

FACETS OF BEING A MULTICULTURAL EDUCATOR

Often when educators hear the words “multicultural education” or “anti-racist education” or “teaching for diversity” they assume that proponents of these are encouraging integration of cultural content into the curriculum. While this is important, multicultural education goes well beyond this. Below are some of the facets of being a multicultural educator.

Curriculum:

Typically, the classroom curriculum has displayed limited, biased perspectives. Often only the dominant, European-American culture is represented without showcasing the perspectives of other peoples. It is necessary to incorporate multiple worldviews and representations into the curriculum. What types of people are featured as the “movers and shakers” in your discipline? What areas of the world are discussed most? How are various racial groups represented in examples, readings, lectures, and other class activities? How are working and lower socioeconomic status people represented? How is structural inequity explained—or is it even mentioned at all?

Pedagogy:

In addition to what we teach, how we teach is very important. Some pedagogies are more democratic and humanizing than others, particularly for marginalized or underrepresented groups. How are you incorporating cultural knowledge into your teaching? Are you drawing on multiple learning styles and intelligences? How competitive and cooperative in your classroom? Which students have more power and receive more attention than others? How do you handle bias incidents in the classroom?

Challenging Structural Inequity in Schools:

An important layer to being a multicultural educator is to become aware of areas where there is inequity in the structures, systems, and policies of our schools. For example, far more students of color than white students are referred for special education, far fewer students of color are in gifted and talented programs, students of color are suspended and disciplined more often and more harshly than their white counterparts for the same offenses, and the list goes on. As multicultural educators we must become aware of what aspects of our schooling systems are not serving all students equitably and work to change them.

Activism/Social Action:

Structural inequity does not occur only in schools. Inequity permeates our society. More people of color are in poverty, lack health insurance, or are unemployed or underemployed. Numerous studies demonstrate that discrimination still exists in housing practices, lending practices, medical fields, the criminal justice system, and in other aspects of society. It is vital that multicultural educators look beyond the four walls of their classroom or even past the boundaries of their schools to become aware of how systems of power privilege some people while oppressing others. Multicultural educators must work to dismantle these systems and build systems that are more equitable. Further, they must expose these systems to students and help equip students to also work to create a more just and equitable society.

Communication:

One area that is very challenging to educators is communication. We often expect students and families to communicate with us in ways that are acceptable and make sense to us. How often do we attempt to alter our communication to suit the style of our students and their families? In addition, communication styles vary among cultural groups. Some cultural groups prefer a smaller space between speakers while others prefer a larger space. Some cultural groups believe it is polite not to jump too quickly into the reason for your conversation while others believe in addressing the purpose right away. Body language also varies among groups. What do you know about the communication practices of various groups?

Relationships:

Though it may seem obvious, one cannot underestimate the importance of a teacher's ability to build and maintain relationships with students. Important aspects of building relationships include establish trust, knowing students and allowing them to know you, standing up for students and the issues that affect them, telling the truth, wanting the best for students, valuing and respecting students, having high expectations, and having fun together. (For more on this, see Page, M.L. (2004). *Going beyond the book: A multicultural educator in the English Language Arts classroom. Voices from the Middle* 12(1), 8-15.)