

# Cultural Diversity and the Changing Culture of Education

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## ABSTRACT

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The paper will examine the change in schools brought about by cultural diversity and examines the theories that surround the topic. I will evaluate and examine ways in which schools can accommodate cultural diversity.

References will be made to cultural and social changes in our schools and how education is affected by such changes. The issue of multiculturalism, or cultural diversity, and the policies that govern it within our school system will be examined in detail. The classroom and its culture is the focus to determine how effective the programs dealing with diversity really are for the betterment of education. Two studies on diversity that were conducted in rural, urban, and suburban school districts were analyzed and concluding remarks are provided.

# The Changing Culture of Education

## Introduction

Diversity in education is one aspect of social and cultural change that affects our society deeply and is also rapidly changing. Bruner (1996) suggested that how a culture or society manages its system of education is a major embodiment of the culture's way of life, not just of its preparation for it. He also stated that education is a political tool that law makers use to accomplish some of their agendas—like getting reelected to political office.

The idea of a "culture capital" has also received considerable attention recently. According to Bourdieu (1988) cited by (Skrzeszewski & Culberley, 1998), who developed the notion of a culture capital, it is to be educated and culturally literate, that is, knowledgeable and fluid in both language and customs. Hence, immersion in the arts as a symbol of the culture is the most critical factor for the future success of any society. Traditionally, multiculturalism focused on an individual country, internal minorities, who often were the disadvantaged, refugees, and/or immigrants. Now, the focus should be expanded to include not only minorities within a nation, but also ethno-cultural groups within the global society and economy. In a global society we are all members of a minority, that is, tribes interacting and developing as individual human beings in a multicultural context (Skrzeszewski & Culberley, 1998).

Little tolerance for cultural diversity is evident within the educational system. In the next section will be examined how this growing and changing area affects society and the schools and, especially, how it impacts the children in a multicultural classroom.

## Multiculturalism in Education

Multiculturalism, by virtue of its presence, has had a great social and cultural impact on American society. Gibson (1998) reports in her article "The Status of Multicultural Education in Michigan," that the state board of education issued its position on multicultural education. She quotes:

All efforts shall be made to recognize and appreciate that ours is a radically and ethnically diverse society, consisting of men, women, and children whose ancestral cultures, values, and beliefs are unique aspects of our nation's democracy. It is the policy of the State Board of Education to ensure equality of educational opportunity to all students regardless of race, gender, age, religion, language, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, national origin, background, physical and mental condition, or marital status. (p. 18)

This document on educational goals from the state of Michigan reads like educational documents from other states across the United States, except for Texas and California. These two states passed laws, Proposition 227 and 209, in 1993 and 1996 respectively, decreeing that English should be the only language taught in the schools. Parents have to sign a waiver for their child to attend a bilingual class, and only if that class has 20 or more children, is it allowed to operate. If there are less than 20 children in the class, the parent has to remove the child to another school. Bilingual education represents the acceptance of diversity of cultures and the recognition of other languages as having significance or even equal status in American mainstream institutions. It is not right that Californians should attach these prerequisites to their education policy. Walsh (1991) stated that language is one of the principal ways people define themselves; through language they establish alliances with a community, undertake interactions with others, and communicate and receive information. Doing away with such information exchange is just another step towards controlling and subordinating language minority groups. If California can implement such a law, it will bring about a culture change in the schools and in society at large; this would foster a community approach to rearing a child. Already minority communities view educational institutions as a vehicle for economic opportunities and as reinforce of negative stereotypes. This type of law encourages such a belief and creates skepticism within minority communities. One should look at what is good for the child without injecting common fears of cultural differences into educational policy.

Multicultural education seeks to make schools examine and address their role to either empower or disable children. It serves as a solid platform, from which advocacy groups and educators can promote goals of equal opportunity, that is, racial, ethnic, and religious tolerance and gender and sexual orientation awareness. It allows them to openly challenge the

content and values of the traditional school curriculum.

Culturally diverse children are seen as students whose native or primary language is not English and/or who are not native members of the Euro/Caucasian cultural base currently dominant in the United States. Depending on the region of the country, one of these minority groups, by sheer numbers, could be a majority. Texas and California have larger populations of Spanish-speaking people than other states. Their school systems should be tolerant and empathize with the problem of diversity; yet, they are opponents of diversity.

The demographics of the United States are changing dramatically and are, thus, presenting new challenges for all aspects of society. The general population has become more culturally and linguistically diversified and so has the school population. Both the educational system and the government will have to rise to this social challenge as we enter into the 21st century, or new waves of challenges will sweep the country, as was described by Toffler (1995) in his book "Creating a New Civilization." It is imperative that educators reassess their basic assumptions regarding diversity in the schools and in the classroom.

Education has to adapt to the global changes and to cultural change within the society. Children are more informed today than they were 10 years ago. The new information technology has brought them into a fast-paced world, which changes the way they think and also how fast they think. The computer has revolutionized the whole system of assignments and projects. The Internet has given children the opportunity to acquire information instantaneously. They have become more creative and better informed—sometimes more so than their parents. The school system has to keep up with the growing demand of a changing society.

Assessment is another way to separate children of diverse cultural backgrounds from the mainstream population of a school. Traditional testing models centered on labeling students and documenting their failures. A multicultural assessment approach can serve as a basis for advocacy of the students and their families. Proponents of multiculturalism view assessment as an ongoing process, dealing with real learning experiences that provide a clear and direct relationship between assessment and instruction. Opponents of assessment of diverse student populations view it as a weapon to discriminate. Some of the critical elements in multicultural education today are employing student-centered assessment strategies, using culturally responsive instruction, transforming the curriculum, teaching students to accept and appreciate individual differences, teaching social responsibility, promoting family/community involvement and empowerment, understanding behavior in a social/cultural context, and countering resistance.

This writer's concerns are how these policies are implemented and whether they are effective. To this end, the following questions are being asked: Did the policies bring real change

to the school system, right down to the classroom level? Are teachers being educated to effectively deal with these issues? Or are these policies written merely to appease an inquiring public? How do teachers actually work with such diversity in their classrooms?

### The Multicultural Classroom

A teacher's decision about curriculum is dictated by federal, state, and local policy initiatives. These contribute potentially also to shaping how teachers manage and practice multiculturalism or any other subject matter. A multicultural classroom should identify ways in which the histories, beliefs, or experiences of individuals and groups can be shared collectively. Teachers should view multiculturalism as an agent through which youth can learn to assess critically social relationships and work collectively towards institutional change. It is a part of classroom life and should be integral to the presentation of knowledge.

More recent studies on multiculturalism show that collaboration among teachers toward a culturally diverse curriculum can further their understanding of the personal perspectives of those who are culturally different. It enhances effective communication and problem-solving skills, and it helps in applying appropriate evaluation methods when assessing culturally diverse students.

Banks (1994) states with respect to diversity that there are a number of ways teachers can teach diversity. Instead of using fact-based instruction, the curriculum and other units can be organized around larger concepts that deal with multiculturalism, such as diversity, racism, and assimilation. Students can be engaged in approaching concepts from different perspectives and contexts. The teacher can also encourage students to express views, concepts, issues, and problems from the perspective of various races, social classes, and gender groups, and not only from a European, middle-class point of view. Aware educators should realize that students from various cultural groups have different learning styles. While English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL)-children learn English, they should be taught their home language and culture. A teacher should recognize that children are thinkers as well as learners.

At the College of Charleston, a study was done in order to structure an experience for students and teachers that would be responsive to the diversity in our society. It should also make the students sensitive to other cultures within the country. The schools the teachers chose for conducting the study were Union Elementary and South Cooper Elementary, located on an island in the southeastern part of the country.

They consisted of 68% Blacks, 20% Whites, and 12% other mixed minorities, especially Spanish-speakers. The age levels included kindergarten to sixth grade, and projects were implemented according to the different age groups.

The first project in which kindergartners and first, second, and third graders participated was called "I am an individual." The children were allowed to tell stories about themselves and their favorite things with which they like to play. They were also allowed to express their feelings in any way they liked, without any interference from the students or teachers. This process created an atmosphere of trust within the group. The second project was to encourage the children to make a connection with each other. They were to describe differences and similarities of each other. An example would be differences in what one person liked and what he or she did not like. Similarities were also pointed out to make a connection with each other. After this motivational experience, the children broke into groups, and each group worked on a different project. This is called "cooperative learning experience." When the project was over, each group had to share what it had learned and how it felt about working as a group and with each other. The children were then shown a video entitled "What we are good at," which helped to further reinforce and develop an understanding of the classroom community.

Project three was called "We are a Community." This project was done with fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade classes. Here the children had to create a quilt of wildflowers found worldwide. This called for the groups to go to the library and do research. They would then paint the flowers and put them together to create a quilt. This project symbolized the community of wild flowers that is unique to each country and to each ecological environment, but also is part of the larger world community.

Project four was also done with the same group of children. They created pop-up books with elaborate maps portraying local communities. The children then created a three-dimensional community, using milk cartons, grass, pipe cleaners, tree branches to create stop signs, and other materials found in the community. An extension of this project was to create a play from "Brer Rabbit" the way they understood it. The project was to sensitize the children and teachers to cultural themes and create an atmosphere of community in which to work together regardless of the differences in culture or perception. Among the topics that provoked discussion among the teachers was the high activity level of the children. Teachers did not want to deal with the noise level or with their classrooms being altered in any way. The time factor was another issue.

The results of the project showed that (a) teachers had varying degrees of tolerance for the project and the children's behavior, (b) teachers and students learned togetherness, shared experiences, and gained insights, and (c) to bring about growth and understanding, interaction with

people of different cultures is necessary.

To better prepare students, prior to school involvement, the teachers concluded that they needed to focus on the following points:

1. To practice more reflection throughout the experience.
2. To ask the administration to hold more frequent seminars, particularly for the teachers to learn to practice more tolerance for cultural matters.
3. To provide students with more feedback about their performance.
4. To learn the value of cultural traditions.
5. To create a variety of successful multicultural experiences.

Understanding diverse cultures and accepting and utilizing the experiences of children from those cultures in a teaching context, says Ballenger (1992), may also impact teacher behavior.

This study answered my questions about the preparedness of teachers to understand diversity within the classroom. Teachers are not eager to shoulder the extra burden of preparing lessons for diverse groups within the classroom. Only when the impetus is filtered down from the administration, will they be moved to implement the changes. In order to restructure the educational system, teacher training in tolerance and diversity needs to be addressed by educators and the government alike.

Another study was conducted on the nature of multiculturalism in the classroom, and an analysis was provided by Maruza (1994). An urban and a suburban school district in the state of New York were chosen for this study. Included were magnet schools for grade levels 8-11 that had responded favorably to this research project. The project was about social studies, and the topic was U.S. history. The course content provided both continuity and a terrain for observing how teachers conceptualize multiculturalism with respect to U.S. history and society. All the teachers in the magnet schools were of European descent, except for one who was a Native American. The student population was largely of African descent. The second largest group was of European descent. The method of data collection used was interviews, observations, and document analysis over a 2-year period, from 1994 to 1996. Teachers were interviewed on how they made sense of and negotiated multiculturalism in the classroom. Observations were scheduled to further explore how teachers understood their classroom practice. Data analysis proceeded by branching out from the field notes to the interview course material and then back again in a circular fashion. The following points of interest emerged from this study: (a) an emergence of various points of view, (b) an emergence of heroes and public figures, and (c) an emergence of social critique.

In three of the classes, the teacher told the story of

Christopher Columbus. Aspects of multiculturalism were characterized by an exposition of two different points of view. Some teachers were unnerved when their one-sided approach to this topic was challenged. However, sometimes the teacher used the student perspective to structure the lesson. The teacher would also encourage students to think in meaningful ways and utilize these thoughts to create a part of the lesson. This approach encouraged the emergence of different points of view.

The emergence of hero figures was another facet that came out of this study. Heroes were portrayed as white men, who were rewarded for bravery, strength, and even weaknesses. The teacher showed that heroes did not accomplish everything by themselves, as portrayed in the book, but as a group with supporters. A comparison was made with the White House and the president, who relies on his team of advisors to make decisions for the good of the country.

Another facet of the study, social critique, emerged in a different way. The source treatment changed, and social critique was incorporated into how the United States was portrayed, particularly with respect to issues of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Europeans were depicted as courageous settlers, but the topic of enslaved Blacks was ignored. Negative sentiments were expressed toward other minorities, especially the Chinese and the Japanese. The topic of racism was not allowed to be discussed. In the end, students and teacher sided with the European settlers.

The analysis concluded that the United States was portrayed as not socioeconomically stratified, and thus, by default, the perspective presented was arguably that of the white middle-class. Ignored was that people stand in different relations to political, economic, and cultural institutions and that they do not share the same consciousness, needs, and interests at the same point in time (Maruza, 1994).

Maruza noted that what impacted the presentation of knowledge in the classroom was the teachers who were interviewed and who narrated their understanding of multiculturalism and their reasons for constructing their practice the way they did, linking their thoughts and actions to larger institutions and social processes. Some teachers avoided multiculturalism because they did not want to upset students or other people for fear of reprisals from the administration. Most teachers wanted students to learn that there are religious, linguistic, and ethnic differences among people; that they can accomplish things in different ways; and that there are different ways of knowing.

Many interactions are going on in the momentary shaping of classroom life. According to Maruza, the enactment of multiculturalism within a single teacher's practice can radically change depending on the continuity of positive influences. In a multicultural classroom, materials that have negative stereotypical depictions should be limited in favor of the ones that offer multiple views. However, not all such

materials should be avoided; teachers should openly critique these materials in the class so that students can see the differences and make their own choices. Teachers should understand the social order from their racial, gender, and social class location (Sleeter, cited by Maruza, 1994).

Showalters (1997) stated that multiculturalism is, among other things, a form of accountability to significant constituencies of the present public school system. Cultural identity is increasingly perceived as a process of constructing realities that reflect individual or small-group needs. Multiculturalism is not just an obligation or responsibility; it is also a social and economical resource that should be nurtured as a part of every community's social capital. We should find effective ways to convey the spirit and nature of one cultural group to another. Change has to begin at the classroom level in our schools. Administrators cannot control attitudes at that level of education; teachers have to take the leading role and challenge the present situation to create tolerance in the classroom.

A little effort in constructing lesson plans to include minorities and different cultural perspectives can only enrich the minds of students. As Toffler (1995) said, we have to stop running our schools like factories and consider the humanistic side of them. We have to connect with our students and sensitize them to an appropriate tolerance level and show them how to interact with other people. The world is a global society, and education is part of it. We cannot ignore values and morals and leave everything to technology; after all, this is what separates us from the animals.

Barber (1991) summed it up:

The greatest potential for American educational reform may lie in broadening our knowledge about effective teaching to include the kinds of understandings, skills and abilities required to better serve the needs of all students in our schools. Still, the call for critical and culturally responsive pedagogy distilled from decades of ethnographic classroom research has yet to produce widely recognized standards of practice that include the ability to demonstrate multicultural knowledge, knowledge of language and diversity, or skill in interacting with students from differing backgrounds. (p. 256)

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