

Researching RACISM

Can multicultural education really change children's attitudes? Two AC professors designed a study to find out

by brad whitehouse



A little over two years ago, Sociology Professor Agnes Caldwell started an experimental class that really seemed to work. The objective for the students in Reading to Eliminate Racism was simple enough: read books with multicultural themes to elementary school kids, and see if it changes their perceptions about race and ethnicity.

Everything seemed to come together. They worked with Cambios, an organization in Lenawee County dedicated to eliminating racism. The college students felt like they were making a real difference, and Caldwell believes they were learning at a level not possible in the classroom. Most importantly, both the college students and the elementary school teachers reported that the program was actually changing the children's attitudes and behaviors.

The teacher in Caldwell was thrilled. However, the social scientist in Caldwell was hounded by a nagging question: Was it too good to be true?

"The supporters of multicultural education say it does all these [great] things. The reality is that we don't know—and this is exactly what the critics say, 'Where's the evidence?' And

Recent research on multicultural education for children is almost nonexistent. A promising new study by Agnes Caldwell and Scott Behrens could begin to change that.

that's fair to say, as a scientist," Caldwell said.

The tough part is that the issue is somewhat of a political minefield.

"We're dealing with race and ethnicity, we're dealing with the big "D" word, diversity, we're dealing with teachers, who systematically are constantly under pressure from the state, from the local government, from parents, from everyone. And we're dealing with an issue—race—that most people just don't like to talk about, because it's often not talked about well," Caldwell said.

Caldwell decided to forge ahead, with the help of Scott Behrens from the teacher education department. They developed a pilot study that was designed to determine, "Does the Cambios program really change diversity attitudes?" The answer, quite simply and dramatically, was yes.

The study took advantage of the second run of the Reading to Eliminate Racism class in the fall of 2002. As part of the one-credit class, AC students made weekly visits to eight K-5 classrooms for a period of 10 weeks. A \$750 faculty research grant funded training for teachers and readers on how to administer a survey, which the children took before and after the program.

The study showed, in statistically

significant figures, that the children had better self-identity, engaged in discriminatory behaviors less often, and appreciated differences more, specifically in regard to language. It also showed that the students actually enjoyed the learning, an element that Behrens and Caldwell view as a key part of effective education.

The professors are elated about the results. The study was just a pilot, but there is remarkable potential. This type of data could make a big splash for multicultural education, because while there's lot of talk about how important it is, there's not much research to back it up.

"One of the most interesting things about it is that there have been virtually no studies done on the attitudes of elementary children since the 80s, because of the politics attached to the multicultural debate," Caldwell said.

By validating a program like Cambios, Behrens thinks teachers might gain a real advantage. While teachers feel a lot of pressure to address issues of race and ethnicity, they often don't feel that they have the training they need. An outside program like Cambios helps get the ball rolling.

"It gives them the security to be able to address issues that they're supposed to address in the classroom, but typi-

cally don't," he said. "More importantly, it gives them the means to do it without taking a substantial amount of their time away from the things that they think they need to cover."

The situation might be a win-win situation for Cambios and Adrian College. Cambios gets readers for its multicultural program, and the study may eventually help the nonprofit make its case to win funding. And AC students get involved in the community and get a chance to do real research.

"The students were so engaged in this study," Caldwell said. "They loved it!"

The next step? Caldwell and Behrens will try to publish the results. They plan to expand the study beyond a pilot, to obtain more detailed results that will be more relevant to the field. The pilot also raised some questions that they want to look into more. So while it's just a beginning, it's a promising one. And to Caldwell, there isn't a more important issue to study.

"W.E.B. Du Bois in 'The Souls of Black Folk' said that the problem of the 20th century is the color line. Let's call it the problem of the 21st century, too."

For a Cambios reading list, visit contact.adrian.edu

CAMBIOS COMES TO CAMPUS

Organization gets new digs in North Hall

Cambios Inc. has found a new home at Adrian College. The organization, which promotes multicultural education in the area, is now located in North Hall on the Adrian College campus.

Cambios has an office to use, in addition to having access to College resources, such as the College phone system, the library, and photocopiers. The College will also soon host the organization's website, and may offer guidance with grant writing.

Having Cambios on campus will allow a closer partnership with the College. Cambios will provide work-study jobs, volunteer opportunities, and access to multicultural books. In addition, collaborations with Adrian classes will now be even easier than before.

While Cambios and Adrian College will remain separate entities, there are several connections between the two. Adrian professors Maher Mualla and Don Cellini are both on the Cambios board of directors. In addition, professors in the sociology/criminal justice/human services department and the teacher education department have worked with Cambios, and will now be located in the same building as Cambios.

This arrangement comes free of charge to Cambios. The partnership agreement will be reviewed by both sides on an annual basis. The agreement is similar to the one with the Adrian Symphony Orchestra, which is also located on campus.

Cambios (www.cambios.org) does a

variety of things in the community, including heading up a multicultural reading program in area schools. Thanks to a grant, the organization has hired Idali Feliciano, its first half-time director – which makes having a new permanent headquarters especially timely.

