



Multiculturalism:

Beyond Food, Festival, Folklore, and Fashion

by Calvin F. Meyer and Elizabeth Kelley Rhoades



Using well-conceived instructional design, educational programs appropriately can reflect racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

Despite overall trends toward increasing student diversity, geographic areas in the United States vary widely in their ethnic composition. In areas where the population is predominately European American, grasping a realistic meaning of “multiculturalism” can be difficult. Often, interpretations of the concept result in a mix of classroom activities emphasizing Black History Month, illustrating how different cultures celebrate Christmas, and tasting food from different countries. At best, educators recognize the lack of true multicultural understanding; and at worst, they stereotype various cultures in terms of language, ethnicity, and traits.

Effective multicultural education is crucial in an era of changing demographics. About 40 percent of the U.S. public school population is non-European American (Groulx 2001). As of 2003, minority students made up 42 percent of the public school population (National Center for Education Statistics 2005), and 54 of the 100 largest school districts in the United States have a majority of minority students (Schroeder 1996). One in five students has a parent born outside the United States, and one in 20 students was born outside the United States (Vail 2001).

By the year 2020, minorities will comprise about half of the children in the nation’s public schools (Pettus and Allain 1999), yet only about 5 percent of the current teaching force is estimated to be non-European American, down from 13 percent in 1987 (Jones and Sandidge 1997). In addition, fewer minorities are entering education as a career. The vast majority of school board members (85 percent) are European American, as are nearly all (96 percent) superintendents (Vail 2001).

Some teachers have a shortsighted view that multicultural education is not an issue in their predominantly European-American school. Yet, many educators have experienced rapid changes in the ethnic populations

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attending their schools. In addition, both educators and their students must be prepared to live and work effectively in a global economy and social system where they will be exposed to a wide variety of individuals with differing backgrounds, values, and cultural practices. This “demographic imperative” necessitates a change in the way schools and teachers traditionally have functioned (Banks 1991a).

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A Working Definition

Despite widespread confusion and myriad conceptualizations about multiculturalism, many school districts are mandating a multicultural learning curriculum without fully defining or grasping the term. Gorski’s (2001, 1) working definition of multicultural education provided the foundation on which curriculum should be developed:

Multicultural education is a transformative movement in education that produces critically thinking, socially active members of society. It is not simply a change of curriculum or the addition of an activity. It is a movement that calls for new attitudes, new approaches, and a new dedication to laying the foundation for the transformation of society.

Banks (in Banks and McGee Banks 2001, 25) suggested a parallel view:

Multicultural education is also a reform movement designed to bring about a transformation of the school so that students from both genders and from diverse cultural, language, and ethnic groups will have an equal chance to experience school success.

With this defining language, a curricular framework can be established. First, however, educators must recognize that compensatory, fragmented programs consisting of food, festival, folklore, and fashion may not be multicultural in focus. So often these studies emphasize a skewed view of ethnicity, gender, and minority cultures. Rather than produce multicultural relationships, they emphasize the differences, which may teach some level of tolerance, but not understanding.

A second caveat is that any curriculum design that fails to address the idea of transformation also fails to realize the important rationale for multicultural education. Banks (1991b) emphasized three critical factors that make appropriate multicultural education a necessity:

1. Ethnic pluralism is a growing societal reality that influences the lives of young people.
2. In one way or another, individuals acquire beliefs and attitudes, sometimes invalid, about ethnic and cultural groups.
3. These beliefs often provide a negative perspective of differences and thus limit opportunities for members of various groups.

Once these three facets are accepted, the foundation of the multicultural curriculum can be established.

A Curricular Framework

Building on the key notion that multicultural education is a *transformative movement that produces critical thinking and socially active members of society* (Gorski 2001, 1), the curriculum then must ensure the following characteristics (Banks 1991b):

- Cultural learning styles are a part of the classroom community.
- Opportunities to develop a sense of self are continual.
- The totalities of ethnic experiences are conceptualized by the students.
- Conflict between ideals and realities within a human society are understood by the students.
- Explorations of ethnic and cultural opportunity alternatives are available.
- Values, attitudes, and behaviors that support ethnic pluralism are promoted.



- Students are assisted in developing a sense of political efficacy for effective citizenship.
- Skills necessary for effective interpersonal, interethnic, and intercultural group interactions are nurtured.
- Multicultural education is holistically an integral part of the total curriculum.

Once these guidelines are adopted, the implementation is dependent on an understanding of terms that suggest bias. Any instructional design leading to transformative change in thinking and social activity is dependent on the eradication of these elements.

- **Stereotype.** A traditional bias that depicts gender, roles, race, culture, mores, religion, and other realms of diversity as preconceived thoughts not necessarily correlated to fact or reality. Example: A type of food or costume as representative of a minority group.
- **Imbalance.** Refers to a situation in which only one aspect or interpretation of an issue or group of people is presented. Example: Socioeconomic issues are characterized by race or gender.
- **Invisibility.** A bias by simply omitting or greatly underrepresenting in both text and illustration. Example: Visuals in a book depict children of only one race or gender.
- **Unreality.** A bias formed by presenting an unrealistic picture. Example: Visuals or content depict certain traditional skills as representative of one race or gender.
- **Linguistic Bias.** A bias in which masculine terms or pronouns are used to refer to all people. Example: *He, him, and his* are used in reference to all people.
- **Fragmentation.** Occurs when information about diverse issues or roles is not integrated into the body of a text, but is given in a separate section, conveying the idea that certain issues and contributions are tangential to the mainstream and not important (Arends 2000). Example: A history book has a chapter solely on significant people of color.

Transformation of Attitudes

Transformation of teachers' attitudes about multicultural education and minority students is both a crucial and difficult process. Data has indicated that teachers' multicultural knowledge and attitudes are related to minority students' classroom success (Larke 1990; Pettus and Allain 1999) and that undervaluing the experiences of culturally different students can lead to poorer academic achievement (Lucas, Henze, and Donato 1990).

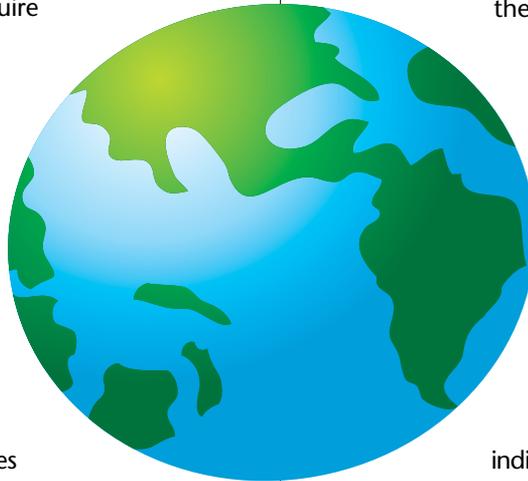
Transformative experiences require the individual to take personal and social risks. Discussions of ethnicity, race, racism, and cultural values are not "safe" topics, and interpersonal change requires the individual to examine assumptions that never before may have been challenged. What kinds of activities lead to actual transformation?

Teachers and students can challenge their own values and beliefs through examining the life stories of others. Reading biographical stories, corresponding with a culturally different pen pal, or interviewing an individual whose experiences have been different from one's own can enlarge a student's worldview, provided these activities focus on the deeper meanings of values, beliefs, and feelings rather than on superficial differences.

Immersion experiences in which the individual gains experience in another culture can be powerful tools for change. Participating in an activity where one does not speak the dominant language, visiting a culturally different church service, or joining a community activity where one does not know the unwritten rules of behavior can challenge the monocultural view. "Working with immigrant families, tutoring foreign students in English, or volunteering at homeless shelters have also shown to be powerful experiences for challenging preservice teachers' stereotypes about poverty and misconceptions about families in different cultures" (Groulx 2001, 64).

A Realistic Assessment of Status

Simply recognizing diversity is not enough. Understanding and respecting different cultural values and ethnicity are essential if a teacher is going to actualize these ideals in the classroom. The ultimate goal of all educators is to improve the quality of life of the individuals. For that to happen, a teacher must be realistic about his or her own conceptualization, values, and internalized emotions regarding cultural diversity.



Research has shown that preservice teachers are poor judges of their own skills and of their readiness for working with minority students; they tend to have (Groulx 2001, 61) *naïve, idealistic beliefs and have not explored their identities as members of a privileged White race, which leads them to adopt a colorblind perspective, ignoring or denying the fact that ethnic or racial differences can have pedagogical implications.*

Thus they require guidance as they explore their status on these issues. One method of self-assessment is completing a survey that addresses their skills in addressing multiculturalism. Such a survey, if answered honestly, will provide the preservice teacher with an opportunity for reflection on personal weaknesses and strengths in terms of his or her effectiveness in addressing multiculturalism.

By rating each of the following statements as *high, medium, or low*, individuals can reflect on and assess their skill level (Arends 2000):

- I can articulate a strong rationale for multicultural education.
- I can describe recent research supporting multiculturalism.
- I can state my own biases about diverse groups.
- I can teach to multiple goals, incorporating information about a diversity of groups.
- I can evaluate curriculum materials for bias and supplement them when necessary.
- I can identify dysfunctional teacher-student interaction patterns.
- I can group students heterogeneously.
- I can use a variety of instructional techniques and strategies.
- I can compare my resources to the terms of bias.
- I can analyze my class delivery with the terms of bias.

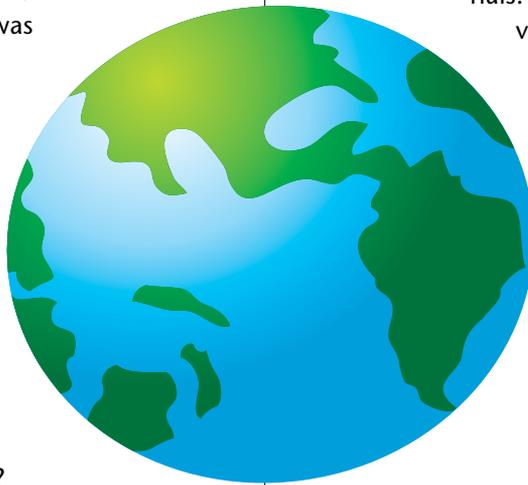
Using the following questions, teachers can summarize their reflections and analysis:

- What are the inconsistencies between the principles of multiculturalism and your own ideas about multiculturalism?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?

Experiential Multicultural Activities

The changing ethnic texture in the United States has stimulated debate over the extent to which schools use food, festival, folklore, and fashion as the heart of a multicultural curriculum. As diversity in the world increases, students must learn skills that cause them to reflect on their cross-racial, cross-ethnic and cross-cultural values. The following are just a few suggestions and ideas that expand the curriculum and prepare pre-service teachers to address these skills:

- After reading *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol 1991), react to the following questions: How did the reading make you feel? How did your childhood educational environment and experiences compare to those presented? How does the environment you now work in compare to what was presented in the reading?
- After reading *Segregated Schools* (Kozol 1995), respond to the following questions in your journal: What does segregation mean in schools today? How do your experiences in an integrated school impact you? What might be the impact of segregation in your school setting?
- Read the brief essay *Privileges of English* (Nieto 1999). Discuss in your triad the following questions: Is English your native language? If so, describe how being a native English speaker impacts your daily life and how it might have influenced your educational experiences. If English is not your first language, write about how this has impacted your life and school experiences. Are there students for whom English is not their first language in your school today? How might this impact their educational experience?
- Read the following articles:
 - “*White Means Never Having to Say You’re Ethnic*” (Perry 2001)
 - “*A Brief History of Multicultural Education*” (Gorski 1999)
 - “*White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*” (McIntosh 1988)After reading the material, create an online threaded discussion about what you read.



Enter a computer chat room with your classmates and respond to the following questions: How did the readings make you feel? How would you describe European-American culture? What types of questions could you raise to get students to think about their own ethnic or racial identity formation? What insights do you now have? What new perspectives have you gained? How will this shape your view of multiculturalism?

The use of multicultural children’s literature is a key ingredient in the multicultural classroom. While an in-depth examination of this topic is beyond the scope of this article, many excellent resources are available to assist educators in selecting appropriate materials. Mei-Yu Lu (1998, para. 6) provided a list of eight guidelines for selecting multicultural children’s literature, recommending that good choices contain:

1. positive portrayals of characters with authentic and realistic behaviors, to avoid stereotypes of a particular cultural group;
2. authentic illustrations to enhance the quality of the text, because illustrations can have a strong impact on children;
3. pluralistic themes to foster belief in cultural diversity as a national asset as well as to reflect the changing nature of the U.S. population;
4. contemporary as well as historical fiction that captures changing trends in the roles played by minority groups in America;
5. high literary quality, including strong plots and well-developed characterization;
6. historical accuracy, when appropriate;
7. reflections of the cultural values of the characters; and
8. settings in the United States that help readers build an accurate conception of the culturally diverse nature of the country and the legacy of various minority groups.

Further resources include the Council on Interracial Books for Children’s (n.d.) guidelines for analyzing children’s books for racism and sexism and Joseph Bruchac’s (2000) suggestions for selecting literature. Other excellent sources are recent winners of multicultural children’s literature awards, such as the Tomás

Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, the Jane Addams Book Award, and the Coretta Scott King Award. See "Recommended Books" for a brief sampling of recent award winners and honor books appropriate for elementary students.

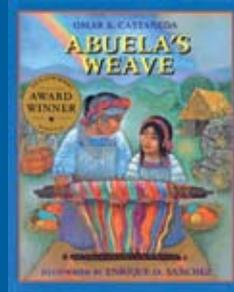
Final Thoughts

The intent of this article is not to provide a comprehensive view of the ideal multicultural curriculum, but rather to illustrate the necessity of tying instructional design to a valid working definition of multicultural education—one that is transformative and results in an improved quality of life for everyone. The increases of our nation's students of color reaffirm a needed commitment to educational programs that appropriately reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity within the United States and the world. Only well-conceived, sensitive, and continuous multicultural curricula will create a real multicultural literacy. An isolated day of food, festival, folklore, and fashion contrives a view of multicultural education that far too often denies understanding rather than enhances it. ■

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Recommended Books for Elementary Students

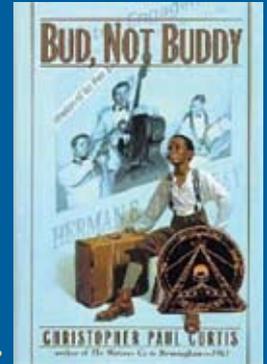


Abuela's Weave,
by Omar S. Castaneda
Baby Born,
by Anastasia Suen
Breaking Through,
by Francisco Jiménez
Bud, Not Buddy, by Christopher
Paul Curtis

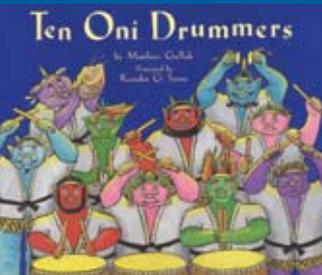
Crazy Horse's Vision,
by Joseph Bruchac
Forged by Fire,
by Sharon M. Draper
Frozen Land: Vanishing Cultures,
by Jan Reynolds
Habibi, by Naomi Shihab Nye
Heaven, by Angela Johnson



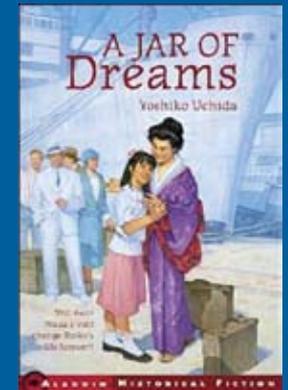
I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl,
by Joyce Hansen
In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall: African Americans Celebrating Fathers,
illustrated by Javaka Steptoe
A Jar of Dreams, by Yoshiko Uchida



Juneteenth Jamboree,
by Carole Boston Weatherford
The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo,
by Tom Feelings
Monster, by Walter Dean Myers
Morning Girl, by Michael Dorris
Rainbow Joe and Me,
by Maria Diaz Strom



Soul Looks Back in Wonder,
illustrated by Tom Feelings,
edited by Maya Angelou
Ten Oni Drummers,
by Matthew Gollub
Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China,
retold by Ai-Ling Louie



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Ten Oni Drummers,
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