Research Note

Food as Lens for Exploring Key Concepts in Cultural Differences: A Curriculum Project—Curriculum Activities (Applying Education Theories)

By: Jerry R. Reed, III

I was invited to work on this project by Dr. Long while I was completing the final year of my master's degree in Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University, Ohio. I had also done undergraduate and graduate work in education. Dr. Long spoke about folkloristic perspectives on food to a class I was taking, and I found her work relevant to my master's project on lunchtime exchanges of food items among middle school students. I was interested in continuing working in folklore and education, particularly around issues of social equity and diversity in the schools. I drew from that background as well as my experiences in teaching and interacting with educational professionals to assist Dr. Long in developing the Keywords curriculum further. I also adapted the different units for specific age groups.

My approach to this curriculum is to provide activities for conversations around concepts of culture that can then be used to better understand and push back against a long history of institutionalized racism and colonialism that has been perpetuated consistently (and in recent years more aggressively) by American society. Diana Baird N'Diaye (2020) reminds us that a pedagogy of equity, "...is subjective and can be subversive in the best sense of the word. The stories recorded may be joyful, painful, or a bit of both, but they are essential". A single curriculum will not be the end all for social equity. While we want to create methods for educators to engage their learners in a conversation about culture, we must urge all individuals within these systems, including ourselves, to "explore our implicit assumptions and practice through a critical lens. We cannot name our White spaces if we do not know they exist… Staying outside this comfort zone takes vigilance and honesty" (Milne 2016: 82).

There have been several movements within education which have pushed for developing culturally responsive pedagogies by attempting to utilize the resources of cultural knowledge students already have, particularly minority students, to used in the classroom to make learning relevant (see Ladson-Billings 1995; Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 1995). Other researchers, like Django Paris (2012), prefer the phrase "culturally sustaining pedagogies," stating that the approach:

> "…requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people… they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence (95).

From this perspective, if we, as educators, are not making conscious efforts to use these methods to preserve our students' cultures, we are participating in an act of aggression against minority cultures that has been a consistent pattern of educational institutions in the US throughout its history (Alim 2007). This curriculum is meant to increase awareness

of and sensitivity to the complexities of cultural differences, so that educators can better challenge the historical patterns in our society.

In addition to making our curriculum relevant, and preserving our students' cultures, we must ask how we can help our students understand cultural differences that they will inevitably encounter in an increasingly culturally pluralistic society. This may require us as educators to take a step back and examine our own biases and culture, and work to create an openness to being able to learn from our students, or a reciprocal pedagogy "teachers and students learning from and with each other- "emotions and desires engaged" -an event that is powerful enough to be narrated" (Bowman & Hamer 2011: 20). This reciprocity includes providing space for students to teach the classroom, including their teacher, about their culture, their values, and their family. Many different identities may pop up in these conversations, Jones lists "In addition to gender, class, and ethnicity, the social categories of family and peers relate to identity and food choice" (148).

We believe that, because of this connection, food acts as a powerful place in which to have the conversation of cultural pluralism and co-existence. More so, applying a folkloristic lens to food, being able to see that even a small difference in a family history, ethnic lineage, or geographic background can have drastic changes to the culturally relevant foods of an individual allows even a largely non-diverse setting to begin to see diversity around them. Even small acts, such as the "proper" way to eat an Oreo, can show a diverse body of thinking and demonstrates the influence of popular media, which is further influenced by class, gender, ethnicity, etc. (Belasco 2008).

This project offers activities and materials to engage students in understanding the diversity they have in their own lives both within and outside their classrooms. We also encourage them to see how, despite a number of differences they may have at various levels, they can find ways to relate and understand each other. The conversations start small, and then build towards larger groups. Through activities that allow students to compare and contrast their tastes and family foods, such as the Sandwich Activity, educators can help nurture a conversation with students about understanding differences.

A personal example of such a conversation comes from my own background. I grew up in the Midwest, but have a very Appalachian family. One of my fondest food memories growing up was going to see my great-grandmother, Granny Margaret, and smelling her cooking a large pot of soup beans, pinto beans stewed for long hours with onion, bacon, and crushed red pepper. Not everyone can relate to my specific love of Granny Margaret's soup beans, but most do have some fond memory of a grandparent or similar elder-figure cooking a beloved childhood dish. Not even all of my family can relate to this love of soup beans, as another great-grandmother, who was also equally Appalachian, had a very different, and sadly, more bland recipe. My family's Appalachian food traditions set me apart from other kids in my Midwestern classrooms, making me aware that they represented a different identity. At the same time, our food heritage was not uniform within our family, illustrating—and perhaps confusing me—about the role of individual taste preferences and choices within a group identity. Most of us can all relate to this memory in some way, and it can be a stepping off point for discussing much larger issues.

Finding common ground in this way can then help students to further understand culture and society, and perhaps even engage in some change for the better. Researchers in the field of character education have long called combining morals and practical knowledge with identity and growth (McGrath 2018). As Lickona (2018) points out, identity itself is at the very center of character education, and that educators must figure out how to "… help young persons as they think and craft their own character, as they clarify a sense of who they are…" (54). Character education should therefore focus on enabling young people to acquire good judgment and govern themselves in accordance with it" (Curren 2017: 30), and food is an ideal medium for such learning.

Kim et al. (2018) show one example of both character education and a culturally responsive pedagogical lens. Their project applied engineering skills to food waste issues in the US, asking through students to identify a food that was culturally relevant to them. They were then tasked with designing new packaging or food waste measures that were more environmentally responsive and protective (31). Engaging students to ask how they can help their community by dealing with food waste allows students to apply their understanding of their culture to help preserve their culture and impact the world beyond that.

Food is a central component of identity, and as such, can be the foundation for social unity and equity as well as the basis for conflict and misunderstanding (Belasco 2008: 19). This curriculum offers a foundation for students and teachers to understand their own cultures and see the complexity and humanity of the cultures around them. It is offered in the spirit of folklorist Lisa Rathje's words on reciprocal pedagogy:

> "To embrace reciprocal pedagogy is also to keep on learning. The sharing of tools and strategies through partnerships and reciprocity will help to address the challenge of staying relevant and vital in an increasingly complicated, interconnected world" (77).

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