

The Definition of Multicultural Education

Multicultural education helps students to understand and appreciate cultural differences and similarities and to recognize the accomplishments of diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. Classroom materials portray these diverse groups realistically and from a variety of perspectives.

Educators tend to take one of two approaches to multicultural education, writes Gloria Ladson-Billings, an assistant professor in the department of curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Teachers using the "multicultural festival" approach have students celebrate ethnic diversity through "foods, fun, and festivals" -- conveying the notion that "diversity issues come into play only during celebratory moments."

Teachers applying a "transformative" approach weave a range of cultural perspectives throughout the curriculum. For example, a primary school teacher may read the Grimm Brothers' European version of the Cinderella fairy tale -- as well as Chinese, Egyptian, and Zimbabwean versions. Students would compare the moral and ethical dilemmas, story structure, standards of beauty, and specific characters in the versions.

Source: Adapted from "Educating for Diversity: What We Can Learn from Multicultural Education Research," by G. Ladson-Billings, in *Educational Leadership*, 51(8), 1994.

Why is multicultural education important?

Narrator: Incorporating multicultural aspects into instruction and curriculum is an essential characteristic of multicultural education.

James Banks: We're living in a nation that's enormously changing demographically. I'm sure, as many teachers realize, that it doesn't matter whether you teach in the middle of Iowa or in the middle of Manhattan -- we need to think about transforming the curriculum to educate kids for the 21st century, because we need to learn to live together to get along together in a shrinking, changing world.

How can you make a curriculum multicultural?

Carlos Cortes: Curriculum development demands choices. We constantly leave things out; we prune them, we change them. That's what education is. In making choices, it seems to me that one of the factors -- and only one of the factors -- should be, "How well is this helping students of different backgrounds learn both about themselves and about others of different backgrounds?"

How does multicultural education benefit students?

Deborah Barretto, teacher: I think the kids here have a better hand in accepting diversity than other students based on what goes on in the classrooms -- and even what goes on in the halls and how the administrators and the teachers deal with students, because they're much more accepting of other cultures and of some of the behaviors that other cultures have, and they're sensitive. It's a sensitivity awareness, I think.

How do you decide what books to teach?

Teacher: If everyone got in the room together -- everyone, all different kinds of folks -- I think you could come to an agreement that there are certain things that are worthwhile to discuss about life: living, how we get along with each other. And, whether that's in *Moby Dick* or whether it's in *Children of the River* or some other book really is immaterial. I think it's kind of the message that you want to get across, and it ought to be something that the kids can relate to, to get across that message.

Why should we teach multicultural literature?

Narrator: Curriculum departments meet regularly at Falls Church High School to review their work. Here, the English department works on broadening their curriculum to include multicultural literature.

Teacher: Well, I can see it. When I look out at the people, I'm holding a book, and it's written by an English author -- I look out and I say, Who knows the story of "Little Red Riding Hood?" And I look out there, and I don't get a lot of response back. So, I think we need to be able to reach the kids on a level that they're understanding from their culture and background.

Educating Everybody's Children: Diverse Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners

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