

Multicultural Experiences For Elementary School Classrooms

Multiculturalism is not only a government policy but a reality of life in Canada. Many of our children are playing and learning with other children from cultural backgrounds quite different from their own. If we want peace and harmony to prevail in our schools and communities, then we need to promote both a respect of differences and the understanding that there are more similarities than differences among human beings. The following ideas are meant to help children develop the attitudes necessary for living happily in a multicultural society and can be integrated into the daily life of your classroom throughout the year.

- as the familiar is usually more comfortable than the unfamiliar, take every opportunity to invite people from a variety of cultural backgrounds to visit your classroom. Use a circle discussion rather than lecture format to increase personal interaction between your guest and your students. Plan one visit per month throughout the year.

- ask a panel of people from various cultural backgrounds to discuss an issue that you are studying in class. Prepare your students beforehand, so that they come with interesting questions for the panelists.

- when studying a particular culture, be sure that your students have contact with people from that cultural community—linking classroom or textbook knowledge to real people will help prevent generalizing and stereotyping about cultural groups.

- to develop the concept that each of us is unique and yet similar in many ways, take Polaroid pictures of your primary students and help them mount the pictures on a large piece of chart paper. At circle time, discuss the similarities and differences among the children and the special qualities of individual children.

- provide a box for each child to decorate with shiny paper, glitter, stickers, etc. Talk about special things that people treasure for various reasons. Ask your students to take their boxes home and put some of their treasures into them, then bring them back to show their classmates. Allow time for every child to say something about his/her treasures.

- with the help of parents or other members of the cultural groups represented among your primary students, learn the words to Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes in the children's first languages.

- make thumb prints of each of your primary students with an ink pad. Let them compare the prints and see that although they are similar, no two are exactly alike. Make hand or foot prints using paint.

- borrow a skeleton or use a picture of a skeleton. Name the body parts in a number of different languages. Point out that everyone's skeletal structure is the same regardless of outward appearances.

- play music from different cultures during quiet times (when your students are working on art projects or eating lunch). Introduce musical instruments from different cultures as part of your music program.

- arrange to have your students exchange letters with a class in another country. This is a wonderful project to integrate Social Studies with Language Arts and to help children form personal relationships with people from another culture.

- conduct a series of circle discussions about friends and friendship. Ask your students to identify qualities in people that they value in friends. Talk about what they do with their friends. Discuss the circumstances that encourage friendships between people (e.g. living in the same neighbourhood, enjoying the same sports, having parents that are friends, being part of a minority in a larger group). Establish that even though we might respect people and even like them, we do not form friendships with everyone.

- brainstorm different types of homes in which people live or have lived (houseboats, pagodas, stilt houses, adobe houses, apartment buildings, igloos, teepees). Depending on the age and ability of your students, explore this topic further: research types of houses, collect pictures and make collages of homes, label a map of the world with pictures of typical homes in different regions, make a chart to show how North American homes have changed over time. Read *A House is A House for Me* by Mary Ann Hoberman.

- develop concepts of families by discussing what family members do for each other (provide companionship, shelter, food, emotional support, protection), and what constitutes a family (people that you live with and have regular, ongoing intimacy with).

- have your students create coat hanger mobiles depicting their families. Provide precut adult and child shapes (in white, beige and brown tones), string, hole punches and coat hangers. Have the children choose body shapes to correspond with their family members and colour in facial features. Older children might enjoy making paper clothes for the people shapes to show cultural customs. Discuss the diversity in family size and composition.

- plan a potluck lunch to close a unit about a country or cultural group. If possible, compile a collection of appropriate recipes for your students to choose from. Alternatively, take your students to a specialty store and have them select and pay for ingredients and then cook a dish representative of a cultural group at school. Parents or community members may be willing to help.

- focus on bread since it is made all over the world in various forms with similar ingredients. Collect recipes for a variety of types of bread (roti, pita, pancakes, bannock, chapati, tortilla) and either make them with your class or ask parents to make them at home. Discuss how the bread is eaten and what cultural groups they represent. Sample the breads and share preferences.

- make a special effort to acknowledge all special days celebrated by children in your class (request this information in a class newsletter or school notice). Consult with parents or community members to avoid oversimplifying the meaning and traditions of cultural holidays. Special days provide an excellent opportunity to invite cultural leaders or family members to visit your classroom to share information. Your students may also like to show and explain items from home that are associated with special days.