

Book Review:

Raising Multicultural Awareness in Higher Education

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Klein, Ana Maria (2006). *Raising multicultural awareness in higher education*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Ana Maria Klein's (2006) *Raising Multicultural Awareness in Higher Education* offers valuable insight on the significance of providing multicultural education in today's postsecondary classrooms. The book provides practical tools for faculty to engage their students in multiculturalism that may be linked to positive outcomes of student satisfaction and ultimately to retention. This book is best described as a forum and a toolkit for its target audience: a forum where the author shares the teaching and learning experiences of herself, her college students in teacher preparation programs, and other educators with whom she came into contact; and a toolkit that current and future faculty can turn to for practical guidelines on how to multiculturalize their curriculum.

The book contains 15 chapters and can be divided into three sections. The first section deals with teachers as social beings and the role teachers play in the education of their students. The second section explores theories and practices pertaining to teaching and learning in a multicultural environment. The last section offers opportunities for readers to reflect on what they have learned throughout the book and conceptualize their growth as a multicultural educator. At the end of each chapter, the author presents both practical and reflective exercises for readers to apply the materials to their teaching practice.

Multicultural education defined

In order to explain the concept of multicultural education, it is necessary to address the meaning of culture. The author of the book precisely defines culture as "the sum total of ways of living, including values, beliefs, aesthetic standards, linguistic expression, patterns of thinking, behavioral norms, and styles of communication which a group of people has developed to assure its survival in a particular physical and human environment" (p. 69). Multiculturalism, in contrast to monoculturalism, describes a state where the cultures of diverse groups in society are equally valued. Multiculturalism in the context of the educational environment, as explored in this book, encompasses an even broader meaning of diversity, and refers to an educational approach where instructors include the experiences

and perspectives of all cultural and social groups, including those of their students, into the teaching and learning experience when appropriate.

Central to the concept of multicultural education is the acknowledgement of diversity in every aspect possible: race¹, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, academic ability, learning styles, etc. Even when a group of students fits into these categories, it is important for instructors to realize that each student brings different life experiences that have shaped them and that it is detrimental to treat them as if they are identical.

Such an appreciation and celebration of individual differences naturally leads to a student-centered instructional approach, which is the essence of multicultural education. Teachers need to realize that teaching is all about students and not about teachers themselves. Therefore, on a practical level, when introducing a new topic in classroom instruction, Klein suggests that teachers need to probe students' prior knowledge, find out their interests, and analyze their learning styles in order to maximize the effect of teaching and learning.

Significance of multicultural education

Multicultural education seems to be a buzz word in many urban educational settings in the United States. However, carefully analyzing and truly understanding the significance of such an educational approach is the first step toward its successful implementation. In today's America, both the K-12 school system and the higher education system are much more diverse than ever in terms of student demographics. In many schools and colleges in metropolitan areas, racial minorities together outnumber Caucasian students. Such a phenomenon warrants a redefinition of racial and ethnic minority and majority.

To further illustrate this point, Klein argues that the metaphor of a melting pot is no longer representative of the ethnic realities of the 21st-century United States. Replacing the melting pot is the concept of a tossed salad, where many ethnicities and cultures are present and each maintains distinct characteristics.

As the result of diversity, traditionally underrepresented students are participating in education, especially higher education at an unprecedented rate. These students include racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, those from the lower socioeconomic strata of the society, etc. In order to better serve the unique needs of these populations, educators need to be knowledgeable about the diverse cultural backgrounds that these students bring to the classrooms and tactfully use them as media to deliver curriculum.

In addition, the world of today is increasingly competitive and interconnected. In order to prepare our students to be productive citizens in a global economy, teachers must have the mentality and tools to instill global perspectives in our students.

Finally, in the information age, our students can easily access many kinds of information in which they are interested. In some cases, they are more knowledgeable than their teachers on certain subjects. It is therefore imperative for teachers to acknowledge this reality and equip themselves with as much knowledge as possible about the world and its

¹ Klein disagrees with the concept of grouping people into different racial categories for any reason. From her perspective, human race best describes any individual's racial background. The author of this book review, however, believes that race is an important aspect when discussing social differences.

cultures. Ultimately, such knowledge will transform into more successful learning experiences of our students.

Challenges faced by multicultural education endeavors

The fundamental challenge for multicultural education is the reality that human beings do not relate well with differences, which leads to prejudice and discrimination. People are generally resistant to accepting those who are different from themselves. Such differences may include physical appearances, cultural habits, world views, etc. To tolerate those who are different from us requires education and a conscious decision to embrace differences. A Jew who grew up in Valenzuela, Klein experienced first-hand what it was like to be different from her peers. She was denied entrance to a classmate's house, because she, unlike the rest of the students, was not Catholic.

Human beings' natural tendency to relate poorly with differences leads to bias or prejudice, both of which are used interchangeably to describe an unfavorable feeling or opinion formed without enough knowledge, and often resulting from fear or distrust of ideas different from one's own. Every individual, a teacher or a student; an adult or a child, has biases toward certain things or people. Children are usually perceived as innocent, but they can be prejudiced and seek to gain power over others. Prejudice occurs because as social beings, humans learn from the environment, and consequently, model certain behaviors, which, in turn, impact the perspectives and behaviors of those around us.

The author uses the five progressive stages of prejudicial behaviors proposed by Allport (1954, as cited in Klein) to further illustrate the progression of prejudice in school settings. Prejudicial behavior starts with *antilocution*, where the oppressor uses oppressive language to demonstrate control over other people or groups. Such behaviors often go unnoticed as the result of *avoidance* by teachers. *Discrimination*, which is the unfair treatment of others, presents itself in ways such as the exclusion of others from classroom or school activities. The next stage is *physical attack*, which, in the case of children, often occurs in the playground. *Genocide*, which is the loss of life caused by violence, demonstrates the most severe consequence of prejudice.

As the author points out, understanding and implementing multicultural education first requires an authentic self exploration and analysis on the part of the teacher to acknowledge one's own cultural habits, values, and biases, so as to not let these interfere with the learning of a new culture. Furthermore, teachers need to encourage students to recognize their biases. Multicultural education becomes irrelevant when teachers and students do not relate the treatment and experiences of other people to those of their own.

Understanding the causes and consequences of prejudice, and teachers' role in intervention will help teachers model appropriate behaviors to their students and implement proper intervention strategies when prejudicial behaviors among students occur. Teachers should intentionally foster a safe classroom environment, where students are willing to include others, especially those who exhibit differences from themselves in physical appearances, behaviors, viewpoints, etc, in discussions and activities. To achieve this goal, teachers need to create an open forum in the classroom, where they model honest communication of their views to the students, so that together, teachers and students exchange views and learn from each other in a non-judgmental environment.

Another challenge to the implementation of multicultural curriculum is the demands and constraints of standards-based, highly tested teaching and learning environment in our school system. Because of such an educational environment, authentic instruction, examples of which include portfolio assessment, creative reading and writing, and science forums, does not occur as frequently as multicultural educators would like. Teachers surveyed by the author in a study observe that standardized testing does not motivate the unmotivated students. Furthermore, it puts underrepresented student populations at a disadvantage. For example, some content tested is not taught in the school curriculum, rather, it is acquired from home experiences. Those from low socioeconomic families may not have the cultural or social capital in their home environment required to expose them to the experiences necessary to answer the questions correctly.

Institutionalized racism is explored as the author observes the grouping of youths into certain slots or tracks in today's school system. For example, all underrepresented youths are grouped into one slot, which could include African American students, ESL students, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those with lower achievement. Such grouping obscures the differences among these students. As a result, rather than providing these students with the necessary assistance for them to excel academically, the tracking system proves to be a self-fulfilling prophecy where these young people are doomed to fail.

Goals of multicultural education

The goal of multicultural education is not limited to mentioning the contributions of a particular cultural group once a year, which, James Banks (2003, as cited in Klein) calls the contributions approach. In the same vein, the goal is not constrained to what an additive approach would accomplish—exposing students to a few more facts about people of color during certain holidays. Instead, the goal should be to develop a sustained understanding and appreciation in students' minds of all cultures, especially those that are different from their own. A multicultural curriculum encourages and provides students with tools to discover those cultures that they are unfamiliar with. It instills in students the philosophy that all cultural groups in society should be treated as equals.

To further demonstrate the necessity of the above point, the author notes that students learn to reject certain national or cultural groups through the curriculum they are taught in school. Therefore, instead of siding with the heroes and heroines of the story in the textbook, the author advises teachers to encourage their students to explore the experiences of all participants in historical events. In other words, the roles of the protagonists, antagonists, and victorious characters are all important. Fostering interest in the life experiences of others and deeper thinking in students will lead to more informative and inclusive viewpoints of the students. Klein uses the example of a common homework assignment to illustrate this point. Each student, in his or her formal schooling, has been assigned to read classic books and the end goal is almost always finishing a book report by the deadline. Klein advocates a shift in the focus of literacy from such a shortsighted goal to encouraging students to learn and appreciate the different life experiences of the characters in the books.

Another goal of multicultural education is for each student to feel involved in the learning process and find connections between the curriculum and his or her life experiences. A student in a successful multicultural education environment is one who is engaged in his or her learning. Klein strongly urges teachers to use such methods and tools as action

research, data-informed learning, and evidence-based instruction to achieve the goal of student engagement. As a physics professor interviewed by Klein suggests, teachers should start where the students are, to understand that each individual has a story to tell, each of us has gifts to bring to the classroom and that the teachers' responsibility is to tap into the potential of each student.

The next goal is a natural progression of student engagement as mentioned above. It is the creation of a student-centered learning environment. This goal calls for the overcoming of the *deficit orientation*, which is an oppressive form of thinking where the more powerful group views others as inferior. An example of a deficit orientation instructional approach is a teacher-centered classroom environment, where students are expected to passively listen and take notes, without interacting with or offering feedback for peers or teachers. On the contrary, a student-centered classroom environment is featured by ample opportunities for students to discover new knowledge for themselves, instead of teacher feeding the curricular content to students.

Ultimately, the goal of multicultural education is a total transformation of the current curriculum, classroom environment, and treatment of multicultural issues. Such a transformation transcends the contributions and additive approaches explained earlier, and reaches a level where students engage in deeper thinking and actively seek the truths through multiple resources. Eventually, the transformation presents itself in the form of social action, where students and teachers serve as change agents for their schools and communities. At this stage, learning goes beyond the boundaries of the classroom, and students and teachers alike take the experiences and knowledge gained in the classroom to their communities to make a positive difference. The result of such transformations is the formation of the global citizenship that James Banks enthusiastically advocates (Klein, 2003). In other words, students educated through multicultural perspectives and practices become productive and peaceful participants who contribute to the welfare of not only their immediate communities, but also the world.

Practical suggestions for multicultural educators

Teachers are usually passionate about teaching and are enthusiastic about the subject matters they teach. Through the process of gaining new knowledge in the subject area, a teacher is accumulating cultural capital, which enables him or her to become a cultural broker to the students. Klein offers useful suggestions to teachers as they strive to teach from a multicultural perspective.

In terms of instructional practices, the author recommends: 1) learning centers in certain portions of the classroom, where the teacher provides resources and tools for students to engage in learning about people and events through such activities as action research; 2) theme-based instruction, where students are given the opportunity to choose a theme that relates to the topic being discussed and gather information around that theme; and 3) a classroom time line, which gives students a historical perspective on people and events and helps them understand the gradual development of human history.

The author also promotes the concept of self-regulated learning. This means that in the classroom, the students are engaged and motivated in the learning process and know exactly what to do in order to accomplish learning goals. To foster self-regulated learning,

the teacher needs to establish and communicate clear guidelines, set manageable goals, and invent interesting tasks for students to perform.

Many new teachers are challenged by the task of developing effective lesson plans that emphasize multicultural perspectives. The author offers a simple formula. The lesson plan should include the goal and objectives, state standards, realia needs, topics that will be taught, ways in which they will be delivered, activities that students will do and methods of assessment of student performance. Of course, what ties these sections together is the goal of multiculturalism. Teachers need to incorporate their understanding and knowledge of multicultural education in order to ensure that students have a successful multicultural learning experience.

In cross-cultural teaching, the author suggests that it is important to go beyond listening to students. As teachers, we should listen for non-verbal cues. Teachers should try to learn as much as possible about the cultural backgrounds of their students and adjust their pedagogies accordingly. For example, instead of expecting new immigrant students from a collective culture to immediately assimilate to a classroom environment featured by student initiative and student-teacher interactions, it is best to allow these students to gradually transition into class activities by first having them sit by more capable students and imitate others.

Multicultural education and community college retention

As a community college educator, I consider this book of particular relevance to the learning experiences of community college students. Retaining these students until they accomplish their educational objectives has been a goal that community college faculty and administrators have strived to achieve for decades. One of the challenges to such a goal is the heterogeneity of community college students. It can be argued that this particular student population is more diverse than any other found in the entire American education system. Such diversities include race and ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, academic ability, prior schooling, employment status, family structure, and intention for participating in higher education, to name a few. The diversity determines that a cookie cutter curriculum will not satisfy the learning needs of all students. If a more culturally responsive approach, such as multicultural education, is not utilized, these students are likely to drop out.

In addition to the heterogeneity of community college students, they are likely to be commuters. Classroom engagement is therefore of particular significance, because the classroom is almost the only place where most students interact with faculty and each other. As we know through decades of research on higher education retention, students drop out because of a disconnection or mismatch between their life experiences and the institution's culture, which, for these commuter students, is exhibited in the classroom. For these students to stay enrolled until they graduate, transfer, or obtain a certificate, faculty need to conscientiously invest in developing a multiculturally-oriented curriculum that connects students' life experiences to their learning and enthusiastically implement the curriculum. I recommend Klein's book as a useful resource for my colleagues in the community college, as they strive for student success.

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