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EMBRACING OUR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
THE WINNIPEG CULTURAL DIVERSITY PROJECT

PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT

The purpose of this document is to provide educators with a description and overview of Winnipeg’s UNESCO Associated Schools Network Cultural Diversity Project as an example of good practice that can be readily adapted for use by any educational community.

Schools interested in having their students explore, understand and value the cultural variety and differences that exist in their own city and by extension to the national and global community, will find this document helpful as a starting point. Grade five (age 10-11) seems to be the right age to expose the students to the notion of cultural diversity. By continuing with the same students the next school year when they are in grade 6 (age 11-12), the students are more comfortable with the familiar faces they have already met. They are ready to deepen their knowledge, understanding of and respect for other cultures while learning more about and appreciating their own cultural roots and identities.

Common intercultural projects between schools can take many different forms. Schools may choose a faith-based approach similar to this project or they may choose to focus on the different ethnic, gender, racial and socioeconomic cultures that best represent the demographics of their own communities. For example, projects can take place in a school where students of various cultures and religions co-exist; students can visit the various cultural community centres instead of houses of worship; urban and rural students can come together to explore the similarities and differences in their respective communities. It is really a matter of taking stock of one’s own student population, reaching out and connecting with other neighborhoods and school communities to develop a sustainable partnership.

Projects may also be extended into grades 7 and 8 (age 12-14). Imagine the possibilities of these same students raising awareness of and taking action on local situations advocating unity and strength in diversity. Taking this even further middle schools and high schools may also want to consider forming partnerships and developing projects with their local feeder schools.

No matter what form schools decide to take, the objective is the same, that is, to develop and promote successful practices for living together in peace with people of different, backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, beliefs and religions.
OUR STORY

It just seemed to fall into our laps. “We could have a mini Jerusalem Summit right here in Winnipeg”, said the Principal of the English/Hebrew Bilingual School to the Principal of the Islamic School and the Principal of the Catholic School. It was that simple. We had come for a provincial UNESCO Associated Schools Network meeting in Manitoba, Canada, in the Fall Term 2006 and immediately recognized the opportunity to bring our students, whose faiths are representative of those found in Israel’s significant and culturally diverse city of Jerusalem, together in some fashion.

But what would that look like? As members of the UNESCO Schools Network in Canada, classroom programs in our respective schools were already incorporating the four UNESCO study areas (Appendix 1). It was now a matter of broadening the learning activities to include a networking model that would capitalize on our three faith-based, culturally unique schools with a focus on Intercultural Learning.

We became aware of an organization in Toronto that could provide guidance and support for our initiative. The educational consultant form the Canadian Centre for Diversity (CCD), now known as the Canadian Institute for Diversity and Inclusion (http://www.cidi-icdi.ca), was contacted and agreed to facilitate our first workshop in June 2007 with grade 5 students from three schools in the Winnipeg area, in Manitoba – Al Hijra Islamic School, St Emile Catholic School and Brock Corydon English/Hebrew Bilingual School. We felt that the grade 5 was a good age group to start with as they were beginning to think about the world beyond their own families and local communities and were ready to tackle more complex global issues. In addition, beginning with grade 5’s near the end of the school year would provide continuity for these same students in Grade 6 when they would come together again visiting three houses of worship – a Mosque, Synagogue and a Catholic Church.

One year later John Pritchard School, whose population represented a different demographic area of the city and whose mandate was not culturally or faith based, recognized the value of broadening its students’ experiences, joined the UNESCO network and our project. Several years later, realizing the importance of having the Aboriginal culture represented in the project, Niji Mahkwa Aboriginal School located in the heart of the Inner-city was invited into the Network and to participate in the project. (With the Aboriginal perspective included, witnessing a traditional pipe ceremony in addition to visits at the houses of worship was added)

The CCD’s involvement consisted of provided some funding for the project, but most importantly, their Winnipeg representative took on the job of training students from several high schools to facilitate the grade 5 workshops. For the past couple of years, the CCD has not been involved with the project. Fortunately, Winnipeg-based members of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO’s Youth Advisory Group stepped forward and volunteered to train Grade 11 and 12 students from two of our UNESCO Network High Schools to facilitate the Grade 5 workshop. The inclusion of the YAG members and the High School student leaders provides a youthful presence that positively connects with the grade 5 students. In addition, the high school student involvement allows these students to develop their leadership skills, helps them clarify their own thoughts on cultural diversity and gives them the opportunity to make a difference in promoting the UNESCO Schools study area of intercultural learning.
It has now been nine years and over 900 grade 5 and 6 students have participated in the Cultural Diversity Project. With the commitment of the each school’s community of teachers, administration and families, the project is still going strong.

**PROJECT JUSTIFICATION**

Winnipeg is a typical Canadian city with a demographic based around multiculturalism and a diversity of languages. The city also has the highest percentage of First Nation and Metis peoples living in any major Canadian city and this plays an important part in the city’s makeup. Our students are regularly exposed to the various media reports and images highlighting the racist and unsustainable practices that unfortunately plague our society.

Winnipeg is a Signatory Municipality associated with the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination (CCMARD, one of the seven coalitions that compose the International Coalition of Cities Against Racism). The International Coalition, launched in March 2004 by UNESCO, consists of networks of cities interested in sharing their experiences to improve their policies against racism, discrimination, exclusion and intolerance. Winnipeg’s Cultural Diversity Project provides an excellent opportunity for students to actively promote these municipal policies.

Middle Years students are beginning to understand the important roles they have not only in their local communities, but also within the national and global context. This is a core concept of the Social Studies curriculum that enables students “to acquire the skills, knowledge, and values necessary to understand Canada and the world in which they live, to engage in active democratic citizenship, and to contribute to the betterment of society” (Kindergarten to Grade 8 Social Studies: Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes).

UNESCO’s Education Programme has made Global Citizenship Education (GCED) one of the strategic areas of work to “empower learners to be responsible global citizens... give learners the competencies and opportunity to realize their rights and obligations to promote a better world and future for all (http://www.unesco.org/new/en/global-citizenship-education). This project helps develop students’ awareness and understanding of what it means to be a responsible citizen, and the importance of learning to live together with others in peace.

**PROJECT KEY OBJECTIVES**

The project is designed to have students actively participate in exploring their own cultural identities and to begin the life-long journey towards understanding and respecting other cultures, traditions and religions. Students are engaged in critically examining their own cultural traditions, values and beliefs; exploring concepts of diversity, differences, and inclusion; becoming aware of the cultural and religious issues that exist in their community and in other countries; and collaborating with children from different backgrounds in dialogue and joint ventures to envision a sustainable peaceful coexistence.

The schools involved want students to:

- Develop an understanding of, and appreciation for, our society’s diverse population.
- Interact empathetically with and show respect for other cultures, ethnicities, beliefs and religions.
- Understand that sustainable human health and well-being is characterized by people co-existing harmoniously within local, national, and global communities and with the natural world.
PROJECT PHASES AND ACTIVITIES

September – June:
Grade 5 and 6 classroom teachers integrate UNESCO’s cultural diversity study theme within their respective curriculum programming. Learning activities are specifically designed to engage students in first reflecting and recognizing the values and traditions of their own cultures. This is then followed up with analyzing and discussing various texts and media sources (such as newspaper, internet, TV, radio, novels) that present the unsustainable practices occurring locally, nationally and globally that hinder and pose obstacles to peaceful relationships. An assortment of picture books and novels related to the topic of cultural diversity have been purchased for each classroom library (appendix 2) to support both the classroom and home in fostering a greater understanding of and respect for other cultures.

Grade 5 Students

May:
Classroom teachers in each Grade 5 class:
- Introduce the Cultural Diversity Workshop that the students will attend in June.
- Engage students in exploring what they know and understand about the cultural groups represented in each of the 5 schools and what more they would like to learn about these cultural groups.

May:
Full day training session for 12 High School students by YAG members (Appendix 3)

June:
Grade 5 students from each of the 5 schools participate in a daylong interactive cultural diversity workshop:
- 9:30 – Introduction and Keynote speaker (Appendix 4, a)
- 10:00 – Student Workshop Activities (Appendix 4, b)
- 12:00 – Lunch – Students sit with a partner from another school; an opportunity to have informal conversations and to develop friendships.
- 12:30 - Students participate in creating art banners that creatively represent diversity or play soccer or basketball; further opportunities for the students to share age appropriate experiences.
- 2:00 – Wrap up - sharing and presentation of the banners for each school

The next day, students in their respective classes:
- write reflective responses and share their thoughts in group and class discussion
- choose a group of student representatives who will meet the following year with representatives from each of the 5 schools to decide on and develop a joint initiative related to sustainable development.

Grade 6 Students

September:
Grade 6 student representatives (the previous Grade 5 students) come together to develop a joint sustainable development project and report back to their respective classrooms. These students meet several more times during the school year to continue their plans with input from their classmates.

October:
Classroom teachers from each of the Grade 6 classes in the five schools discuss the up-coming field trip and explore with their students their understanding of the cultural groups they will be visiting.

November:
Grade 6 students from the 5 schools attend a morning pipe ceremony at Niji Mahkwa School to learn about this spiritual indigenous ceremony.

December:
Grade 6 students from all 5 schools visit a Mosque, a Church and Synagogue where each of the clerics at these houses of worship explain aspects of their religions and customs. Students
reflect on the field trip experience with classroom discussions and written reflections.

January–June:
Grade 6 students continue to engage in discussions and activities that will allow them to further explore the relationship between cultural diversity and sustainable development within their own communities and within the context of their city, country and in other countries.

• Students are given home assignments that encourage family dialogue related to cultural diversity and sustainability issues.

• Throughout the year, students are given the opportunity to creatively express their understanding of cultural diversity through the arts such as creating hallway murals, learning the songs and dances of each other’s cultures and preparing and sharing of food.

• Guest speakers representing various cultural groups are invited into classrooms for presentations and opportunities for interaction, questions and answers.

GOOD PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

This Cultural Diversity Project is a good example of the key teaching processes and student learning that are involved in promoting a deeper understanding of cultural diversity according to a UNESCO publication entitled “Education for Sustainable Development – An Expert Review of Processes and Learning”, (Tilbury, D. 2011):

Processes:

• Processes of multi-stakeholder collaboration and intercultural dialogue;

• Processes which engage the ‘whole system’;

• Processes which stimulate innovation within curricula teaching and learning experiences;

• Processes of active and participatory learning.

Learning:

• Learning to ask critical questions;

• Learning to clarify one’s own values;

• Learning to envision more positive and sustainable futures;

• Learning to think systemically;

• Learning to respond through applied learning;

• Learning to explore the dialectic between tradition and innovation.

Studying about the cultural mosaic of Winnipeg and Canada through classroom conversations and various text and media offers a degree of understanding. Taking this learning beyond the classroom walls into the community brings an authentic, concrete and real life experience that can only enrich student understanding and strengthen the partnership that exists with the five schools.

These cultural diversity events create a tangible, concrete experience for the students enabling them to bring meaning to the abstract lessons that take place in the classrooms. The intercultural dialogue that takes place amongst the students, the physical presence in the houses of worship, the critical exploration of current cultural issues, the opportunity to question and find answers to their wonderings enable the students to apply their learning and collaboratively envision and plan for a positive future. The students being paired up with a student from another school encourages a human exploration that would not have taken place otherwise. Muslims, Jews, Aboriginals and Christians travelling throughout the city together visiting the houses of worship, eating lunch together, creating art and playing games – what better way to break down cultural barriers and misconceptions?
POSITIVE OUTCOMES

While it is difficult to measure the impact of this project on students’ values and attitudes, it is clear that the students are interested and engaged in the project events. They are focused and on task during the activities and ask probing questions of the various facilitators and clerics. The students are happy to make new friends as they exchange contact information and enjoy meeting their partners again the following year. Some students comment that they were pleasantly surprised to see that other students would be interested in coming to their school to learn about their rituals. They also take pride in their own culture and religion and they are eager to share information about themselves and their traditions.

Students’ personal reflections and classroom conversations after the events demonstrate an appreciation of what they have experienced and that they have a greater understanding of other people’s faiths and traditions. Much of their responses centered around the similarities they noticed, seeing other students of their own age as having similar interests and at the same time different rituals, dress, food and celebrations.

The teachers who are involved in the project already value the importance of promoting cultural diversity education in their classroom programs. They see the positive impact these experiences have on their students – in the respectful words they use and in their actions they display with the students from the other schools. They appreciate the opportunity to collaborate and plan with other teachers and to use each other as expert resources inviting each other as guest speakers to augment their classroom discussions; they appreciate the financial resources made available for them to implement appropriate activities for their students beyond the classroom walls; and they appreciate the support they are receiving from their students’ families, and their administration.

This project has assisted teachers addressing and enhancing the curricular expectations for their grade levels and in promoting the four main pillars of learning in UNESCO’s Associated School’s network learning mandate, i.e. for students to become aware of and understand the issues of cultural diversity; to be involved in their education knowing they can take action; to develop the attitudes and commitment necessary as a responsible global citizen; and learning to live together in peace and dignity. They see the value of student representatives from each school learning, that despite the different cultures that exist, they share similar values in caring for others. They see students developing teamwork and leadership skills and a sense of cultural interconnectedness as they learn to problem solve and make decisions in a collaborative manner when given the task of creating joint sustainable projects that will have long term and far reaching effects.

It is the powerful lingering images that have the most impact on the teachers – images of Muslim girls putting headscarves on the Jewish girls as hijabs in the mosque; boys and girls choosing to sit with students from the other schools enjoying a popsicle treat after a sports game or after creating joint art banners to be hung in each school as a memory of this important event in their lives; and the images of grade 6 students giving their valedictorian speeches remembering with fondness the cultural diversity activities and the new friends they made and hope to stay connected.
STRATEGIES FOR FACILITATING THE PROJECT

**Strategy 1:**
It is important for the Grade 5 and 6 classroom teachers and administrators from the participating schools to meet at least once a year to review the project, highlight the impact on student learning, share the challenges they face amidst the multitude of expected curricular learning outcomes and the time needed to give the appropriate attention to promoting deep understanding of cultural diversity and discuss possible changes that may improve the quality of the experience for their students.

**Strategy 2:**
The written and oral reflections of the students need to be developed after each of the events, as they are valuable data sources of deeper learning, cultural awareness and understanding.

**Strategy 3:**
Funds need to be continuously explored to maintain the costs associated with the project - transportation of students, rental fee for the workshop location, food for the students, honorariums for the high school students and guest keynote speakers, supplies for the art activities, appropriate books for classroom and school libraries and release time for teachers to debrief, plan next steps and develop appropriate classroom learning activities.

**Strategy 4:**
Continuity from one year to the next is essential in maintaining the integrity of the project. Therefore it is important to ensure that when changes in classroom teachers and administrators takes place, that the necessary information is shared.

**Strategy 5:**
Classroom teachers need to be assured that developing this kind of a program is not an “add-on” to their already busy program, but an opportunity to enhance the curricular outcomes that promote cultural diversity.

**Strategy 6:**
A coordinator from one of the schools needs to be assigned to keep everyone on track i.e. maintain open communication, call and chair the meetings, assign the numerous tasks associated with each event, ensure bills are paid.

**Strategy 7:**
Being that the students are 10 and 11 year olds, appropriate behaviour may not always be displayed by everyone at all times during the events. These are great opportunities for the ‘teachable moments’ that need to be addressed.

**Strategy 8:**
Teachers need to keep in mind that for some students, their perceptions of others may be challenged by these experiences and that these students will come to realize that what is depicted in the media is not representative of the norm.

**Strategy 9:**
There may be families who may not feel comfortable or may disagree with some of the events. We need to respect their feelings, listen to their concerns, and hopefully they will begin to value the experiences for their children as they hear from others about what took place.
Strategy 10:
Presentations to Parent Advisory Councils in the beginning of the year and regular updates of the schools’ activities regarding the project are essential in eliciting their support and their endorsement.

Strategy 11:
It should be noted that a cultural diversity project can be tailored to the specific demographics and cultural groups represented in the school community. For example, projects can take place in a school where students of various cultures and religions co-exist; students can visit the various cultural community centres instead of houses of worship; urban and rural students can come together to explore the similarities and differences in their respective communities. It is really a matter of taking stock of one’s own student population, reaching out and connecting with other neighborhoods and school communities to develop a sustainable partnership.

Strategy 12:
Regarding the Grade 6 students’ joint project, it is important to arrange opportunities for the students to meet several times to decide on and develop a project that their respective classes can then participate in whether it be researching and acting on humanitarian issues in Northern Manitoba’s First Nations Reserves or some of the many Human Rights issues facing marginalized communities both locally and around the world. In Winnipeg, our Grade 6 student representatives come together with students from the other elementary, junior high and high school students to develop joint efforts such as student forums and conferences with guest speakers addressing a wide range of social justice topics that the students themselves choose.

Strategy 13:
The United Nations has designated specific days, weeks, years, and decades, each with a particular theme in order to promote international awareness and action on the related issues. Schools are encouraged to create special observances of these dates that would support their curricular studies. March 21, The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, is one that compliments the Cultural Diversity Project. Students from the participating schools would develop actions that address a local or global issue related to this theme.

Strategy 14:
In order to properly review this project, a thorough process of gathering data needs to be developed to gauge the feelings and thoughts of parents, staff and students. It is also useful to survey the students and families prior to the Grade 5 cultural exchange and then after grade 6. As teachers and administrators from each school meet to review the data, improvements and changes may be made to the various activities associated with each grade’s event.

For more information, please visit the Canadian Commission for UNESCO’s website at http://unesco.ca/home-accueil/asnet-reseau%20new