

**Multicultural Education:
New Path Toward Democracy**

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Re-envisioning Education and Democracy

December 15, 2005

Multicultural Education: Education for Equity and Democracy

*Diversity as
Multicultural education for learning
Is democratic
For the socialization
Of all active citizens
~Caroline Mwonga~*

Multicultural Education and Public Schools

Unlike most educational systems around the world, the American education system is distinctive in nature. In establishing “universal education for all,” the American public school system fosters ideals of equal educational access and opportunities for all citizens.¹ Conversely, when such concepts are put to test, theory defies practice. To further explain, African-Americans, Native-Americans, Asian-Americans, and within contemporary society immigrants from diverse backgrounds, have been historically marginalized and excluded from receiving equitable access and opportunities within public education. Thus, multicultural education as an educational alternative, attempts to critically analyze inequalities within the American public school system, and suggest strategies for further inclusion of marginalized groups.

Public Schools and Democracy

Before we begin presenting, analyzing, and hopefully reforming our schools, it’s important to take a step back and through an historical context, reexamine the basic foundations of the American public education system. The public school system, as a public institution, through constant reform characteristically serves as one of the “oldest and most dynamic institutions,” within the United States.² The function of public education is to allow future citizens the opportunity to acquire knowledge, and specific skills necessary for future democratic participation. In contrast to other political systems, Americans highly value democracy,

¹ School: The Story of American Public Education

² School: The Story of American Public Education

“government for the people, and by the people,” as the basic foundation of democratic society.

As discussed, an example of a democratic principle evident in the American education system is the idea of “universal education for all.” Through this principle, the American education system, founded to connect democratic principles and values to future active citizens, clearly plays an important role in how we perceive our nation and our future.³

Public Schools, Democracy, Diversity

Why is public education so important in the United States? Horace Mann, an educator who greatly influenced public education and schooling within the United States, foresaw public education as “the great equalizer.” (Nieto, 20) In valuing democracy, public education also fosters equal access as an important principle. This is evident in national laws that establish compulsory education, mandating all children irregardless of circumstance, background, race, or sex attend school. In addition, desegregation efforts of the 1950’s and 1960’s by overruling the “separate and equal” clause, ruled that equal opportunity and access to public education was a right affordable to all Americans regardless of race or background. However, as is evident in contemporary society, public “schools have consistently failed to provide an equitable education for many students” through the prevailing discrimination that exists in the “structure of schools, curriculum...and interactions among teachers and students.” (Nieto 20) The discrimination that persists is categorized as racism, classism, ethnocentrism, or sexism. These colloquialisms exist because of a false notion that anyone or anything that doesn’t mold into the superior culture (mainly white, European Anglo-Saxon, middle to upper middle-class, male) is inferior.

³ School: The Story of American Public Education

Multicultural Education as Education for Equity and Democracy

Multicultural education, as an educational alternative and strategy, recognizes and attempts to reform the inequalities that exist. As discussed in Parker's book, "*Teaching Democracy Unity and Diversity in Public Life*," the central purpose of multicultural education is

"to improve race relations and to help all students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to participate in cross-cultural interactions and in personal, social, and civic action that will make our nation more democratic and just." (Parker, 1)

To further clarify, multicultural education is a form of democratic citizenship education that recognizes the plurality of our society, and attempts to bring historically marginalized groups to the forefront of public education, to further develop active democratic citizens. Parker further highlights that "the failure to grasp the interdependence of *Pluribus* and *Unum*...is mirrored in the gap between multicultural education and citizenship education." (Parker, 2) To explain, multicultural education in fostering citizenship education, attempts to connect the concepts of *Pluribus* (many) and *Unum* (one), to create inclusive, equitable, and just societies. Furthermore, multicultural education is not just for individuals that characterize diverse backgrounds, however multicultural education is citizenship education for everyone.

The next question that arises is how can we integrate multicultural education into public schools? James Banks, a multicultural education expert, highlights five dimensions of multicultural education that are important for integration to public schools.

- 1. Content Integration**

The extent to which teachers use a variety of information from diverse cultures and groups to convey key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in subject area.

- 2. Knowledge Construction**

The extent to which teachers help students understand how knowledge is created and how it is influenced by a variety of cultural and social-class groups.

- 3. Prejudice Reduction**

Focuses on student's racial attitudes and how they can be modified.

- 4. Equity Pedagogy**

Teachers use a variety of teaching styles consistent with learning styles of cultural and ethnic groups.

- 5. Empowering School Culture**

Restructuring and reorganizing culture of schools to include and empower “diverse racial, ethnic, language, and social class groups.”
(Banks, 4-6)

All these dimension are integral to fostering multicultural education and democratic theories of equality into public schools, because they focus on curricular and pedagogical approaches to public education. With concern to the curriculum, the five dimensions focus on the structure of learning, and how multicultural instruction can be developed into the course of study. In terms of pedagogy, the five dimensions focus on techniques, strategies, and approaches teachers can use to facilitate learning through multicultural education. In relating the discussed concepts, this initiative will attempt to focus on the historical implication of public education in the United States, and the dynamics associated with the concept of multicultural education. In particular this initiative will focus on multicultural education as an educational alternative and strategy, in creating culturally responsive classrooms through curricular, pedagogical, and classroom reform.

Multicultural Education

Brief History

Through an historical lens, the beginnings of multicultural education can be traced back to the 1960’s and early 1970’s. This specific time period was marked with great social unrest and reform. With particular concern to public education, multicultural education was at the forefront. During this time, inequality especially among minority groups, in comparison to the white dominant culture, became a social issue, and numerous social/educational programs were developed. Several of these programs include, under President Johnson’s War on Poverty initiative (1964), the Head Start program.⁴ The Head Start program was created to provide disadvantaged children a preschool experience before they entered kindergarten. In addition,

⁴ Robles de Melendez, Wilma., and Vesna Ostertag. Teaching Young Children in Multicultural Classrooms: Issues, Concepts, and Strategies. (New York: International Thomson Publishing, 1997) 168

several acts, such as The Coleman Report (1966), discovered that desegregation still hadn't been achieved in public schools, and were passed to address inequalities.⁵ However, most of the programs created to address social/educational inequalities, were created in a hasty manner, and proved at an institutional and systemic level ineffective. Thus, multicultural education arose as an educational alternative to address social/educational inequalities, and since then “multicultural education has been transformed, refocused, reconceptualized, and [undergone] a constant state of evolution both in theory and in practice.”⁶ Furthermore to give a formal definition, multicultural education is a progressive educational approach that transforms, critiques, and addresses inequalities, failings, and discriminatory practices in public schools. The core democratic principles, in addition to educational equity, are derived from ideals of social justice to promote the development of socially aware and active citizens. Lastly, multicultural education views public schools as democratic institution, necessary for societal change and the elimination of oppression and injustice.

Multicultural Education through Prejudice Reduction as Antiracist Education for All

How does multicultural education seek to challenge and reform the inequalities that exist in our society? To answer that question in brief, a multicultural education “challenges and rejects...discrimination in schools and society and...affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic diversity) that students, their communities, and schools represent” (Neito, 2008) Within that respect, this initiative will focus on concepts of multicultural education as antiracist education, multicultural education as important for all students, and multicultural education as education for social justice. To begin, multicultural education as antiracist allows individuals, students, and teachers to critically analyze societal topics in a historical and contemporary

⁵ Robles de Melendez and Ostertag 169

⁶ The Challenge of Defining Multicultural Education
<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/initial.html>

context. Through comparing and contrasting topics, this allows students and teachers to study the relationship and interconnections between diverse groups and social issues. Secondly, multicultural education as widely perceived isn't just for students of colors, or other disadvantaged students that are "neglected or miseducated" in public schools. (Neito, 213) Multicultural enrichment is expansive, therefore all individuals irregardless of their background can benefit. Interestingly, Neito points out that individuals that are part of the dominant culture are "often the most miseductated" or in retrospect "feel that they do not have a culture" within our pluralistic society. The miseducation and lack of awareness students from the dominant group face in public schools, further transcends to the polarization and marginalization of diverse groups in our society, and future inaction.

Multicultural Education for Justice

Consequently, multicultural education as an educational alternative, also serves as education for justice. Multicultural education develops students into future democratic citizens by allowing them to learn how to think in a more "inclusive and expansive" manor, critically analyze learned information, and further turn that knowledge into action. (Nieto, 216) In addition, multicultural education as a tool for justice and social change works within three broad categories. Firstly, the transformation of self is the first basic tier allowing for individual awareness through teaching and learning. The second tier, which this initiative will thoroughly examine, involves the transformation of schools and schooling. And, the last tier involves the transformation of society, further creating justice and social change.⁷

Initiative: Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms

Throughout this initiative, we've explored the inequalities that exist within the public education system, especially with concern to historically marginalized groups. In addition, we've

⁷ The Challenge of Defining Multicultural Education

also explored the possibility of multicultural education as a strategy for antiracist education, for all individuals, to address the inequalities that exist in public schools, and to create just societies. However, in addressing the problem, how can we employ multicultural education into schools effectively? The solutions that will be addressed include curricular transformation to incorporate multicultural education, development of pedagogy through strategic techniques, and the development of a positive classroom climate to create culturally responsive schools and classrooms for the development of democratic citizens.

Curriculum

The curriculum, defined as an integrated academic course of study, required for a specific program or degree, within the public education system is often mismatched with student needs. To further explain, the public school curriculum is often at odds with student needs because it doesn't seek to integrate school life with the student's community life. This fact is even more true for students of diverse backgrounds, because public school curriculum represents "what is thought to be important and necessary knowledge" by the dominant culture. (Neito, 74) For instance, textbooks, important tools for the development of a curriculum, often reinforce the dominate Eurocentric culture while perpetuating stereotypes of minority groups in mainstream society. Thus, multiculturalism and diversity, as focal concepts, are often misrepresented by mainstream culture. Furthermore, multicultural education in recognizing democratic principles of equitable education and opportunity, also recognizes the need for diverse perspectives within education to create just societies.

How can schools go about integrating multicultural perspectives into school curriculums? Unfortunately there exists no true answer, however James Banks offers four approaches to integrating multicultural content into elementary and high school curriculum.

Level 1: The Contributions Approach

At this level, teachers introduce heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements into the mainstream curriculum. This can be done through presenting information about famous people, such as Martin Luther King. In addition, in teaching about other cultures, teachers integrate cultural foods or music, and focus on themes like Black History Month.

Level 2: The Additive Approach

At this level, teachers add and integrate multicultural content, concepts, themes, and perspectives without changing curricular structure. For example, this can be done through adding books by African-American writers, or including a unit/course focused on covering African-Americans throughout history.

Level 3: The Transformation Approach

The Structure of curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives. This can be done through including African American or Latino American History into the larger subject of American History. In addition, teachers and students work together and share knowledge to understand the varying multicultural perspectives.

Level 4: The Social Action Approach

Students make decisions on important issues affecting multiculturalism and take action to solve them. This is done through incorporating social issues, racism, classism, and sexism into the curriculum, and using the students as a resource to cover the topics. Thus, the textbook is viewed as a single, biased perspective, and classroom interactions are emphasized to address those issues.

The levels discussed, and as formulated by Banks, are varying ways in which multicultural perspectives can be integrated into the curriculum. The first two levels, involving no structural change to the curriculum, and in employing multicultural perspectives through a Eurocentric perspective, provide the least amount of multicultural insight. At these levels, if a multicultural perspective is presented into the curriculum, it is often “watered down” and transcended as lessons about tolerance. (Melendez & Ostertag, 184) For example during Black History Month, teachers usually emphasis the same mainstream lesson, Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and further tailor topics on multiculturalism as lesson on getting along with one another. These influences transform multiculturalism and multicultural education into a mainstream topic, misrepresented and irrelevant to the public school curriculum. In contrast the last two levels, in reforming the existing curriculum, fully integrate diverse voices and allow students, with the guidance of teachers, opportunities to critically analyze existing social structures to promote equitable and just schools. We can conclude that for schools to effectively promote multicultural perspectives into the curriculum, the structure of the curriculum must be transformed, to allow

teachers and students to play an active role through discussing and critically analyzing social structures.

Multicultural Curriculum Case Study

How should schools reform the curriculum to allow students and teachers to critically analyze social structures? In answering that question, this initiative will look at an example, through a case study. Downingtown High School, a large, white, suburban school located in Philadelphia has been very successful in raising multicultural awareness, and establishing a multicultural course of study in English. Initially, there were concerns about how a dominantly white school, and within that, how a dominantly white English department would go about teaching multicultural literature. However, throughout the program's consecutive years, these concerns have been addressed successfully. To begin, the school choose to adopt multicultural literature, to comply with a Pennsylvania State Standard "calling for an assessment of students' ability to evaluate and respond critically to works of various individuals and cultures." (Robinson, 69) In reviewing and comparing their curriculum with the states standards, the school realized that their English program was outdated, and failed to provide the student body (94% white) "a complete picture of the real world." (Robinson, 70) To address this problem, the English department decided to review and discard some Eurocentric literature, to accommodate for multicultural literature. In addition, to allow the student body an inlet into multicultural literature, the English department also adopted an effective strategy of using children's literature in relation to the topic of the novels read.

Several years into the program, the multicultural literature program proved to be a success. In addition, to provide further depth into the study of multicultural literature, the English department also created a multicultural literature course opened to seniors to take as an elective,

or as an additional course of study. This specific case study proves that transforming the curriculum to incorporate multicultural perspectives can prove to be a challenge, especially for public schools with a less diverse student-teacher body. Conversely, by not providing a multicultural course of study, public schools are failing to prepare students to become active citizens in our pluralistic society.

Pedagogy and Classroom Climate

Many teachers today refuse to see differences among their students in attempts to uphold a “fair, impartial, and objective” view. (Nieto, 109) By not acknowledging gender, racial, and ethnic differences, teachers ignore how differences can affect learning styles. In contrast, a multicultural perspective attempts to recognize and critically analyze differences rather than deny that differences exist. In addition, as most teachers fear, multiculturalism in recognizing differences does not lower student’s expectation or “water down” the curriculum. However in recognizing multicultural differences, provisions if possible, should be made for students to have an equal education with equal opportunities. Rather than viewing cultural differences as a “burden, a problem...or a challenge,” teachers should view differences as strengths, in order to develop culturally responsive classrooms. (Nieto, 110)

In order for multicultural education to work in the classroom level, teachers must employ effective teaching strategies or rather effective pedagogy. Such teaching practices are often referred to as culturally responsive or “culturally relevant” techniques. (Ladson-Billings, 159) Several strategies as highlighted below include: linking school culture with home culture and incorporating culturally relevant teaching skills. Creating culturally responsive classrooms through linking school and home culture, attempts to “locate the problem of discontinuity between what students experience at home and what they experience at school in the speech and

language interactions of teachers and students.” In addition, to create culturally responsive classrooms, teachers must provide culturally relevant teaching. If the instructional teaching is presented effectively students will develop skills necessary for academic success, maintain individual cultural competence, and develop “critical consciousness” skills. (Ladson-Billings, 162) Furthermore, for the academic success of cultural groups, teachers must effectively interact with students, and provide instructions that “[demand, reinforce, and produce]” academic excellence in students. (Ladson-Billings, 163) In establishing cultural competence and integrity, schools and teacher can recognize diverse cultures as relevant in education and create equitable educational opportunities.

Linking School and Home Culture through Teacher-Student Interactions

- Teachers should be knowledgeable on sociolinguistic communication, or “when, about what, to whom, and how long to speak in conversations within cultural groups.
- Teachers should convey rules (formal and informal) for communication to students (when, where, how) (Woolfolk, 186)

Learning Styles Characteristic to African-American Students

- Visual/global rather than verbal/analytical
- Reasoning by inference rather than formal logic
- Focus on people and relationships
- Energetic involvement in several, simultaneous activities
- Step-by-step learning
- Greater dependence on non-verbal communication” (Woolfolk, 184)

Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies for African-American Students

“Use appropriate nonverbal cues, gestures, and eye contact
Allow equal “talk time” for teacher and students
Emphasize small-group learning and hands-on contact with the teacher
Use a variety of learning activities that include movement, games, poetry, and music.”
(Woolfolk, 185)

The next question that arises is how can teachers employ these effective teaching techniques to promote a positive classroom environment. In “*But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*,” Gloria Ladson-Billings compiles and explores the results of her three year study on successful teachers of African-American students. Although the teachers studied, differed on the surface in terms of teaching styles, they shared similar philosophical and ideological views. In choosing to teach at a low-income, predominantly

African-American school, the teachers closely identified with teaching, students, and the community. Several strategies that the teachers employed to create positive classroom climate include following:

- They focused positive energy instead of negative energy on all students
- Provided students with challenging work and followed with scaffolding (guidance) through teacher-student interactions if students had difficulties
- Created a warm and welcoming classroom environment
- Used students culture as tools for student learning
- Involved parents and the community into the classroom
- Provided tools for students to view the world critically. Students become the researchers and “subjects” not “objects” of study

The culturally relevant teaching strategies as pedagogical techniques, when presented and employed by these successful teachers, further aid in the development of culturally responsive classrooms, and provide an environment conducive to multicultural education. Lastly, in order to create culturally responsive classrooms through effective teaching strategies and positive classroom environment, the curriculum must be transformed to adopt multiple, diverse perspective.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the education system in the United States is unique in nature. Firstly, in perpetuating and fostering democratic ideals, the American education system establishes universal education for all citizens, thus creating a public school system. The public school system, as a democratic institution, theoretically is supposed to foster democratic ideals of equal educational access and opportunities for all students. However in practice students representing diverse backgrounds are often left out of that sphere. Multicultural education serves as an alternative and solution to the existing educational programs because it seeks to address inequalities that exist in our society, and furthermore critically analyze those inequalities to promote social justice. Several ways in which multicultural education can be incorporated into public education to create culturally responsive classrooms is through the curriculum, the basic

educational structure of schools, and through culturally relevant teaching and pedagogical techniques that cater to positive classroom climate. To conclude, multicultural education in fostering the creation of culturally responsive classrooms in public schools, further allows for the development and reform of individuals, schools, and hopefully in the long run communities and societies.

Works Cited

Banks, James. "Multicultural Education Historical Development, Dimension, and Practice." Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education. Ed. James Banks, Cherry McGee Banks. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004. 3-29.

Various authors within the handbook present their theories on multicultural education, and research in the respective field. In particular, James Banks begins by tracing multicultural education from its beginning, during the 1960's and 1970's, and addresses the historical implications of its origin. In the second part of the book, Banks relates the historical roots of multicultural education by highlighting methods and theories of implementation in contemporary education. In addition, Banks advocates multicultural educations as education for the development of democratic and just citizens, and highlights the specific dimension necessary for its success.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." Theory into Practice 34 (1995) 159-165

The author presents problems, findings, and solutions based on a past research initiative. In researching how, teachers employ relevant pedagogy, the author attempts to link relevant teaching to student learning and motivation. The subjects are effective African-American teachers, teaching in urban schools, to minority students. The author, through classroom observation, observes classroom environment and teacher-student interactions to draw links.

Nieto, Sonia. Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education. New York: Longman, 1992.

The author introduces and explores the concept of multicultural education as a broad and inclusive topic. Multicultural education, in the book, is viewed in a personal, social, historical, and political context. The author explores social issues of race, ethnicity, and language within education and present ways in which multicultural education addresses those issues. In addition, students, the main concern and subject of the book, are portrayed as active learners exploring social issues, and seeking ways to resolve those issues through interacting with one another to promote social justice.

Parker, Walter C. Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life. New York: Teachers College, 2003

The author presents multicultural education as citizenship education necessary to develop democratically engaged citizens. Diversity and the plurality of society are important themes throughout the book; which the author presents as necessary for public, democratic life. In

addition, he addresses ways in which multicultural education can influence citizenship education. In particular the book focuses on pedagogical techniques and discussion to promote diversity, and to encourage critical thinking.

Robinson, Nancy. W. "Challenge Us; I Think We're Ready: Establishing a Multicultural Course of Study" The English Journal 91 (2001) 68-73

The author of the text, an English teacher at Downingtown High School, relates the struggles and triumphs of implementing a multicultural curriculum. In attempting to introduce multicultural literature into the school, the author, and the predominantly white teachers within the school are faced with the problem of introducing and analyzing multicultural literature through a Eurocentric view. However, in realizing the pressing need for students to be culturally aware, the author conveys the growing need for students to gain multicultural insight through literature. The failures/success, and strategies employed to overcome downfalls, are discussed by the author from the beginning of the programs installation to today.

Robles de Melendez, Wilma., and Vesna Ostertag. Teaching Young Children in Multicultural Classrooms: Issues, Concepts, and Strategies. New York: International Thomson Publishing, 1997.

The book attempts to provide a plan for professionals within the education field. Particularly, teachers of young children, attempting to incorporate a multicultural curriculum. The authors present plans about how to teach about diversity, and how to teach to diverse students. The book begins with a brief history and foundation of multicultural education, followed by social trends and developmental views, and then further transitions into how multicultural education can be implemented in the classroom.

Woolfolk, Anita. Education Psychology. Needham Heights: Simon & Schuster, 1995

In contrast to the authors discussing multicultural education, Woolfolk presents multicultural education through the eyes of a previous teacher and educational psychologist. Multicultural education is presented through the views of behavioral, cognitive, and social psychology. The author places greater emphasis on multiculturalism in classrooms and teacher-student dialogue. In addition, the advantages and disadvantages of multicultural education are discussed as they related to observable, psychological behavior in the classroom

School: The Story of American Public Education

<http://www.pbs.org/kcet/publicschool/>

The website explores the foundations of American education and the American public school system. Topics like, universal education and compulsory education are presented. In addition, in exploring the historical roots of public education, changes and educational reform through their impacts are discussed.

The Challenge of Defining Multicultural Education

<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/initial.html>

The website is dedicated to relaying information about multicultural education. The site focuses on history, theory, and the implementation of multicultural education. Most of the information is basic, in providing definitions, and a lot of theories and multicultural theorist are discussed to further convey multicultural education.