

# Profoundly Multicultural Questions

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*We must address the deeply ingrained inequities of today's schools by asking difficult questions related to equity and access.*

Educators must ask themselves profoundly multicultural questions, that is, troubling questions about equity, access, and fair play—questions that examine the sociopolitical context of education and school policies and practices. Who is taking calculus and other academically challenging courses? Are programs for bilingual or special education students placed in the basement? Who is teaching the children—for example, why aren't highly qualified teachers teaching children in low-income districts? How much are children worth—do we value some children over others? Until we confront these broader issues and do something about them, we will be only partially successful in educating young people for the challenging future.

I still recall the question that my friend Maddie, also an educator, asked me a number of years ago when I was describing an initiative to bring a multicultural program to a particular urban school district. A supporter of multicultural education, she was nonetheless becoming frustrated by the ways in which many districts were implementing it.

She was especially concerned that many students from that particular district were doing poorly in school, and she asked impatiently, “But can they do math?”

Her question stayed with me for a long time—and prompted me to think about what it means to provide an education that is both multicultural and equitable (Nieto, 1999). Sadly, issues of equity and access are not always linked with multicultural education. Sometimes, multicultural education is seen as little more than a way to promote self-esteem, or simply as a curriculum that substitutes one set of heroes for another. When that happens, we may end up with young people who feel good about themselves and their heritage but who have few skills that prepare them for life; or alternatively, who know how to do math and science and read, but who know little about their cultural backgrounds and are even ashamed and embarrassed by them.

Let me make clear that I strongly believe in multicultural education. That first exhilarating course that I took on the subject nearly 30 years ago put into words many of the ideas I had wanted to express since becoming a teacher. More recently, the term *culturally responsive pedagogy* has come into use and been advocated persuasively (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). An outgrowth of multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy is founded on the notion that—rather than deficits—students' backgrounds are assets that students can and should use in the service of their learning and that teachers of all backgrounds should develop the skills to teach diverse students effectively.

Despite my great support for these philosophies, however, I am also concerned that they can be used in simplistic ways that fail to address the tremendous inequities that exist

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in our schools. For example, to adopt a multi-cultural basal reader is far easier than to guarantee that all children will learn to read; to plan an assembly program of ethnic music is easier than to provide music instruction for all students; and to train teachers in a few behaviors in cultural awareness or curriculum inclusion is easier than to address widespread student disengagement in learning. Although these may be valuable activities, they fail to confront directly the deep-seated inequalities that exist in schools. Because they are sometimes taken out of context—isolated as prepackaged programs or “best practices”—multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy can become band-aid approaches to serious problems that require nothing short of major surgery.

I define multicultural education as an anti-racist education that is firmly related to student learning and permeates all areas of schooling (Nieto, 1994). It is a hopeful way to confront the widespread and entrenched inequality in U.S. schools because its premise is that students of all backgrounds and circumstances can learn and achieve to high levels, and—even more essential—that they deserve to do so. Multicultural education needs to be accompanied by a deep commitment to social justice and equal access to resources. Multicultural education needs, in short, to be about much more than ethnic tidbits and cultural sensitivity.

For instance, although educators may call attention to the fact that the curriculum in U.S. schools is becoming more multicultural (an overblown claim in any event), they may neglect to note that the achievement gap between white students and students of color is growing. Although the gap was reduced by about half between 1970 and 1988, it has been widening since then. The reversal is evident in grades, test scores, dropout rates, and other indicators, and it has taken place in every type of school district and in all socioeconomic groups (D’Amico, 2001). Just one example: The average 12th grade low-income student of color reads at the same level as the average 8th grade middle-class white student (Kahlenberg, 2000). In terms of high school completion, 88 percent of white students have graduated from high school, but the rate for Hispanics is just 56 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). Given these alarming statistics, the claim that education is equally available to all is more of a fiction than ever. Multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy by themselves cannot solve these problems.

It makes sense, then, to look carefully at two factors besides cultural differences that influence student learning: the sociopolitical context of education, and school policies and practices. The former includes societal ideologies, governmental policies and mandates, and school financing. School policies and practices—specifically, curriculum, pedagogy, tracking, testing, discipline, and hiring—can also either promote or hinder learning among students of different backgrounds.

Besides focusing on matters of culture and identity, educators also need to ask profoundly multicultural questions—that is, troubling questions that often go unanswered or even unasked. The answers tell us a great deal about what we value because the questions are about equity, access, and social justice in education. Here are a few of the questions that we must address if we are serious about giving all students of all backgrounds an equal chance to learn.

## WHO’S TAKING CALCULUS?

I use “calculus” as a place marker for any number of other high-status and academically challenging courses that may open doors for students to attend college and receive advanced training. For instance, we find that although slightly more than 12 percent of white students are enrolled in calculus, only 6.6 percent of African Americans and 6.2 percent of Latinos and Native Americans are enrolled. In the case of physics, the numbers are 30.7 percent for whites, 21.4 percent for African Americans, 18.9 percent for Hispanics, and 16.2 percent for Native Americans (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002). This situation has serious implications for reforming such policies as rigid tracking, scheduling, and counseling services. Access to high-level and demanding academic courses has a long-term and dramatic effect in terms of college attendance and subsequent quality of life. For instance, the 2000 U.S. Census reported that annual average earnings for those with a bachelor’s degree were nearly double the amount for those with just a high school diploma: \$45,678 compared with \$24,572 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b).

## WHICH CLASSES MEET IN THE BASEMENT?

Language-minority students and students with special needs are too often hidden away in the basement—or in the hall closet, or the room with the leaky ceiling on the fourth floor, or the modular unit separated from the rest of the school. Administrators offer seemingly logical reasons for placing these students in these areas: There’s no other available space in the building; these students were the last to arrive and therefore need to be placed where there’s room; now they’re closer to the English as a Second Language teacher. But placing programs for marginalized students in less desirable places is a powerful metaphor for the low status and little attention that they receive. It also serves in many cases to segregate these students from the so-called “regular” (English-speaking) or so-called “normal” (non-

special needs) students, in this way creating an even greater gulf between them and the rest of the school.

The continuing segregation of students on the basis of race and ethnicity is a trend that has been escalating for the past 20 years. According to Gary Orfield (2001), most of the progress made toward desegregating schools in the two decades prior to 1988 has been lost in the past 15 years. For African Americans, the 1990s witnessed the largest backward movement toward segregation since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Latinos are now the most segregated of all ethnic groups—not just in race and ethnicity, but also poverty. U.S. schools are becoming more separate and unequal than ever.

## WHO'S TEACHING THE CHILDREN?

The question of who is teaching the children is inextricably linked to matters of social justice in education. Teachers working in poor urban schools tend to have less experience and less preparation than do those in schools that serve primarily white and middle-class students (Editorial Projects in Education, 1998). In addition, poor urban districts are more likely to hire teachers out of field than are suburban and middle-class school districts (David & Shields, 2001). These situations would be deemed unacceptable in more affluent districts.

Related to teachers' experience and training is the issue of teachers' race and ethnicity. Although all educators—teachers, administrators, curriculum coordinators, and others—need to develop the attitudes and skills to be effective with our increasingly diverse student population, we need a concerted effort to recruit a more diverse faculty. At present, the number of students of color in U.S. classrooms is growing dramatically at the same time that the number of teachers of color is declining. In 1972, just 22 percent of students in public schools were considered “minority”; by 1998, it was 37 percent (NCES, 2000a). The teaching force, on the other hand, is about 87 percent white. These trends show little sign of changing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

The growing gap is problematic because mounting evidence indicates that a higher number of teachers of color in a school—particularly African American and Hispanic—can promote the achievement of African American and Hispanic students (Clewell, Puma, & McKay, 2001; Dee, 2000). In fact, one study found that a higher number of teachers of color can have an even greater impact on the achievement of white students (Meier, Wrinkle, & Polinard, 1999). Another study found that having same race and gender role models was “significantly and consistently predic-

tive of a greater investment in achievement concerns” on the part of young people (Zirkel, 2002, p. 371).

Associated with teacher quality is the question of teachers' influence on their students. The proof is growing that all teachers—regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender—who care about, mentor, and guide their students can have a dramatic impact on their futures, even when these students face tremendous barriers related to poverty, racism, and other social ills (Flores-González, 2002; Noddings, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). Stanton-Salazar, for instance, suggests that mentoring and support from teachers can provide students with the social capital they need to succeed, thus creating networks that “function as pathways of privilege and power”—pathways not generally available to poor students of color (1997, p. 4).

## HOW MUCH ARE CHILDREN WORTH?

What do we pay for education, and how does the answer differ according to students' race, ethnicity, social class, and above all, home address? The well-known facts are that school financing is vastly unequal and that students with wealthier parents are fortunate to live in towns that spend more on their education, whereas young people who live in financially strapped urban or rural areas are much less fortunate (Kozol, 1991). Regrettably, the children who need the most get the fewest funds and resources (NCES, 2000b).

We also need to ask what our most vulnerable students are worth in terms of attention and care. A recent court case is a good example of the low value placed on students who attend poor urban schools. In June 2002, an appeals court in New York State ruled that youngsters who drop out of the New York City schools by 8th grade nevertheless receive “a sound basic education” (cited in González, 2002). The result of this astonishing ruling was to overturn a 2001 landmark decision that had found the state's formula for funding public schools unfair because it favored schools in suburban areas. The majority opinion in the appeals ruling, written by Judge Alfred Lerner, said in part,

the skills required to enable a person to obtain employment, vote, and serve on a jury are imparted between grades 8 and 9. (cited in González, 2002)

Although Judge Lerner conceded that such a meager education might qualify young people for only the lowest-paying jobs, he added, “Society needs workers at all levels of jobs, the majority of which may very well be low-level” (cited in González, 2002). I am left wondering whether

Judge Lerner would want this level of education for his own children or would think it fair and equitable.

These, then, are some of the profoundly multicultural questions that I suggest we ask ourselves. Certainly they are not the only questions that we can ask, but they give us an inkling of the vast inequities that continue to exist in U.S. public schools. My questions are not meant to diminish the noble efforts of educators who struggle daily to reach students through culturally responsive education or through an accurate representation in the curriculum of students' histories and cultures. But as we focus on these approaches—approaches that I wholeheartedly support—we also need to ask troubling questions about equity, access, and fair play. Until we do something about these broader issues, we will be only partially successful in educating all our young people for the challenges of the future.

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