researchers have suggested that differences may be a result of sex-role differentiation, a function of personality differences associated with sex role identification stemming from social rather than biological factors (e.g., Sherman, 1967; Vaught, 1965). Cross-cultural studies support the theory that gender differences in academic performance may be imposed by society. Gender differences in academic aptitude and performance are more pronounced in societies which tend to emphasize social conformity and stereotyped sex-role expectations than they are in societies with more relaxed social organization and less emphasis on sex-role stereotypes (Witkin & Goodenough, 1979). Some investigators have proposed that external socializing forces may work in conjunction with internal biological processes to create differences in the academic behavior, preference, and performance of females and males (e.g., Block, 1981).

The occupations that individuals pursue in adulthood are often determined by their educational experiences in elementary and secondary schools. Boys and girls often select different programs of study in high school, particularly in vocational studies. It has even been suggested that high schools tend to "disempower" some females, reinforcing the stereotype of women in subordination to men (Weis, 1991). In college, a disproportionate number of males enroll in technical and business majors. These differences in education and training result in gender inequalities in different occupations.

It has been suggested that changes in inequalities and stereotypes in education will result in greater equality between genders in adult society. Programs addressing gender equality in the schools generally fall into three categories: women's studies, nonsexist education, and legislation. Women's studies programs are offered at the

secondary and higher education level. These programs attempt to develop an awareness and appreciation of women as a separate group (or microculture) that has often been neglected in male-dominated society. Culture, development, and achievement of women is addressed.

Women's studies are also an integral part of nonsexist education. But nonsexist education represents a much more comprehensive approach to gender equity across the curriculum. The selection of nonbiased materials is an important aspect of nonsexist education. Materials should expose students to the contributions of both females and males, illustrations should feature both genders in nonstereotyped roles, and all subjects should be taught from both female and male perspectives (for example, a history course focusing on wars and political power would tend to center around male personalities, but a history course focusing on the influences of the family, society, and the arts would include both female and male personalities). In nonsexist education, it is important for teachers to interact effectively and in a nonbiased manner with all students. Since research indicates that educators often interact differently with and have different expectations for female and male students, this kind of equity may be difficult to achieve. Nonsexist education also avoids sorting, grouping, or tracking students according to gender. In nonsexist education, the learning environment, curriculum, and instruction are geared toward encouraging all students to explore traditional and nontraditional sex roles and to develop positive self-images about their sexuality (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986).

Title IX is an example of the way changes in society are reflected by changes in legislation. This law makes it illegal to treat students differently on the basis of sex; preventing sex discrimination in the admission of students, treatment of students, and employment of personnel. Title IX dictates that all courses, clubs, and other educational opportunities must be open to all students. But strict interpretation of Title IX can become somewhat controversial, especially in regard to athletics. According to

the law, sports offered by a school must be coeducational with the exception of activities in which team selection is based on competitive skill, and contact sports.

The disproportionate number of women in less prestigious and low-paying jobs attests to the existence of sex inequalities in American society. Legislation such as Title IX reflects a national interest in correcting this inequity. Women's studies and nonsexist education represent programmatic attempts to resolve this problem. But continued research is needed to ascertain the most effective programs and practices to facilitate change. Educators are faced with the challenge of providing equal training and opportunity for all students regardless of gender. This topic offers many implications for research. Improved programs, curriculum, and materials are needed. But, no matter how comprehensive a program may be, its effectiveness will be ultimately determined by the teachers and other school personnel who implement that program. There is an especially critical need for strategies to facilitate more equity in teacher interaction with female and male students.

### *Exceptionality*

Individuals with exceptionalities include both the gifted and the handicapped. Exceptional students may be rejected by society, or may choose to reject society. Exceptional individuals often have unique social and personal needs which may be difficult for mainstream society to understand. This lack of understanding can become manifested in discriminatory treatment. Federal laws mandate equal education for handicapped persons, but these laws are not always implemented. Without educational opportunities, a handicapped person may never be able to function successfully within the social and economic mainstream. This tends to perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce feelings of rejection. Consequently, many handicapped individuals function within their microculture and remain isolated from mainstream society.

Gifted and talented individuals generally do not experience the same type of discrimination as handicapped persons, but they often experience isolation from the

mainstream society and may prefer to function primarily within a microculture of others with similar interests and talents where they find acceptance, understanding, and intellectual stimulation.

Public law 94-142 and other legislation mandate placing handicapped children in the least restrictive environment. PL 94-142 does not specifically mention mainstreaming, but it does require that handicapped students be placed in the most normal educational setting possible while still meeting their special educational needs. Depending on services available within the school district and the individual student's needs, compliance with PL 94-142 may range from having students remain in a special education classroom most of the time to having students spend the entire school day "mainstreamed" into a regular classroom (Rodriguez, 1983).

The individualized education program (IEP) is another specification of PL 94-142 requiring a written commitment of resources and specifying the program to be provided to a handicapped student through special education and related services. An IEP must be prepared for each handicapped student at the beginning of each school year and must be reviewed and updated at least once a year (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986; Rodriguez, 1983).

Exceptional students are entitled to equal opportunities in society and education, but they are often discriminated against. Some of the problems exceptional students encounter in the classroom stem from teachers' lack of understanding of exceptionalities. Many classroom teachers do not feel that they are adequately prepared to meet the needs of exceptional students and may even hold biased or stereotyped views of those students. Research is needed to develop more adequate and effective ways to train both preservice and inservice teachers to: interact effectively with exceptional students, promote understanding and acceptance of exceptional students among classmates, and provide for and promote development of positive self esteem among exceptional students.

## *Age*

Age is another social factor, one that is so much a part of our everyday life that it is sometimes overlooked. Distinctive age groups within society in the United States include childhood (early, middle, and late), adolescence, adulthood (early and middle) and old age. Each age group represents a unique microculture with its own behaviors and social expectations. Each age group faces certain social advantages, disadvantages, and stereotypes which are unique to that group. But, unlike other microcultures such as gender and ethnicity which usually remain constant throughout life, any individual who lives long enough will eventually experience each of the age groups (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986).

Age is an important consideration in learning. In education, much attention has been focused upon the psychological and emotional characteristics of learners in various age groups and in designing appropriate instructional techniques, curriculum, and materials. Certainly, it is necessary to provide appropriate instruction for each age group, but these topics are often pursued to the exclusion of other pressing concerns for research. Many communities are addressing other social problems such as racism and sexism through special programs in the schools. The problem of age discrimination is just as real in our society, but programs addressing this problem are rare. If students are to understand and respect different age groups, age must be addressed in the curriculum. There is a great need for model programs promoting age awareness in the schools. Programs which include opportunities for students to interact with people from a variety of different age groups could be especially useful. (For example, how would age stereotypes of a fourth grade class be effected by an integrated curriculum that includes visits to a maternity ward and hospital nursery to learn about newborn infants, to a daycare facility to read to young children, to a senior citizen's center to interview seniors about a past event, etc.?)

The age group which suffers the most discrimination in society is the elderly. This microculture must deal with a number of negative stereotypes. They are discriminated against in the workplace, are often neglected as consumers, and are sometimes shunned by younger members of society. Many elderly people do not feel comfortable within their own microculture (the booming cosmetic surgery business in the United States attests to many individuals' desire to remain affiliated with a younger age group). As the proportion of senior citizens in the United States increases, however, it will become necessary for public education to address the needs of these individuals more directly. A network of elderhostel activities is already in place at many institutions across the country, but more must be done within each community to provide for this growing microculture.

Each age group has special needs and has much to contribute within society. Public education focuses on childhood through adolescence. Certainly, the education of the young is an appropriate role for schools in the United States. But education must also provide for understanding and respect of different age groups. It is important for educational institutions to avoid discriminatory practices on the basis of age and to provide programs which are of interest and are accessible to senior citizens. Research is needed to improve existing educational programs and to develop bold new approaches so that biases and stereotypes related to age can be eliminated.

### ***Conclusions***

*"Learning and self-esteem are heightened when individuals are in respectful and caring relationships with others who see their potential, genuinely appreciate their unique talents, and accept them as individuals." (American Psychological Association, 1991, Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: Guidelines for School Redesign and Reform)*

A number of different social factors are operating within society in the United States. These factors are not necessarily distinct--an individual may identify with any

number of microcultures. Such diversity has tremendous potential to enrich the learning environment, but often, the opposite is true. When students with diverse social characteristics are placed in an environment where understanding and respect are not cultivated, discrimination can result.

There is a critical need for additional research involving teacher/student interactions in the socially diverse classroom. It is discouraging to note that innovative programs which seem very promising often fail to produce significant improvement in student self esteem, attitudes, or academic achievement. Certainly, the fatal flaw in many programs has been the assumption that teachers' beliefs and values about student diversity can be changed with minimal (or no) training. The role of the teacher is crucial. Teachers can wield an important influence on their students' social, moral, and cultural values (Tuck & Albury, 1990). A student's self-esteem can be strongly influenced by the way the teacher interacts with her/him. When teacher and peer disapproval of student language and behaviors creates a conflict within the student (Caraway, 1986; Wieseman, 1986), the student is faced with a dilemma: "My teacher says that it's *bad* to talk [or act, or dress, etc.] that way, but that's the way my parents talk. Either my parents are wrong or my teacher just doesn't know anything."

Research indicates that self-esteem can be improved through informed intervention of teachers within the regular school setting (Parish & Philip, 1982), but such efforts are not always successful, especially with minority and disadvantaged students whose self-esteem may be very fragile (Dryfoos, 1990; Hornett, 1990; Shirley, 1988).

Many teachers hold stereotypes about different microcultures within society. These stereotypes are usually a product of the teacher's background and generally are not malicious in intent. However, when a teacher does not understand aspects of a student's beliefs, language, or behavior, the teacher is likely to perceive that student as "inferior," setting lower standards and often labeling the student as socially and/or

academically deficient (Hornett, 1990; McDiarmid, 1992; Ross & Smith, 1992; Studstill, 1985). Data from schools across the United States indicate that a disproportionate number of low-income and minority students are placed in "low ability" groups (McDiarmid, 1992, p. 91).

Social factors in learning are important considerations which can facilitate student empowerment through increased self-esteem, greater motivation, and improved communication among students, school personnel, and parents. Students and personnel in educational institutions across the United States are a wonderfully diverse and complex population. This diversity represents a valuable educational resource which can enrich the learning environment, but that resource can only be tapped if educators and researchers find ways to provide every student with a nurturing and supportive learning environment which promotes knowledge and respect of self and others.

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