Why Education Must Be Multicultural
Addressing a Few Misperceptions With Counterarguments
Donna Y. Ford, PhD

Abstract: The United States is considered the land of immigrants and cultural diversity, and our nation’s ever changing demographics attests to this. Yearly, our nation and schools become more racially and linguistically different. In what ways, we must ask, are schools welcoming and providing for students who come from different cultural backgrounds, especially Black and Hispanic students? The author contends that schools and educators must be culturally responsive; however, misperceptions hinder their appreciation of and respect for multicultural education and, thus, the adoption of culturally responsive practices is infrequent and/or met with reservations. Several (by no means all) misperceptions are share accompanied by counterarguments.

Keywords: multicultural education, misperceptions, culturally responsive education, gifted education

The goal of creating an education that is multicultural or culturally responsive is increasingly in demand in our classrooms and schools. The need is particularly important given the large percentages of Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American students in our schools and the reality that our nation is the most racially diverse in the world. As of 2012, almost half of students in public schools are non-White (Aud et al., 2012), and the percentages increase yearly.

This article was written with two major purposes in mind. First, educators must ensure that students have deep and authentic educational experiences about the lives of others who do not share their cultural and racial background and experiences. Second, educators must ensure that culturally different students learn about themselves in rigorous and relevant ways. Combined, these objectives reflect the value and goal of all students having mirrors and windows in their educational experiences—books, literature, visuals, media, guest speakers, topics, issues, and more.

While some educators support multicultural education and endeavor to incorporate multicultural content into the curriculum, a few widespread misconceptions about what multicultural education is and how it should be implemented hinder the process (e.g., Vargas, 2010). In this article, I share several reasons multicultural education must be addressed in classrooms; these reasons are divided into three categories: (a) Which students need multicultural education? What must be taught about racially and culturally different groups? (b) What is the purpose of multicultural education? What are the benefits of multicultural education? (c) What does rigorous multicultural education look like (e.g., models)? To address these overarching questions, I first share myths and/or misperceptions, and then a reality or counterargument for each.

Which students need multicultural education? And what must be taught about racially and culturally different groups? Three misperceptions are addressed.

1. In a predominantly monocultural school and/or community, there is no need to study other cultures. (Why should we study other cultures when there are only or primarily Whites in the class and/or community?)
2. White students do not need an education that is multicultural, regardless of the demographics of the classroom, school, and community. Multicultural education is only for “minorities”
3. There is no need to focus on subgroups of racially and culturally different populations; those who are categorized as Hispanic/Latino, for example, are the same in culture.

Multicultural education is for all students. The more racially and/or culturally homogeneous the classroom, school, and community in which students live and learn, the more students must be exposed to multicultural education to prevent and counter stereotypes learned in their homes, schools, communities, and the media. If students primarily or only interact with those from the same racial and cultural
backgrounds, how and when will they learn to understand and interact with other cultural groups? Multicultural education provides such opportunities. High-quality books, literature, videos, biographies, as well as a focus on the history, lives, customs, values, and accomplishments of racially and culturally different individuals and groups are essential.

What must be taught about racially and culturally different groups? When curriculum is color-blind and/or not multicultural at the highest levels, stereotypes can be created or promoted among students. For example, when lesson plans and books focus mainly on clothes worn by culturally different groups, without historical context and without authentic learning about the cultural group, then White students may develop stereotypes. I recall a recent activity where elementary students were asked to come to school dressed as African Americans. The letter sent home to parents indicated that if the second-grade children did not have African American attire, they could come dressed as zebras, tigers, lions, and so on. In another lesson plan at a different school, the third graders learned about slavery. Soon thereafter, the White students wanted to reenact slavery by taking on the role of slaver owners capturing and bidding on slaves (their Black classmates). The White students were taught that they were superior. The Black students were taught that they were inferior and a commodity.

Lesson plans that focus on the major racial/cultural groups without attention to subgroups fail to capture the uniqueness of each subgroup relative to their specific history, experience, language, and other cultural aspects. When we talk with and listen to those designated as Latino or Hispanic or Asian or Pacific Islander, educators and students will learn that they are not homogeneous. Mexicans are similar to and different from Cubans, Chinese are similar to and different from Japanese, and so on.

To view each racial/cultural group as if they are monocultural is not only incorrect but also creates or reinforces stereotypes. According to John Ogbu (1978), every “minority” group has a unique history in the United States that needs to be studied, understood, and validated to more authentically understand, support, and educate them.

To paint a broad stroke about those categorized or labeled as Hispanic/Latino or Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Black/African American is to discount meaningful differences within and among such cultural groups. One helpful resource is Culturegrams (see www.culturegrams.com), which describes authentic histories, attitudes, values, habits, customs, and traditions among over 200 cultural groups and subgroups.

In addition to addressing misunderstandings about cultural groups and subgroups, it is important to focus on curricular issues. Four misperceptions are given attention.

1. Information taught about one racial/cultural group is applicable to other racial/cultural groups. “Minorities are minorities.”
2. Books and literature about other cultures are often authentic.
4. Multicultural education should be taught as a separate subject.

To view different racial/cultural groups as if they are homogeneous is erroneous and can contribute to color blindness (aka culture blindness) among students. When cultural differences are ignored or even disparaged, conflicts in schools are likely. To decrease and ideally eliminate cultural conflicts, students must learn about those who are different from them in authentic ways. Lee and Low (2013) reported that, in 2012, a whopping 95% of children’s books were about White children. Keep in mind that students from all racial backgrounds are disadvantaged. Culturally different students have virtually no opportunity to read about themselves; and White students will rarely read about others. See Ford (2011) for other information and multicultural resources to address this imbalance. Teachers who want to teach about other cultures may unintentionally choose books that are racist or not representative of a particular group. Many culturally inappropriate books exit—text and illustrations can be inaccurate. For example, in one book series, slaves are considered immigrants. This is inaccurate and a grave historical injustice.

The Council on Interracial Books for Children published Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks (see Derman-Sparks, 1989). The guidelines suggest (a) checking illustrations for stereotypes; (b) checking the story line that promote/reinforce stereotypes; (c) weighing power relationships between racial and cultural groups; (d) noting the heroes and victims; (e) checking for loaded words, terms, and phrases; (f) examining the author’s perspective and motives; and (g) checking the copyright date to see if current or outdated. All of these suggestions and more are necessary to determine the effect on all students’ self-perception and racial identity, as well as cross-cultural relationships.

James Banks’ (in press) multicultural model is useful for helping educators to examine their lesson plans and avoid promoting stereotypes and otherwise miseducating students. His multicultural curriculum model is divided into four approaches—from least rigorous and authentic (contributions and additive) to most rigorous and authentic (transformation and social action;
see Ford, 2012): (a) contributions approach, (b) additive approach, (c) transformation approach, and (d) social action approach. Key words or descriptors for each approach appear in Figure 1. The contributions and additive approaches are the most common and least rigorous—stereotypes are often promoted and reinforced. The transformation approach promotes critical thinking and even empathy by providing more than one viewpoint and opposing views, while social action requires students to take make plans and take steps for positive changes. The voices of all groups must be heard and validated. The purpose of teaching multiple perspectives is to develop an understanding of diverse perspectives that can lead to an understanding of what motivates the behavior of others. It should also encourage students to examine their own beliefs and attitudes—and behaviors.

To promote both rigor and relevance, I have created the Bloom-Banks Matrix, described more fully in *Multicultural Gifted Education* (Ford, 2012).

Multicultural education is often taught as a separate subject or class rather than embedded in all courses. Having a separate class sends the wrong message—that such groups are on the margin of society, and their history and experiences are secondary to and disconnected from Whites. Multicultural education is not an add-on or something to do; multicultural concepts, issues, topics, and groups should be infused throughout the curriculum.

In this final section, I consider several multicultural goals and objectives. What is the purpose of multicultural education? What are the benefits of multicultural education? In addressing these questions, two misconceptions come to mind.

1. Multicultural education is divisive.
2. Historical accuracy suffers in multicultural education.

Critics of multicultural education say this approach fosters group conflicts by being anti-White and encouraging negative attitudes toward the United States (see Gorski, 2006; see http://www.nameorg/resolutions/definition.html). According to Banks (in press), the goals of multicultural education are (a) an expanded knowledge of various cultural and racial groups; (b) educational equity; (c) empowerment of students, caregivers, and communities; (d) the promotion of cultural pluralism; and (e) cultural harmony—intercultural/interethnic/intergroup understanding and respect in the classroom, school, and community. Multicultural education is not designed to rewrite history but rather to correct distortions and inaccuracies.

**Summary**

Multicultural education is a progressive approach for transforming education that critiques and corrects color-blind and discriminatory curriculum, practices, and policies in education. It is grounded in ideals of social justice and equity, critical pedagogy, and a dedication to providing educational experiences in which all students reach their full potentials as
socially and culturally aware and responsive citizens. Multicultural education, therefore, acknowledges that schools are essential for providing an education that helps to eliminate racial injustices and increase racial harmony. Thus:

- All curricula must be analyzed to ensure accuracy and completeness. Curriculum must be examined to determine how it is (re)cycling and supporting oppressive societal and cultural conditions.
- All subject and content areas must be presented from multiple and different (even opposing) perspectives. Students must be encouraged to think critically about the curriculum: Whose voices are they hearing and not hearing?
- Teachers must be prepared in colleges, professional development, and scholarship to foster a culturally responsive classroom climate for all students.

Conflict of Interest
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note
1. The U.S. Census Bureau must adhere to the 1997 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards on race and ethnicity that guide the Census Bureau in classifying written responses to the race question—White: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. Black or African American: A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. American Indian or Alaska Native: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment. Asian: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands. The 1997 OMB standards permit the reporting of more than one race. Also note that Hispanics/Latinos are considered an ethnic group. Source: http://www.census.gov/population/race/about/

References

Bio
Donna Y. Ford, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Special Education where she teaches courses in multicultural education, poverty, and gifted education. She writes, presents, and consults extensively on the recruitment and retention of Black and Hispanic students in gifted education, multicultural gifted education, and other topics related to closing the achievement gap.