Multicultural Education

BANKS’S FIVE DIMENSIONS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

NIETO’S SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

FIVE APPROACHES TO MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

CURRICULUM DESEGREGATION AND EQUITY PEDAGOGY

INTERSECTIONS AND COMMONALITIES

SELF-REFLEXIVE CRITIQUES FROM WITHIN THE FIELD

HETEROGENEITY AND HOMOGENEITY

Multicultural education encompasses theories and practices that strive to promote equitable access and rigorous academic achievement for students from all diverse groups, so that they can work toward social change. As a process of educational reform in PK-12 schools, higher education, and increasingly in out-of-school contexts, multicultural education challenges oppression and bias of all forms, and acknowledges and affirms the multiple identities that students bring to their learning.

Scholars have provided a range of definitions of multicultural education since the late years of the civil rights movement. A common theme that researchers of multicultural education underscore is that to maintain its critical analysis of power, multicultural education must be constructed within its history and roots in the civil rights movement (Banks 2004; Grant, Elsbree & Fondrie, 2004; Gay, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). To construct an analysis of power within school reform, several multicultural educators have defined multicultural education as a matrix of practices and concepts rather than a singular static notion. Three major definitions of multicultural educations are reviewed below.

BANKS’S FIVE DIMENSIONS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

James A. Banks (1979), a leading scholar in the field, argued in the early development of the field of multicultural education that “educators should carefully define concepts such as multiethnic and multicultural education and delineate the boundaries implied by these concepts” (p. 237). His later work continued to emphasize this point (2006). Banks has historically advanced a definition of multicultural education as a broad concept and extrapolated on five dimensions (1991, 2004, 2006). He formulated the five specific dimensions as content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure (2004).

Content integration deals with the infusion of various cultures, ethnicities, and other identities to be represented in the curriculum. The knowledge construction process involves students in critiquing the social positioning of groups through the ways that knowledge is presented, for example in scientific racism or the Eurocentric view of the “discovery” of America. Prejudice reduction describes lessons and activities that teachers implement to assert positive images of ethnic groups and to improve intergroup relations. Equity pedagogy concerns modifying teaching styles and approaches with the intent of facilitating academic achievement for all students. Empowering school culture describes the examination of the school culture and organization by all members of school staff with the intent to restructure institutional practices to create access for all groups (Banks, 2004). While highlighting the interrelatedness of the five dimensions Banks promotes deliberate attention to each.
NIETO'S SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Another leading scholar, Sonia Nieto, offered a definition of multicultural education in 1992 that continues to influence discourse in the field (Nieto, 1992, Nieto & Bode, 2008). Nieto's definition of the characteristics of “multicultural education in a sociopolitical context” addresses the context of communities, and the process of education, in terms of elasticity rather than as a fixed and static form (2008, p. 7). She focuses on seven characteristics of multicultural education: “antiracist, basic, important for all students, pervasive, education for social justice, a process and critical pedagogy” (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 44).

Antiracist education makes antidiscrimination explicit in the curriculum and teaches students the skills to combat racism and other forms of oppression. Basic education advances the basic right of all students to engage in core academics and arts; it addresses the urgent need for students to develop social and intellectual skills to expand understanding in a diverse society. That multicultural education is important for all students challenges the commonly held misunderstanding that it is only for students of color, multilingual students, or special interest groups. Rather, all students deserve and need an education that is inclusive and rigorous. The pervasive nature of multicultural education emphasizes an approach that permeates the entire educational experience, including school climate, physical environment, curriculum, and relationships. In education for social justice teachers and students put their learning into action. Students learn that they have the power to make change as apprentices in a democratic society. Multicultural education as a process highlights the ongoing, organic development of individuals and educational institutions involving relationships among people. It also points to the intangibles of multicultural education that are less recognizable than specific curriculum content, such as expectations of student achievement, learning environments, students' learning preferences, and cultural variables that influence the educational experience. Critical pedagogy draws upon experiences of students through their cultural, linguistic, familial, academic, artistic and other forms of knowledge. It also takes students beyond their own experiences and enables them to understand perspectives with which they disagree, as well as to think critically about multiple viewpoints, leading to praxis, or reflection combined with action (Freire, 2000).

Nieto's emphasis on critical pedagogy draws on the work of Freire (2000), linking multicultural education with wider issues of power, including socioeconomic and political equality, in what May (1999) calls “critical multiculturalism.”

FIVE APPROACHES TO MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant connect the role of sociopolitical power to define multicultural education. Sleeter and Grant's article in Harvard Educational Review (Sleeter & Grant, 1987) provided an extensive review of the literature on multicultural education and explained five approaches. This work became a cornerstone of the field, upon which Sleeter and Grant (2006) continue to build. A brief overview and analysis of the five approaches articulated by Sleeter and Grant is provided here.

The goal of the first approach, which Sleeter and Grant call Teaching the Exceptional and the Culturally Different, is to equip students with the academic skills,
Multicultural education acknowledges and affirms the multiple identities that students bring to their learning. WILL & DENI MCINTYRE/ PHOTO RESEARCHERS, INC.

concepts, and values to function in American society's institutions and culture. The positive attribute of this approach is that it spurred the movement toward modifying instruction and curriculum, commonly called differentiated instruction. Critics, however, claim that it has a tendency to emphasize an assimilationist perspective that positions students as holding deficits.

The second approach, Human Relations, consists of developing positive relationships among diverse groups and individuals to fight stereotyping and promote unity. Reducing prejudice and hostility are admirable goals, but according to its critics this approach tends to simplify culture and identity and avoids analyzing the causes of discrimination and inequality. Without a critical perspective, the Human Relations approach runs the risk of falling into the trap of feel-good tactics that are too soft on academic achievement.

Single-Group Studies is the third approach in the Sleeter and Grant analysis. The goal is to engage in an in-depth, comprehensive study that moves specific groups from the margins by providing information about the group's history, including experiences with oppression and resistance to that oppression. The hope is to reduce stratification and create greater access to power. While there are many positive components to this approach, viewing it as a beginning or entry level approach to multicultural education may be the most appropriate appraisal of it. Criticism of this approach cites the unintentional effect of keeping groups such as people of color, women, people with disabilities, and working class people segregated and out of the mainstream curriculum. Other potential pitfalls are the possibility of promoting cultural separatism and the tendency for this approach to be implemented as a mere add-on.

The fourth approach to multicultural education is self-reflexively dubbed multicultural education. Sleeter and Grant use this seemingly redundant title to clarify this approach since so many other practices, such as those described in the first three approaches, are sometimes referred to as multicultural education. They cite Gollnick (1980) to explain that the multicultural education approach promotes a range of goals: the value of cultural diversity, human rights, respect for differences, alternative life choices, social justice, equal opportunity, and equitable distribution of power. There are several criticisms of this approach that are discussed later in this entry. The most severe criticism argues that multicultural education promotes “particularism” and weakens social unification and academic rigor (Ravitch, 1990). Some scholars within the field of multicultural education point to the need for more attention to social structural inequalities and for teaching students the skills to challenge the disparities
resulting from inequitable power structures.

The fifth approach, which is the approach Sleeter and Grant advocate, is *Education that is Multicultural and Social Reconstructionist*, which describes a complete redesign of an educational program. The notion of reconstructionism draws from Brameld’s framework to offer a critique of modern culture (Sleeter & Grant, 2006). Such a redesign recommends addressing issues and concerns that affect students of diverse groups, encouraging students to take an active stance by challenging the status quo, and calling on students to collectively speak out and effect change by joining with other groups in examining common or related concerns (Sleeter & Grant, 1987, 2006).

**CURRICULUM DESEGREGATION AND EQUITY PEDAGOGY**

The three major definitions of multicultural education by Banks, Nieto, and Sleeter and Grant helped to launch the field and continue to sustain a discourse that is constantly evolving. Geneva Gay (2004) has referenced the “shifting contours of multicultural education” and some of the reasons for the developmental changes in its intention, implementation, and effectiveness (p. 193). She demonstrates how multicultural education has changed over time by discussing it as a relatively young field, stemming from the time of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), that has grown through developmental phases. Gay emphasizes how multicultural education’s translation into practice is an ongoing dimension of its development. She cites two avenues for implementing educational equality within multicultural education: *curriculum desegregation and equity pedagogy*.

*Curriculum desegregation* requires analysis from every discipline and should not be relegated to the task of social studies and language arts. Gay points to several scholars who assert typologies that explain progression from simplistic curriculum reform to more comprehensive and complex forms. Other examples include lesson plans for specific subject areas. Gay (2003) also describes developmental paradigms that bridge multicultural theory and practice, pointing out that individual and institutional competencies vary widely, and that becoming a multicultural educator is a process. In this she echoes one of Nieto’s seven characteristics (Bode & Nieto, 2008).

Instructional approaches and the shift to *equity pedagogy* are closely linked to the implementation of multicultural education through refining curriculum content (Gay, 2004). Gay explains that multicultural education places value on “how to effectively teach diverse students as well as what to teach them.” Achieving educational equity is a multi-dimensional goal that is addressed in the proposal for culturally responsive teaching, which consists of many domains:

- The major domains include multicultural content; pluralistic classroom climates and learning environments; teacher attitudes and expectations toward diversity; building community among diverse learners; caring across cultures; use of multiple teaching techniques that are congruent with the cultural backgrounds, values, experiences, and orientations of different ethnic groups; developing personal efficacy and an ethos of success among diverse students; and using culturally informed assessment procedures to determine learning needs, knowledge acquisition, and skill proficiencies. (Gay, 2004, p. 214)

Citing a number of educational researchers who have demonstrated the effectiveness of multicultural education and its role in advancing academic achievement and participation in a democratic society, Gay confirms that educational desegregation and equality are advanced by multicultural education as the field continues to evolve:

Evidence increasingly indicates that multicultural education makes schooling more relevant and effective for Latino American, Native American, Asian American, and Native Hawaiian
students as well…. Students perform more successfully on all levels when there is greater congruence between their cultural backgrounds and such school experiences as task interest, effort, academic achievement, and feelings of personal efficacy or social accountability. (Gay, 2003, p. 35)

INTERSECTIONS AND COMMONALITIES

These researchers' explications of multicultural education deal with anti-racism, anti-oppression, and head-on indictments of policies and practices of schools and governments that maintain status quo privilege, power, and unequal schooling conditions. The aim of creating a more just society, by educating students for high academic achievement in which they become critically reflective and socially engaged is articulated by Banks (2004), Nieto & Bode (2008), Sleeter and Grant (2006) and Gay (2003, 2004). These aims remain consistent for multicultural educators as they reflect on challenges of the field.

SELF-REFLEXIVE CRITIQUES FROM WITHIN THE FIELD

Despite the historical assertions of scholarship and efforts to inform the field of education, especially teacher education, the socially transformative qualities of multicultural education have not been universally understood or embraced. The uneven understandings of multicultural education theory have led to some critiques within the field. Sleeter and Bernal (2004) note that as more and more people have taken up and used multicultural education, it has come to be understood in a wide variety of meanings: “Ironically, (given its historical roots), a good deal of what occurs within the arena of multicultural education today does not address the power relations critically, particularly racism” (p. 240). This point is a prevalent concern among multicultural educators. McLaren and Torres (1999) argue, “in general, discourses in the US that deal with multiculturalism deal very little with the concept of racism and focus instead on the politics and affirmation of difference” (p. 44). Nieto, Bode, Raible, and Kang (2008) concur: “the political and transformative theories of multicultural education have often been neglected when translated into practice. As a result, even though multicultural education has made an important contribution to schools and communities, few long-term institutional changes have taken root” (p. 178). Gloria Ladson-Billings (2004) demands an examination of the intertwining of racialized identities with the political and economic history, and current social order of the United States. She notes a “new citizenship” being taken up by some people of color “who want to remake their world into a more just and equitable one” (p. 117). She sees the challenge for educators “to reveal and incite the power of democratic ideals for marginalized students in U.S. schools” (p. 122).

The challenge of translating multicultural theory into practice and maintaining a critical, transformative focus is increased by the contemporary globalized social order that is exponentially changing the way in which many scholars and educators understand culture and identity. For example, a great deal of research and practice in multicultural education has been influenced by questions of how culture might be defined or understood. Historically, in U.S. society and in many school contexts, the very notions of culture and difference have been delineated into static objects, as a metaphorical flag to wave. In that historical conception, culture is viewed as thing to have, rather than a practice of living, learning, performing, negotiating, and translating multiple experiences for oneself and one’s community. This static framework for viewing culture implies that human identity, and by extension, human knowledge and student achievement, is contained by set boundaries and will remain unchanged.

Such a viewpoint is often referred to as a “modernist” conception of culture and cultural identity, which is challenged by postmodern concepts in multicultural education (Dolby, 2000, Nieto, Bode, Kang & Raible, 2008). The understanding of culture as fluid and performative as opposed to a static fixture
relates to other contemporary inquiries into human identity, such as questions about whether race is an inherent biological fact or a social construct. In 1998 the American Anthropological Association published a “Statement on Race” that indicted the attempts throughout U.S. history to establish division among biological populations as arbitrary and subjective by asserting “present-day inequalities between so-called racial groups are not consequences of their biological in heritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational and political circumstances” (p. 713).

Postmodern scholars criticize the argument that race is a biological rather than a social mechanism as an “essentialist” notion of race. Yet it is critical to note that abolishing notions of race does not end racism. Each scholarly definition of multicultural education reviewed here regards multicultural education as an anti-racist enterprise that assertively seeks to reduce prejudice. Yet these scholars point out that racism remains a stark reality and needs to be addressed by multicultural education even while contemporary discourse of identities call the notion of race into question (Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008).

Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible (2008) ask how multicultural education might transcend typically essentialist notions of race and other identities to reach a more nuanced, critical understanding of multicultural perspectives. As scholars of multicultural education reconceptualize the social constructs of race and racism, they acknowledge that multiple identities work in confluence in the anti-oppression goals of multicultural education. These identities, in addition to race, include social class, ethnicity, religion, language, age, ability/disability, sexual orientation, religion, gender, and other differences. However, because listing these identities as separate labels conflicts with postmodern frameworks on identity that insist identities and cultures are not static but shift and evolve in context, multicultural curriculum and instruction must evolve in a similar manner.

HETEROGENEITY AND HOMOGENEITY

Critical understandings of multicultural education address arguments about whether multicultural education should focus on differences or commonalities across and between ethnic groups. However, when multicultural education is understood within the multiple dimensions advanced by Banks (2006), Gay (2004), Nieto (2008) and Sleeter and Grant (2006) it cannot be viewed as an either/or enterprise. Critics regard multicultural education, with its excessive emphasis on race and ethnicity, as divisive. They accuse its proponents of teaching to special interest groups to “disunite America” (Schlesinger, 1998). Many critics argue that teaching to a specific group emphasizes self-esteem at the expense of academic rigor. However, multicultural education insists on employing a range of strategies that aim for rigorous academic achievement for all students. Some of these educational strategies may involve inclusion of the knowledge, experiences, perspectives, and accomplishments of previously marginalized groups. This would be one of many approaches to multicultural education. Moreover, multicultural education asserts American ideals by upholding the unalienable constitutional right for every student to be prepared for full participation in a democratic society. However, a critical perspective demands that educators view the broad sociopolitical context of individuals and institutions, rather than labeling students or compartmentalizing them into rigid boxes. Such rigidity runs the risk of participating in and reinforcing stereotypes. At the same time, as Gay (2004) pointed out, the project of culturally responsive teaching requires addressing students’ cultural backgrounds through curriculum and pedagogy. Sleeter (2001) provided in-depth analysis of the critiques of multicultural education, addressing both the conservative and radical left critiques of multicultural education. Noteworthy among her multiple findings was that most of the conservative critics ignore the research by scholars in the field of multicultural education (Sleeter, 2001, p. 85).
In summary, the scholars in the field have asserted that multicultural education is a matrix of several dimensions, qualities, and approaches that encompass theories and practices as a process of educational reform. Multicultural education promotes equitable access and rigorous academic achievement for all students so that they can work toward social change.

See also: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


