

Multicultural Education in Public Schools

*A Teacher's Survival Guide*

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The *melting pot* paradigm is an integral part of American culture. The United States is a nation of immigrants where individualism and diversity are the ingredients that forge the *American way of life* (Horace, 1915). However, the idea that out of a multiplicity of races, ethnicities and languages, a homogeneous American culture can be created has proven in practice to be unachievable. This reality is particularly evident in the classroom where teachers are faced on a daily basis with a school population that is ever more complex, diverse and less homogeneous. It is the purpose of this guidebook to familiarize front-line public school teachers with the concept of multicultural education, its history, advantages and challenges; as well as to provide some recommendations and guidance on the way that culture can be integrated in class planning; so as to leverage diversity and promote cooperation.

## Definitions

There is no general consensus among the experts as to a definition of *multicultural education*. The term is often used as a synonym for cultural diversity, race, and ethnicity. For our present purpose, the definition offered by Banks (2001) will be utilized. Banks defines multicultural education as *an idea, a movement and a process*:

As an idea, multicultural education seeks to create equal educational opportunities for all students, including those from different racial, ethnic, and social-class groups. Multicultural education tries to create equal educational opportunities for all students by changing the total school environment so that it will reflect the diverse cultures and groups within society and within the nation's classrooms. Multicultural education is a process because its goals are ideals that teachers and administrators should constantly strive to achieve. (p. 2)

The terms *culture*, *race* and *ethnicity* are also difficult to define or generalize, however, for the present purpose, the following definitions offered by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2003) will be used.

*Culture* is defined as “the belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes (language, caretaking practices, media, educational systems) and organizations” (p. 380).

*Race* is a social construct that is used to categorize individuals “on the basis of physical characteristics, such as skin color or hair type, and the generalizations and stereotypes made as a result ” (p.380).

*Ethnicity* is defined as the psychological acceptance “of group mores and practices of one’s culture of origin and the concomitant sense of belonging... . . . individuals may have multiple ethnic identities that operate with different salience at different times” (p.380).

## History

The origins of multicultural education have been traced by Banks (1989, 2001) and others (Mungazi, 1999; Gutek, 1991) to the emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1960’s. During that period, educational institutions were compelled by an increasingly activist national mood to institute curricular reform in order to be more reflective of the racial diversity of the United States. In the 1970’s the women’s rights movement entered the multicultural struggle and pushed for the elimination of sexism in education. Feminist activists argued in favor for curriculum reform that included more emphasis on the history of the women’s rights movement and made evident the lack of female administrators in education; these early attempts at reform

were soon joined by human rights, gay and lesbian groups, the disabled and others. In order to cope with the pressure brought about to bear on the Educational system by the social activism of the time, K-12 schools made modest, mostly cosmetic, adjustments to the curriculum and policy; these insipient steps at reform, formed the foundations of multicultural education in the United States.

In the 1980's scholars such as J. Banks began to provide the research-based scholarly rationale for multicultural education as essentially, *multicultural equality*. In order to create a just (multicultural) school environment, educators, scholars, administrators and policy-makers began to examine all areas of the educational system, including teacher attitudes, curriculum, counseling, assessments, and textbooks. Also, during the late 1980's and 1990's, the landscape of American education began to look increasingly diverse, student population began to appear less white, less protestant, and less affluent. Increased immigration and internal migration patterns driven by globalization and economic upheavals, gave rise to a body of scholarship regarding the importance of addressing multiculturalism in education; Scholars such as Carl Grant (1994), Sonia Nieto (2000) and others (e.g. Sleeter, 2000). began to develop models for equality in education by emphasizing social change.

During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, multiculturalism began to be challenged by an increasingly nativist mood among the American middle class (Durr, 2003). As economic hardships reached the heart of America, the ills of the political system began to be blamed on the tolerance of the earlier periods, and a sharp retrograde swing towards the so-called melting pot became evident in education; critics of multiculturalism began to call for a return to the assimilation policies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Today, Multicultural education is on the rebound due to

the realities faced by educators on the front line of the cultural wars that have found a battleground on the American Public school classroom (Parrish, and Linder-VanBerschot, 2010).

### Advantages and Challenges

Because multiculturalism is often viewed from the single point-of-view of activism, it is difficult to make a clear cost-benefit assessment of the issue. Proponents of multiculturalism, such as the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) argues that multicultural education is beneficial to the individual, because it promotes self-esteem, provides for equality of opportunity, inhibits prejudice and stereotyping, and teaches the basic tenets of social justice, democracy and citizenship. However, critics point out that there are also some noteworthy drawbacks that result from implementation of ill-informed multicultural programs. An important problem lies in the processes utilized to implement multiculturalism into the school curriculum. Webb-Johnson, and associates (1998) point out that considerable time, funds and human resources have to be dedicated in order to make a multicultural education program work, such as “(a) the conceptual model that drives the program, (b) the organizational structure of the program, and (c) the domains of study that guide teacher education research” (p. 12). What this effectively suggests is that considerable planning, funding and manpower are needed to ensure that the outcomes of multicultural education have a positive impact; most school districts lack the wherewithal to implement such programs. Researchers have also noted that multicultural education causes unintended resistance among the dominant culture students, who feel threatened by change, as well as by the minority culture student who sees multicultural education as an attempt to take his or her culture away. Others have argued that multicultural education provides a superficial, often stereotypical, false understanding of other cultures. It is further

argued by sociologists that multiculturalism has the tendency to create cultural islands that are based on arbitrary social categories.

While both critics and advocates paint seemingly irreconcilable faces of the multicultural argument, there is general consensus that multicultural education is not just about creating a costly school environment that promotes cultural awareness, or simply providing students with a superficial understanding of other cultures. Instead, multiculturalism is increasingly seen as a complex system where a multiplicity of competing priorities vie for validation in a classroom setting where teachers are ill prepared to deal with it (Beachum and McCray, 2004); moreover, most agree that multicultural education defies the formulation of one-fits-all remedies so often endemic in educational policy.

#### Multiculturalism on the Frontline

Researchers, policy-makers, scholars, school administrators and activists have been unable to provide a clear direction on the issue of culture in schools; however, teachers all across the nation are faced daily with the reality of a classroom that is ever more diverse, polyglot, multi-racial, and multi-cultural; reality that account for the high rates of teacher burn out and attrition across the nation.

What follows is not intended to solve the larger problem of multiculturalism in America or in the educational system. It is however intended to define some specific (but abstract) basis for the development of class plans that leverage the positive aspects of multicultural education, while inhibiting its negative effects.

## Thinking through a Multicultural Lesson Plan

In order to create a lesson that thrives on diversity, the multicultural educator must first realize that multiculturalism is a double-edged sword. Overemphasizing cultural differences can lead to more bigotry, not less. It can also increase psychological resistance to integration and exacerbate existing between-group conflicts that pervade the school system and are responsible for the rise in violent behavior. Likewise, it is also counterproductive to maintain a Eurocentric, assimilationist worldview in class planning because such an approach helps to perpetuate the intrinsic injustice in Education and limits the student's ability to see beyond the limits of a single culture. Thus, multicultural teachers must become adept in maintain a pragmatic approach in which diversity is leveraged, but not glorified or rejected.

Second, because the learning process depends on the ability of teachers and students to see the world from the perspective of "the other", multicultural educators must endeavor to provide alternative points of view in their class plans, particularly in areas where cultures are in disagreement; for example while many would disagree on this contentious issue, a multicultural educator would want to teach both evolution and intelligent design theories, in the context of culture, religion and science; it should be noted that most world cultures believe in some form of creationism.

Third, a multicultural educator must become proficient in dealing with ambiguity. When it comes to culture, there is rarely a binary answer, two cultural viewpoints may be correct, even if they are paradoxical in nature. This is particularly relevant when dealing with language minorities and cultural groups that have been stigmatized in the media or demonized for political

exploit. For example, a multicultural educator must be able to leverage diversity by exploring the Middle East conflict from the alternating points of view of the West and the Muslim world.

Finally, the multicultural teacher must understand that culture is an evolving and often incomprehensible creature. On the one hand, it provides individuals with the basis of self-identity and is the glue that keeps social structures from dissolving into chaos and anarchy; culture provides the stability that is needed for progress. Culture, on the other hand, creates islands of isolation that disrupt the very social cohesion it creates; it creates walls of resentment between and among individuals by dividing them in stereotypical groupings and is more often than not resistant to change.

## Conclusion

Multicultural education is a relatively recent historical phenomenon that arose from the need to cope with a globalized, transnational world and the diversity it creates. In America, the educational system is evolving under the stresses created by the collision of world cultures within the small, constrained space of the classroom. These circumstances have given rise to an urgent conversation on how to best cope with an educational system that is no longer under the control of familiar social mores, but which has become a battleground for ancient cultural feuds and in which the minorities are the majority.

While the urgency to find an answer is compelling, consensus on how-to deal with the issue of multicultural education has not been forthcoming from the experts, researchers, scholars, policy-makers, administrators and activists, who instead have provided a conflicting array of theories and hypotheses that serve no practical purpose to those on the front-lines: the classroom teacher. The suggestions offered here, are some basic guidelines that may serve as a starting

point for a larger conversation on practical ways in which the classroom teacher can deal with diversity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century multicultural classroom.

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