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Title: Cultivating Cultural Connections and Competencies  
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Public schools around the world are centers of multi-cultural interactions due to the fact that most communities are socially heterogeneous, and the education of children is generally valued across cultures (Bruner, 1996). In the United States, one of the most socially heterogeneous nations in the world, educational administrators, teachers, and support professionals have found the diversity of schools to be a source of enrichment as well as challenges (Goodlad, 1984). Public expectations that schools can be the means of social integration and new opportunities for students from poor and disadvantaged communities have been increased through national programs like Headstart (early childhood education) and Upward Bound (secondary education). Based on Goodlad's studies of K-12 schools across the country, he found that improvements in student performance occur when individual schools examine and adjust curricula from the students' perspective. Furthermore, schools that were highly effective engaged parents, students, school personnel, and community leaders as key stakeholders in the planning and execution of educational programs (Goodlad, 1984). Giving the stakeholders a voice in deciding on curricular and extra-curricular offerings increased community understanding about the relevancy of the school culture to family and community cultures.

Teaching and learning about cultures, one's own and those of others, is enhanced through interpersonal communication about recognized cultural topics. This is the case for school age children as well as adults. The topics may include: family structures and relationships; the definitions and significance of friendships; natural-human ecological balance points; human spiritual beliefs and practices; the purpose of human striving and creativity; the meaning of art and music; and the purpose and responsibility of social and academic education. It has been noted that culture is so highly integrated into one's way of living that it is more of an unconscious than a conscious influence (Segall, Lonner, and Berry; 1998). However, encounters with those who have a cultural orientation different from one's primary social group can heighten awareness of cultural biases and afford new insights into alternative worldviews or assumptions of people in one's community. Public schools are social institutions in which students, parents, teachers, and community members from diverse backgrounds come together to share ideas and discover new information. Therefore, communicating cross-culturally and learning to respect cultural differences is a crucial part of public education.

Most children begin their formal education at age 5 or 6 when they receive guidance and organized instruction from professional educators rather than family members. However, children bring with them a wide array of attitudes and behaviors learned in their families and neighborhoods. In the United States, as many as twenty-five percent of all students, and a greater percentage in some communities, require intensive assistance from school personnel to meet their basic physical and social needs before they address academic tasks (Dryfoos, 1994). Based on his first hand observations of daily life in culturally diverse urban schools, Kozol (2000) described conditions of poverty and interpersonal violence that shaped the primary orientation of most students. When asked to interact with others, they were often guarded, fearful, and uneasy about trusting peers or teachers with information about themselves. Goodlad (1984) also noted that in many large urban schools teachers spent more time attempting to manage disruptive behavior than instructing students.

Even in dual income middle-class and upper-class households, many parents are highly focused on social, career, and economic pressures. Due to lack of time with their children, they rely on schools to offer basic socialization as well as academic training (Pudney & Whitehouse, 1996). Therefore, educators generally are charged with much more than teaching new and traditional academic skills. Based on these social and educational conditions, schools need effective strategies that facilitate the development of positive social skills among all children.

Furthermore, with the rapid changes in the workplace due to technological and economic developments in the arts, sciences, and industrial production, schools are expected to prepare all students for successful transition into the work world after completing twelfth grade (Kobylarz, 1996). In 1994, the United States Congress passed the School to Work Opportunities Act that provided guidelines and funding for the development of programs that helped students plan their class schedules around vocations and careers that suited their interests and abilities. The American School Counselor Association also endorsed the role of K-12 school counselors as collaborators in the development of school curricula that increased career and vocational awareness and exploration (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). While all students can benefit from such educational services, they add responsibilities to the role of school counselors who often serve as many as 600 students. Counselors as well as other school personnel are expected to manage a range of behavioral problems ranging from threatened and actual interpersonal violence, substance abuse, depression, suicide, and broken relationships.

Given such daunting challenges, educators have little choice but to reach out to a variety of support services and research professionals for possible solutions. Educational and cultural psychologists, especially Bruner, who also served as the first president of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP), suggest starting with the external or objective reality of students that is known by observing and assessing abilities (intelligences) and the symbolic systems (language) students use to construct and express meanings derived from daily experiences (Bruner, 1996). Individual expression of ideas and feelings reflects cultural norms acquired from infancy. However, the longer students are exposed to formal education, the more teachers and peers influence the values and feelings that guide personal choices (Aronson, 2000).

Students align with others and initiate activities in response to perceived needs, and rewards. The longer they remain in school the more reinforcing (for conforming to cultural norms of the system itself) or punishing (for non-conformance to the system) it becomes. When punishments exceed rewards, students either leave school or find ways to express their frustrations and anger (Aronson, 2000). Frustrated students who remain in the school find ways to be contentious or rebellious (Aronson, 2000; Dreikurs, 1968). Seeking to be heard, one way or another, they exert influence on the school system by precipitating disruptions as intense as the Columbine tragedy or as relatively benign as playing practical jokes on teachers.

Bruner (1996) suggested that children are made comfortable at school when teachers and peers recognize and validate their family cultures. Students can discover cultural similarities and differences with others and gain confidence about forging positive relationships. Through group discussions and shared personal narratives, cultural separateness or alienation can be bridged. When common experiences, beliefs, and feelings are discovered, barriers decrease. Students can develop feelings of affinity with their teachers and peers, thereby transforming school from a threatening to an accepting place.

An interactive game like Branch Out engages players in an unconscious micro analysis (Bruner's term) of the participants' cultures. Children reflect and share responses to questions like: who is someone in your family who often comes up with ideas for fun things to do; who is someone who cheers you up when you feel sad; what is your favorite holiday and what makes it special for you? Children can be as expansive or circumspect as they wish to be. Those who choose not to answer a question can "pass". However, for most children (and adults), the opportunity to speak up and be heard is enticing. The more frequently children listen, think, feel, and speak in groups, the more they refine their communication skills. By contrast, when students have strong communication skills but are not encouraged to use them, they may become disengaged and resentful. In effect, children are always observing, imitating, and expanding their behavioral repertoire (Bandura, 1986). When they lack opportunities to discuss observations and related questions, children may act out impulsively, something frequently demonstrated through live and media models in their daily lives. However, in thoughtfully facilitated groups, students have opportunities to listen, reflect, speak, and realize that behavior has consequences. They can creatively and openly express concerns and issues that might otherwise become sources of suppressed distress.

Teachers and counselors in K-12 school systems have effectively used Branch Out, a relatively new group activity designed and piloted by a school counselor, to encourage interpersonal and inter-cultural

understanding. A common goals of many school counseling programs are: the prevention of stress accumulation; teaching and demonstration of assertive communication skills; and the prevention of aggressive interpersonal outbursts (Bosworth et al.; Glasser, 2000; Kelder et al., 1996). Branch Out assists school personnel and students to reach their goals by creating collaborative, inclusive learning environments that promote the growth and development of all students.

Branch Out is especially effective in helping people of all ages develop relationships, feel a sense of belonging, and gain a deeper understanding of one another in a relatively short period of time. Using the image of a tree to symbolize growth, players take turns answering questions and placing a leaf on the tree to represent shared experiences and feelings. Throughout the progression of the game, the tree becomes covered with leaves. Sicangu Lakota, a Native American cultural consultant, described his experience of playing the game with 35 others. “The Branch Out game and workshop, facilitated by Molly Foote, was provokingly symbolic for me. The circle of humanity, which thoughtfully enclosed and gradually nourished a once leafless tree to radiant health, returned my thoughts to my own Lakota Nation. In particular, a spiritual man named Black Elk who, looking toward our future, said the sacred hoop of the people would be mended and the tree of life, in the center, would bloom and blossom again. I thought this as I added, in turn, a red leaf to our group’s budding tree.”

The Branch Out game and curriculum is designed to help players feel good about themselves and those around them, to help them feel fully present, proud, and able to show who they really are, and to branch out by achieving new insights about their potential. The theoretical foundation of this activity is that the more positively one feels about her/himself and the more one knows about self and others, the more committed one can be to creating respectful and encouraging social environments anywhere and everywhere. Branch Out is about discovering the profound value of being a person as self, and as self in relationships with others. It heightens awareness that what is said and done in all life contexts is chosen behavior and has consequences for all who are involved. Through a series of activities chosen from the curriculum guide that accompanies the game, teachers and counselors can facilitate interactions among students, parents and students, mixed age groups of diverse backgrounds, that can enhance appreciation of interpersonal and intercultural diversity.

Since its initial development in 1997, Branch Out is being used in over 100 organizations, including K-12 schools, colleges, camps, faith communities, and corporate teams. People are using the game in locations across the United States, Canada, and in an international school in Japan. Further information about Branch Out may be found at: [www.cultivatingconnections.com](http://www.cultivatingconnections.com)

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