

15 Misconceptions About Multicultural Education

Jerry Aldridge, Coordinator, Early Childhood Programs, and Charles Calhoun, Assistant Dean for Urban Affairs, School of Education, University of Alabama at Birmingham; and Ricky Aman, Cal-Tex, Pekanbaru, Sumatra, Indonesia

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The movement toward multicultural education has gained momentum over the past 20 years. Guidelines from professional organizations have been in place for some time. While many elementary educators support multicultural development and genuinely try to incorporate diverse cultural issues into the curriculum, some widespread misconceptions about what multicultural education is and how it should be implemented hinder the process. Specifically, at least 15 common misconceptions should be addressed:

1. People from the same nation or geographic region, or those who speak the same language, share a common culture. At least seven distinct dialects and cultures can be found in the Southern United States alone (Cross & Aldridge, 1989). Most Latinos share a common language, but they cannot be considered as one ethnic group sharing a similar culture. Tremendous historical, racial, and cultural differences must be acknowledged (Banks & Banks, 1997). The cultures of Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Argentina are distinctly different from one another, even though they share the same language. In Canada, the language (French Canadian) and culture vary dramatically from that of Alberta and other provinces.

Numerous similar examples in Asia can also be found. In Indonesia, for example, many people speak Bahasa Indonesian. The country is actually home to hundreds of different languages and dialects and numerous diverse cultures. One can find Sundanese, Bataks, Minang, Javanese, Balinese, Dayak, Toraja, and the many tribal languages and cultures of Irian Jaya. In Malaysia, there are Malays, Chinese, East Indians, and the tribal groups of Sarawak. To view regions or nations as if they were monocultural is erroneous, and it may inhibit students' construction of the fact that many parts contribute to the whole.

2. Families from the same culture share the same values. This notion is especially false for nondominant cultures living in the United States. Lynch and Hanson (1998) reported at least four ways individuals and families from other countries "live out" their culture in the United States. These include "1) mainstreamers, 2) bicultural individuals, 3) culturally different individuals, and 4) culturally marginal individuals" (p. 19). In reality, a continuum of cultural identity exists and the entire range often can be found within the same family. For example, grandparents may maintain their original culture, while their grandchildren may be bicultural or mainstreamers.

3. Children's books about another culture are usually authentic. This is an especially common misconception. Teachers who want to share other cultures may unintentionally choose books that are racist or not representative of a particular group. Many of us can identify certain culturally inappropriate books, such as *The Story of Little Black Sambo* by Bannerman (1899), *The Five Chinese Brothers* by Bishop and Wiese (1939), or *The Seven Chinese Brothers* by Mahy (1990). Others are more subtle. A book that is often recommended (see Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987) is *Tikki Tikki Tembo* (Mosel, 1968). The book does have a delightful repetitive pattern that many children enjoy. The text and illustrations, however, are inaccurate depictions of any Chinese. In the text, the first and most honored son had the grand long name of "Tikki tikki tembo-no sa rembo-chari bari ruchi-pip peri pembo." The message about Chinese names is less than flattering. People in the Southern United States would be appalled if parents in the People's Republic of China were reading stories to their children about Southerners who used to name their children long names such as Bubba Bubba Jimbo Kenny Ray Billy Bob.

The Council on Interracial Books for Children published *Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks* in 1980 (see Derman-Sparks, 1989). The guidelines suggest: 1) checking illustrations for stereotypes or tokenism, 2) checking the story line, 3) looking at the lifestyles (watching out for the "cute-natives-in-costumes" syndrome, for example), 4) weighing relationships between people, 5) noting the heroes, 6) considering the effect on a child's self-image, 7) considering the author's or illustrator's background, 8) examining the author's perspective, 9) watching for loaded words, and 10) checking the copyright date.

Other criteria are available to readers. For example, Rudine Sims Bishop (1993) has published guidelines in *Teaching Multicultural Literature in Grades K-8*.

4. Multicultural education just includes ethnic or racial issues. While ethnic and racial concerns are a large part of multicultural education, gender and socioeconomic diversity also are important. Children come from many types of homes, including those headed by lesbian or gay parents. Furthermore, people from lower socioeconomic environments often have more in common with one another than they do with those of similar racial or ethnic heritage from higher income levels (Strevy & Aldridge, 1994).

One source that is helpful in dispelling this myth is *Teaching With a Multicultural Perspective: A Practical Guide* (Davidman & Davidman, 1997). Sleeter and Grant (1993) also have written extensively about school goals for multicultural education. These include the promotion of "equal opportunity in the school, cultural pluralism, alternative life styles, and respect for those who differ and support for power equity among groups" (p. 171).

Gollnick and Chinn (1990) recommend five goals for multicultural education. These goals also emphasize issues beyond the boundaries of ethnic or racial issues. They include: 1) the promotion of strength and value of cultural diversity, 2) an emphasis on human rights and respect for those who are different from oneself, 3) the acceptance of

alternative life choices for people, 4) the promotion of social justice and equality for all people, and 5) an emphasis on equal distribution of power and income among groups.

5. The tour and detour approaches are appropriate for teaching multicultural education. What is the tour approach and the detour approach? Louise Derman-Sparks (1993) uses the phrase "tourist-multiculturalism" to describe approaches that merely visit a culture. The tour approach to education involves a curriculum that is dictated primarily by months or seasons of the year. For example, some teachers believe an appropriate time to study Native Americans is November, when Thanksgiving occurs in the United States. Elementary teachers may take a detour during November and have children make Indian headbands or present a Thanksgiving play. Similarly, Black History Month often is the only time children study African American leaders or read literature written by Black authors. Maya Angelou once remarked that she will be glad when Black History Month is no longer necessary. When all Americans are sufficiently a part of our courses of study and daily instruction, there will be no need for Black History week or month.

These tour and detour methods trivialize, patronize, and stereotype cultures by emphasizing traditional costumes, foods, and dances while avoiding the true picture of the everyday life of the people from that culture (Derman-Sparks, 1993). Students often come away from such teaching with even more biases. Recently, white students in one district checked out of school during a Black History Month program. Their parents indicated they felt that "This program was for them-not us."

6. Multicultural education should be taught as a separate subject. Just as touring and detouring are not recommended practices, neither is teaching multicultural education as a separate subject. In fact, this is just another detour. In a subtle way, it points out that many groups are still on the margin of society.

James Banks (1994) has divided multicultural curriculum reform into four approaches. These include: 1) the contributions approach, 2) the additive approach, 3) the social action approach, and 4) the transformation approach. This fourth approach is particularly powerful in addressing the myth of teaching multicultural education as a separate subject. In a transformation approach, the structure and basic assumptions of the curriculum are changed so that students can view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups. History often is written from the winner's perspective, and so in traditional curricula students only get to hear the voice of the victor. In a transformation approach, "students are able to read and listen to voices of the victors and the vanquished" (p. 26).

Making multicultural education a separate topic would simply add something else to teachers' already full plates. We advocate an approach that promotes education that is multicultural overall. Multicultural concepts should be infused throughout the curriculum.

7. Multicultural education is an accepted part of the curriculum. In fact, this is far from true. There are current efforts to eliminate multicultural education from the schools. The popular media also has its staunch critics of multicultural education. On the back cover of

Rush Limbaugh's (1994) popular book *See I Told You So* he says, "Multicultural education is just an excuse for those who have not made it in the American way." It is important to note, however, that there has never been one American culture, but many. Ross Perot used the term "melting pot" throughout his presidential campaigns. Perhaps a better way to look at the United States would be as a salad bowl (Aldridge, 1993). Unique, different cultures contribute to the whole country, just as a tomato or celery adds to the salad.

8. Multiculturalism is divisive. According to this myth, immigrants coming to the United States eventually have been assimilated and considered themselves to be Americans. The myth goes on to state that when ethnicity is turned into a defining characteristic, it promotes division rather than unity. This shallow reasoning denies the multiple diversities that always have existed and continue to exist throughout the United States (Swiniarski, Breitborde, & Murphy, 1999).
9. In predominantly monocultural or bicultural societies, there is no need to study other cultures. This myth is pervasive in such societies. For example, we have heard from some undergraduate education students who protest, "Why should we study other cultures when there are only Whites and Blacks in the class and in our community?" In the past two years, however, that same community has had an influx of Mexican and Asian families. Furthermore, the closest elementary school to the students who made this comment had 71 different nationalities represented. With an increasingly diverse society, bicultural and monocultural areas especially need to learn about cultures to which they will be in close proximity in the immediate future (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994).
10. Multicultural education should be reserved for older children who are less egocentric or ethnocentric. Lynch and Hanson (1998) tell us that "cultural understanding in one's first culture occurs early and is typically established by age 5" (p. 24). They go on to say, "children learn new cultural patterns more easily than adults" (p. 25). Young children are capable of learning that we are all alike and all different in certain ways. Children in the early elementary grades often study the family and community. Gathering pictures of each family and discussing the differences and similarities is a good place to start. Interestingly enough, the critics who suggest that multicultural education should be postponed are often the same ones who are interested in pushing academics down into the preschool curriculum.
11. When multicultural education is implemented, the commonality is lost (Swiniarski, Breitborde, & Murphy, 1999). As school curricula expand to incorporate more diverse cultures, conflicts may arise just as they did with the civil rights movement. However, multicultural education can assist society in being more tolerant, inclusive, and equitable, recognizing that the whole is rich with many contributing parts (see Ravitch, 1991/1992).
12. We do not need multicultural education because America already acknowledges its cultural diversity. Those who agree with this statement are quick to point out that Martin Luther King's birthday and Black History Month are widely celebrated. This is exactly what we mean by a tour or detour approach, which is often more divisive than transformative (see Derman-Sparks, 1989).

13. Historical accuracy suffers in multicultural education. Proponents of this statement have suggested that certain curricula promote that Cleopatra was Black and that Western Civilization started in Egypt rather than Greece. If students are taught appropriate skepticism at an early age, then they will develop questioning abilities to research discrepancies found in historical literature (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994).
14. Most people identify with only one culture. Increasingly, children and families are multiethnic in nature. Here are just two examples. Maria is an Evangelical Christian from Ecuador who married Mohammed, a Muslim from Pakistan. They have two elementary-age children who are being raised in Queens, New York. The children have never visited Ecuador or Pakistan. Patrick is of Chinese heritage, but was born in Jamaica. His family later moved to Toronto and now lives in Miami.

These children are not stereotypical. They have a unique cultural heritage. Multicultural education should examine intrapersonal cultural diversity as well as the interpersonal. If this is not acknowledged and valued, children like Patrick could experience intrapsychic cultural conflict.
15. Finally, there are not enough resources available about multicultural education. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, in the past 10 years, a plethora of sources have emerged concerning cultural diversity. We have found the references in this article to be very helpful. The list of multicultural Web sites provided at the end of this article are other valuable resources for elementary teachers.

There are, no doubt, many other misconceptions about multicultural education. These 15 represent those encountered in the authors' personal experiences. Although all three authors of this article come from different races and cultural backgrounds, we are sometimes surprised at our own lack of understanding and by some of our own misconceptions that we have constructed in the past. As have many teachers, we have participated in some of these myths. However, we have a commitment to multicultural education and learning. As we continue to examine our own misconceptions about diversity, we hope you will make the effort to do the same.

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