

Multicultural Education: Development, Dimensions, and Challenges

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Multicultural Education

Development, Dimensions, and Challenges

Mr. Banks focuses on the development and attainments of multicultural education — a story that needs to be told, he says, “for the sake of balance, scholarly integrity, and accuracy.”

By JAMES A. BANKS

THE BITTER debate over the literary and historical canon that has been carried on in the popular press and in several widely reviewed books has overshadowed the progress that has been made in multicultural education during the last two decades. The debate has also perpetuated harmful misconceptions about theory and practice in multicultural education. Consequently, it has heightened racial and ethnic tension and trivialized the field's remarkable accomplishments in theory, research, and curriculum development. The truth about the development and attainments of multicultural education needs to be told for the sake of balance, scholarly integrity, and accuracy. But if I am to reveal the truth about multicultural education, I must first identify and debunk some of the widespread myths and misconceptions about it.

Multicultural education is for the others. One misconception about multicultural education is that it is an entitlement program and curriculum move-

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ment for African Americans, Hispanics, the poor, women, and other victimized groups.¹ The major theorists and researchers in multicultural education agree that the movement is designed to restructure educational institutions so that all students, including middle-class white males, will acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively in a culturally and ethnically diverse nation and world.² Multicultural education, as its major architects have conceived it during the last decade, is not an ethnic- or gender-specific movement. It is a movement designed to empower all students to become knowledgeable, caring, and active citizens in a deeply troubled and ethnically polarized nation and world.

The claim that multicultural education is only for people of color and for the disenfranchised is one of the most pernicious and damaging misconceptions with which the movement has had to cope. It has caused intractable problems and has haunted multicultural education since its inception. Despite all that has been written and spoken about multicultural education being for all students, the image of multicultural education as an entitlement program for the "others" remains strong and vivid in the public imagination, as well as in the hearts and minds of many teachers and administrators. Teachers who teach in predominantly white schools and districts often state that they don't have a program or plan for multicultural education because they have few African American, Hispanic, or Asian American students.

When educators view multicultural education as the study of the "others," it is marginalized and held apart from mainstream education reform. Several critics of multicultural education, such as Arthur Schlesinger, John Leo, and Paul Gray, have perpetuated the idea that multicultural education is the study of the "other" by defining it as synonymous with Afrocentric education.³ The history of intergroup education teaches us that only when education reform related to diversity is viewed as essential for all students — and as promoting the broad public interest — will it have a reasonable chance of becoming institutionalized in the nation's schools, colleges, and universities.⁴ The intergroup education movement of the 1940s and 1950s failed in

large part because intergroup educators were never able to persuade mainstream educators to believe that the approach was needed by and designed for all students. To its bitter but quiet end, mainstream educators viewed intergroup education as something for schools with racial problems and as something for "them" and not for "us."

Multicultural education is opposed to the Western tradition. Another harmful misconception about multicultural education has been repeated so often by its critics that many people take it as self-evident. This is the claim that multicultural education is a movement that is opposed to the West and to Western civilization. Multicultural education is not anti-West, because most writers of color — such as Rudolfo Anaya, Paula Gunn Allen, Maxine Hong Kingston, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison — are Western writers. Multicultural education itself is a thoroughly Western movement. It grew out of a civil rights movement grounded in such democratic ideals of the West as freedom, justice, and equality. Multicultural education seeks to extend to all people the ideals that were meant only for an elite few at the nation's birth.

Although multicultural education is not opposed to the West, its advocates do demand that the truth about the West be told, that its debt to people of color and women be recognized and included in the curriculum, and that the discrepancies between the ideals of freedom and equality and the realities of racism and sexism be taught to students. Reflective action by citizens is also an integral part of multicultural theory. Multicultural education views citizen action to improve society as an integral part of education in a democracy; it links knowledge, values, empowerment, and action. Multicultural education is also postmodern in its assumptions about knowledge and knowledge construction; it challenges positivist assumptions about the relationships between human values, knowledge, and action.

Positivists, who are the intellectual heirs of the Enlightenment, believe that it is possible to structure knowledge that is objective and beyond the influence of human values and interests. Multicultural theorists maintain that knowledge is positional, that it relates to the knower's values and experiences, and that knowl-

edge implies action. Consequently, different concepts, theories, and paradigms imply different kinds of actions. Multiculturalists believe that, in order to have valid knowledge, information about the social condition and experiences of the knower are essential.

A few critics of multicultural education, such as John Leo and Dinesh D'Souza, claim that multicultural education has reduced or displaced the study of Western civilization in the nation's schools and colleges. However, as Gerald Graff points out in his welcome book *Beyond the Culture Wars*, this claim is simply not true. Graff cites his own research at the college level and that of Arthur Applebee at the high school level to substantiate his conclusion that European and American male authors — such as Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Twain, and Hemingway — still dominate the required reading lists in the nation's high schools and colleges.⁵ Graff found that, in the cases he examined, most of the books by authors of color were optional rather than required reading. Applebee found that, of the 10 book-length works most frequently required in the high school grades, only one title was by a female author (Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*), and not a single work was by a writer of color. Works by Shakespeare, Steinbeck, and Dickens headed the list.

Multicultural education will divide the nation. Many of its critics claim that multicultural education will divide the nation and undercut its unity. Schlesinger underscores this view in the title of his book, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. This misconception is based partly on questionable assumptions about the nature of U.S. society and partly on a mistaken understanding of multicultural education. The claim that multicultural education will divide the nation assumes that the nation is already united. While we are one nation politically, sociologically our nation is deeply divided along lines of race, gender, and class. The current debate about admitting gays into the military underscores another deep division in our society.

Multicultural education is designed to help unify a deeply divided nation rather than to divide a highly cohesive one. Multicultural education supports the no-

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tion of *e pluribus unum* – out of many, one. The multiculturalists and the Western traditionalists, however, often differ about how the *unum* can best be attained. Traditionally, the larger U.S. society and the schools tried to create unity by assimilating students from diverse racial and ethnic groups into a mythical Anglo American culture that required them to experience a process of self-alienation. However, even when students of color became culturally assimilated, they were often structurally excluded from mainstream institutions.

The multiculturalists view *e pluribus unum* as an appropriate national goal, but they believe that the *unum* must be negotiated, discussed, and restructured to reflect the nation's ethnic and cultural diversity. The reformulation of what it means to be united must be a process that involves the participation of diverse groups within the nation, such as people of color, women, straights, gays, the powerful, the powerless, the young, and the old. The reformulation must also involve power sharing and participation by people from many different cultures who must reach beyond their cultural and ethnic borders in order to create a common civic culture that reflects and contributes to the well-being of all. This common civic culture will extend beyond the cultural borders of any single group and constitute a civic "borderland" culture.

In *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldúa contrasts cultural borders and borderlands and calls for a weakening of the former in order to create a shared borderland

culture in which people from many different cultures can interact, relate, and engage in civic talk and action. Anzaldúa states that "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition."⁶

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION HAS MADE PROGRESS

While it is still on the margins rather than in the center of the curriculum in most schools and colleges, multicultural content has made significant inroads into both the school and the college curricula within the last two decades. The truth lies somewhere between the claim that no progress has been made in infusing the school and college curricula with multi-ethnic content and the claim that such content has replaced the European and American classics.

In the elementary and high schools, much more ethnic content appears in social studies and language arts textbooks today than was the case 20 years ago. In addition, some teachers assign works written by authors of color along with the more standard American classics. In his study of book-length works used in the high schools, Applebee concluded that his most striking finding was how similar present reading lists are to past ones and how little change has occurred. However, he did note that many teachers use anthologies as a mainstay of their literature programs and that 21% of the anthology selections were written by women and 14% by authors of color.⁷

More classroom teachers today have studied the concepts of multicultural education than at any previous point in our history. A significant percentage of today's classroom teachers took a required teacher education course in multicultural education when they were in college. The multicultural education standard adopted by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education in 1977, which became effective in 1979, was a major factor that stimulated the growth of multicultural education in teacher education programs. The standard stated: "The institution gives evidence of planning for mul-

ticultural education in its teacher education curricula including both the general and professional studies components."⁸

The market for teacher education textbooks dealing with multicultural education is now a substantial one. Most major publishers now have at least one text in the field. Textbooks in other required courses, such as educational psychology and the foundations of education, frequently have separate chapters or a significant number of pages devoted to examining concepts and developments in multicultural education.

Some of the nation's leading colleges and universities, such as the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Minnesota, and Stanford University, have either revised their general core curriculum to include ethnic content or have established an ethnic studies course requirement. The list of universities with similar kinds of requirements grows longer each year. However, the transformation of the traditional canon on college and university campuses has often been bitter and divisive. All changes in curriculum come slowly and painfully to university campuses, but curriculum changes that are linked with issues related to race evoke primordial feelings and reflect the racial crisis in American society. For example, at the University of Washington a bitter struggle ended with the defeat of the ethnic studies requirement.

Changes are also coming to elementary and high school textbooks, as Jesus Garcia points out elsewhere in this special section of the *Kappan*. I believe that the demographic imperative is the major factor driving the changes in school textbooks. The color of the nation's student body is changing rapidly. Nearly half (about 45.5%) of the nation's school-age youths will be young people of color by 2020.⁹ Black parents and brown parents are demanding that their leaders, their images, their pain, and their dreams be mirrored in the textbooks that their children study in school.

Textbooks have always reflected the myths, hopes, and dreams of people with money and power. As African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and women become more influential, textbooks will increasingly reflect their hopes, dreams, and disappointments. Textbooks will have to survive in the marketplace of a browner

America. Because textbooks still carry the curriculum in the nation's public schools, they will remain an important focus for multicultural curriculum reformers.

THE DIMENSIONS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

One of the problems that continues to plague the multicultural education movement, both from within and without, is the tendency of teachers, administrators, policy makers, and the public to oversimplify the concept. Multicultural education is a complex and multidimensional concept, yet media commentators and educators alike often focus on only one of its many dimensions. Some teachers view it only as the inclusion of content about ethnic groups into the curriculum; others view it as an effort to reduce prejudice; still others view it as the celebration of ethnic holidays and events. After I made a presentation in a school in which I described the major goals of multicultural education, a math teacher told me that what I said was fine and appropriate for language arts and social studies teachers but that it had nothing to do with him. After all, he said, math was math, regardless of the color of the kids.

This reaction on the part of a respected teacher caused me to think more deeply about the images of multicultural education that had been created by the key actors in the field. I wondered whether we were partly responsible for this teacher's narrow conception of multicultural education as merely content integration. It was in response to such statements by classroom teachers that I conceptualized the dimensions of multicultural education. I will use the following five dimensions to describe the field's major components and to highlight important developments within the last two decades: 1) content integration, 2) the knowledge construction process, 3) prejudice reduction, 4) an equity pedagogy, and 5) an empowering school culture and social structure.¹⁰ I will devote most of the rest of this article to the second of these dimensions.

CONTENT INTEGRATION

Content integration deals with the extent to which teachers use examples,

data, and information from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate the key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline. In many school districts as well as in popular writing, multicultural education is viewed almost solely as content integration. This narrow conception of multicultural education is a major reason why many teachers in such subjects as biology, physics, and mathematics reject multicultural education as irrelevant to them and their students.

In fact, this dimension of multicultural education probably has more relevance to social studies and language arts teachers than it does to physics and math teachers. Physics and math teachers can insert multicultural content into their subjects — e.g., by using biographies of physicists and mathematicians of color and examples from different cultural groups. However, these kinds of activities are probably not the most important multicultural tasks that can be undertaken by science and math teachers. Activities related to the other dimensions of multicultural education, such as the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, and an equity pedagogy, are probably the most fruitful areas for the multicultural involvement of science and math teachers.

KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

The knowledge construction process encompasses the procedures by which social, behavioral, and natural scientists create knowledge in their disciplines. A multicultural focus on knowledge construction includes discussion of the ways in which the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the construction of knowledge. An examination of the knowledge construction process is an important part of multicultural teaching. Teachers help students to understand how knowledge is created and how it is influenced by factors of race, ethnicity, gender, and social class.

Within the last decade, landmark work related to the construction of knowledge has been done by feminist social scientists and epistemologists, as well as by scholars in ethnic studies. Working in philosophy and sociology, Sandra Harding, Lorraine Code, and Patricia Hill

Collins have done some of the most important work related to knowledge construction.¹¹ This ground-breaking work, although influential among scholars and curriculum developers, has been overshadowed in the popular media by the heated debates about the canon. These writers and researchers have seriously challenged the claims made by the positivists that knowledge can be value-free, and they have described the ways in which knowledge claims are influenced by the gender and ethnic characteristics of the knower. These scholars argue that the human interests and value assumptions of those who create knowledge should be identified, discussed, and examined.

Code states that the sex of the knower is epistemologically significant because knowledge is both subjective and objective. She maintains that both aspects should be recognized and discussed. Collins, an African American sociologist, extends and enriches the works of writers such as Code and Harding by describing the ways in which race and gender interact to influence knowledge construction. Collins calls the perspective of African American women the perspective of "the outsider within." She writes, "As outsiders within, Black women have a distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies."¹²

Curriculum theorists and developers in multicultural education are applying to the classroom the work being done by the feminist and ethnic studies epistemologists. In *Transforming Knowledge*, Elizabeth Minnich, a professor of philosophy and women's studies, has analyzed the nature of knowledge and described how the dominant tradition, through such logical errors as faulty generalization and circular reasoning, has contributed to the marginalization of women.¹³

I have identified five types of knowledge and described their implications for multicultural teaching.¹⁴ Teachers need to be aware of the various types of knowledge so that they can structure a curriculum that helps students to understand each type. Teachers also need to use their own cultural knowledge and that of their students to enrich teaching and learning. The types of knowledge I have identified and described are: 1) personal/cultural, 2) popular, 3) mainstream academic, 4)

transformative, and 5) school. (I will not discuss school knowledge in this article.)

Personal/cultural knowledge consists of the concepts, explanations, and interpretations that students derive from personal experiences in their homes, families, and community cultures. Cultural conflict occurs in the classroom because much of the personal/cultural knowledge that students from diverse cultural groups bring to the classroom is inconsistent with school knowledge and with the teacher's personal and cultural knowledge. For example, research indicates that many African American and Mexican American students are more likely to experience academic success in cooperative rather than in competitive learning environments.¹⁵ Yet the typical school culture is highly competitive, and children of color may experience failure if they do not figure out the implicit rules of the school culture.¹⁶

The popular knowledge that is institutionalized by the mass media and other forces that shape the popular culture has a strong influence on the values, perceptions, and behavior of children and young people. The messages and images carried by the media, which Carlos Cortés calls the societal curriculum,¹⁷ often reinforce the stereotypes and misconceptions about racial and ethnic groups that are institutionalized within the larger society.

Of course, some films and other popular media forms do make positive contributions to racial understanding. *Dances with Wolves*, *Glory*, and *Malcolm X* are examples. However, there are many ways to view such films, and both positive and negative examples of popular culture need to become a part of classroom discourse and analysis. Like all human creations, even these positive films are imperfect. The multiculturally informed and sensitive teacher needs to help students view these films, as well as other media productions, from diverse cultural, ethnic, and gender perspectives.

The concepts, theories, and explanations that constitute traditional Western-centric knowledge in history and in the social and behavioral sciences constitute mainstream academic knowledge. Traditional interpretations of U.S. history — embodied in such headings as “The European Discovery of America” and “The Westward Movement” — are central concepts in mainstream academic knowledge.

Mainstream academic knowledge is established within mainstream professional associations, such as the American Historical Association and the American Psychological Association. It provides the interpretations that are taught in U.S. colleges and universities.

The literary legacy of mainstream academic knowledge includes such writers as Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, and Aristotle. Critics of multicultural education, such as Schlesinger, D'Souza, and Leo, believe that mainstream academic knowledge in the curriculum is being displaced by the new knowledge and interpretations that have been created by scholars working in women's studies and in ethnic studies. However, mainstream academic knowledge is not only threatened from without but also from within. Post-modern scholars in organizations such as the American Historical Association, the American Sociological Association, and the American Political Science Association are challenging the dominant positivist interpretations and paradigms within their disciplines and creating alternative explanations and perspectives.

Transformative academic knowledge challenges the facts, concepts, paradigms, themes, and explanations routinely accepted in mainstream academic knowledge. Those who pursue transformative academic knowledge seek to expand and substantially revise established canons, theories, explanations, and research methods. The transformative research methods and theory that have been developed in women's studies and in ethnic studies since the 1970s constitute, in my view, the most important developments in social science theory and research in the last 20 years.

It is important for teachers and students to realize, however, that transformative academic scholarship has a long history in the United States and that the current ethnic studies movement is directly linked to an earlier ethnic studies movement that emerged in the late 1800s.¹⁸ George Washington Williams published volume 1 of the first history of African Americans in 1882 and the second volume in 1883. Other important works published by African American transformative scholars in times past included works by W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, Horace Mann Bond, and Charles Wesley.¹⁹

The works of these early scholars in

African American studies, which formed the academic roots of the current multicultural education movement when it emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, were linked by several important characteristics. Their works were transformative because they created data, interpretations, and perspectives that challenged those that were established by white, mainstream scholarship. The work of the transformative scholars presented positive images of African Americans and refuted stereotypes that were pervasive within the established scholarship of their time.

Although they strove for objectivity in their works and wanted to be considered scientific researchers, these transformative scholars viewed knowledge and action as tightly linked and became involved in social action and administration themselves. Du Bois was active in social protest and for many years was the editor of *Crisis*, an official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Woodson co-founded the Association for the Study of Negro (now Afro-American) Life and History, founded and edited the *Journal of Negro History*, edited the *Negro History Bulletin* for classroom teachers, wrote school and college textbooks on Negro history, and founded Negro History Week (now Afro-American History Month).

Transformative academic knowledge has experienced a renaissance since the 1970s. Only a few of the most important works can be mentioned here because of space. Martin Bernal, in an important two-volume work, *Black Athena*, has created new interpretations about the debt that Greece owes to Egypt and Phoenicia. Before Bernal, Ivan Van Sertima and Cheikh Anta Diop also created novel interpretations of the debt that Europe owes to Africa. In two books, *Indian Givers* and *Native Roots*, Jack Weatherford describes Native American contributions that have enriched the world.

Ronald Takaki, in several influential books, such as *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* and *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, has given us new ways to think about the ethnic experience in America. The literary contribution to transformative scholarship has also been rich, as shown by *The Sig-*

nifying *Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture*, by Houston Baker, Jr.; and *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*, edited by Terry McMillan.

A number of important works in the transformative tradition that interrelate race and gender have also been published since the 1970s. Important works in this genre include *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, edited by Carol Ellen DuBois and Vicki Ruiz; *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States*, by Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei; *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, by Jacqueline Jones; and *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology*, edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly.

THE OTHER DIMENSIONS

The "prejudice reduction" dimension of multicultural education focuses on the characteristics of children's racial attitudes and on strategies that can be used to help students develop more positive racial and ethnic attitudes. Since the 1960s, social scientists have learned a great deal about how racial attitudes in children develop and about ways in which educators can design interventions to help children acquire more positive feelings toward other racial groups. I have reviewed that research in two recent publications and refer *Kappan* readers to them for a comprehensive discussion of this topic.²⁰

This research tells us that by age 4 African American, white, and Mexican American children are aware of racial differences and show racial preferences favoring whites. Students can be helped to develop more positive racial attitudes if realistic images of ethnic and racial groups are included in teaching materials in a consistent, natural, and integrated fashion. Involving students in vicarious experiences and in cooperative learning activities with students of other racial groups will also help them to develop more positive racial attitudes and behaviors.

An *equity pedagogy* exists when teachers use techniques and teaching methods that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial and ethnic groups and from all social classes. Using teaching techniques that cater to the learning and cultural styles of diverse groups and using the techniques of cooperative learning are some of the ways that teachers have found effective with students from diverse racial, ethnic, and language groups.²¹

An *empowering school culture and social structure* will require the restructuring of the culture and organization of the school so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality and a sense of empowerment. This dimension of multicultural education involves conceptualizing the school as the unit of change and making structural changes within the school environment. Adopting assessment techniques that are fair to all groups, doing away with tracking, and creating the belief among the staff members that all students can learn are important goals for schools that wish to create a school culture and social structure that are empowering and enhancing for a diverse student body.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE

The achievements of multicultural education since the late Sixties and early

Seventies are noteworthy and should be acknowledged. Those who have shaped the movement during the intervening decades have been able to obtain wide agreement on the goals of and approaches to multicultural education. Most multiculturalists agree that the major goal of multicultural education is to restructure schools so that all students will acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function in an ethnically and racially diverse nation and world. As is the case with other interdisciplinary areas of study, debates within the field continue. These debates are consistent with the philosophy of a field that values democracy and diversity. They are also a source of strength.

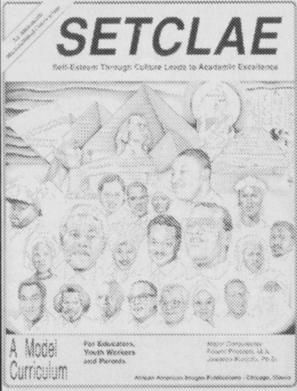
Multicultural education is being implemented widely in the nation's schools, colleges, and universities. The large number of national conferences, school district workshops, and teacher education courses in multicultural education are evidence of its success and perceived importance. Although the process of integration of content is slow and often contentious, multicultural content is increasingly becoming a part of core courses in schools and colleges. Textbook publishers are also integrating ethnic and cultural content into their books, and the pace of such integration is increasing.

Despite its impressive successes, however, multicultural education faces serious challenges as we move toward the next century. One of the most serious of

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these challenges is the highly organized, well-financed attack by the Western traditionalists who fear that multicultural education will transform America in ways that will result in their own disempowerment. Ironically, the successes that multicultural education has experienced during the last decade have played a major role in provoking the attacks.

The debate over the canon and the well-orchestrated attack on multicultural education reflect an identity crisis in American society. The American identity is being reshaped, as groups on the margins of society begin to participate in the mainstream and to demand that their visions be reflected in a transformed America. In the future, the sharing of power and the transformation of identity required to achieve lasting racial peace in America may be valued rather than feared, for only in this way will we achieve national salvation.

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