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**Multicultural Education:  
Suggestions for Implementation  
and School Transformation**

**Amy M. Williamson, Ed.D.**

**Assistant Professor**

**Angelo State University**

**USA**

**Latasha Jones, Ph.D.**

**Clinical Assistant Professor**

**Georgia State University**

**USA**

Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209  
Email: [info@atiner.gr](mailto:info@atiner.gr) URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)  
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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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**Multicultural Education:  
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**Amy M. Williamson, Ed.D.**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Angelo State University**  
**USA**

**Latasha Jones, Ph.D.**  
**Clinical Assistant Professor**  
**Georgia State University**  
**USA**

**Abstract**

School populations are consistently becoming more diverse, yet multicultural education is not emphasized in schools, and tolerance is not a sufficient focus. This article emphasizes the importance of implementing multicultural education in schools, and the responsibility of administrators to take the lead in utilizing multicultural education as a tool for transforming and improving school culture.

**Keywords:** multicultural, administration, education, diversity, tolerance

**Corresponding Author:**

## **Introduction**

Racial and ethnic diversity in the United States increased more in the 1980s than in any other decade. In the 1990s, people of color, women, and immigrants constituted approximately 85% of the entrants into the workforce. By the year 2020, one of every three Americans will be a person of color, and students of color will make up approximately 50% of the student population. In the lifetimes of many of today's college and university students, non Hispanic whites are predicted to become less than half of the population of the United States (Meacham, McClellan, Pearse, and Greene, 2003).

Communities of diversity are found in schools every day, both inviting and requiring educators to grow as they learn from their students. However, whether this diversity is a result of a fast-paced transition or of at risk neighborhoods, it is imperative that school districts, campuses, and classrooms engage themselves positively in the lives of their students, rather than become a negative voice that reiterates other pessimism they encounter on a daily basis. Acceptance is key for multicultural populations. Diversity-enhanced schools are places of vibrant opportunity and should be meaningful and exciting places to work (Howard, 2007).

Changing demographics have profound implications for all levels and functions of the school system. To create welcoming and equitable learning environments for diverse students and their families, school leaders must engage the entire school community (Howard, 2007). A sense of engagement is directly linked to a sense of acceptance—thus the importance of multicultural education.

## **What is Multicultural Education?**

Although hard to define and difficult to put a finger on, culture is extremely powerful. This ephemeral, taken-for-granted aspect of schools, too often overlooked or ignored, is actually one of the most significant features of any educational enterprise (Peterson & Deal, 1998).

The movement of multiculturalism affects school leaders, parents, community members, and society as a whole (Attinasi, n.d.). Understanding that communication styles, attitudes towards conflict, different approaches to task completion, decision making styles, attitudes toward disclosure, and approaches to knowing are all influenced by one's culture results in a greater understanding of students and in their learning needs. In addition, this knowledge provides a foundation for what can be taught about culture within the classroom. A multicultural education teaches not only about race and ethnicity, but also about cultures enveloping classes, genders, religions, and geographic location, for example. Tolerance, acceptance, and respect are at the heart of this teaching and should prepare students for critical thinking, understanding of diversity, and productivity in society.

## **Multicultural Education from Administrators' Perspectives**

### *Administrator Perspectives*

The role of school leaders in the crafting of cultures is pervasive. Their words, their nonverbal messages, their actions and their accomplishments all shape culture. They are models, potters, poets, actors, and healers, They are historians and anthropologists. They are visionaries and dreamers. Without the attention of leaders, school cultures can become toxic and unproductive. By paying fervent attention to the symbolic side of their schools, leaders can help develop the foundation for change and success (Peterson & Deal, 1998).

School leaders from every level are key to shaping school culture. Principals communicate core values in their everyday work. Teachers reinforce values in their actions and words. Parents bolster spirit when they visit school, participate in governance, and celebrate successes (Peterson & Deal, 1998).

The administrator serves as the leader in behavior and attitude of a school campus. Therefore, the administrator must take lead in creating an environment that is conducive to differences- even when there are varied perspectives for implementing issues of diversity into the curriculum or overall school program. To do this, administrators must take into account the varied perspectives of teachers and students within their schools. They must uncover and articulate core values, looking for those that buttress what is best for students and that support student-centered professionalism (Peterson & Deal, 1998).

When surveyed, secondary principals from smaller schools tended to have a more negative perception of multicultural education. These principals tended to be located in rural, low-socioeconomic, less educated communities. The characteristics of these communities contributed to the principals' negative perceptions. Also, the total number of students in the school influenced the principals' perceptions of the negative value of multicultural education (McCray, Wright, and Beachum, 2004). A tolerant and welcoming school starts with an educated, aware, and accepting school leader.

### *Teacher Perspectives*

Teachers familiar with classrooms or environments predominantly of one race may find themselves uneasy and unwilling to embrace the call for acceptance from students of other ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Ninety percent of U.S. public school teachers are white. Most grew up in middle class, English speaking, predominantly white communities and received their preparation in predominantly white colleges and universities (Howard, 2007). It stands to reason, therefore, that most public school teachers are not well equipped to deal with the growing diversity of the students they teach. The cultural incongruities that exist in classrooms present challenges for an educational system that often assumes that everyone learns the same material in the same way (Uehara, 2005). Perhaps the most powerful approach to multicultural education is making classroom instruction more congruent with the cultural value systems of a diverse student population. Ethnographic studies

have demonstrated that culturally responsive education can strengthen student connectedness with schools, reduce behavior problems, and enhance learning (Bazron, Osher, and Fleischman, 2005).

Administrators must address the incongruities that result after having multiple teachers from multiple backgrounds and level of comfort and knowledge of multicultural education. These incongruities can be addressed in various ways. One specific way that administrators can work towards implementing an inclusive toolkit is by creating diversity specific professional development. Professional development for creating inclusive, equitable, and excellent schools is a long-term process. One central leadership commitment is clearly needed (Howard, 2007). Not only do teachers need opportunities to learn more about the cultures their students represent, but they also need training that will provide them with ideas for addressing these cultures and diverse needs through their instruction, and time to successfully implement them.

### *Student Perspectives*

A student's cultural background can provide educators with an important resource for learning. Children construct meaning from the text of television, books, movies, and radio. Oftentimes these interpretations and meanings are quite different from those intended by the media maker and those constructed by parents and teachers. The social context of America consists of countless socialization influences on young people's attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge (Uehara, 2005).

In one study, writing samples of 123 eighth grade students were produced during a multicultural literature unit in which the students were asked to reveal their perceptions of characters and people from cultures different from their own. Although the students involved were primarily white, the responses dealt more with power than with color (Dressel, 2005). It is important not only that educators, campus leaders, and other school personnel be aware of the impact cultural differences have on students and on the school, but that also that they have a keen sense of its impact on their roles.

Administrators cannot overlook the perspectives of students. Students know when their teachers are validating and encouraging their differences rather than simply tolerating who they are. For this reason, administrators must poll the students to ensure that multicultural education is functioning in the school. One strategy for a toolkit is to create Multicultural Advisory Councils where students are active members who create opportunities for "real talk" and "real action." The establishment of a Multicultural Advisory Council for campuses and/or districts would provide administrators and teachers alike with an additional tool for learning more about students' cultures and instructional needs.

### *Effect on School Culture and Climate*

Despite the evidence regarding the increasing amount of diversity in our society and schools, the idea of implementing multicultural education in



our schools still generates clashes of opinions throughout society (McCray, Wright, and Beachum, 2004). Change has to start with educators before it can realistically begin to take place with students. Cultural competence, the ability to form authentic and effective relationships across differences, is a must have when a school desires a culture and climate of acceptance. Young people, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, have sensitive antennae for authenticity (Howard, 2007). There is a marked difference in a student's perception of their teacher if they believe the teacher is genuinely interested in them, as compared to if they believe the teacher does not want to be bothered or is not trying to relate to them on some level.

School administration, staff attitudes, mission, vision, and goals all contribute to the school culture and climate. If educators are open to student diversity and cultural responsiveness, students will in turn feel more positive, accepted, and capable of success. Tolerance, respect, and acceptance should not only be taught, but demonstrated as well (Uehara, 2005).

School leaders must model inclusive and non-judgmental discussion, reflection, and engagement strategies that teachers can use to establish positive learning communities in their classrooms. For school leaders and teachers to directly confront the current and historical inequities that affect education, they must engage in lively conversation about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigration, and other dimensions of diversity and social dominance (Howard, 2007).

### **Multicultural Education, Instruction, and Student Expectations**

Today's schools are microcosms of the larger society of the United States: a sea of faces representing a plurality of cultures, races, religions, and ethnicities. Forging a sense of interconnectedness and community within this diverse student population so that the classroom is inclusive and respectful creates an inviting learning community (Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006).

Administrators who are unfamiliar with students' diverse backgrounds, for example, sometimes misinterpret cultural difference as misbehavior. Statistical studies have established that minority students are suspended from school more often and for longer durations than Caucasians, are punished more severely, and are disproportionately referred for restrictive special education services (Bazron, Osher, and Fleischman, 2005). Many education leaders in diversity-enhanced schools are moving beyond blame and befuddlement and working to transform themselves and their schools to serve all their students well. This transformative process has five steps: building trust, engaging personal culture, confronting issues of social dominance and social justice, transforming instructional practices, and engaging the entire school community (Howard, 2007).

In addition to multicultural text in an English classroom, other content area and elective classrooms have both the opportunity and the responsibility to incorporate multiculturalism- it should not be confined to language arts

classrooms, as this would defeat the purpose. Tackling the challenge of relating curriculum to the students being taught, creating awareness of other cultures, and providing a sense of acceptance and respect for all students are at heart of a multicultural curriculum. Where culturally responsive teaching leads, high expectations and positive reinforcement must follow. As a result, student expectations should not be lowered due to teacher bias, lack of differentiation, or unwillingness to try new strategies or programs. Accountability for learning falls in the hands of teachers and should be seen as a challenge, not a burden. Unfortunately, as stated above, when leaders have negative perceptions of diversity, and teachers do not know how to address diversity, stereotypes and lowered expectations often become the subscribed philosophies.

### **Multicultural Education and Assessment**

When school outcome data is observed, the history of racism, classism, and exclusion in the United States is unmistakable. Systems of privilege and preference often create enclaves of exclusivity in schools, in which certain demographic groups are served well while others languish in failure and mediocrity. As diversity grows in rapidly transitioning school districts, demographic gaps become increasingly apparent (Howard, 2007).

According to Aronson and Steele's work on stereotype threats (1995), research indicates that intellectual performance is quite fragile and can vary greatly depending on the social and interpersonal context of learning. Three factors specifically were found to majorly effect students' motivation and performance: their feeling of belonging, their trust in the people around them, and their belief that teachers value their intellectual competence. The capacity, therefore, of adults in a school to form trusting relationships with supportive learning environments for their students can greatly influence achievement outcomes (Howard, 2007).

Transforming instruction in a manner that becomes more responsive to diversity, requires examining pedagogy, as well as curriculum and interaction patterns with students. In addition, a hard look at data to determine which students are in need of new strategies, and facing the limitations of teachers' knowledge and skills and make way for new ideas are needed (Howard, 2007).

Culturally responsive teaching, or CRT, involves the following elements:

- 1) Forming authentic and caring relationships with students
  - 2) Using curriculum that honors each student's culture and life experience
  - 3) Shifting instructional strategies to meet the diverse learning needs of students
  - 4) Communicating respect for each student's intelligence
  - 5) Holding consistent and high expectations for all learners
- (Howard, 2007).

In some cases, teachers have the desire to incorporate multicultural education into their curriculum but find their goals difficult to implement. Demands of school policies, mandated assessments, state mandates, mainstream constructions of a teacher's role, ideologies of curriculum and assessment, and even racial bias may contribute to the downfall of constructivist teaching hopes. High stakes tests tend to silence diverse points of view, a factor that may further contribute to the lack of teachers of color in American schools (Agee, 2004). Administrators can make this implementation more effective for teachers by allowing for curriculum expansion and common planning time. Without allowing this, teachers and instructional administrators wouldn't have time to implement a multicultural curriculum into their schools.

### **Misconceptions about Multicultural Education**

The need for a multicultural curriculum is great. Yet, a definite understanding of what multicultural education is *not* must be clear.

Common Misconceptions:

- People from the same nation or geographic region, or those who speak the same language, share a common culture.
- Families from the same culture share the same values.
- Children's books about another culture are usually authentic.
- Multicultural education just includes ethnic or racial issues.
- The tour and detour approaches are appropriate for teaching multicultural education.
- Multicultural education should be taught as a separate subject.
- Multicultural education is an accepted part of the curriculum.
- Multiculturalism is divisive.
- In predominantly monocultural or bicultural societies, there is no need to study other cultures.
- Multicultural education should be reserved for older children who are less egocentric or ethnocentric.
- When multicultural education is implemented, the commonality is lost.
- We do not need multicultural education because America already acknowledges its cultural diversity.
- Historical accuracy suffers in multicultural education.
- Most people identify only with one culture.
- Finally, there are not enough resources available about multicultural education. (Aldridge, n.d.)

These misconceptions can be countered through the tips that we have discussed throughout the article. These specific toolkits include implementing professional development, creating multicultural advisory councils,

emphasizing multicultural curricula, and creating a safe, tolerant, and culturally aware school environment.

## Conclusion

Parents, teachers, principals, and students often sense something special and undefined about the schools they attend. For decades, the terms climate and ethos have been used to capture this pervasive, yet elusive, element we call “culture” (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Part of a school culture includes its emphasis on learning, its appreciation of the student population, and its attitude toward instruction.

All educators around the nation are encountering classrooms comprised of an unprecedented number of students from various cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Due to the influx of immigrants entering the U.S. educational system, the number of students who speak a native language other than English has grown dramatically and will account for about 40% of the school-age population by 2040 (Allison & Rehm, 2007).

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