

Multicultural Education

by [Keith Wilson](#)

Associate Professor and Director of Rehabilitation Programs Department of Counselor Education,
Counseling Psychology, and Rehabilitation Services, The Pennsylvania State University

What is Multicultural Education?

Multicultural education relates to education and instruction designed for the cultures of several different races in an educational system. This approach to teaching and learning is based upon consensus building, respect, and fostering cultural pluralism within racial societies. Multicultural education acknowledges and incorporates positive racial idiosyncrasies into classroom atmospheres.

Pros of Multicultural Education

A significant demographic transformation is on the horizon for the United States of America. Bennett (1995) estimates that "by the year 2000, over 30 percent of our school age population will be children of color" (p.18). Additionally, research has indicated that ethnic minority students are disproportionately poor, dropping out of school, being suspended or expelled, and achieving far below their potential relative to the ethnic majority (Bennett, 1995). Consequently, teachers must prepare themselves and their children for the ever changing challenge of interacting and communicating with diverse races. Reduction of fear, ignorance, and personal detachment are possible benefits to a Multicultural education. The following excerpts are taken from Paul Gorski (1995), a University of Virginia Doctoral student during a case study interview:

The idea of political correctness with the black race astounds me. I found it extremely interesting that some blacks in our class prefer to be called African American. In all of my classes...I have felt like I was stepping on egg shells as to not offend the blacks in my class. I am honestly glad it is not that big of an issue to my fellow classmates--it promotes a more comfortable, genuine environment for me to be totally honest and carefree.

Initially, the student interviewed in the case study reflected an attitude that would probably not facilitate consensus building, respect for other cultures, or fostering of cultural pluralism within different racial communities and in the classroom. However, with integrated curriculum, social activities, administrative support, and staff training, fear, ignorance, and personal detachment may be notably reduced in both students and teachers. Benefits to multicultural education can help to eliminate the crux of stereotyping, prejudice, racism, and bigotry (Fear, Ignorance, dis-ownership). Case study analyzed:

1. fear: "I have felt like I was stepping on egg shells as to not offend blacks in my classes..."
2. ignorance: "I found it extremely interesting that some blacks in our class prefer to be called African American."
3. dis-ownership: "I am honestly glad it is not that big of an issue to my fellow classmates."

The writer agrees with Hilliard and Pine (1990), "if Americans are to embrace diversity, the conscious and unconscious expressions of racism (sexism) within our society must be identified and done away with" (p. 7). Multicultural education is the potential catalyst to bring all races together in harmony.

Cons of Multicultural Education

According to some views, if one wants to alienate and further fragment the communication and rapport between ethnic groups, implement multicultural education. As stated by Bennett (1995), "to dwell on cultural differences is to foster negative prejudices and stereotypes, and that is human nature to view those who are different as inferior" (p. 29). Thus, multicultural education will enhance feelings of being atypical. Schools in America may see multicultural education as a way to "color blind" their students to differences. Administrators may view the "color blind" approach as a gate keeper that assures equal treatment and justice for all students and as a way to facilitate compatibility and sameness of all cultures. A common statement from this line of thinking is, 'we are more alike than different'. We should focus on the similarities and not the differences to achieve greater equanimity among the races.

Ethnicity is breaking up many nations. If one looks at the former Soviet Union, India, Yugoslavia, and Ethiopia, all countries are in some type of crisis. Closer to home, one observes the divisiveness of the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson trials in our country, we can see how focusing on race and multiculturalism may lead to a further divisiveness between the races in America. Over time, multicultural education may have unplanned for and undesired consequences. For example, multicultural education rejects the historic American goals of assimilation and integration of ethnic cultures into the majority culture. Hence, the perception may result that America is a country of distinct ethnic groups, as opposed to a more traditional view of the country that involves individuals making decisions for the good of the order (Schlesinger, 1991).

Multicultural education may increase the resentment encountered by students who feel that changes in school traditions, curriculum, and academic standards are not necessary to get along and respect students from ethnic minorities. Since many institutions resist change of any kind, passive resistance on the part of the administration may simulate acceptance of the tenants of Multicultural education. Of course, excepting the tenants of multicultural education should be avoided with enthusiasm and optimism.

What would real Multicultural Education look like?

The writer submits that multicultural education must have, as its crux, the below defining characteristics to achieve its purposes for students, teachers, parents, and administrators of the school system: a) a learning environment that supports positive interracial contact; b) a multicultural curriculum; c) positive teacher expectations; d) administrative support; and, e) teacher training workshops (Bennett, 1995). If one of the features is absent, frustration and heightened resentment may occur as backlash behaviors multiply.

The effects of a positive multicultural climate may manifest in a number of ways, such as: a) diminished pockets of segregation among student body; b) less racial tension in the schools; c) increased ethnic minority retention and classroom performance; and, d) inclusion of a multicultural curriculum. In short, the multicultural educational environment should not be a microcosm of our present American society, with regard to issues of diversity and tolerance. Many factors determine a successful multicultural atmosphere, but the features as outlined above may be important indications of success.

Administrative support for multicultural education is critical. How can a house stand if the foundation is fragile. Multicultural education will be as successful as commitment to it by school administrators. Regardless of the level of commitment (local, state, and/or national), programs initiated under the guise of multiculturalism must receive reinforcement from administrators who are accountable for the success of established multicultural initiatives. A key factor in any proposed multicultural initiative is curriculum development.

A multicultural curriculum should be considered for several reasons: a) provides alternative points of view relative to information already taught in most educational systems; b) provides ethnic minorities with a sense of being inclusive in history, science etc.; and, c) decreases stereotypes, prejudice, bigotry, and racism in America and the world. A significant demographic transformation is on the horizon for American schools. Educational institutions have been dictated too long by attitudes, values, beliefs, and value systems of one race and class of people. The future of our universe is demanding a positive change for all (Hilliard & Pine, 1990).

Definition of Terms

- Stereotype n. 1. a standardized image or conception shared by all members of a social group.
- stereotyping, prejudice, racism, and bigotry.

References

Bennett, C. (1995). *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.). Massachusetts: Allen & Bacon.

Hilliard, A. & Pine, G. (1990, April). Rx for Racism: Imperatives for American's schools. Phi Delta Kappan, (593 - 600).

Gorski, P. (1995). A course in race and ethnicity. Language of closet racism [On-line: <http://curry.eduschool.virginia.edu/go/multicultural/langofracism2.html>. Available E-mail: pcg9@curry.eduschool.virginia.edu.

Schlesinger. A. (1991, July 8). The cult of ethnicity, good and Bad. Time, 21. Word Perfect Corporation [Computer Software]. (3rd. Eds.) (1994).

Collins Electronic English Dictionary & Thesaurus. Orem, Utah. Authors.

Fuente: Critical Multicultural Pavilion [en línea]

<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/papers/keith.html>