

# Multiculturalism's Five Dimensions

## Dr. James A. Banks on Multicultural Education

Dr. James A. Banks, author of *Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society* (Teachers College Press, \$22.95), spoke recently with *NEA Today's* Michelle Tucker about the concept he's developed called "the five dimensions of multicultural education." Especially for NEA Today Online readers, here is the complete interview. A shorter version ran in the September 1998 issue.

### Could you briefly describe the five dimensions of multicultural education?

Yes. But I'd like to first, if I may, talk a little bit of why I developed the dimensions.

I found in my work with teachers that many thought of multicultural education as merely content integration.

I once gave a talk on multicultural education at a school. When I was done, a math teacher said to me, "What you said is fine for social studies, but it has nothing to do with me."

My first reaction was anger and frustration. But then I thought my role as a scholar is to get beyond that and realize that maybe other teachers think that also—that in the minds of many science and math teachers, multicultural education was simply content integration.

So I developed the "five dimensions of multicultural education" to help educators see that content integration—say, putting content about Mexican Americans or African Americans in the curriculum—is important, but that it's only the first dimension of multicultural education, and that multicultural education has at least five dimensions.

### So the first dimension is content integration?

Yes, because that is how we got started. That is, we got started putting African Americans in the curriculum, Mexican Americans in the curriculum, Asian Americans in the curriculum. But while that's important, that's really only one dimension.

You'll notice that as I move across the dimensions, more and more teachers can get involved—more kinds of teachers, whether they teach math or science.

Frankly, with content integration, language arts and social studies teachers can do more than the physics teacher. Now, it's true that the physics teacher can show bulletin boards of famous women who were physicists, or minority physicists, or people of color who were physicists, but that isn't really what multicultural education is about. As I move across these, you'll see what I really consider the heart of multicultural education for the physics teacher.

### What's the second dimension?

Knowledge construction.

The knowledge construction process moves to a different level because here teachers help students to understand, investigate, and determine the implicit cultural assumptions and frames of reference and perspectives of the discipline they're teaching.

In other words, we help kids understand.

I'll give an example. What are the values that underlie knowledge? How do historians or scientists construct knowledge? We begin to look at some of the assumptions of knowledge.

Look at the values and assumptions that underlie terms like "the westward movement," for example. What does that term mean? What does the author mean about the west?

It wasn't west to the Lakota Sioux. It was the center of the universe. That was their home. It wasn't west for the Mexicans because it was north. And it wasn't west for the Japanese—it was east. So if it was west for one group of people, that was the Anglo Americans who were headed toward the Pacific.

Knowledge construction then helps kids understand that when scientists or textbook writers use words like the “westward movement,” these words are heavily loaded. There are a lot of values and assumptions that underlie words like that.

### **So this helps children to become more critical thinkers and readers?**

Exactly. It helps them become more critical readers. More critical thinkers. For example, the book *The Bell Curve* suggested that African Americans were intellectually inferior to whites. So the question becomes, “What are the assumptions of that writer?”

That’s the knowledge construction process.

### **You write that the third dimension is “equity pedagogy.” What’s that?**

By equity pedagogy, I simply mean that teachers change their methods to enable kids from diverse racial groups and both genders to achieve.

My friend who’s at the University of London has introduced the concept of the “multicultural atom.” What’s that? It’s an atom that all kids can understand.

Equity pedagogy has to do with the physics teacher not so much adding content about women physicists and African American physicists, but rather the physics teacher changing the way she teaches physics, for example, so that girls and African Americans can learn physics.

What we found, for example, from the work by people like Triesman, is that African American students will learn calculus better if they learn it in cooperative groups. Elizabeth Cohen has found that, too. So that equity pedagogy has to do with the physics teacher modifying the way he or she teaches physics in order to enable Mexican American students to learn it more effectively. In other words, the metaphor of the multicultural atom captures the essence of equity pedagogy.

### **Does classifying students by learning styles risk stereotyping them?**

I’m not really talking about learning styles. I’m talking about teachers modifying their teaching styles so that they use a wide range of strategies and teaching techniques such as cooperative groups, simulations, role-playing, and discovery. In the end, this will help many white children, too, since they often do not learn from a highly individualistic, competitive teaching strategy either.

### **So teachers are not necessarily saying, “Oh, I have Asian American students in my class. This research says this, so I’ll teach them particularly this way.” It’s more like they should be open-minded and flexible...**

...And use a wide variety of strategies that cater to a wider range of students.

When the research suggests that cooperative learning often enhances the learning of Mexican American students, what we have to keep in mind is that there are all kinds of Mexican American students.

And that’s the danger that I think you were talking about—that if teachers read that research indicates that cooperative learning can enhance the achievement of Mexican American students, that there are Mexican American students who learn perhaps better from a different strategy.

But what we’re suggesting is that cooperative learning will enhance the achievement of a wide range of students from a wide range of groups. So that as we increase our repertoire of pedagogy, we will reach more and more students from all groups.

### **What’s the fourth dimension?**

Prejudice reduction. Notice that by the time we get to equity pedagogy and prejudice reduction, all teachers can be involved. Because all teachers—whether you teach math or physics or social studies—should work to reduce prejudice in the classroom. And research indicates that adolescent prejudice is very real, and that kids come to school with prejudices toward different groups. That’s something that I think all teachers should be sensitive to. And all educators should use methods to help kids develop more positive racial attitudes.

## **What's the last dimension of multicultural education?**

Empowering school culture and social structure. Here I'm talking about looking not just at individual classrooms, but at the total school culture to see how to make it more equitable.

For example, grouping and labeling practices, disproportionality in achievement, who participates in sports, in the interaction of the school staff. Now what does the school staff look like racially? We can talk about equity all we want to, but we must ask, who are the teachers? Who are the leaders? Are they diverse? In other words, we have to walk the talk.

Let me give you an example from a local school that was a predominantly white school—an example of a school culture that wasn't empowering. This young African American woman wanted to be a cheerleader, that was her great ambition. Here's how the school chose the cheerleaders: by a vote of the student body. And each time it was a blond, blue-eyed girl who won and became a cheerleader. So here was a practice that was quite unconscious or what Charles Silverman called "mindlessness," and what Joyce King calls "dysconscious racism."

I don't think it was deliberate racism, but it was mindlessness that led to a practice that was inequitable. That led to a school culture that wasn't empowering, because the Black and Asian girls could never get enough votes to be cheerleaders. That's an example of a non-empowering school culture.

## **In your writing on multicultural education, you talk a lot about how it will help us create a society where more people will participate in our democratic institutions and in working to make it a more harmonious society. Can you speak to how equity pedagogy—the third dimension—works toward those broader goals?**

I think if we're going to have people participate as citizens in a democratic society, they have to have the skills and knowledge and the racial attitudes needed to work with people from diverse groups.

Rodney King raised a question, "Can we all get along?" We all can't get along if we have tremendous class divisions, as we do now. If we have tremendous ethnic divisions. For example, we know that many people from all ethnic groups don't vote and that there's a strong relationship between education and voting. We need to increase voting among all groups, but especially among groups of color so that they will vote on issues that deeply affect them. The voting rate among Hispanics in California, for example, needs to be greatly increased.

We can't have citizen participation in an equitable way unless we prepare people with the skills and knowledge and also the racial attitudes. So as long as African American and Mexican American students are educated substandardly, they will not have the skills and the attitudes needed to participate effectively in a democratic society. And as long as white kids, the majority kids, are educated in a way that does not enable them to attain racial attitudes that are positive, they will go and vote for initiatives that polarize racial groups.

Children from all these groups, the majority and all the minorities, need democratic skills and knowledges in order to participate effectively in a democratic society. Because lack of participation results in further stratification and polarization. When people don't participate, when people don't know each other, this just further polarizes.

## **How should teachers who aim to employ not only equity pedagogy, but all of multicultural education, reconceptualize their roles? You talk about how teaching should not be about the teacher as the source of all knowledge and students as passive recipients, so how does a teacher redefine him or herself?**

I think the traditional conception of teaching was "filling up the bucket"—that they would just give to students. But if we talk about a pedagogy of liberation, we're talking about teachers and student becoming learners together

I'd like to give an example of that. Let's say the teacher is teaching about Columbus and the Tainos, the people who were in the Caribbean when Columbus arrived. The teachers raise the question, "So the

textbooks, boys and girls, say that Columbus discovered America.” Not many textbooks say that today, but let’s assume that one did. So then the teacher begins to learn with the students. “Let’s learn together, class. Weren’t there people here when Columbus came?” The teacher may not know much about the Tainos. So the teacher reads a book to the class about the Tainos and then asks, “What might the Taino Indians have thought about Columbus’ arrival in their land?” The teacher and the students share. They learn together and share their perspectives.

They become joint learners in this multicultural classroom. The teacher has a culture, and the teacher and students learn together, share their cultures and construct new knowledge in the classroom. That’s how I see teachers reconceptualizing their role.

## **If a teacher is of a different culture or background than the students, how can she or he work to better teach them?**

Learning about each other’s cultures, and also learning about cultures they don’t know together, like the Tainos.

The really important thing I want to point out is that it’s not the race of the teacher, but a set of cultural characteristics that make them effective with children of color. It’s not their race per se. But it’s a set of characteristics that make them effective with—and I’d say students of color rather than minority students, because in so many cities, people of color are the majority in the school population.

White teachers can be effective with students of color. It’s a set of characteristics. I want to cite two research studies. Judith Kleinfeld found that white teachers could be effective with Native Alaskan students if they had characteristics that were tuned in with their culture. Gloria Ladson-Billings, in her book *The Dreamkeepers*, found that the effective teachers of African American children were both Black and white. It wasn’t their race, but it was a set of characteristics that made teachers effective.

## **And what kinds of characteristics are we talking about?**

Gloria Ladson-Billings found that it was teachers who knew the culture of the kids, often had lived in the community. Who understood the daily lives of the students. Who could relate to the students. Who understood their verbal cues. Who understood their nonverbal cues.

Kleinfeld found that it was teachers who were warm demanders. She described several kinds of teachers. One was, “Don’t Smile Until Christmas.” They weren’t effective. Another type she studied was the “anthropologist”: “Let the natives be natives.” They made few academic demands—and weren’t effective.

The most effective teachers were what she called the warm demanders. They said to the kids: “Achieve this for Mrs. Jones.” The teachers showed the kids they cared. They were demanding, but the key here is that they were warm demanders. They showed that they cared before they made the demands, unlike the “Don’t Smile Until Christmas” teachers.

So it was teachers who knew the cultures of the kids, teachers who understood the kids, teachers who made demands but were warm demanders. Teachers who had high expectations of these kids.

## **Is becoming familiar with the culture of your students something that any teacher can do at any point in their career?**

I’m not sure any teacher can. Many teachers can. I think that it has something to do with the values, attitudes, and experiences of the teacher.

And some of the research that my students are doing finds that teachers who are more able to do this have certain kinds of backgrounds, that they’ve lived in diverse communities, for example. Or they’ve had experiences cross-culturally. I guess I’m hesitant to say any teacher can become effective with students from diverse racial, ethnic and cultural groups.

## **Any suggestions for...**

...Facilitating the ability to do it? Have cross-cultural experiences. Read multicultural literature. Put yourself in a different culture. Have friends from a different racial group. Read Toni Morrison's new book, *Paradise*. Read Charles Johnson's new book, called *Dreamer*. You know what I'm trying to say. Go see the movie "Rosewood." It's about the Black Southern experience. These are the kinds of experiences that will enable teachers to acquire the ability to reach across cultures. It's a process. A process that never ends.

## **How do teachers come up with a balanced multicultural content? For instance, you wouldn't only want to teach Booker T. Washington's perspective. You also have to teach DuBois's perspective.**

I think the teacher should make sure that whenever any issue is covered, there are several perspectives. Never can you deal with them all. That's not possible. But if you deal with several and change the perspectives when you teach about an issue, you will cover a range of perspectives over time.

For example, if you're teaching about the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, that was the treaty in which most of the Southwest became part of the United States. Clearly one perspective has to be the Mexicans who were living in that territory, who were living in northern Mexico. Another perspective that's pertinent would be that of the Indians who were living in Mexico before it became the United States. And of course the Anglo settlers. The perspectives will differ with the different issues.

But I think that the teacher has to make sure that several perspectives are taught. What about women? You know, what happened to Mexican women who lived in the Southwest before it became the United States?

The real issue is to make sure that several perspectives are covered, and to change them over units. That you can never cover them all, that's not possible. But vary them. So my answer is vary the perspectives as we teach different concepts and issues.

## **And then I suppose at certain levels you can get involved with issues of historiography, and why we receive history this way, and why isn't it from the perspective of the other groups?**

But I think there's another really important point that you have to keep in mind. As we teach about diversity, we have to keep in mind: How do we maintain our unity? *E pluribus unum*. We have to talk about *pluribus*, but we also have to maintain unity.

So we always have to keep in mind: How do we construct the nation-state? How do we educate students so that we not only respect their cultures, but that we also build a nation? The real question is how do we build a nation that's inclusive? How do we build a nation in which all children see themselves?

I think the way that we build unity is not by, as we did historically, ignoring Mexican American culture, ignoring Puerto Rican culture. But I think the way we build unity is that we reconstruct the center. Is that we build a new center that recognizes our diversity, that we build a new center that gives voice to the voiceless. Not by ignoring it, because that's what we did in the past.

I do think that we need to balance diversity with unity, and that we have to construct a new meta-narrative, we have to construct a new story of America that's inclusive. But I do think that we have to build a nation state, as well as teach about diversity, because we could splinter.

## **That's the classic American dilemma, individual versus community, but broadened. And I suppose a problem is that our national identity, almost in terms of what America means ideologically, gets very ambiguous at times.**

And what people think it means, I think, it has to be reconstructed. It reminds me of an anecdote told by Ronald Takaki, a Japanese American historian, in his book, *A Different Mirror*. He was giving a speech in Norfolk, Virginia, and the taxi driver asked him in very Southern English, "How long have you been in this country?"

Now, Ron speaks excellent English, and his family has been in the United States for several generations. When he told the taxi driver that, the taxi driver said, “I wondered because your English is excellent.” Of course, the irony is that Ron speaks flawless English and that the driver spoke with a pronounced Southern accent. The taxi driver didn’t see him as American is the point. So how do we help the future taxi drivers rethink America, and how do we construct a new American identity? I think those are issues that need to be on the table.

## **And one way to do that is by educating kids from the start to construct their own knowledge and think for themselves—all of these are goals of multicultural education...**

But there is no one model American. What makes an American is not how we look—we look all kinds of ways—but what makes an American is a commitment to a set of democratic ideals. That’s what distinguishes us from Japan and Germany, where you have to have blood to be Japanese or German. But the unique and wonderful thing about the American story is that what makes an American—ideally, at least—is our commitment to a set of ideals and not what we look like. And that’s what students have to understand.

## **What about a situation where a classroom is not culturally diverse?**

You ask about “a situation that is not culturally diverse.” I’m going to contest that and say that all classrooms are culturally diverse. And that we need to uncover that diversity.

For example, in most classrooms, there are students from different social-class groups. In most classrooms, there are students from different religious groups. In most classes there are students from different ethnic--white ethnic groups. We need to uncover the diversity within whites. And we can start there.

“Boys and girls”—all white classroom—“how are we different? What are some ways in which we are different?” There are some students who are gay. There are all kinds of differences.

So my answer to that question is one, that we need to uncover the diversity among whites. There’s a myth that whites are homogeneous. Whites are themselves very diverse, but I think we’ve concealed those differences. Social class diversity, kids who are different in views and perspectives—there’s diversity there.

And even within an all-white classroom, a teacher can do a lot to teach about groups of color. Research indicates that through vicarious experiences, the curriculum can have a powerful effect on racial attitudes. By vicarious experiences, I mean videotapes, simulations, role-playing, films and literature.

Research indicates [reviewed in *The Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, Macmillan, 1995] that vicarious experiences such as video tapes, simulation games, and films can be very powerful and can positively influence students’ racial attitudes. In some instances, believe it or not, vicarious experiences can be as powerful or more powerful than the actual contact. Anyway, that’s an amazing finding.

## **What is the one linchpin of getting multicultural education to be not just effective, but to be the approach?**

Teachers have to engage in a process of self-transformation.

Teachers often say, “Dr. Banks, I have all these minority children in my classroom, I have 30 diversities and five languages. What am I going to do?” And you know what I respond? I say, “Start with yourself.”

I heard a quote on NPR not long ago: “Before we can transform the world, we must first transform ourselves.” I think teachers must start with the process of self-transformation, a process of reading, a process of engaging with the other, a process of understanding that the other is us and we are the other.

Martin Luther King talked about how our fates are intimately connected. He said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” We are intimately connected.

Teachers have to begin to see that I am the other and the other is me. That I have to transform. That in the long run our fates are tied. That the future of immigrant children is my future, that our fates are intimately connected. And that my journey is the journey of all people.

### **Any final comments?**

I'd like to close by suggesting that teachers ought to do three things, and that they have to teach kids to do these three things. And that is to know, to care and to act.

That is to say, in order to bring about reform and to bring about this self-transformation, we need knowledge. We cannot do it in ignorance. But knowledge is not enough. We also have to care. Look at what happened in Germany—one of the most knowledgeable societies in the world in the 1940s, and yet 6 million were killed in the Holocaust. So just knowing is not enough. We also need to care.

Horace Mann said to the graduates of Antioch College in 1859, "Be ashamed to die until you've won some victory for humankind." So I think we have to care and we have to win victories, and I tell teachers that these can be small victories. They don't have to be great victories. You know, a small victory once a day or once a week. Helping a child feel needed, helping a child overcome, helping a child feel better in school that day, it's a small victory. A series of small victories.

Finally, I think we need to act because Dante said that the worst place in Hell is reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, take a neutral position.

I think that we need to know, to care, and to act, because I think in that way we can help transform ourselves and help transform the world. Margaret Mead said that a handful of people can change the world. And so that's how I'd like to end.

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