

Teaching Multicultural Education and the Gospel of Jesus Christ

A Joint Statement by the BYU Multicultural Education Faculty, Dept. of Teacher Education

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Teaching concepts like racism, sexism, or other forms of social inequity on any university campus is a challenge. It also presents wonderful opportunities for personal insight and growth. Some of the ways these opportunities and challenges are manifest at Brigham Young University (BYU), a religiously-affiliated school, are unique. Indeed, at BYU we believe that “faith enhances rather than detracts from true learning”.¹

In this memo, we highlight three principles in teaching multicultural education, when “bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel [of Jesus Christ]”.² We provide a brief summary of what we teach and why in BYU multicultural education courses, as well as what it means to teach this content in the light of Christ’s restored gospel. The principles that we offer are meant to address tensions that arise when preparing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be *equitable* educators—with the knowledge, skills, and, most importantly, the dispositions they need to foster meaningful and safe school learning environments for *all* of God’s children.

Human Diversity is Part of God’s Plan

Elder D. Todd Christofferson said recently that “the diversity we find now in the Church [is] just the beginning.” He continued, “it’s not just diversity for diversity’s sake, but [...] that people [...] bring different gifts and perspectives, a wide range of experiences and backgrounds, and challenges [that] show us what really is essential in the Gospel of Christ [...]. Much of the rest that has been [...] acquired over time and is more cultural than doctrinal can slip away and we can really learn to be disciples”.³ Our differences, in other words, help us better understand and live the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. This approach to human diversity is consistent with recent changes at BYU (e.g., the creation of a new Assistant to the President for Student Success and Inclusion, doubling the number of first-generation college students among admitted freshmen). We use this gospel approach to human diversity in our multicultural education classes.

¹ Kevin J Worthen, “BYU: A Unique Kind of Education,” BYU Conference address, 28 August 2017.

² Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967.

³ See video “Is There a Place for Me?” by D. Todd Christofferson on the “Unity in Diversity” Church website: <https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/unity-in-diversity?lang=eng>

Multicultural Education

Public schooling in the United States is characterized by profound inequities. Although the demography of children and youth in the US public education system, from preschool to high school, is immensely--and increasingly--diverse, schools are not inherently welcoming or accommodating places for this diversity. Currently there are more non-White than White students enrolled in US schools, and the portion of those living in poverty increases year after year. One in five US children lives in an immigrant household in which their first language is other than English. Schools remain woefully segregated by race and ethnicity,⁴ and the achievement opportunity gap by family income continues to increase.⁵ Factors that explain inequities like these are institutional *and* interpersonal in nature. School programs like anti-bullying initiatives to reduce suicide attempts in LGBT youth,⁶ for example, are successful when the staff who implement them are willing to be vulnerable to understand the issues students face, and committed to act on behalf of students even when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient.

The purpose of multicultural education coursework is to foster knowledge, skills, and, above all, dispositions that educators need to provide *all* students with excellent, fair, inclusive, and harmonious learning experiences and developmental opportunities. Among all school factors, educators--those who work day in and day out with students in classrooms--are the single most important contributor to student success.⁷ BYU students in multicultural education coursework, required for state licensure and national accreditation in teacher education, engage difficult and non-intuitive concepts like privilege, implicit bias, gender socialization, and social reproduction in order to develop competencies they need to be equitable educators.

In the Light of Christ's Restored Gospel

It is natural for students to disregard or even resist difficult and uncomfortable concepts, especially ones that at first seem inconsistent with one's worldview.⁸ King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon, however, teaches us to "[put] off the natural man [or woman] and [become] a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord [by being] submissive, meek, humble, full of love, [and] willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict

⁴ Gary Orfield, Erica D. Frankenberg, and Chungmei Lee, "The Resurgence of School Segregation," *Educational Leadership* (2003).

⁵ Sean Reardon, "The Widening Income Achievement Gap," *Educational Leadership* (2013).

⁶ Mark L. Hatzenbuehler and Katherine M. Keyes, "Inclusive Anti-Bullying Policies and Reduced Risk of Suicide Attempts in Lesbian and Gay Youth," *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2013).

⁷ Eric A. Hanushek, "What Matters for Student Achievement," *Education Next* (2016).

⁸ Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[...].”⁹ In other words, the Christlike character that His gospel teaches us to develop helps us to overcome barriers to becoming equitable educators. Two recurring barriers in our courses are deficit thinking¹⁰ and color blindness.¹¹

Deficit thinking in education is the tendency to attribute the failure of low-income students (and other “minoritized” groups) to deficiencies that they and their families possess. Common reactions to academic achievement disparities by family socioeconomic status, for example, blame parents who do not value education or children who lack motivation. It is less natural to consider the ways that school segregation, unequal school funding, low teacher expectations, curricular materials, or school-community relationships underlie these disparities. Considering these sources requires students to be willing to understand how one’s social position and structures of privilege in society, regardless of one’s effort, affect educational opportunities.

Color blindness is the tendency to dismiss the significance of race, or other dimensions of human difference, in explaining inequity or in providing equitable opportunities in education.¹² A natural response to racism in schools is to “stop talking about it”--a widely-held belief that race does not affect how we interact or that racism will end if we simply stop bemoaning it. Color blindness disregards not only the lived experiences of persons of color, but also the effects of our unconscious racial biases. A recent study found that preschool teachers have unintentional biases that underlie much higher rates of discipline referrals for Black boys.¹³ In BYU multicultural education courses, we discuss the insidious nature of implicit biases, regardless of good intentions, and how overcoming them requires us to “put off the natural man.” Rather than feigning blindness, we seek to acknowledge our prejudices, refine them through new experiences, and learn to see strength in our differences.

⁹ Mosiah 3:19

¹⁰ Richard R. Valencia, *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

¹¹ Kerri Ullucci and Dan Battey, “Exposing Color Blindness/Grounding Color Consciousness,” *Urban Education* (2011)

¹² Helen A. Neville, Miguel E. Gallardo, and Derald Wing Sue, *The Myth of Racial Color Blindness: Manifestations, Dynamics, and Impact* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2015).

¹³ Walter S. Gilliam, Angela N. Maupin, Chin R. Reyes, Maria Accavitti, and Frederick Shic, *Do Early Educators’ Implicit Biases Regarding Sex and Race Relate to Behavior Expectations and Recommendations of Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions?* (New Haven, CT: Yale Child Study Center, 2016)

Tensions that Arise

Sometimes tensions arise for BYU students trying to square concepts in multicultural education with their understanding Christ's gospel, though most students find our courses to be faith-affirming. We see these tensions as pedagogical resources rather than obstacles. They provide wonderful opportunities to refine our understanding and testimonies of Christ's restored gospel, to deepen appreciation for and comprehension of multicultural concepts, and, most importantly, to become more like our Savior, the Master Multicultural Educator.

One example of a tension is when we scrutinize the notion of meritocracy--that status, prosperity, and privilege in US society are earned by one's hard work and effort alone. We read research findings and discuss how much of accomplishment, including in education, depends on the circumstances (e.g., neighborhood, parent education, social networks) that we are born into, rather than individual effort. This can be difficult for students to grapple with, particularly in light of LDS scripture that teaches us "to act for [our]selves and not to be acted upon."¹⁴ We discuss how we are to make sense of effort vis-a-vis privilege--rather than minimizing the significance of one or the other--and draw on gospel tools like the grace-works quandry to think through implications for their work as educators in multicultural settings. We use the tension to foster understanding of core concepts in our field by deepening faith and testimony in Christ's gospel.

A second example of a tension that arises for BYU students in multicultural education courses concerns gender. Standard multicultural education content defines gender as a social construct that is neither binary nor innate. Gender roles are learned through cultural socialization, which tends to privilege boys over girls and men over women. Squaring these ideas with our theology that "gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose"¹⁵ can create dissonance for BYU students. We discuss differences and similarities between gospel and societal notions of "gender," and, once again, the implications for educators to provide safe and meaningful learning experiences for all students across the gender identity spectrum.

Teaching Principles

Though not a panacea, three principles guide our teaching of multicultural education at BYU. We find that these principles help us to successfully navigate difficult, and

¹⁴ 2 Nephi 2:26

¹⁵ *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995)

sometimes very emotional, conversations with students about weighty topics. Whereas our respective assignments, classroom activities, and interactions with students in these classes differ; each of us base all of our work in BYU multicultural education classes on these three principles.

Principle 1: Grappling with multicultural education concepts should be an act of faith. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf recently said that “a question that creates doubt in some can, after careful investigation, build faith in others.”¹⁶ We aspire to provide “faith-based teaching”¹⁷ of multicultural education content by helping students become careful investigators of complex social issues. We teach that no question is too controversial for the Lord. Indeed, Elder M. Russell Ballard recently taught,

“There is absolutely nothing wrong with asking questions or investigating our history, doctrine, and practices. The Restoration began when Joseph Smith sought answers to his sincere questions. [...] When someone comes to you with a question or a concern, please do not brush the question off—do not tell him or her to not worry about the question. Please do not doubt the person’s dedication to the Lord or His work. Instead, help the person find the answers to their questions.”¹⁸

We share with students our own process of seeking answers to difficult questions, and the ways that this has built--and continues to build--our faith in Jesus Christ. We are honest with them about our current understanding and grappling. We teach them to search relentlessly, ponder sincerely, pray faithfully, and to “doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith.”¹⁹

Principle 2: Christ-like love is the greatest motivator in teaching, including with those whose practices or values differ from my own. Most dimensions of human difference (e.g., language, national origin, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) have nothing to do with sin. Even when other dimensions do, like sexual behaviors of parents or youth that are inconsistent with the law of chastity, our task as educators is the same: provide safe and meaningful learning experiences and developmental opportunities.

¹⁶ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join With Us,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2013

¹⁷ Kevin J Worthen, “BYU: A Unique Kind of Education,” BYU Conference address, 28 August 2017.

¹⁸ M. Russell Ballard, “To the Saints of the Utah South Area,” A Regional Broadcast to the Utah South Area of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 13 September 2015.

¹⁹ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join With Us,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2013

The most important motivator in our work as educators of faith is Christ-like love--love for students, love for subject, and love of the Lord.²⁰ Our love should not depend in any way on the extent to which students' or their parents' values or practices reflect our own. When we sense even the slightest dependence, we should apply Elder Uchtdorf's bumper-sticker adage: "Don't judge me because I sin differently than you."²¹

Christ-like love does not ignore or diminish student differences, but seeks to understand, to appreciate, and to integrate differences to enhance classroom teaching and learning. The role of public school educators is to foster spaces of belonging in order to teach academic content meaningfully, not necessarily to impose our values. Educators of faith should be open with our values, practices, and traditions as a way for students to do the same, especially when they differ from ours.

We seek to model this love in our relationships with BYU students in our courses. We strive to make "our classrooms [...] spaces for love, spaces for testimony, spaces for mourning and understanding, spaces for agency, and spaces for joy."²²

Principle 3: Becoming an effective multicultural educator is a process, not a destination. A refrain that we grapple regularly with in BYU multicultural education courses is that "we see the world not as it is, but as we are." An inevitable truth of our mortal sojourns, this is a critical realization for multicultural educators. To enhance the effectiveness of our teaching across social and cultural differences, educators must learn to see as others see. We must establish and maintain meaningful relationships and regular interactions with those who differ from us.

In this sense, becoming effective multicultural educators is akin to developing Christlike character. It is a process rather than a destination. BYU President Kevin J Worthen recently asserted,

"[P]erhaps the only way we can remain sufficiently humble and charitable is to ask ourselves, every day, the question, 'Am I sufficiently humble and charitable?' And we need to be open, every day, to the thought that we may not be."²³

²⁰ John S. Tanner, "Notes from an Amateur on Academic Excellence," BYU Conference address, 24 August 2004.

²¹ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Merciful Obtain Mercy," *Ensign or Liahona*, Apr. 2012

²² Eric D. Huntsman, "Hard Sayings and Safe Spaces: Making Room for Struggle as Well as Faith," BYU Conference address, 7 August 2018.

²³ Kevin J Worthen, "BYU: A Unique Kind of Education," BYU Conference address, 28 August 2017.

We strive to model for our students the quest to develop Christlike character and the critical dispositions of multicultural educators--i.e., social awareness, student advocacy, and meekness.²⁴ We intend for all of our assignments, classroom activities, and interactions with students to move a little closer to this lofty aim.

Conclusion

In his "Second-Century Address" to BYU faculty, students, and staff, President Kimball invited us to confront "pain, challenge, and adjustment" in order to "serve the world better."²⁵ He specifically said that "we look forward to more being done in the field of education." We are convinced that BYU education graduates should be among "the best in [the] field"²⁶ of multicultural education, because we strive to emulate the character of our Savior Jesus Christ, the Master Multicultural Educator. Accomplishing this requires us as BYU faculty to encourage students to grapple faithfully, to love without condition, and to endlessly strive. We are committed to practicing these principles of teaching.

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²⁴ Bryant Jensen, Erin Feinauer Whiting, and Sara Chapman, "Measuring the Multicultural Dispositions of Preservice Teachers," *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment* (2018)

²⁵ Spencer W. Kimball, "Second-Century Address," BYU Devotional, 10 October 1975.

²⁶ BYU Mission Statement