

Struggles facing multicultural curriculum in



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Struggles Facing Multicultural Curriculum in Public Schools Multicultural education is designed to change the total educational experience so students from diverse racial and ethnic groups, exceptional students, both gender groups, and from each social-class group will experience equal educational opportunities in school. Clearly many public schools lack a clear understanding of how to create a multicultural environment that is supportive to all students. Teachers should help students to develop a delicate balance of cultural, national, and global identifications because of the rich diversity in the United States and throughout the world (Banks, 2001) While many schools have attempted to infuse a multicultural curriculum their attempts have failed miserably.

Many students are feeling that their educational experience is lacking cultural relevance and meaning. Students want an education that reflects their own community values and goals. The lack of educational relevance has been linked to decreased student motivation and interest in school (Ford & Harris, 2000). Teachers blame the current obsession with standardizing curricula and measuring output as the prime culprit controlling what is taught.

Many teachers are focusing on covering what is to be tested with little or no time used discussing any unrelated topics. Multicultural education appears to be in very real danger of getting shelved as the preoccupation with national and state standards and testing intensifies. Clearly there has been a de-emphasis on multicultural education because of ill-prepared teachers and an increased emphasis on the standards. Education is facing critical issues, as

our nation becomes increasingly diverse. The need to teach across cultures and to all students is more important today than ever before.

We must prepare students to live in a multicultural world. The multicultural classroom experience identifies and empathizes with all cultures and groups. Teachers attempting to incorporate a multicultural curriculum must ask themselves such basic questions: “ Are we promoting an appreciation of multicultural voices within the classroom? “ Are we encouraging students to question and openly discuss critical issues surrounding diversity and multiculturalism? ” “ Are we truly preparing students to live in a multicultural society? ”(King, 2000) By answering these basic questions while preparing class activities, teachers can improve student participation and retention across cultures. When preparing for class, instructors should make sure course materials represent female authors, international cultures, people of color, and the disabled (King, 2000).

Instruction should not focus on cultural generalizations; this only reinforces negative stereotypes. The environment of a multicultural classroom should be a nonthreatening learning environment where diverse students speak freely about the topic without fear of alienation from peers or teacher. This multicultural montage of questions is a tool that will place all students at an equal advantage in the learning environment. “ Being able to connect with all students is vital to the academic retention of all students (King, 2000).

In 1995, 43 gifted Black students in grades 6 through 9 were interviewed about their curricular needs and concerns in a study about underachievement among gifted, potentially gifted, and general education

students (Ford & Harris, 2000). Specifically 41% of the students were tired of learning about White people in class and 87% agreed that they enjoyed school much more when they were learning about people of their own culture and race; and all students supported the idea of learning more about Black people in school. Many of the Black children felt that White people were just trying to advance other White people and leave Black people behind and ignorant. In this study many of the Black students felt like they were not learning about themselves. From their comments it is clear that black students see their education as lacking in cultural relevance and meaning. The gifted Black students want more from their educational experience than is currently being offered.

The infusion of Multiculturalism in the classroom will greatly benefit all students by giving them an identity and a sense of ownership in the educational process. It is clear that students want more out of their educational experience than a one sided view of the world. “ The nation is diverse and so must be the students’ educational experiences if they are to thrive as leaders in the next century (Ford & Harris, 2000). The standards movement has also brought along many challenges that have consequently affected multiculturalism in the classroom. The current obsession with test scores has caused many classroom teachers to shy away from topics of discussion that do not directly relate to the standard course of study.

This is called a narrowing down of the curriculum to meet the needs of the test and accountability standards. Both teachers and administrators in school districts blame new state standards and anticipated state assessments, which have put pressure on school districts to standardize and emphasize

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content at the expense of any other concerns (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000). “ State mandated curriculum standards are clearly the order of the day (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000). The true damage of enforceable curriculum standards on multicultural education is unknown but by all indications it is gaining momentum at shelving multicultural education in public schools. The standards movement’s preoccupation with testing is one of its most troubling aspects. The more standardized the curriculum is the less engaging it will be for the students.

Students will receive a set of textbooks that will almost inclusively follow the standard course of study. All the facts are laid out for students to memorize with limited pieces of predigested knowledge to be learned as irrefutable facts. The standard textbook is written in such a way as to be as non-controversial as possible regarding cultural differences. Thereby not causing any opposing views that would foster questioning or challenging of facts.

All the families in the textbooks are happy and live in nice homes in nice neighborhoods. One of the principles of multicultural education is to create an atmosphere where students can question the status quo without fear of alienation. Standardized curriculum does not devote a lot of time for interactive activities. Culturally diverse students are all too aware of these discrepancies in the textbook information.

Adrienne Rich captures the distress of this kind of situation in a powerful quote: “ When someone with the authority of a teacher, says, describe the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000). ” Mandated

curriculums whether embodied in textbooks or some other form can hinder teachers and prevent individual students needs from being met while in class. Teachers simply cannot take time away from the standard course of study for individual discussion if test scores are the standard. Empowering teachers to make the decisions necessary to create a multicultural classroom environment is not necessarily going to improve education.

While standardization of the curriculum may dull the multicultural experience, a high degree of cultural homogeneity in the teaching profession can also reduce the learning experience (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000). Teachers base their decisions and interpretations on their views of the world. White teachers are going to make interpretations through the eyes of a white person, which may not be the same interpretation of a Black or Hispanic student's view. Teachers are guilty of this by no fault of their own; it's just the way their belief system works. Multicultural education is not a quick-fix workshop topic in which a teacher can learn over night. Learning to teach across culture takes time and a lot of practice.

Teachers need to spend time in the communities their students live to develop good pedagogy relating to their individual cultural circumstances. It must be understood that multicultural education is not a program added to the curriculum. Multicultural education is a reforming of school in ways to support equity among all students. " Multicultural education is about dialogue across diverse groups and about learning to share power; it is a process of cross-group collaboration to reform schools so that they work for everyone (Bohn & Sleeter 2001). " The success of multicultural education will rely on the ability of educators, legislators, and students working together to

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press the vision onward until real equity is achieved for all American students.

There are many challenges that face education and one of the most crucial is educating all students in a global United States. The traditional classroom of one or two cultures being represented is a thing of the distant past. Today's educational experience is quite diverse in population, which requires diversified teaching strategies to be successful. Multicultural education attempts to give all children an identity and a sense of belonging within the educational setting. The United States can not remain a dominant power if we graduate students who are not equipped for a global economy (Banks, 2001).

Multicultural education attempts to incorporate all cultures into the classroom so our students are prepared for the diversities of life. While multicultural education faces obvious obstacles such as standardized curriculum and ill prepared teachers and infusion techniques. The overwhelming need for a diversified cultural curriculum is well documented and supported. We are a nation of many ethnic and cultural backgrounds and to ignore the differences is asking for failure in our public school system. Multicultural curriculum is experiencing many struggles at the hands of state assessments and teachers who do not understand the true meaning of a multicultural education. It takes everyone on a school campus to develop ways to engender respect, appreciation, and cooperation among students so that a sense of ownership and belonging permeates the campus (King, 2000).

Multicultural education is experiencing difficulties because of testing and uninformed educators. The action or inaction of a school will declare a student a failure or a success. The responsibility of a teaching cultural diversity is that of the family and the school. If both responsible parties ignore their responsibilities then we can only expect an intolerant and ignorant nation to continue which is not preparing our students to interact with a global United States.

I believe that not teaching our children to act with understanding and compassion of others we are sentencing our children to a life of conflict and full of hardships. References Banks, J. A. (2001).

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