

Summer camp programs foster multicultural awareness

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Elementary-age is a time when children are curious about the world, have the natural predisposition for learning other languages, and enjoy being exposed to new and challenging educational experiences. Because regular school programs are unable to cover all possible topics and ensure the successful future of your child, exploring a multicultural summer camp provides wonderful opportunities to help children acquire the necessary skills to function effectively in a globalized world. Nowadays, schools and teachers seem so overwhelmed by covering content in order to pass the State standardized tests that little or no time is left to create multicultural awareness among children. The purpose of this paper is to describe how a summer camp program provides a rich avenue for multicultural education.

What is a multicultural summer camp? One of the goals of this type of summer program is for students to explore another language, and acquire first-hand knowledge of another culture from an international faculty member for a short intensive period.

The second language is taught mainly using the language immersion approach. Foreign language immersion is an approach to teaching another language that involves immersing students in the target language throughout the day. "Immersion represents the most intensive form of content-based foreign language instruction" (Snow, 1986). The term "immersion education" came to prominence in

Canada during the 1960's to describe innovative programs in which French language was used as a medium of instruction for elementary students whose home language was English.

In immersion, language learning is done in such a natural way that students feel comfortable with the instruction and instructors. With this approach, children are curious and less self-conscious than adults in exploring new languages.

The international faculty who work in these summer programs are the key to multicultural awareness. They bring a taste of their countries into the classrooms by teaching their native language and culture. Learning a second culture will also help children contribute significantly to their own culture and to a global world. "One of the goals of multicultural education is to help all students to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to interact, negotiate, and communicate with peoples from diverse groups in order to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good" (Banks and Banks, 1995).

Summer camps with a multicultural perspective encourage appreciation and understanding of other cultures as well as one's own culture. "Teaching with a multicultural perspective promotes the child's sense of uniqueness of his own culture as a positive characteristic and enables the child to accept the uniqueness of the cultures of others" (Gomez,

1991).

As a director of a multicultural summer camp for many years, I have observed that there are a growing number of families who are choosing this kind of summer program for their children. For example, The International School summer camp program in Portland, Oregon, grew from a 38 student average in their two-week sessions in 2003 to 127 students average per session in 2007. Such growth indicates a growing interest from the public in these kinds of summer programs. A summer camp may not seem like a long exposure to learn a foreign language, but it is a good way to get a child started and develop interest in other languages and cultures.

What factors are important to consider when choosing a multicultural summer camp program? Language choice is highly personal, and many variables may factor into the language selected. Parents consider a variety of factors including family heritage, languages present in the community, future opportunities for their child, and personal interest. Some families have their child attend camp to reinforce second language learned at home or school; others use summer camp for their child to explore a brand new language and culture.

It's important to remember that whatever language you choose, your child will be getting a window into the broader world. This will stimulate his interest and ability to pursue more learning in any language and culture.

There is so much variety in summer camp programs that it can be difficult to choose. In many of these multicultural summer camps both beginners and advanced speakers are welcome and approximately fifty to seventy percent of a child's day is in the new language, with the remainder in English (e.g., Physical Education, Yoga, Dance, Music and Movements classes). The latter provide the link to their own culture and to the English language.

Finally, as the world continues to exhibit more globalization and inter-dependence, multicultural summer camps provide wonderful opportunities for children to acquire life-long skills that promote understanding and appreciation of others. Young children will become used to the fact that other cultures, languages and points of view exist. And most important, these summer programs will create the awareness in parents and children about the importance of multicultural education as one key to the successful future of their children.