



Sorting Through the Multicultural Rhetoric

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To find harmony in diversity, teachers must wade through the rhetoric to glean the best research on multicultural education and, as usual, rely on their own best instincts.

In the spring of 1984, I was working in a bicycle shop in a crowded resort town on the Massachusetts coast. Families there own an average of two-and-a-half bicycles apiece — at least one of which came into our shop for repairs. We couldn't work fast enough to fix them, and the bikes began piling up. We hung them from hooks in the shop. We lined them up on the sidewalk. And they kept coming.

Realizing this was a desperate situation, our boss called a huddle behind the cash register. He looked out at all

the broken bikes, looked back at us, and was silent. I thought he was going to cry. Then he slammed his fist on the counter and shouted, "Do everything! Now!"

I've been reading a lot of articles on education reform lately, and I think I know how teachers feel. *Everything* is expected of them. *Now.*

Teachers are expected to teach to a variety of learning styles, abilities, beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, personal interests, and family problems. They have to contend with limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, marginal

students, discipline, violence, and drugs. And they are expected to make learning happen under these circumstances.

The goal of multicultural learning must seem like just another brick in an insurmountable tower. Teachers intrepid enough to get past the initial confusion and the shortage of curriculum and administrative support must next make it through a minefield of rhetoric.

Beyond the Rhetoric

Educators disagree, first, over which groups should be included in multicultural plans — racial and ethnic groups, certainly, but what about regional, social class, gender, disability, religious, language, and sexual orientation groupings?

There is further disagreement over the goals of multicultural education. Should it be to promote understanding of and sensitivity to other cultures? To advance academic achievement of minorities? To model a multicultural society where every group shares equal power? To offer a radical critique of Western culture? To provide intensive study of single ethnic groups? To train students in social action skills?

James Banks, who has worked harder than most at trying to clarify the issues, offers an articulate description of the goals of multicultural education:

- to "transform the school so that male and female students, exceptional students, as well as students from diverse cultural, social, racial, and ethnic groups will experience an equal opportunity to learn in school"

- to "help all students develop more positive attitudes toward different cultural, racial, ethnic and religious groups"

- to "empower students from victim-

ized groups by teaching them decision-making and social action skills"

- to help students develop cross-cultural dependency and view themselves from the perspectives of different groups (1989).

Banks acknowledges that multicultural education has become a "useful umbrella," but one that "is not an adequate concept to guide research and policy decisions on problems related to racial and ethnic minorities" (1988). Thus, the evolution of *multi-ethnic* education: multicultural education that excludes gender, religious, ability, and social class groupings.

Outside the Classroom

There is another level of confusion: what does multiculturalism imply outside the classroom? In addition to the academic goals, Grant and Sleeter (1989) identify "societal goals": "to reduce prejudice and discrimination against oppressed groups, to provide equal opportunity and social justice for all groups, and to effect an equitable distribution of power among members

of the different cultural groups."

Another writer attacks multiculturalism for failing to "tackle fundamental issues of racism. . . . Instead it helps explain differences in behavior, in attitudes. . . . Often the aim of such an approach is to help students 'adjust' to living with people who are different — and in the process, to live with society's racism" (Murray 1991). To correct this, Murray offers a narrower perspective: "anti-racist education."

On the far right of the continuum of misconceptions stand people like *Newsday* writer Lawrence Auster (1991), who fears that Western culture will be lost in the multicultural shuffle: "The defining concept of multiculturalism is that our society is a collection of equal cultures, from which it follows that the United States' dominant Western culture is illegitimate and must be dismantled or drastically weakened." Auster seriously suggests immigration restrictions as one solution to the "problem" of multiculturalism, a position shared by David Duke and other leading white supremacists.



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Caution: Danger Ahead

If teachers make it past the confusion about concepts, other obstacles appear in their path. One is intolerance among the "multiculturalists" themselves.

In attempting to close the ranks of multiculturalists around a specific

curriculum that purifies and romanticizes their own history, offending other groups and ostracizing members of their own group who do not subscribe to their strong ethnic position.

Others believe multicultural polarization may be contributing to growing ethnic tensions on college

tural dilemma: "What should a teacher do if he or she comes across a Turkish boy giving his sister a severe beating outside the school gates because he saw her talking to boys during the morning recess?" Bullivant proceeds to discuss the "assumption of normative equivalence" and "naive



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ideology of social change, Sherritt (1990) offers 10 rules for "What Not to Do in the Name of Multiculturalism." They are not rules, really, but rather bitter, uninformative gripes: "Don't pretend that you're a cultural pluralist if you don't know what cultural plurality means," "Don't say that you believe in multicultural education when you don't believe in anything that multicultural education stands for." Exclusionary stances, usually posed with more subtlety, can be found throughout the literature.

As ethnic and racial groups seek specialized attention to their concerns, there is danger of polarization. Banks (1988) describes the division that occurs when ethnic groups promote a

campuses. "A kind of politics of difference emerges in which racial, ethnic, and gender groups are forced to assert their entitlement and vie for power on the single quality that makes them different from one another," writes Steele (1989).

"Separatism and even tribalism in the old-fashioned sense are increasing. . . . If humanism and communal understanding can't happen on a college campus, how in the world can it happen on city streets?" asks Boyer (in DePalma 1991).

Basic issues of fairness and common sense can be distorted if multiculturalism is translated as moral relativism. In a text for new teachers, Bullivant (1989) presents a multicult-

cultural relativism" as possible factors in the teacher's decision about whether or not to intervene.

Nonsense. If a child is being beaten, someone should try and stop it. There's no multicultural issue at work here. Our cultural differences must take their expression within the context of a nation with laws.

The danger of stereotyping is also inherent in the multicultural perspective. As cultures are "taught," generalizations are made and assumptions drawn about individual members of that culture. Hilliard (1976) has ascribed to African Americans a set of tendencies that are meant to be learning style characteristics but sound a lot like stereotypes: They "tend to

approximate space, numbers, and time rather than stick to accuracy," and "have a keen sense of justice and are quick to analyze and perceive injustice." If, in the name of multicultural education, teachers form expectations of individuals based on such race-based generalizations, they are modeling prejudice, not tolerance.

Transcending Our Cultures

In the field of multicultural education, the struggle for clarity and the battle of ideas will go on. Meanwhile, teachers must teach. Rather than wait for the outcome of the debate, perhaps it's better if teachers make their own honest efforts to build diverse communities in the classroom, using the research that makes sense and their own best instincts.

Most teachers, after all, have a pretty good understanding of what they need to do: Care about their children. Teach them to care about each other. Show them that hatred hurts. Show them how to think critically. Open up new worlds for them to discover. Offer them the tools of change. Create a small caring community in the classroom.

Multicultural education is not a substitute for individual attention. But multicultural education, by some definition, is essential. We must help our children find a place in our pluralistic world. In doing so, we must avoid stereotyping, resegregation, indoctrination, assigning blame. We must confront the problems of prejudice and inequality in our classrooms as well as in our society.

And we must remember that as individuals we are not merely expressions of culture; we are also capable of transcending our cultures. In that way, we are all alike. □

Bringing Tolerance and Diversity into the Classroom

Launched in December 1991, *Teaching Tolerance* features successful school programs and teaching resources to help bring the issues of tolerance and diversity into classrooms across the curriculum. The 64-page, full-color magazine will be mailed free to educators twice a year. Its publisher, the nonprofit Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, is sponsor of the Civil Rights Memorial, designed by Maya Lin (see photo, p. 12), and has a long history of courtroom

victories against organized white supremacist groups.

"*Teaching Tolerance* is not a forum for political or ideological debates," explains editor Sara Bullard. "Rather, it is meant to be a collection of ready-to-use ideas and strategies—and, above all, a source of encouragement for the thousands of teachers who are working to build communities of understanding in their classrooms."

To receive the magazine, write to Teaching Tolerance, 400 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL 36104.

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