The Multicultural Classroom: A Look at Demography

Schools across the US continue to diversify, making multicultural classrooms more of the norm than the exception. Children of color comprised 43% of the public school enrollment in 2004 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006a). By 2020, it is estimated that students of color will make up half the student population (Weisman & Garza, 2002). The number of English language learners also continues to grow, representing 19% of public school students in 2004. This gain reflects a 162% increase in students who speak languages other than English at home over the last 25 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006a). While widely believed to be an issue confined to urban schools, changing demographics impact schooling across the US. In 2004, students of color made up 23.6% of the public K-12 enrollment in Kansas; in 2005, 23% of students in Minneapolis public schools were English language learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004–2005, 2006b). While the US will serve as the focus for this chapter, immigration continues to impact schools around the world. Canada enrolls 40,000 new immigrant students in its public schools each year; 80% do not speak English (Strum & Biette, 2005). European schools also serve students from a variety of language, cultural and religious backgrounds. For example, ~5 million Muslims live in France (Judge, 2004). Issues around culture, identity, and patriotism recently came to a boiling point regarding the wearing of head scarves by Muslim girls in French schools. French law consequently banned pupils in public schools from wearing any conspicuous sign of religious affiliation (Judge, 2004). This example illuminates the “realness” of cultural clashes in school. Regardless of place, teachers find themselves charged with educating children from diverse backgrounds. How can teachers be responsive to this need?

Examples of “multicultural” education abound:

• A third-grade teacher celebrates Cinco de Mayo in her class of mostly Caucasian students. They listen to songs in Spanish and eat tamales. The students make paper sombreros to wear during the festivities.
A first-grade teacher includes baby dolls of many races in his dramatic play area. He has multicolored paper and paint in the art corner to represent a variety of skin tones. On the wall are basic words in Spanish, English and Vietnamese, the primary languages of his students.

In a sixth-grade suburban classroom, students read a story about Martin Luther King and complete a multiple choice quiz on their reading. They are preparing for standardized tests. The test prep materials include pictures of children in grass skirts, a child wearing a fez, and a girl in traditional African clothes, intended to show diversity.

Students work in collaborative groups on math projects. They are designing buildings which will benefit their urban community: a fire station, a community center and a church. They practice sophisticated geometry skills and work with a parent volunteer on how to read a blueprint. They send letters to their local representatives, offering alternatives to the demolition of a former factory building, which they would like to be redeveloped into a neighborhood school.

Do these lessons adequately represent multicultural education? What does it look like to teach multiculturally in the classroom? The field of Education continues to grapple with what multiculturalism entails. To better understand the term, it is first necessary to deconstruct multicultural. While the term multi easily implies many, cultural provides a special challenge. Culture is used in daily conversation to represent the more tangible manifestations of our lives: food, art, clothes, music. In classrooms, multiculturalism tends to begin and end at this level: teachers may explore diverse music, celebrate various holidays or incorporate examples of multicultural art in lessons. While these are important components of building a multicultural community, culture can be understood in a much more expansive way. McLaren (2003) defines culture as “a set of practices, ideologies and values from which different groups draw to make sense of the world” (p. 74). Looking through this lens, culture includes much more than concrete representations of a group’s identity. Thus when we talk about multicultural education, two key concepts are pertinent: (1) culture is made of many components, both tangible and invisible; it is “the sum total of ways of living” (Irvine, 1995, as cited in Irvine and Armento, 2001, p. 6). These components include communication styles, use of stories, ceremonies, power dynamics, childrearing practices, religion, language, rituals, gender roles, use of time, and deference to elders; (2) cultural norms and expectations differ group to group, thus to be multicultural means to include a myriad of perspectives on culture (including those of people of color, English language learners, Caucasians, of all classes, ability levels and orientations).

A commitment to honoring multiple world views and to exploring different paths that lead to rigorous academic achievement is at the core of multicultural education. Rather than conceive of multicultural education narrowly as something teachers “do” or “add” to their curriculum, this chapter will help provide a multilayered view of multicultural education as a comprehensive approach to students, pedagogy and learning. The chapter will open with a discussion of tensions in the field over what multicultural education means. I will then turn to key principles that help form the foundation of multicultural education. Rather than provide a laundry list of what teachers can do, I will focus more on dispositions, attitudes and approaches that can undergird powerful instruction for children of color and English language learners.