

Multicultural Education

“As the challenge to better educate underachieving students intensifies and diversity among student population expands, the need for multicultural education grows exponentially. Multicultural education may be the solution to problems that currently appear insolvable: closing the achievement gap; genuinely not leaving any children behind academically; revitalizing faith and trust in the promises of democracy, equality, and justice; building education systems that reflect the diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, and social contributions that forge society; and providing better opportunities for all students” (Gay, 320)

The issue of multicultural education “is becoming increasingly important” (315) as the cultural diversity of our country becomes progressively more reflected in our schools. It is estimated that by the year 2050, no more than 50% of the population will be of Anglo ancestry. Geneva Gay believes that the demographics, social conditions and political circumstances in multicultural education have important implications for educators. In her article, “The Importance of Multicultural Education,” Gay argues that multicultural education is essential in allowing all students to reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally.

Conceptions of Multicultural Education

Gay identifies several conceptions that are obstacles to the implementation of multicultural education. To begin, multicultural education is not a central part of the regular curriculum. It is “relegated primarily to social studies, language arts, and the fine arts and have generally targeted instruction for students of color” making it “susceptible to sporadic and superficial implementation, if any.” (316).

The next obstacle lies with teachers and educators who are “unconvinced of its worth and its value” and/or “sceptical of the feasibility of its implementation” (316). Gay draws attention to the “perception of multicultural education as a separate content” (317). This perception would simply be another addition to the teachers' already full plates. Gay advocates an approach that promotes education that is multicultural overall: “In its comprehensive form, it must be an integral part of everything that happens in the education enterprise” (317). Multicultural concepts should be woven “into the central core of curriculum, instruction, school leadership, policymaking, counselling, classroom climate, and performance assessment.” (317).

Reality/Representation in Multiculturalism and Curriculum Development

High quality educational experiences will not exist if some ethnic groups and their contributions to the development of history, life, and culture are ignored or demeaned (Gay, 2000). Gay criticizes the curriculum which “virtually overlooks the contributions of the many ethnically diverse people” (318) It points out that many groups are still on the margin of society and further “perpetuate[s] exclusions” (318). This approach to education involves a curriculum that is dictated primarily by months or seasons of the year, with methods that trivialize, patronize, and stereotype cultures. These attitudes distort reality with students that often come away from such

teaching with even more biases. Gay advocates not just the need to include” equitable representation of diversity” in school curriculum, but also representation of ethnic diversity “in all strata of human accomplishment instead of typecasting particular groups as dependent and helpless victims who make limited contributions of significance.” (318)

Relevance in Multiculturalism and Curriculum Development

Gay addresses the relevance of multicultural education in school curriculum. In order to establish “educational relevance” for students of color, instruction must include “content about the cultures and contributions of many ethnic groups” (320). Gay believes is it imperative that teachers learn how to recognize and incorporate “a variety of teaching techniques that are culturally responsive to different ethnic styles.” (319) Through the teaching practice of “cultural similarity and responsiveness” (319), students will “perform more successfully on all levels” (320).

Multicultural education seeks to create an environment in which students can understand, respect, and ultimately value cultural diversity. The lack of contact or complacency with other cultural and ethnic groups will place students at a disadvantage. Multicultural understanding helps prepare students with the broader understanding of culture that the future will most certainly require.

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