

Classroom and school shared decision-making: The Multicultural education of the 21st century

Overview: Since the early 1970s, multicultural education has been a part of the foundation of American public schools. It opened the classroom door to mutual understanding among students, students and teachers, as well as adults in the community. It did this by providing the academic/political foundation that legitimized Afrocentric questions and the goals of multiculturalism, shining the light of science (both social and biological) on the illusions of stereotypes and the shadows of prejudice, exposing discrimination in American society and its public schools. Interestingly, in the early 1990s, multicultural education began to lose some of the gravitas it once had. Attacks on multiculturalism from cultural conservatives and doubts about its viability from its contemporaries compel many questions.

Where does multicultural education stand in the overview of the history of democratic education? Is this 20th century concept still influential or has it reached its limits? Is an appreciation of cultural diversity enough, or does this meet only half the intellectual and moral challenge of the democratic role and responsibility of public education? Has it been able to relate to the African American urban working class global hip-hop culture? Where does it fit in current urban school reform? Is school and classroom shared decision-making its logical extension into the 21st century?

Multiculturalism: Its roots

Afrocentrism emerged as a response to the Eurocentric bias pervasive in America's schools. An outgrowth of the Civil Rights movement, the goal was to gain power to define how education for children of oppressed racial groups should be conducted. Tied to a larger struggle for political and economic equality, schools became a site where the struggle was carried out. This perspective assumes that ethnic and cultural identity is inherently linked to school performance.

Multicultural education

Multicultural education describes a system of instruction that attempts to foster cultural pluralism and acknowledges the differences between races and cultures. The goal is to help students understand and appreciate cultural differences and similarities and to recognize the accomplishments of diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups, not just the mainstream culture. Various cultures in a society merit equal respect, status, scholarly interest, and preservation. Different cultures or cultural identities can coexist peacefully and equitably in a unified society. Activities like Black History Month, U.N. Day, guest speakers, or multicultural fairs intend to teach understanding and respect.

Influence on school performance

Multicultural educators, in particular, argue that inclusion of African history, personalities, and contributions in

schooling and curricula will enhance students' cultural and self-esteem and contribute positively to their academic performance.

Afrocentric/Multicultural education has not worked

Nonetheless, although past and present multicultural efforts that integrate race, ethnicity, and culture in urban public school reform were and are indeed necessary, *if one of the main goals of this reform is keeping African Americans in school and graduating, the reform has not worked.*

United States Graduation Rates for 2001: National rate 68%

Native 51%, Black 50% (Males 42.8%), Latino 53%, Whites 75%, Asian 77%

"Loosing Our Future: How Many Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind"
A 2004 Urban Institute/ Harvard Civil Rights Project report
www.americanprogress.org/kf/losingourfuture_summary.pdf

United States Graduation Rates for 2004: National rate 69.9%

Native 47.3% (Males 44.6%), Black 52.9 % (Males 46.2%), Latino 57.6 % (Males 52.3%), White 75.1%, Asian 78.9%

Diplomas Count: Ready for What?
www.edweek.org/we/toc/2007/06/12/index/html

One urban district: Indianapolis (Indiana*) Public Schools

2004 graduation rate for males--the worst in the nation:

White 22%, Black 21%.

*Indiana's Black male graduation rate was 38%, 2006 Schott Foundation Report

Also, according to the Schott report, IPS led the nation in the over-diagnosis of Black males as mentally retarded by 5 times the norm. www.schottfoundation.org/publications/Schott_06_report_final.pdf

Multicultural education: "...an increasingly mainstream, stale, and ineffective practice" (Dolby, 2000)

Not only has multicultural education not kept blacks in school, according to Shawn Ginwright (2004; 2006) today's students do not always see the relevance of multicultural/Afrocentric education to their day-to-day lives. Ultimately, for black urban working class students and parents alike, multicultural education is simply irrelevant outside of the school context. It seemingly does little to address real-life concerns such as employment, child/health care, housing, police brutality, empty storefronts, or neighborhood crime.

The middle-class backed notion that achievement could be attained by students' reclamation of ancient African ideologies failed to take into account students' lived experience, ignoring more important social and economic issues that also influence what happens in school-- privileging the middle-class interests of black professionals over the concerns of the local working-class community.

Ginwright also exposes a generational divide: pre-1980s educators have not been able to keep up with post-1990 multicultural developments, undermining the necessity of building a bridge to the 21st century working class urban global hip-hop culture, one where students use more than

race to form identity. *In summary, multicultural education has lost its ability to relate.*

Multicultural education, as it is now situated, is passé

As it now stands, multicultural education describes a system of instruction that attempts to foster cultural pluralism and acknowledges the differences between races and cultures. The goals are:

- to help students understand and appreciate cultural differences and similarities
- to recognize the accomplishments of diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups
- to show various cultures in a society merit equal respect, status, scholarly interest, and preservation
- to show different cultures or cultural identities can coexist peacefully and equitably in a unified society

The B&LPI calls for a new century of “democracy” orientations

Here, students will continue to be exposed to the academic side of multicultural education, but we also move to matters that “are relevant to the problems of living together” (Parker, 2003) *where this ethos is realized in democratic practice.*

Multicultural education reform is shared decision-making with students in classrooms and schools

Amy Gutmann, in her essay, “Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education” (1995), argues

that justifying multiculturalism is no longer one of the toughest tasks now facing American public schools because *an appreciation of* cultural diversity (include one's own cultural/gender identity/ethnic/religious heritage) *is not enough*. It meets only half the intellectual and moral challenge of the democratic role and responsibility of public education.

Consequently, she suggests multiculturalism expand politically, not just pedagogically, by teaching students the civic virtue of mutual respect and its understanding *through practice*--teaching students how to engage together in respectful discussions in which they strive to understand, appreciate, and, if possible, resolve school and classroom disagreements, including those that may be partly rooted in cultural differences.

Mutual respect that rests only on student cognition of cultural diversity is an incomplete democratic virtue. *Recognition needs to be accompanied by a willingness which is enabled by an ability to deliberate about politically relevant disagreements.*

This evolves by practicing classroom and school democracy, where students must, along with others, ask and act on the answer to the democratic question: How do different people/groups share the same space? This is much different than studying Chinese American history and taking

a test, playing the African djembe at a school cultural fair, dressing up like Indians for Thanksgiving, or learning one of the songs by Jimmy Rogers, the father of country music.

This is authentic multiculturalism: practicing shared decision-making in classrooms and schools. In a democratic school culture, it will be necessary for students (and teachers) to apply what they have acquired through study, projects, reports, and testing especially to the goal of "...showing how different cultures or cultural identities can coexist peacefully and equitably in a unified society."

Studying the importance of this goal and actually attempting to "coexist peacefully and equitably" in school bathrooms, hallways, and classrooms are too different things. Here individuals/groups have to directly take into account culture and cultural differences in considering what is fair for everyone through explaining, listening, taking stock, consideration, deliberation, and decision-making.

This is the practice of multicultural education.

This can expand to involve students in classroom and/or school decision regarding curriculum, teaching styles, project rubrics, textbooks, lunch menus, hiring teachers, or simply responding to the fundamental question of a 21st century multicultural education: "What can students do to help run the school?"

These activities will complement and expand current multicultural education, evolving with its 20th century accomplishment to a 21st century global-oriented democracy paradigm of study and the challenge of daily application.

References

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