

The National SEED Project

Cathy L. Nelson

The National SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project on Inclusive Curriculum provides K-12 teachers an opportunity to renew their teaching selves and consider what gender-inclusive and multicultural curriculums might look like. The project seeks to engage teachers in curricular and systemic change by bringing issues of race, gender, class, and ethnicity into their classrooms. In seven-day summer workshops, SEED leaders prepare to facilitate monthly three-hour seminars for other teachers during the following school year.

Since 1987, SEED has held seminars led by 198 teachers in 32 states and 7 Asian countries. To date, more than 2,500 educators have participated. Peggy McIntosh, Associate Director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, and Emily Style, English teacher and Diversity Coordinator in the Madison, New Jersey, School District, have co-directed the project since it began.

At the workshops, project leaders and consultants speak from many disciplines and reflect diverse ethnic backgrounds. Sessions immerse participants in recent scholarship on inclusive education, model teaching strategies to link content and pedagogy, and are grounded in the experiences of participants.

In 1988 I became part of a SEED community of 35 learners who teach. Looking at the textbooks of our lives was essential before imagining school climate and curriculums that would more accurately reflect our diverse world. During our first moments together as a community of scholars/learners, we read aloud our personal versions of Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," drawing upon the gendered and remembered voices from our own pasts. The first stories we told were our own. The first voices we heard were our own. Immediately we recognized the authenticity and power of our own lived experiences.

Conversations continued throughout the week, formally and informally. We read and discussed recent scholarship reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of women's and ethnic studies. We were exposed to a growing body of scholarship that calls into question traditional content and practices in schools. Initially overwhelming, the many books, articles, films, and videos shared by the consultants ultimately brought into focus much that my own education had not included.

A particularly useful metaphor developed by Emily Style suggests that an inclusive curriculum provides students with a balance of *windows*—to frame and acknowledge the diverse experiences of others—and *mirrors*—to reflect the reality and validity of each student.⁽¹⁾ My own K-12 education excluded the experiences of women, all people of color, and people with disabilities. Before I could change my own teaching, I had to recognize how entrenched I was in replicating a past that had provided me and most of my students with few windows and mirrors.

Seminar leaders shared materials and strategies to facilitate curricular change, including Peggy McIntosh's theoretical work on curriculum⁽²⁾ and invisible systems of privilege.⁽³⁾ Experienced project leaders described the various ways they approached their seminars.

When I returned to my school district, we issued an open invitation to our K-12 staff and neighboring district personnel to participate in SEED and provided \$1,000 for materials. Twenty teachers responded. Together we rediscovered and reactivated the

curious learners within ourselves, giving one another the gift of time for adult conversations and ending our professional isolation.

At the monthly seminars, we expanded the perspectives we bring to our classrooms by looking more closely at the courses we teach. Risk-taking became expected behavior, and we shared how the content and processes are changing in our classrooms.

For example, at one seminar a middle school teacher revealed that the 8th grade English curriculum included no books with female protagonists. That soon changed. Another teacher with a graduate degree in English realized that his own education had never required him to read a book by a woman and only two books by African-American men.

Also, the tradition of discussing people of color only as victims of dominant cultures contrasted sharply with our new understandings, as we read together works by Zora Neale Hurston, Michael Dorris, Ignatia Broker, Amy Tan, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, and other authors of color.

During our discussions, some teachers recalled preservice education programs that had directed them to “select materials boys will read, because girls will read anything.” The process of learning to teach inclusively includes *unlearning* as well.

I am proud to be part of a network that respects teachers and regard us central to improving education. The project has been critical in the process of becoming the teacher I want to be. Perhaps SEED’s greatest strength is bringing teachers together in conversation with one another within and across disciplines and districts. At the project’s core is a fundamental belief that, given the opportunity, teachers will inspire, motivate, and learn with one another. Trusting the adult learners teachers are. Learning to listen to our own voices as well as others.

⁽¹⁾ E. Style, (1988), “Curriculum as Window and Mirror.” In *Listening for All Voices: Gender Balancing the School Curriculum*, pp.6-12, (Summit, N.J.: Oak Knoll).

⁽²⁾ P. McIntosh, (1983), *Interactive Phases of Curricular Re-Vision: A Feminist Perspective*, and (1990), *Interactive Phases of Curricular and Personal Revision with Regard to Race*, (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women Working Papers No. 124 and 219, Wellesley, Mass.).

⁽³⁾ P. McIntosh, (1988), *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies*, (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women Working Paper No. 189, Wellesley, Mass.).

Cathy L. Nelson taught secondary social studies at Fridley High School in Fridley, Minnesota and founded the MN Inclusiveness Program. For additional information on the MN SEED Training, please contact <<< miprogram@aol.com >>>.

Reprinted from EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP, December 1991/January 1992