

A Mountain Cultural Curriculum: Telling Our Story

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Abstract

Jim Wayne Miller, professor of English at Western Kentucky University, declared that school children in West Virginia have more exposure to other cultures than they do to their own. His concern was that, "Lack of knowledge about the area's history helps perpetuate negative stereotypes about the region's mountain people" (Associated Press, 1994). If the Mountain Culture, to which many of the students belong, is not reflected in the curriculum, their identity, voice, heritage, history, and arts are censored and the Mountain Cultural youth are rendered invisible in their own state. Results from a survey of three elementary schools located in three counties in West Virginia served as the impetus to develop and implement curricular changes to include Mountain Culture. In this paper, I describe a case study of one elementary school's use of social reconstruction pedagogy. The project, "Telling Our Story," was implemented in 1995 and 1996 at a rural school in a small West Virginia strip mining community. My husband, David, and I served as Mountain Cultural artists in residence. My role in this project was a participant-observer. My husband and I are from the Mountain

Culture and learned our art forms from our elders in the home and/or community. The project utilized issues of the community, Mountain Cultural arts, and labor history.

Introduction

The Mountain Culture is a response to the geographical land forms, occupations, resistance, oppression, social change, political dynamics, and stereotypic representations of the culture.¹ These components create beliefs, ways of life, traditions, actions, reactions, and art (Morris, 1996). The diverse art forms include ballads, songs, dance, visual art, storytelling, and poetry that tell stories about people, events, and religious beliefs. In Lucy R. Lippard's (1990) exploration of folk art from various cultures, she concluded, "Folk arts has been defined as art that reflects its surroundings. These artists provide intricate maps of reality of daily and spiritual life" (p. 77). In the Mountain Culture, the art forms are passed orally from one generation to the next. The tradition of teaching the art forms includes stories that put the art form, the maker, skills, and medium into context. David Novitz (1992), a philosopher, views stories as part of the art.

It is not just that we have "images," "pictures," and "views" of ourselves which are more or less "balanced," "colorful," or "unified," but that we also have "stories" and "narratives" to tell about our lives which both shape and convey our sense of self. (p. 86)

The elementary school that participated in the case study is located in a small rural community. Since the development of automated coal mining and the decline of the railroad system, the once prosperous community's population and job opportunities have dwindled. Many subsist below the poverty line. The majority of the students are from the Mountain Culture whose families have lived in the immediate area for two generations or more. The school's principal gleaned this information through the community's oral and written history. There

¹In a previous study, I interviewed 16 West Virginia Mountain Cultural artists. I asked them to define Mountain Culture, the art forms from that culture, and the methods of teaching (Morris, 1996). Their definitions were used for this paper and project.

were five classroom teachers, one physical educator, and one part-time art educator. Out of the seven teachers, only two, the physical and art educators were from West Virginia. The school is considered the center of the community. Parent participation is high and a town/school reunion is held every other summer. David Morris and I were artists in residence at the school in 1994. The principal received a grant to implement school-wide thematic curricula in 1995 and 1996, and hired David and I as coordinators and artists for one of the projects.

This paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, I define the multicultural approach that I utilized. In the second section, I describe the development and implementation of the Mountain Cultural curriculum. In the third section, I focus on examples of lessons and activities. In the fourth section, I explore the evaluations of the project from the students', parents', artists', and teachers' views. This case study of incorporating Mountain Culture in West Virginia's public education is an example of social reconstruction and multicultural education through the traditions of the Mountain Culture.

Pedagogy and Multiple Perspectives

Prior to discussing the Mountain Cultural curriculum, I will establish an understanding of the terms "culture," "multiple cultures," and "multicultural education" as applied in this project. Fairchild (1970) states that culture encompasses "all behavior patterns socially acquired and socially transmitted by means of symbols" (p. 80). By extension culture includes customs, techniques, beliefs, institutions, and material objects. Garcia and Pugh (1992) conceive of culture as "a kind of argument that stems from certain premises or given conditions, both material and nonmaterial" (p. 218). Owens (1987) believes that culture represents values, or what one thinks is important, beliefs, or what one thinks is true, and norms, or how one acts. Davidman (1995) offers the notion of social or cultural groups as any group having

an identity or label which is recognized or created in a macroculture (from within or outside the social group . . . [T]his is the case because its identity and label are facts which are negotiated or given meaning within that specific macroculture. (p. 10)

Davidman (1995) also observes that cultural groups may have identity in one macroculture but not another. We can consider these conceptions of culture at various levels, including perspectives of individual, family, and community.

The goals of multicultural education in general have broadened from their initial intent to address issues of civil rights and racism in the 1960s and 1970s to a reform movement that includes issues related to ethnicity, gender, class, language, ability, and age. Banks (1993) identifies content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure as dimensions of multicultural education. In a sociopolitical context, Nieto (1992) asserts that, "Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism" (p. 208). Nieto's concept of multicultural education centers around critical pedagogy, in which social change becomes the ultimate goal. In striving to achieve such goals, Nieto (1992) assumes that multicultural education is for everyone without exception. Teachers should not be the sole recipients of criticism for student failure, since schools, communities, and society in general, are inseparable.

Sleeter (1989) conceptualizes multicultural education as one which seeks to develop political resistance to oppression, and believes that the tasks of multicultural education should be to:

1. Articulate more clearly what social changes are desired, and to clarify the relative importance of addressing individual prejudice and stereotyping versus inequality among groups.
2. Delineate exactly who is struggling against whom over what, and develop strategies to promote solidarity and a clear sense of an agenda for social action.
3. Develop organizational structures that articulate and promote the goals of multicultural education and social movements with which it is connected.

4. Study the politics of social change and translate this into teaching approaches for classroom use.

5. Systematize insights into educational organizational structures, curriculum, and instruction in a developmental fashion. (pp. 66-68)

This approach to multicultural education reflects a social reconstructivist mindset, one which critiques contemporary culture from an orientation that addresses issues of oppression and social structural inequality.

My conception of education that imbues elements of multiple cultures and perspectives evolves from my own teaching experience and the writings of these educators and researchers. Taken collectively, the models of multicultural education indicated the need for the following guidelines in the design and implementation of the Mountain Cultural curriculum:

1. Multicultural education is basic to all learning experiences.

2. Participatory interaction is encouraged of all learners.

3. Critical dialogue strives for self and social empowerment.

4. Multiplicity of problems and solutions is recognized.

5. Assumptions of language, communication, behavior, and power are examined.

Mountain culture traditions and manner of teaching aligns with the social reconstructive multicultural education approach. In my previous study, Mountain Cultural artists referred to a process of learning their art form that included recognizing oppression, valuing resistance, and using the arts as a social tool for reformation (Morris, 1995). The elders and artists of the community were their teachers, and

the schools included these cultural teachers in school functions. The tradition of resistance and exploitation is a central part of the Mountain Culture and artists interpret this tradition in many forms (Morris, 1995). The primary teaching method used in the Mountain Culture is shared stories, observation, and hands-on exploration (Whisnant, 1983; Jones, 1994; Morris 1995). I used these traditions and educational processes as the foundation for pedagogy in the classroom. The Mountain Cultural curriculum involved teachers in a critical examination of the history of the Mountain Cultures' traditions, rituals, and struggles with colonialists. The objectives were to encourage students' development of cultural pride, value, sense of place, cultural identity, and voice.

Developing and Implementing a Mountain Cultural Curriculum

In developing the curriculum, the coordinators made decisions regarding the required or encouraged nature of multicultural education and whether separate, sequenced or infused strategies should be applied. At this point in the project, it was important to review previous approaches by the school in exploring cultures and /or Mountain Culture. One teacher had integrated heritage activities and equated heritage and culture. The heritage approach, as she described it, emphasized "the good ole days," and addressed activities such as making butter. The idea of exploring the purpose and relevancy of those activities to the children's lives was not a part of her decision-making process regarding curriculum. Sterilized romantic representations re-define history and ignore injustice, exploitation, and resistance. Because this was the only inclusion of Mountain Culture in their educational system, I concluded that staff development would be the first phase.

At the staff development workshop, I spoke about positive resistance, critical analysis, and critical consciousness; and gave the staff a packet of lesson plans that utilized those components. I introduced art works that expressed socio-cultural issues of the Mountain Culture. The packet also included issues, critical questions, and resources to encourage the teachers to explore beyond the lesson plans. At first, the teachers feared repercussions for teaching about Mountain Culture issues and critical actions. The principal voiced her concerns about viewing and teaching resistance as a positive concept. She spoke about her goal to "squash" such thoughts. To her, resistance and behavioral problems were the same.

I decided that if critical analysis and critical consciousness were going to be a part of this project, I would need to utilize peer coaching. I modeled critical analysis with the students in the teachers' classrooms while they observed. Afterwards, I met privately with each teacher concerning observations and ways to teach critical thinking. Each teacher observed and met with me for **five** days over a period of **three** weeks. We evaluated why some strategies worked well and others did not. Familiarity with the processes helped the teachers feel more comfortable asking questions that might lead to unpredictable student responses.

Previous heritage programs were usually held for one week. I presented Howard Gardner's (1995) idea that, "It makes far more sense to spend a significant amount of time on key concepts, generative ideas, and essential questions and to allow students to become thoroughly familiar with these notions and their implications to nearly every topic" (p. 208). Since it was the stated goal of the group to teach lifelong skills, the length of time was increased from one week to six weeks. The teachers stated that this would allow them ample time to explore the topics in multiple perspectives and learning styles.

As the coordinator of this six-week project, I had asked both the teachers and David to come prepared to share ideas at a staff development meeting for the purpose of creating a curriculum. We also discussed the importance of including the community in the project to help dissuade the County Board of Education from closing the school. The group decided that a festival and its media coverage would be a good opportunity to introduce resistance to the proposed closing. We agreed that the curriculum themes would be resistance, positive cultural identity, and community pride. We developed the following curriculum guidelines:

1. Examine community issues that affect students.
2. Have students and teachers gather data regarding targeted issues that are reflected in current media and arts including magazines, newspapers, movies, television, cartoons, and books.
3. View, read, and analyze from multiple perspectives and

agendas.

4. Bring in guest speakers such as artists, historical society representatives, labor representatives, and community members.

5. Examine oral, local, regional, state, and world histories regarding chosen issues.

6. Study current and past artistic interpretations, such as poetry, dance, tunes, ballads, plays, and stories that express chosen issues.

7. Based on research, art forms, and discussions, have the students produce a variety of projects that reflect their experience, community, history, heritage, arts, culture, talents, and interests.

8. Evaluate and analyze the educational process by exploring questions such as: Has this experience changed my perspective? What have I learned? How can I take the new knowledge and manifest change for myself, my community, and state?

David and I presented lessons on the occupations of the town, John Henry's resistance to industrial change, local historical events, and *Rocks in My Pockets*, a book by Bonnie Collins (1989), about mountain people's values, ways, and relationship to people from outside their culture. These core materials were integrated into all subjects and explored in a variety of ways. The teachers implemented self-directed community research.

Activities for Social and Cultural Consciousness

In phase two, the classroom teachers chose activities and lessons to introduce the students to the study of their culture(s) and community. All the grades explored: jobs of the past and present, how occupations created the town, food ways, stories, games of the past, and family lore.

The students and teachers completed a variety of projects and explored each one extensively.

In one of the lessons, they explored the theme, “John Henry, man or myth.” The tunnel where John Henry had worked, raced the steam engine, and died is located near this school. The students’ had not explored the importance of John Henry to their lives. The teachers showed a variety of film and animated versions of the John Henry story. Each version was critically examined and compared to the others. From their examination, the students developed several notions. The first was the importance of a story, narrative or written, and how, in this case, the story encouraged multiple artistic interpretations. The second notion involved the way each version and interpretation had a slightly different purpose. The example the students used was a cartoon that portrayed John Henry as a mythical character disregarding historical evidence that he lived, or was at least a compilation of several men. The students compared that version to the *Dance Theater of Harlem’s* signature piece *John Henry*. The students saw the dance version as emphasizing strength, courage, and racial tension. This led the students to an exploration of the different reasons people tell stories.

The students and teachers viewed a visual interpretation of John Henry by West Virginia sculptor, Charlie Permelia at *Mountain Homestead*, a living history museum in Beckley, West Virginia. Permelia depicted building a railroad, digging a tunnel, and the John Henry Steamdrill Race. It comprises 400 separate pieces made from 56 types of wood grown in West Virginia. The trip included a visit to the Exhibition Coal Mine. Students rode a mantrip that goes through a converted mine. An ex-miner served as a guide and told stories about constructing a mine, mining, and mining disasters. Many of the children’s parents and grandparents were and are miners. Prior to this, many of the students spoke about their lack of knowledge about coal mines because they had never seen one. The trip helped them realize what a mine is and what is required to work in one. What they had imagined it would look like compared to what they saw was for many a moving experience. The teachers stated that this led to various classroom discussions and explorations that included labor and union history.

In phase three, David and I integrated their explorations into Mountain Cultural art forms. The objectives were to have students and teachers explore the traditions through documentation, written

formats, visual interpretation, drama, ballad singing, and movement. We emphasized the variety of languages or disciplines that we could utilize to express self, culture, ideas, and life experiences. Students utilized critical analyses in examining the past and representation of the past, such as the story of John Henry and how literature and popular media portrayed John Henry.

The week long residency culminated with a “Community Festival.” The tradition of festivals goes back to the early 1800s and was used as a format that included political, social, and cultural components (Whisnant, 1983). The arts were a tool for social change, an approach that is advocated today by some social and critical theorists as a way to develop social and cultural transformation (Giroux, 1992; Trend, 1992). It was within the tradition of the Mountain Culture that the arts were used as tools to re-establish cultural and social practices, and that the festivals celebrated community, identity, and voice. The stated intention of the principal and teachers was to bring to the community’s attention the Board of Education’s decision to close the school. They hoped that the awareness of the school’s closing and reminder of positive resistance through articulation of voice and community protest would save the school.

The fifth/sixth grade (combination class) wrote a historical, speculative play based on one student’s actual experience of finding a pre-Civil War sword stuck vertically into the ground. With the help of the local historical society and the State archeologist, the students obtained information regarding the town’s involvement in the Civil War, and how a sword was used as a marker to locate buried payroll, important documents, and/or a body. The students used the information to write a play. They cast themselves and wrote their own lines. Students designed and created a backdrop, costumes, and set.

The fourth grade class explored the ballad as an art form, after they enjoyed a ballad that David had sung for them entitled “Barbara Allen.” The story in this old Scottish ballad reveals how a young woman’s jealousy led to the death of the young man who loved her and then to her own death. A rose grew from the lover’s grave and from her grave a briar, which then intertwined. The use of the metaphor and the moral of the story highly motivated the students to hear more ballads. On the whole, the class enjoyed visualizing the action in the ballad stories and were eager to learn the art form of ballad making. The class collected

oral and written histories about their community, and learned to sing the ballad of *John Henry*. Due to the previous in-depth exploration of John Henry, we expanded this study by including a historical examination of how technology affects our lives. We discussed the importance that John Henry's resistance to modernity has had on the world, and how his resistance did not change technological advancement but encouraged self-determination. The study of John Henry served as an example of the liberation of oppressed people through his ability to empower workers to take pride in their culture and history, and to fight for their rights. His memory and drive were and are used to represent collective groups and unions. Using their experiences and collected information, they wrote a ballad about their community. The students included resistance as a response to the possibility of their school being closed. They viewed their school as the center of their community. In the last verse, the students recognized change but they viewed the change as a natural occurrence that should not keep people from acting like a community:

We have all seen some change
 Nothing stays the same
 At our long history we can look
 There's still community
 People can't you see
 On Pax we'll never close the book
 (Morris, 1995, p. 196)

The second/third grades (combination class) concentrated on visual and movement interpretations of the Mountain Culture. They made dancing body self-portraits and learned to flatfoot, a Mountain Cultural dance form. We critically examined the difference between flatfoot dance, as they learned it, and what they had seen in movies, television, and cartoons. In many of the examples viewed, the children felt there was an attempt "to make fun of us." We discussed reasons why people of the Mountain Culture are ridiculed in popular media. Shows such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*, an episode of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and *Bugs Bunny* were reviewed for their stereotypical representation of the Mountain Culture people. As part of this exploration, we countered the misrepresentation with their observations of their people and place.

The combined class of kindergartners and first graders wrote a

song about occupations in their town and a person in the town that they believed was important to their community. This person was also used as an example of a positive image of the Mountain Culture because she had won the blue ribbon at the West Virginia State Fair in 1994 for her biscuits. It was interesting to note the children's commentary in their song regarding mining and who gets the coal and who doesn't.

Fayette County, West Virginia
There's the little town of Pax
Right through the middle
Runs the railroad track.
The miners mine the coal.
The train wheels roll
And they take away the coal
But they never bring it back.
We grow the gardens, we make the jelly
And we put it on a biscuit made by Phyllis Kelly.
At the Pax Reunion we all gather around
We're all mighty proud of our home town.
(Morris, 1995, p. 191)

Evaluation

David and I went back to the school nine months later. We visited the classrooms and spoke about stereotypic images of the Mountain Culture—specifically the image and word *hillbilly*. Nine months earlier, the majority accepted the word *hillbilly*. A few had internalized some of the characteristics. An example of this was observed when one of the children made a mistake while painting the play backdrop. The child slipped into a southern drawl and stated, "Dah, I'm just a dumb hillbilly." Several other children who heard this student laughed and repeated the derogatory statement. However, they also voiced their hatred or dismissal of the image. Now, many of the children spoke freely about the image of themselves and their people and what was being projected onto them by popular media's portrayal of them. We examined the historical, political, and social context of the stereotype—and questioned why the image exists. We discussed possibilities for change and action that would be necessary for transformation to occur.

The students had been familiar with the school rules of no

talking and no movement in the classroom. The Mountain Culture project involved collaboration, talking together, and moving from group to group. Their normal school routine had been replaced with activities that required self control within organized chaos. The teachers responded with their concern regarding students' response to being called *hillbillies*. Once the project concluded the teachers' enforced the prior school rules of no talking or movement in the classroom. Some students had not developed self-discipline. Apparently, on the last day of our residence, an outbreak of negative behavior had occurred that included name calling. For the teachers, this confirmed their belief that exploring resistance leads to fighting. The two fights were enough for the teachers to stop exploring positive resistance. David and I used this opportunity to revisit John Henry's positive resistance to the Industrial Revolution. John Henry did not stop the Industrial Revolution from occurring, but his courage and determination gave him a voice. We reviewed John Henry's description of himself as a "natural man," and what that might have meant to him. The objective was to learn how to assert voice within appropriate behavioral guidelines. Simply stated, no fighting allowed. The children played out "what if" situations, such as, "What if someone called you a *dumb hillbilly*?" As a group, we analyzed the responses.

At the end of the day, some of the students wanted to review the songs they had learned nine months ago, others wanted to dance, and a few wanted to draw pictures. After a day of group work, it was interesting to note that the students separated into small self-interest groups. David led a sing-a-long. I danced with students, while others sat at tables or on the floor and drew pictures of John Henry, mountains, or portraits of David and me. They had remembered the art, songs, and dance, and that through traditions, strength for resistance is restored. This is the essence of Mountain Cultural curriculum. We taught through the cultural traditions of learning, storytelling, and the arts.

Overall the students were responsive to this approach and each participated in their own way. Parents observed their children doing self-assigned homework. Examples given were:

1. Drew pictures about their day.
2. Interviewed parents and grandparents about Mountain Culture issues.

3. Went to the town library to get books on the project's themes.
4. Students changed their requests from, "I want to go to the library" to "I need to go because we are studying John Henry."

The teachers' evaluations of this project were divided. Immediately following the community festival, the teachers felt the positive energy from the students and parents. The community had responded positively and the press coverage was good. The teachers, at the time, responded with pride in their students and relief that the project came together so well. Two months after the project, their evaluations were still positive and included criticisms that I expected. The teachers complained that the project required too much research, too much time, and left them drained. Some of the specific responses given were:

1. There was no single textbook to consult.
2. During the artists' week, their schedules changed.
3. Children were too excited and hard to control.
4. Lack of a schedule created discipline problems.

The teachers stated the positive components of the program as:

1. Students that were labeled difficult or learning disabled participated more fully. The teachers attributed this to the oral components such as storytelling and singing.
2. Children seemed to enjoy the self-directing research. Two teachers stated they were surprised that the students actually wanted to explore issues and had anticipated that students would slough it off and do very little work.
3. The community seemed interested and more parents

volunteered to participate than in previous projects.

4. The project was important to the students, personally and educationally. The teachers stated that students talked about their involvement and contributions for months and would refer to the project in classroom discussions connecting their exploration or culture to new topics. One teacher regarded this as annoying and disruptive and a negative component of the program and asked, "What does one issue have to do with the other?"

The teachers and principal stated that they were committed to this pedagogical approach and would continue to explore social, political, historical, and cultural issues. However, for their own comfort, they wanted to review ways to implement stricter discipline and conduct less research while utilizing the Mountain Culture curriculum. The teachers' criticism of the project was focused on discipline issues and teacher control versus student self-directed behavior. I had not anticipated this conflict, but I conclude that this is a by-product of the principal's discipline philosophy and policy. Disorder of any type is not tolerated. The principal believed that control over the students' behaviors was essential to having an efficient and productive school. The principal's strict disciplinary policies may be due to time constraints since she served as both the school's principal and the fourth grade teacher. I had not observed the teachers in their classroom prior to our participation. If I had, I believe that I would have been able to identify control over the students as a major objective for the teachers. By identifying this conflict, I could have suggested positive reactions and actions when using a critical student-directed approach to dealing with organized chaos and students' excitement over the project. The teachers felt a loss of control over their classroom, and reacted by applying more restrictions which created more confusion and frustration for the students. It was difficult for me to believe that teachers would react so negatively to children's excitement in learning. I observed a real need for classroom management skills. The teachers recognized the conflict in their evaluation but blamed the program. From this I learned that in future applications, knowledge of the school's discipline philosophy and individual teaching styles is necessary to insure that conflict resolution can be a part of the curricula.

This case study described and interpreted how a school faculty

and community defined and explored cultural identity, history, and the idea of community. In reviewing the evaluations, I concluded that the project met the overall objective which was finding the silenced voice and fostering a sense of cultural identity. Perhaps the most salient suggestion for the field of art education would be for art educators to reconceptualize the notion of multicultural education by viewing multiple cultures and perspectives as an ongoing process that begins with self and filters out. In developing a strong sense of identity, we may view other cultures as broader patterns of similarity and difference. The objective is to eliminate the notions of exotic and romantic from culture and replace it with self-determined voice and respect. Revisiting issues and themes and expanding the explorations by including multiple cultures and perspectives reiterates that culture is always changing. The benefit, of course, for all students, regardless of their ethnic, racial, and cultural background, is to engage in equitable learning.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates the need to help students identify their cultural selves as a foundation for recognizing their inclusion in the discussion of culture and related topics. By constructing personal narratives or coherent life stories, each participant established an important connection to their cultural identity. Stivers (1993) expounds upon this idea, "We find identity and meaning as result of the stories we tell about ourselves or that others tell about us. Therefore, a narrative approach to self-understanding is not a distortion of reality but a confirmation of it" (p. 412). If their story is not included, as in this case when the Mountain Culture is excluded from the majority of schools in West Virginia, the cultural identity and voices of the culture are silenced. The teachers, David, and I discovered that once the students found their voices and felt that they were heard, they had much to express.

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