

Taking on Tradition

Survey reveals strategies for principals wishing to promote multicultural understanding in rural, predominantly white schools

By Jacquelynne Anne Chase

Imagine a town where there are fields of potatoes as far as the eye can see, and where there are more cows and chickens than people. The people are friendly and welcoming, and an iconic small-town charm fills the air. These are the hallmarks that come to mind when thinking of my hometown in western Massachusetts.

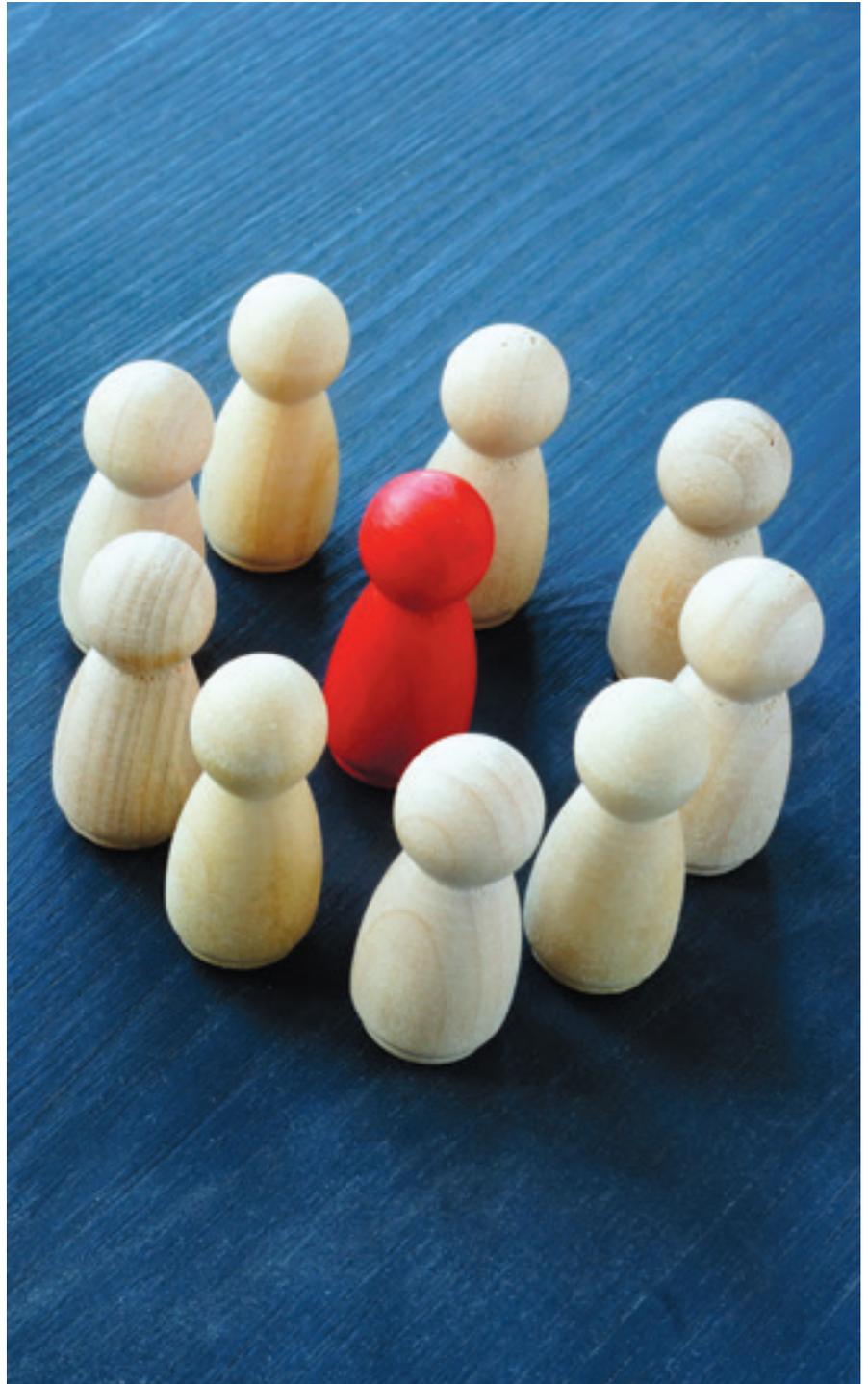
But people's remarks were often speckled with an unconscious racism. In bars, white farmers would praise their Jamaican workers' performance while referring to them using racial epithets. In schools, white teachers would teach predominantly white classes about Christopher Columbus without hesitation and deem current events too politically charged to discuss.

As a white teacher at a predominantly white school, I could have ignored race as a topic in my classrooms. But learning about race is necessary if students ever wish to leave their racially homogeneous communities. Race is integral to understanding U.S. history and a vital part of engaged citizenship.

Teaching Touchy Subjects

As a teacher, I made diversity education and exposure a main tenet of my instruction. I had students read the newspaper daily and hosted Socratic seminars on topics that the principal considered "touchy," such as the 2016 election, immigration reform, and gun control. When suggesting such topics, I was often met with doubt or discouragement rather than support.

Fifth- and sixth-graders were asking questions about what they saw on the news, however, and they were mimicking racist things they heard outside



of school. Hearing students use racial slurs on the playground during my first year, I realized that we as a school needed to make multicultural understanding a priority.

I wasn't taken seriously. The administration was focused on keeping traditions alive, not on prioritizing the expansion of multicultural understanding in our predominantly white, rural school. I recall a staff meeting in which I suggested a schoolwide Indigenous People's Day celebration alongside the traditional scarecrow-making competition and was quickly turned down by the leadership team.

At another staff meeting, I asked whether we could reengineer our holiday craft night in December as a multifaith celebration with different stations for each of the holidays in December—Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Three Kings Day, etc. The principal rejected the idea, saying that parent volunteers like to do the same crafts every year.

Tradition became one of my greatest hurdles. I knew that if I wanted to prioritize multicultural understanding among students, I would need to do it in my own classroom. Even there, however, I faced challenges: On one occasion, I was told that an article mentioning the Ku Klux Klan was “too vulgar” for students to read, even in context.

A Study of Support

Undeterred by such setbacks, I decided to explore multiculturalism further. As part of my dissertation, I conducted an explanatory, sequential mixed-method study that began with a closed-response survey sent to

167 Massachusetts principals—all of whom were at predominantly white, rural schools that housed at least one middle grade (5–8).

The topics in the survey addressed three guiding research questions:

1. To what degree do principals consider it a priority to expand multicultural understanding in predominantly white, rural, middle-school grades?
2. What are principals doing to expand multicultural understanding in predominantly white, rural, middle-school grades?
3. What do principals report are the factors and conditions that inhibit and support their efforts to expand multicultural understandings in predominantly white, rural, middle-school grades?



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Out of 17 survey responses, 10 principals agreed to participate in in-depth interviews to get further detail on their perspectives. Here are the findings.

First, a schoolwide theme of “acceptance for all” might not be effective. What is effective is for principals to have direct control over their personal multicultural understandings.

Next, principal goals that match school goals promote multiculturalism, and principals expressed a desire to guide and support

teachers in expanding multicultural understandings more effectively.

Finally, specific aspects of school culture influence the expansion of multicultural understanding, and flexible subject areas supported principals fostering multicultural work.

So, what steps can principals wishing to expand multicultural understanding take to improve their practice? Data analysis and a review of literature led to recommendations that have the potential to aid principals at schools of

all demographic makeups. The most important recommendations are:

- Include multiculturalism in the school’s mission.
- Share personal multicultural understandings to benefit teachers and students.
- Tie professional practice goals to district or school improvement plans when the focus is on expanding multicultural understanding.
- Provide more multicultural professional development opportunities to teachers.
- Provide teachers with resources and time to practice modeling multicultural understanding for students.
- Take time to look at the school culture as a whole and consider how the culture embodies multiculturalism.
- Help teachers plan how to use required standards to leverage multicultural understanding in their curricula.

Specific aspects of school culture influence the expansion of multicultural understanding.



There’s a dearth of information on principals supporting predominantly white, rural schools in expanding middle-grade students’ multicultural understanding, so this study is a first step toward filling that void. It’s also a call to action for leaders, since principal support has been linked to teacher effectiveness and student achievement, and multicultural understanding is essential to globalized, responsible citizenship.

Students can’t build these understandings without the support and guidance of their school. If principals could put these recommendations to work in their practice, teachers, students, and entire communities could benefit. Reflect on the list above and ask yourself whether you have taken the appropriate steps—and address what might be lacking. **P**

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