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What is your definition of multicultural education?

A lot of people are thinking about multicultural education today in terms of the changing demographics. And that is one way of looking at it, and certainly an important way. We are more diverse than we've ever been as a nation. However, I started school over 50 years ago and when I was in school I was in a very diverse school. Diversity is not something new, it's been with us since the founding of our nation, of course. Another rationale for multicultural education has been that it's the right thing to do, the ethical thing to do. Now I buy into that, but not everybody would. I think it's providing social justice for all children when they're all represented, affirmed, and given access to education. But a third rationale is that we all benefit, we are all the poorer when we have only one way of looking at things.

How can we think, for example, that we couldn't be enriched by reading the poetry of Langston Hughes? How could we think we wouldn't be enriched by speaking a language other than English and being fluent in at least two languages? We are enriched by these things. We are not deprived by these things. So learning about the range of experiences and possibilities in the world will enrich all of us. Multicultural education is for everybody.

It always surprises me when people say that multicultural education is about political correctness because a politically correct stance is only one way of looking at things. I think that multicultural education gives us a variety of perspectives and many ways of looking at things. That being the case means it's not so neat. It's not so confined. It's messy. It can be full of conflict. That's what democracy is about. And if we truly believe in democracy then we need to welcome those disparate voices -- those voices of conflict and tension and difference -- into the conversation. Otherwise we're just paying lip service to democracy. Democracy is not easy. We need to work hard at it. And one of the ways to work hard at it is not to squash the voices of people we don't agree with.

When I think about multicultural education, I think of it in the socio-political context. What I mean by that is that we can't just focus on the pleasant aspects of diversity such as food, music, cultural traditions. Those are nice and certainly should be part of the multicultural perspective, but it's far easier to look at those things than to really confront ... institutional polices and practices that are unfair to some people. We need to avoid this "holidays and heroes" approach to diversity or a "tourist" approach to diversity.

I also believe that multicultural education needs to be understood as basic education. It's not a frill, it's not a fad, it's not an add-on, and it's not something that is separate from the curriculum and the climate in the school. I see it as basic as reading, writing, arithmetic, and computer literacy. It's basic for living in today's world. And if we don't teach all our children with a multicultural perspective, we're not preparing them to live in the world.

How can teachers bridge the cultural gap between themselves and their students?

We need to acknowledge that 90 percent of teachers are white, monolingual English speakers. And about 40 percent of our youngsters in school are children of color. There is a very big gap there, but it's a gap that we can work with. In fact, we have a responsibility to work with it, because all teachers need to feel comfortable teaching all students. I'm not just talking about white teachers; I'm talking about African American teachers teaching Vietnamese kids, and about Latino teachers teaching African American kids, and so on and so forth. There's great diversity. We can't assume that those 10 or 11 percent of teachers who are teachers of color are effective teachers of all students of all backgrounds either. All of us need to learn how to do this better. [Teachers] have a responsibility to see their profession as one in which lifelong learning has to be the bedrock of teaching. That means learning about the students who they teach.

The more they delve into it the more comfortable they will feel teaching subject matter that doesn't come from their own experience. If we only taught what came from our own experience we would live very limited lives. And if we only learned what is our experience we'd live very limited lives. One of the foundations of multicultural education is that we need to go beyond our own experience. We need to affirm our experience and the experience of the young people who we teach, but we also need to move beyond it so that we can embrace a much broader range of experiences. I understand that it's hard, but it is every teacher's responsibility to reach every child to the best of his or her ability. And learning about the content of their lives through the literature, through the history, through contact with the individual families are significant steps in that journey.
Teachers need to learn the context as well. Take *The Circuit* [by Francisco Jiménez], for example. In order to look at that book -- which has been a very powerful book for a lot of kids -- teachers need to know something of the context of the migrant experience. You can't just pick it up. You need to really immerse yourself in learning about that experience. But once teachers do that, they become richer for it and so do the students.

I think all teachers are capable of being fantastic teachers of children of various backgrounds. The way for them to prepare is to immerse themselves in the content that they'll be teaching and also to look critically at themselves. You can't just learn the content. I've often said that to really be a multicultural educator you need to first become a multicultural person. That means looking critically at who you are, what you value, how you reflect those multicultural values, and then looking at your own biases. All of us have these biases. So we have to look very deeply into ourselves, what we value, who we are, and what we think about the students who are sitting in front of us. Then we have to think about how to deal with those biases in a way that doesn't jeopardize the students we're teaching. I think that personal journey is as much a part of a teacher's development as is immersing oneself in the content. They have to go hand in hand.

**Why is the discussion of identity important in a multicultural classroom?**

I think we're getting away from a sense of identity being a monolithic thing, and being something that one develops and keeps one's whole life. My identity is always changing everyday. The person who I was when I was a child is different from the person I was as a young adult and the person who I am now. And those shifting identities have to do with your own individual experiences and the sociopolitical context in which you live. They change all the time, and teachers need to know that because their own identities are also changing.

They can't impose their own ideas of what identity is on the kids. And identities are not only shifting but they're very multiple right now. For example, my granddaughter is African American, Puerto Rican, Native American, French Canadian, Jamaican: she's all those things. Culturally, she's more Puerto Rican and Spanish since my husband is Spanish than anything else. But I want people to recognize that it's not easy to categorize kids just by what they look like. People might look at her and say she's African American or she's Puerto Rican. Yes, she is those things, but she is more. And so we can't just have these antiquated notions of identity anymore of what race means and culture means. We need to have a more sophisticated and complemented understanding of these issues.

I think it is important for teachers to dare to engage in these conversations. They are difficult, but it's worthwhile because kids are living these realities all the time -- and even for kids who are not living these realities, they need to know about them. So whether we're talking about Mexican American children, African American children, white kids, kids of any socioeconomic backgrounds, they all need to know that this is also part of our reality here.

**What advice do you have for teachers in approaching multicultural education?**

When we make anything multicultural an add-on it really doesn't work. We need to infuse it completely: not only in the language arts, but in everything. And so it means looking at things through different eyes, looking for new information and new perspectives to teach kids different ways of looking at things. I think it's a habit that we need to develop as teachers, as educators. It means learning to look at the world in a more complicated way.

A teacher's responsibility is to present information in as fair and multiple a way as possible, and have children learn to weigh the evidence and to ask questions, to think about things critically. It's not to present one politically correct or politically incorrect way of viewing the world. This is very hard, whether we're talking about a first grade classroom or a doctoral seminar. We always have to catch ourselves and think about what we're doing and the message that we're getting across to our students.

We always have to start with what children know. You don't stay there, but you use it as the basis for understanding the world and then moving beyond that experience and embracing other experiences. [Students] need to know that their experiences do matter. Their lives and realities, their culture, and the language that they speak are important and that these can be a good foundation for education.

http://www.learner.org/workshops/tml/workshop1/commentary3.html

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