



A Synthesis of Scholarship in Multicultural Education

[by Geneva Gay](#)

Introduction

Multicultural education means different things to different people. However, the differences are not as great, confusing, or contradictory as some critics and analysts claim. Many of these differences are more semantic than substantive, a reflection of the developmental level in the field and the disciplinary orientation of advocates. One should expect people who have been involved in a discipline or educational movement for a long time to understand and talk about it differently from those who are new to it. Similarly, educators who look at schooling from the vantage point of sociology, psychology, or economics will have differing views of the key concerns of schooling. Yet, these disparate analysts may agree on which issues are the most critical ones. Such differences over means coupled with widespread agreement on substance are naturally found in discussions of multicultural education. But this diversity should not be a problem, especially when we consider that multicultural education is all about plurality.

The field includes educational scholars, researchers, and practitioners from a wide variety of personal, professional, philosophical, political, and pedagogical backgrounds. Therefore, we should expect that they will use different points of reference in discussing ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism. Yet, when allowances are made for these differences, a consensus on the substantive components of multicultural education quickly emerges. Such agreement is evident in areas such as the key content dimensions, value priorities, the justification for multicultural education, and its expected outcomes. Only when these fundamentals are articulated do variations emerge.

Some advocates talk about expected outcomes, while others consider the major determining factor to be the group being studied; the arena of school action is the primary focus for one set of advocates, and still others are most concerned with distinctions between theory and practice. Some people are selective about where to begin and what to emphasize in cultural pluralism. Others are more inclusive and want its impact to be felt in all dimensions and on every level. Regardless of these variations, all conceptions of multicultural education share four characteristics: (1) they are based upon a common set of assumptions, (2) they evolve out of common concerns, (3) they contain common guidelines for action, (4) they share a desire to make cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity integral parts of the educational process.

When planning for multicultural education in school programs, it is important to allow different conceptions of multicultural education to be expressed in the school decisionmaking process rather than to insist on one definition. Conceptions of multicultural education contain value beliefs and reflect the varying levels of understanding among people involved in the school decisionmaking process. Conceptions of multicultural education and the value beliefs within them delineate the scope, focus, and boundaries of the field of multicultural education. These conceptions are guidelines for action and need to be clearly understood early in the process of making educational decisions. Accordingly, this synthesis includes various conceptions and definitions of multicultural education and outlines the implications of these definitions for practice.

Definitions of Multicultural Education

Definitions of multicultural education vary. Some definitions rely on the cultural characteristics of diverse groups, while others emphasize social problems (particularly those associated with oppression), political power, and the reallocation of economic resources. Some restrict their focus to people of color, while others include all major groups that are different in any way from mainstream Americans. Other definitions limit multicultural education to characteristics of local schools, and still others provide directions for school reform in all settings regardless of their characteristics. The goals of these diverse types of multicultural education range from bringing more information about various groups to textbooks, to combatting racism, to restructuring the entire school enterprise and reforming society to make schools more culturally fair, accepting, and balanced. For this reason, the field of multicultural education is referred to interchangeably as multicultural education, education that is multicultural, and antiracist education.

The following are the most frequently used definitions of multicultural education:

- An idea, an educational reform movement, and a process intended to change the structure of educational institutions so that all students have an equal chance to achieve academic success
- A philosophy that stresses the importance, legitimacy, and vitality of ethnic and cultural diversity in shaping the lives of individuals, groups, and nations
- A reform movement that changes all components of the educational enterprise, including its underlying values, procedural rules, curricula, instructional materials, organizational structure, and governance policies to reflect cultural pluralism
- An ongoing process that requires long term investments of time and effort as well as carefully planned and monitored actions (Banks & Banks, 1993).
- Institutionalizing a philosophy of cultural pluralism within the educational system that is grounded in principles of equality, mutual respect, acceptance and understanding, and moral commitment to social justice (Baptiste, 1979)
- Structuring educational priorities, commitments, and processes to reflect the cultural pluralism of the United States and to ensure the survival of group heritages that make up society, following American democratic ideals (AACTE, 1973; Hunter, 1974)
- An education free of inherited biases, with freedom to explore other perspectives and cultures, inspired by the goal of making children sensitive to the plurality of the ways of life, different modes of analyzing experiences and ideas, and ways of looking at history found throughout the world (Parekh, 1986, pp. 2627)
- A humanistic concept based on the strength of diversity, human rights, social justice, and alternative lifestyles for all people, it is necessary for a quality education and includes all efforts to make the full range of cultures available to students; it views a culturally pluralistic society as a positive force and welcomes differences as vehicles for better understanding the global society (ASCD Multicultural Education Commission, in Grant, 1977b, p. 3)
- An approach to teaching and learning based upon democratic values that foster cultural pluralism; in its most comprehensive form, it is a commitment to achieving educational equality, developing curricula that builds understanding about ethnic groups, and combatting oppressive practices (Bennett, 1990)
- A type of education that is concerned with various groups in American society that are victims of discrimination and assaults because of their unique cultural characteristics (ethnic, racial, linguistic, gender, etc.); it includes studying such key concepts as prejudice, identity, conflicts, and alienation, and modifying school practices and policies to reflect an appreciation for ethnic diversity in the United States (Banks, 1977)
- Acquiring knowledge about various groups and organizations that oppose oppression and exploitation by studying the artifacts and ideas that emanate from their efforts (Sizemore, 1981)
- Policies and practices that show respect for cultural diversity through educational philosophy, staffing

composition and hierarchy, instructional materials, curricula, and evaluation procedures (Frazier, 1977; Grant, 1977)

- Comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students that challenges all forms of discrimination, permeates instruction and interpersonal relations in the classroom, and advances the democratic principles of social justice (Nieto, 1992)

These various definitions contain several points in common. Advocates agree that the content of multicultural education programs should include ethnic identities, cultural pluralism, unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, and other sociopolitical problems stemming from long histories of oppression. They believe that, at best, multicultural education is a philosophy, a methodology for educational reform, and a set of specific content areas within instructional programs. Multicultural education means learning about, preparing for, and celebrating cultural diversity, or learning to be bicultural. And it requires changes in school programs, policies, and practices.

Multiculturalists explicitly value diversity and agree that the specific content, structures, and practices employed in achieving multicultural education will differ depending on the setting. Therefore, it is useful for educators to develop their own definitions of multicultural education, within the general boundaries outlined above, to fit their specific needs, rather than imposing a universal structure to implement multicultural education.

Multiculturalists also agree that multicultural education has implications for decisionmaking that will affect operations at all levels of education, including instruction, administration, governance, counseling, program planning, performance appraisal, and school climate. Thus, everyone involved must play an active role in implementing multicultural education. Promoting diversity means acknowledging diversity, incorporating diversity into all levels, and demonstrating pride in cultural pluralism along with a sincere belief that diversity is desirable.

The actions taken in schools to adopt multicultural education should reflect the race, language, ethnicity, habits, and customs of ethnic groups throughout the global community. In order to promote a comprehensive understanding of cultural groups, we must use a variety of methods and a composite of various areas of scholarship, including the humanities, arts, social sciences, history, politics, and sciences.

To implement multicultural education fully, fundamental changes will need to be made in the conception, organization, and execution of the educational process. These changes require modifications in an educational system that has been governed with a monocultural orientation based on Eurocentric, middle class cultural norms. Thus, implied in the definitions given above is another concept that finds general agreement among multiculturalists: multiculturalism requires simultaneous changes on multiple levels of schooling. These changes must be deliberate, longrange, ongoing, and, most important, comprehensive.

The Need for Multicultural Education

Multicultural education should become a regular part of education in the United States for three major reasons: the social realities of U.S. society, the influence of culture and ethnicity on human growth and development, and the conditions of effective teaching and learning. These reasons explain not only the need for multicultural education, but also what its content emphasis should be and how it should be taught. Each reason plays an important and unique role in establishing the justifications, parameters, and directions for multicultural education.