

# Encouraging Multicultural Education

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## The ASCD Multicultural Education Commission

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*To ignore or invalidate a person's cultural heritage is to limit the possibilities for developing full human potential. Recognizing, valuing, and encouraging cultural diversity are goals of education in a pluralistic society.*

ASCD's commitment to multicultural education emanates from the realities of life in the United States. It also emerges from the Association's consistent affirmation of democratic processes and humanistic ideals.

We live in a culturally pluralistic society. With the increasing complexity and interdependence of economic, political, and social affairs, similarities and differences among cultural groups become more pronounced. A single national culture is no longer acceptable as a feasible concept for educational processes and interpersonal behavior. A dynamic realignment of political and economic power among various interest groups in our country and among world nations emphasizes the need for increased understanding of ourselves and others.

Attempts to understand "other" people and bases for "others'" decisions, intentions, and values must be broadened beyond historically mono-cultural perspectives. Shifting balances of power reduce abilities of adherents of the dominant culture to control their own destinies, as well as those of "others." This fact certainly necessitates a deeper reexamination of "others" if we are to understand and coexist with them. Life in a

culturally pluralistic society requires fundamental changes in educational philosophies, processes, and practices. We might consider these as basic needs for human renewal.

An initial step toward human renewal must emphasize that many different cultures exist in the United States. It must also include a recognition of their right to exist, and an acceptance of the fact that they represent humanity's potential in a very altruistic sense.

Human renewal must further recognize the validity and viability of cultural diversity. As educators, we must strive to understand cultural pluralism and develop an empathy for more than the obvious "trappings" that might characterize a culture. It is therefore time to translate our concern for individual development into the more difficult task of understanding individuals within the context of their cultural group experiences.

As we accept the realities of cultural pluralism, a growing recognition of the worth, dignity, and integrity of each individual becomes defined in behavior—in the cultural context of each indi-

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From the filmstrip series, *With Pride to Progress* (Set 2, "The Puerto Rican Child"), produced by Parents' Magazine Films, Inc.

vidual. Thus, our concern for maximizing individual development of human potential must increasingly be viewed as a continually emerging and evolving one, shaped by different cultural contexts, which nourish the growth and development of the individual. There is no single criterion of human potential applicable to all. Instead, complex and varied sets of coherent values, motives, attitudes, and attributes—which determine behavior patterns—exist among cultural groups. Added to this is the effect of economic, political, and social racism toward non-white minority groups. All of these factors must be considered in our efforts to design opportunities for educational experiences that will maximize human dignity and potential for all individual students.

Different cultural and social environments have determining influences on individual perception and behavior. Two such environments are our early-life experiences and our technological society. The earliest associations of a child form the basis of his/her cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is the essence of relationship patterns, linguistic and expressive communication, and the fundamental values and attitudes through which

each child grows. To ignore, or invalidate this living experience for any individual is, in effect, to distort and diminish the possibilities for developing that person's potential.

The growing impact of the complexity of life in our highly technological and industrialized society necessitates recognition of cultural pluralism, and should foster active efforts for its positive perpetuation. We are all in danger of being alienated, bureaucratized, and depersonalized by the rationality of the ethos of industrial technology. Not only are ethnic minorities being deculturalized and dehumanized, but *all* of us are being sized and fitted to sets of specifications that are essentially depersonalizing, and destructive to human individuality. In a very real sense, members of the majority culture or dominant segment of society are just as invalidated as *individuals* as are members of minority groups and cultures. All face the superstructure of technical-industrial-economic rationality. Cultural pluralism emerges not only as a social fact, but also as a positive ideal to preserve the integrity of all individuals. It is necessary for the development of a more humane society through democratic processes.

## Definition

ASCD's commitment to cultural pluralism evolves from a concern for more valid educational futures, and a realization of the social and cultural changes taking place in our society. Cultural pluralism is neither the traditionalist's separatism nor the assimilationist's melting pot. It is a composite that recognizes the uniqueness and value of every culture. Cultural pluralism acknowledges that no group lives in isolation, but that, instead, each group influences and is influenced by others.

In educational terms, the recognition of cultural pluralism has been labeled "multicultural education." The essential goals of multicultural education embrace: (a) recognizing and prizing diversity; (b) developing greater understanding of other cultural patterns; (c) respecting individuals of all cultures; and (d) developing positive and productive interaction among people and among experiences of diverse cultural groups.

Multicultural education, as interpreted by ASCD, is a humanistic concept based on the strength of diversity, human rights, social justice, and alternative life choices for all people. It is mandatory for quality education. It includes curricular, instructional, administrative, and environmental efforts to help students avail themselves of as many models, alternatives, and opportunities as possible from the full spectrum of our cultures. This education permits individual development in any culture. Each individual simultaneously becomes aware that every group (ethnic, cultural, social, and racial) exists autonomously as a part of an interrelated and interdependent societal whole. Thus, the individual is encouraged to develop social skills that will enable movement among and cooperation with other cultural communities and groups.

Multicultural education is a continuous, systematic process that will broaden and diversify as it develops. It views a culturally pluralistic society as a positive force that welcomes differences as vehicles for understanding. It includes programs that are systematic in nature; that enhance and preserve cultural distinctions, diversities, and similarities; and that provide individuals with a wide variety of options and alternatives.

Multicultural education goes beyond an un-

derstanding and acceptance of different cultures. It recognizes the right of different cultures to exist, as separate and distinct entities, and acknowledges their contribution to the societal entity. It evolves from fundamental understandings of the interaction of divergent cultures *within* the culture of the United States. If multicultural education is to achieve its goals, the concepts that constitute its foundations must pervade the educational experiences of *all* students.

The concepts of multicultural education seem rather familiar—and they are. What is new is contextual in nature, a sifting and winnowing to understand these goals in cultural terms. What previously seemed appropriate goals in terms of *individuals* now gain in perspective by looking at individuals in the context of cultural realities (including both origins and experiences).

The major application factor for multicultural education concerns the quality of the interaction—that which characterizes content and context of the school in relation to each child's unique cultural group reality. The critical commitment must be to *diversification*, since without this acceptance and its deliberate advancement, there is little hope of building greater understanding or greater respect for individuals. Therefore, the heart of multicultural education pertains to the interactional dimensions of human behavior, and the development of effective skills to facilitate such functioning. Multicultural education can be addressed by the type of interaction that is encouraged and structured in the schools' curricula and environment. It includes the broadest range of potential human interaction, both in content and context.

Multicultural education emphasizes the development of communication skills to enable cross-cultural and inter-ethnic group interaction. It endorses the development of perceptual, analytical, and application skills, which can be applied in both formal and informal, personal and institutional settings. It also places a high priority on developing abilities to make dependable, responsible decisions, and to gain, maintain, and exercise political power. The concern for multicultural education is fundamentally a concern for maximizing individual ability—to use communicative and interactional skills to improve the quality of life in a culturally pluralistic, multiracial, and highly technological society.

## Application

In practical terms, ASCD's application of multicultural education calls for an examination of educational content and processes. ASCD's goals include the creation and advancement of understanding, along with a respect for differences that can lead to an altruistic development of human potential. A number of suggestions are apparent at both content and process levels. The following suggestions are clearly illustrative and are not intended to be comprehensive:

1. Examine text materials for evidence of racism, classism, sexism, and realistic treatment of cultural pluralism in American society.

2. Develop new curricula for all levels of schooling—curricula that enhance and promote cultural diversity.

3. Provide opportunities to learn about and interact with a variety of ethnic groups and cultural experiences.

4. Include the study of concepts from the humanistic and behavioral sciences, which are applicable for understanding human behavior.

5. Organize curricula around universal human concerns, which transcend usual subject-matter disciplines; bring multicultural perspectives to bear in the study of such issues.

6. Broaden the kinds of inquiry used in the school to incorporate and facilitate the learning of more humanistic modes of inquiry.

7. Create school environments that radiate cultural diversity.

8. Maximize the school as a multicultural setting, with the idea of utilizing the positive contributions of all groups to accomplish common tasks and not just to reduce deficiencies for the deprived.

9. Recognize and utilize bilingualism as a positive contribution to the communication process, and include bilingual programs of instruction for monolingual children.

10. Examine rules, norms, and procedures of students and staff with the purpose of facilitating the development of learning strategies and techniques that do not penalize and stigmatize diversity, but rather, encourage and prize it.

11. Institute a system of shared governance in the schools, in which all groups can enter

equally in the learning and practice of democratic procedures.

12. Organize time, space, personnel, and resources to facilitate the maximum probability and flexibility of alternative experiences for all youngsters.

13. Institute staffing patterns (involving both instructional and non-instructional positions) that reflect our culturally pluralistic and multi-racial society.

14. Design and implement preservice and in-service programs to improve staff ability to successfully implement multicultural education.



Photo: Joe Di Dito, NEA.

ASCD is committed to the mandates of multicultural education. The Association endorses the reality of cultural pluralism, as well as the potential for the advancement of human life through the acceptance and prizing of diversity, which makes possible greater understanding among groups, with respect for individuals. It recognizes that specific and concrete commitments must be an integral part of all ASCD's activities, and of the entire educational enterprise, if we are to more effectively advance the cause of social functioning and educational proficiency for our diverse population. <sup>71</sup>

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