

Out of the Mouth of Babes: Students' Responses to a Tolerance Initiative

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Abstract

A middle school in USA has recently implemented a tolerance initiative designed for teachers to incorporate their interpretation of multicultural education into curriculum. This qualitative study focuses on students' responses to the tolerance initiative based upon what their evaluation of how the teachers are making culture an endemic part of what they are learning in their math, language arts, and social studies' classes. The students participated in semi-structured interviews. The data results were shared with the teachers to inform them of how students' perception of their teaching strengths as well as area to improve. The students found the following: the social studies teacher not only incorporated aspects of their culture into her subject matter but also shared the cultural aspects of the other students in class; the language arts teacher focused more of his lessons on socioeconomics and less on other kinds of diversities; and the math teacher takes the stance that math is universal to all cultures and thus the students could not see themselves—or other aspects of diversity—in what she taught.

Key Words: tolerance, multicultural education, students

Maria Thompkins, Bonita Stoker, and Sidney Johnson (all proper names used throughout this document are pseudonyms) are responsible for creating the teaching-for-tolerance initiative. They developed a survey—with the assistance of a local university liaison—that was administered to 398 Friendly Middle School students. The initial purpose of the survey was to “get feedback on the general initiatives we were going to work on each year” according to Maria Thompkins. The survey asked students to provide demographic information about their age, grade level, gender, and ethnicity.

It also contained 30 Liker statements which students were to respond to by circling the number—1 to 5—that best described their experience at Friendly Middle School (one was the lowest; five was the highest). Maria had this comment about the results of the survey: We had what we considered a high level of responses to [statements] such as ‘Students do not treat me with respect at this school’ and ‘where you live make a difference in how people in this school treat you’. When we saw those results, we immediately started writing grants to get staff development.

Sidney Johnson added that the tolerance initiative developed “out of a [Professional Development School] project, and one of our site-improvement grants where we asked for funding to really address some of the issues.” She added that the survey reported findings largely reflected that students from the lower socioeconomic class believed they were discriminated against by students from the upper socioeconomic class based on what area of the Friendly community they live. Overall, issues with socioeconomics and respect (and on a minor scale, culture, and gender) were the factors that led some teachers to believe that implementing a tolerance initiative was necessary.

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Teaching-for-Tolerance Initiative Defined

Sidney Johnson, a technology teacher and one of the pioneers of the teaching-for-tolerance initiative, suggested that most of the Friendly faculty concur that in order to assist students in developing tolerance and respect for underrepresented groups within the school they must incorporate multicultural education into state-mandated curriculum. She added that they believe this incorporation must be done to show students examples of groups of people being discriminated against because of race, class, religion, and/or gender so that students will appreciate, accept, and respect difference. She also noted that the tolerance initiative was designed to help students see themselves and other cultures through a multicultural perspective. Hence, Friendly teachers define the teaching-for-tolerance initiative as an incorporation of multicultural education into state-mandated curriculum. The initiative is not a specific curriculum across grade levels. Friendly teachers are taking issues related to tolerance and prejudice and are integrating them into existing curriculum. Further, this initiative is unassociated with the *Teaching for Tolerance* of the Southern Law Poverty Center.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to address how friendly's teaching-for-tolerance initiative raises the tolerance levels of students in comparison or contrast with what student are taught by their parents about tolerance.

Specifically, this qualitative study focuses on, but is not limited to, this research question: What are students' reflective responses to what teachers are teaching as part of the Teaching-for-Tolerance initiative? Three female students were participated in this study: Meko, a Chinese-American; Freda, an African-American; and Brandy, a European-American with Native American ancestry. These girls are in the seventh grade. Their responses are based upon what they are learning about tolerance in their geography, language arts, and mathematics classes.

Teaching-for-Tolerance Disclaimer

The term "tolerance" is not what I espouse. Its usage throughout this document refers to what Friendly teachers call their initiative or what current research has to say about *tolerance*, not my personal beliefs on or about "tolerance." Intolerance—which I define as a refusal to respect persons based upon racism, ageism, heterosexism, ableism, religionist, and classism—is the most insidious form of disrespect. The opposite of intolerance, from my vantage point, is respect and acceptance—not tolerance.

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study were selected through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling, commonly used by qualitative researchers, is to identify subjects appropriate for research and to ask those identified subjects to refer additional subjects to the researcher (McCadden, 1998; Plummer, 1983). In snowball sampling, participants familiar with the context under study identify additional participants and sub contexts for study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). More specifically, Bryman (2016) suggests that in snowball sampling, "the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these [people] to establish contacts with others" (p. 98). As Beardsworth & Keil (1992) explain, this technique "cannot possibly claim to produce a statistically representative sample, since it relies upon the social contacts between individuals to trace additional respondents" (p. 261). Thus, snowball sampling was the process used in selecting the three students.

Background Information on the Three Middle School Girls

Three students participated in this study. They provided their reaction to what teachers were teaching as part of the tolerance initiative. Background information on the students is below.

Meko. Meko is a student who considers herself to be well liked by her peers. She says, "We just get along with everybody. Skin color is not a real issue at [Friendly] I don't think, and it's a real good thing. And I really like that because we should not judge each other by the color of our skin." While "skin color" is not a problem in Meko's opinion, she does believe that a few of her peers probably gossip about her when she is participating in her Chinese culture. For instance, Meko recalls a few students snickering when she spoke Chinese to another Chinese student who had limited English proficiency. When it happened she says, "I didn't let it bother me. Most of the students who heard it were impressed that I can speak two languages anyway."

After school, Meko participates in violin and piano. On Friday she typically, “go to the movies” with her friends or “hang out with them”. She says that she learns more about culture through her interaction with her diverse group of friends.

Freda. Freda is a bubbly African-American girl who is very friendly with all persons with whom she comes in contact. This personality has made her a very popular person at Friendly according to Freda. She has a diverse group of friends who she spend time with on a consistent basis. She admits that she learns more about diversity first through what she observes her peers doing as part of their culture then through her interactions with them.

Freda regards Friendly as being a good school overall. She does believe that some of her peers can be very mean to other students. She says, “I have witnessed several of the people I know pick at other kids based upon what they have on or how they talk.”

After school, Freda enjoys relaxing at home and spending time with her friends. She used to participate in Friendly’s after-school program that assists students with their homework. She no longer participates in the program since she earns A’s and B’s in her classes now. She asserts that the teachers at Friendly are nice, but they do not do enough to address African culture in the classroom.

Brandy. Brandy is proud of being a Friendly Middle schoolgirl because “the teachers are nice, and they teach us about respect.” Brandy believes that her statement transcends into what her parents are teaching her at home. She puts her training into practice when she is interacting with people who do some things that she would disapprove. She says, “The teachers teach us about how we should treat others and how we should act during school. That connects to what I am learning about at home.”

Brandy enjoys talking on the phone and spending time with her friends and family after school. Her friends and family live in area that is comprised of people from diverse backgrounds. Brandy says she typically goes over to her friends’ and spends the night with them over the weekend.

Investigation of Research Question

Interviews: I conducted 5 interviews with each of the three students. Approximately 4 to 5 questions were asked of each student during each interview. Four to five questions were asked during the interview based upon how long or short the student’s responses were or how much time was left in the interview. There was always time to ask students four interview questions. If time permitted, a fifth question was asked. The semi-structured interviews with students lasted approximately 20—25 minutes. A total of twenty-four questions were asked.

Prior to setting a day and time for an interview with the three students, I contacted the students’ physical education teacher seeking his permission to interview the students during his class. After establishing possible days and times I will interview the students with the physical education teacher, I had to call the parents to ask them for permission to interview their children at the school. Once verbal permission was granted from the parents, I asked them to submit a letter to the principal of Friendly Middle School granting me permission to interview the students at the school during their physical education class. Upon the principal’s approval, the letter of permission was given to the student who would give it to the physical education teacher as proof that the parents were aware that I was interviewing their child on that day.

Twenty-four questions were asked to students in Friendly’s library. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 20-25 minutes.

Meko’s reaction. Meko’s experience at Friendly Middle School is a good one. She describes Friendly as “a very good school. It has a very safe and educational environment, and everybody is friendly here.” Meko adds:

It is a very diverse school. We have a lot of different ethnic origins—Black, Hispanic, and Asian. In addition, no one is really racist, but we just get along with everybody. Skin color is not really an issue here at [Friendly] which is a good thing and I really like that because we should not judge each other by the color of our skin. We should judge each other by our personalities.

Meko states her personality makes her “good representative of the Chinese race.” She describes her membership with Chinese culture on her experiences at Friendly this way:

The Chinese have a lot of different traditions and beliefs than Americans. For example, we eat different things. We have different festivals we celebrate. You just learn a lot of stuff from your culture, and you get to teach others about your culture. I think it is really cool, and so do other people. We have this Chinese girl, and she does not speak English. Therefore, I have to speak Chinese to her, and my friends think it’s really fascinating.

Meko was not always proud of her Chinese background since she was once self-conscious about how other people viewed her as a Chinese girl. She adds, “When I was little, I used to be really embarrassed because I was Chinese, and my name was [Meko]. But now it is not an issue anymore because I am happy with who I am and just being different and just being me.”

Although Meko enjoys being Asian, she has witnessed intolerance at Friendly. She recalls what she witnessed: I have seen recently that people are making fun of the two girls who hang out with each other. They are both from China, and they do not speak any English. Some people make jokes about them. They call them weird names and stuff. I said to them, ‘Why don’t you guys quit?’ and other people will tell them they are being mean and rude. Those people would stop for that moment, but it goes on the next day. [I] has to keep reminding them. However, they say to me, ‘Oh, [Meko], you’re cool.’ but I tell them that it doesn’t have anything to do with them making fun of Asians. I don’t think [intolerance] is a problem here for Blacks and Hispanics; it’s mostly for Asians.

Meko states that such instances of intolerance occur outside of the classroom (i.e. the hallways, bathrooms, and on the playgrounds), but Meko believes that tolerance is a worthwhile issue for teachers to teach. She adds that she has to exercise tolerance. She states:

Tolerance is something you really have to have because not everybody is the same. Everybody is different, and everybody has his or her own personality, and you have to respect that. You have to respect everybody. There are snobby people who are sometimes in my group when it comes to socializing or doing group projects, and I don’t like them at all. However, I don’t let them know that I dislike them. I don’t make fun of them for dressing really bad because they show a lot of skin. I have them in gym classes, and they will pull their tops really high or really low; and that is gross. However, I don’t say anything. Therefore, I think that everyone should realize tolerance is something people need to know how to use.

Some people may argue that defining tolerance varies from culture to culture. Instructionally, Meko stated that her geography teacher teaches things that relate to her culture. She mentions: Some of the traditions that we learned when we were studying Southwest Asia related to me as an Asian. Even when the two boys and one girl from China came and did a presentation—that connected with my culture. I learned some things about the Chinese culture that I was not aware of.

Meko adds that learning about other cultures in geography helped her to have respect for them for what those people endured and what their customs and traditions are. She offers this example: When I saw *The Power of One* in my geography class, I was amazed at how the main character wanted to help Black [Africans] to read, but the White [Africans] did not want them to. Those [Black Africans] had a drive to want to read and sacrificed their lives to do it and a White [African] went against what was considered [socially correct] to teach them how to read. So, I learned that tolerance is not exercised everywhere, but I have respect for those people in the movie who wanted to work with Black Africans to help them.

However, Meko adds that her “language arts teacher doesn’t really teach us about diversity, tolerance, or respect. Those words haven’t come up this year.” Meko adds: I don’t see any lessons on discrimination or prejudice or intolerance in any of the stories that we read in language arts class. It is hard to cover so much stuff in the year. Some of our teachers are a little lazy, and sometimes I don’t think they teach a whole lot on different things that address prejudice or discrimination, but that’s not my problem.

Meko continues that what she has learned in her language arts class has very little to do with her Asian culture. She states, “In English, [the language arts teacher] teaches us a lot of basic things like commas, period, punctuation, and writing; and in our culture we get taught the same way. We kind of use some of the same rules which we apply to what is considered language arts in the Asian culture.”

However, Meko asserts that she does learn lessons in her language arts even though they do not connect with her culture. She considers *Where the Red Fern Grows* to be “a really good book. It is really sad. It teaches a lesson about friendship and being there for other people even if they aren’t human because it is about a dog and a boy.” This book “teaches you to be a good friend, and it talks about a strong bond between a boy and a dog; it teaches you a lot about life too.”

Meko expresses the same sentiment about her mathematics class. She does not believe that neither her language arts nor math classes could improve upon teaching subject matter that relates to her culture. She offers this reason: “I think it is hard for my math and language arts teachers to teach lessons that relate to my Chinese background since it is not what the subjects are about. I don’t think my language arts and math teachers could improve upon teaching about my culture. It is easier for my geography teacher to do it of course.”

She continues by stating that she learns lessons in math as well that she can apply to her life. She referred to what she learned when the math teacher was teaching the Percent of Change unit. She stated, “You can do anything when you are doing calculations. In the grocery store if you want to see the percentage or discount on items, you know how.” Meko suggests that applying such lessons to her life as an American is the intent of what teachers are teaching.

Meko adds that she learns more about diversity and tolerance through observing the interactions among the groups of students at Friendly Middle School. Throughout this school year, she noticed:

Black people like to dance and have fun. Their tradition is to have big meals as part of Sunday dinner. Whites are different. At Christmas, their tradition is shopping. They have their traditions at Thanksgiving; they have to have a turkey. Sometimes we don’t have a turkey on Thanksgiving, but that is how the American cultures have their traditions. Americans like hamburgers, and Chinese people like sesame chicken, sweet, & sour chicken, and low mien. In addition, Whites like their pastries. I don’t know why they do. We are all different in our own ways, and we all are similar in some ways. We have to appreciate that and accept it without being intolerant.

Meko felt certain that her observations of her circle of friends are correct since, “I talk to them, and I read stuff about them in magazines and books and billboards. And then I watch TV and see all the things about them and recall the information I read about them.”

Meko concludes that while education should have some focus on teaching students about different cultures, she does not believe teachers do not see it as an important issue. She states, “I don’t think teachers care about teaching culture. I know when they went to school they did not get into learning about culture. The teachers here mostly want to give you the skills they think you need for life.”

Freda’s reaction: Freda is in the seventh grade. Freda describes her experience at Friendly as a fun one since that she has “some good teachers.” She enjoys Friendly because of her teachers and friends who are there. She said, “There are popular groups and not-so-popular groups, and some people in-between. And there are some people who hang out with both groups of people.” Freda confessed that she is not sure what group she belongs to. She admits, “I switch [in-between] groups a lot, but it does not matter to me. A lot of people don’t like to be labeled. I am friends with everybody with people from the popular group, the not-so-popular group, and the others, but everybody is generally nice to each other.”

Freda has witnessed instances of intolerance. She states:

Some people can be very mean about what people have on. However, it doesn’t happen a lot though. There was this one comment that made me mad. We were at camp, and this boy was acting silly. He said, ‘I really like your shirt. You must have gotten it from Gabes. It was funny, but I didn’t laugh; but other people were laughing.

Freda continued that only her geography teacher refers to lessons on differences and tolerance through what she teaches; hence, the lessons connect to her culture in some aspects. She stated, “We are studying [North] Africa and [Southwest] Asia now. The lessons on Africa connect to my culture since my roots are in Africa. I don’t learn about differences or tolerance in my language arts or math class. But we did do something in math that I learned about. We had to do a math report on a mathematician. I chose Benjamin Banneker who was a Black math person.”

Freda was not sure how her math and social studies teachers could improve upon teaching subject matter that connects with her culture, but she offered this suggestion for how her language arts teacher may do so, "Our class needs to read black literature."

Freda believes her middle-school experiences coupled with what she learns at home have taught her more about diversity and tolerance. Some non-challenged students were going to classes in wheelchairs and with blindfolds on their eyes. Freda stated that other teachers were teaching students about respecting physically challenged students. She added, "Students were doing it because teachers wanted them to know that if a [blind] person would come to our school, [we] would know how to tolerate it and deal with it because the student cannot help it, and it is not [the fault of the student]." Several of Freda's Asian, White, and Black friends participated.

As a result of her frequent interactions with her friends, Freda has this perception of Asians, Whites, and Blacks: If you describe an Asian person, you would say they aren't white; they are pale. They are tannish-like, and they have flat faces. They have no eyebrows and no eyelashes. If you describe a White person, some are tannish and some are pale. They have silky, smooth hair. A Black person has kinky hair, and they are dark skinned, light skinned, or brown skinned.

Freda believes her perception is accurate based upon what she sees.

Freda believes there is a protocol for students who are victims of intolerant behavior. She says, "Students could go to the principal or counselor and talk to them about it. They say they do not allow people to be disruptive and disrespectful toward people." She continues:

This school provides rules for all people, and they expect all people to follow those rules. Students are graded based upon citizenship marks. Citizenship marks mean if you talk or disobey school rules and if you get so many marks then you get an *I* and those are really bad up to ten. At ten, you get called to the office and probably get suspended from school.

Brandy's reaction: Like Freda, Brandy assesses her experience at Friendly Middle as having been pleasurable. She believes its tolerance initiative should address cliques and peer pressure since they are a part of the reality of all students. She spoke of the student population as having cliques of students. She elaborates:

There are the popular kids, and there are some who are in-between and then there are the kids the popular ones treat differently so they hang around each other. I think a lot of people don't know where they are, so they try to hang around the popular group but the popular [students] don't like them. They make fun of them. Some people pretend to like people, but they really don't.

Brandy believes she is part of the "in-between" group since I have friends in both. But some people in the popular group are snotty. So, I really don't like to hang around them much. Then the people in the other group are too smart for me. They talk using big words, so I can't understand them. Therefore, I'm in between.

Brandy prefers to be part of the "in-between" group since she has more friends. She adds, "In the popular group, the people pretend to be somebody's friend, and then when someone needs them, they just ignore them and will not be there. But the group I am a part of, I can count on them if I need help."

Brandy has witnessed intolerance among her peers at Friendly Middle School. She states, "There was this girl who made a comment on how she didn't want to hang around poor or minority people. And then right away, she changed her comment because she thought she was not going to be popular anymore."

Brandy then recalls another instance of intolerance:

I think in gym class, the girls are treated differently. Right now, we are playing flag football. We have four girls on own team. There are two who are really good, and the boys act like they don't see that. They think that the girls are bad—like they cannot throw or anything. But they won't admit that some of the girls can throw better than the boys and can catch better than they can. There are boys and girls on different teams, but the boys would not pass the ball to the girls.

Brandy states that her gym teacher did not reprimand the boys for their act of intolerance nor addressed the issue of intolerance in class. However, she stated that her geography teacher teaches lessons related to tolerance, respect, and diversity. She recalled how she felt after learning about the Japanese:

We were learning about Japan and how they brought a lot to the economy; it made me look at them in a better way. Some people were like, 'The Japanese speak language funny and too fast' or 'They are over-populated, so people should not pay much attention to them'. But if you look at how much they were able to drop bombs during WWII, you have to realize they have a level of intelligence, and you have to respect it.

Brandy continued that she believes that learning about religion in geography connects more with her cultural background than the other lessons she has learned since those lessons confirm what she is learning at home. She stated:

I learned that there are many religions but some of the things taught are the same. Our parents teach us pretty much the thing. They teach us respect, but then they branch off into our religion. Like [Carla, one of my friends], she is Arabic. She doesn't believe in God, and I am Christian, and I do. But we are both taught respect and how to act towards our teachers and towards guests that we come in contact with.

Brandy also described her reaction to what she is learning in language arts. She enjoyed *Where the Red Fern Grows* since she learned how hard children had to work in the early 1900s and how people were "intolerant of them because they could not read or write." The main lesson she learned was "don't judge a book by its cover since people wrongly judged the poor people by the way they didn't have an education. But my parents have taught me how to just get to know a person and accept them for who they are."

Brandy added that her math teacher helped her to understand how to figure out the percentage of items—something that her mother attempted to teach her at home. She elaborated, "[Learning about percentage] helped me to figure out 15% off of an item to figure out what the final cost of the item is. My mom tried to teach me, and I never learned it. But then I went to math class, and I learned how to."

Comparing/Contrasting Meko, Freda, and Brandy

Meko suggests there is some connection between what she learns at home and what she learns at school. Meko has the perception that overall her teachers are not concerned with teaching culture. She is pleased to be a Chinese-American girl, but that has not always been the case. When Meko was younger, she did not want it known to her other school friends that she speaks Chinese because she was ashamed to be Chinese. Since Meko only felt this way around her school friends, then it may send a subtle indictment against her elementary school. If her elementary school only taught a Eurocentric curriculum—taking the imperialistic attitude that only Western thought and beliefs are superior—then it is not surprising that Meko was ashamed of being Chinese. Her culture was viewed as being inferior by virtue of what she was learning in the classroom. Now that she is older, she appreciates the Chinese lessons she learns at home. To Meko, her geography/social studies teacher does a good job teaching about diversity through cultures. She feels empowered, however, through what she learns from home. Meko's mother wants her daughter to acculturate to United States culture while maintaining her Chinese culture. Meko understands that, so she sees the merit behind what her language arts and mathematics teachers are teaching her even though what they teach has very little connection to her Chinese culture. Meko did not make the connection that the grammar rules she is taught in language arts are similar to the grammar rules in Chinese.

Freda provided short responses during my interviews with her. She enjoys learning about different cultures in her geography/social studies class, but she believes that her language arts classes could improve if her teacher would include works by and about African-Americans. She was excited about learning that Benjamin Banneker was an African-American mathematician, but it was the only time in her mathematics class that information related to an African-American was presented. and it was Freda who researched and presented the information to her teacher. Freda is content with Friendly's curriculum since she learns more about African-Americans at home. She also learns more about different cultures by interacting with her friends and their families. Also, Freda seems to be content with how Friendly's administration handles intolerance.

Brandy did not refer to her Native American heritage during my interview with her. She is pleased with what Friendly teachers are teaching. She seems to have an open-mind. She enjoys learning about the contributions of people of color. Off-tape, she admitted to reevaluating her own perceptions about the Japanese people.

She has heard different students make remarks about them, but she was made aware of how intelligent the Japanese are during one of her geography/social studies classes. She is excited to learn about different cultures from her geography/social studies teacher and from her ethnically diverse friends. She believes that some of what Friendly teaches translates into what she learns at home.

Findings

The student participants had different views related to the tolerance initiative. Meko believes that Friendly teachers are not interested in teaching diversity since it may be difficult for some teachers to do so because of their subject expertise. She does not believe diversity can be taught in language arts or mathematics. She learns most about diversity through her interactions with her friends and from her parents. She takes on the passive attitude about what the teachers are teaching as part of the initiative.

Freda seems to be just as passive. Like Meko, Freda learns more about her culture at home. She was more vocal about her language arts teacher presenting works by and about African-Americans. She is pleased to learn more about different cultures through her geography classes. She also learns about diversity through the interaction with her friends. She did not mention anything related to how mathematics can be diversified.

Brandy is accepting of Friendly's tolerance initiative as it is. She does believe that boys are treated differently than girls in some instances, but overall, she is satisfied with what teachers are teaching as part of the initiative. She feels like it is intellectually stimulating overall even though she would like for her mathematics class to be more challenging. She learns about diversity through interacting with her friends. She appreciates what she learns in her geography/social studies class since it helps her to reevaluate some of the perceptions she may have about different groups.

Conclusions for Research Question

Meko, Freda, and Brandy are middle school girls who are taught to accept school as it is presented to them. Meko, Freda, and Brandy are pleased with the geography/social studies teacher's presentation of social studies since they learned about the contributions of various cultures. Meko and Brandy believe that the language arts teacher's presentation of language arts is what middle school students should accept as part of their middle school years. Freda, on the other hand, believes that the language art teacher could diversify his curriculum by including works by and about African-Americans. Meko and Brandy do not believe that mathematics can be diversified, so they accept their math teacher's presentation of it without question. Freda did not state anything related to what math teacher could do to diversify mathematics, but she was excited about doing research on Benjamin Banneker during Multicultural Week.

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