

Culture provides the blueprint that determines the way an individual thinks, feels, and behaves in society. We are not born with culture, but learn it through enculturation and socialization. It is manifested through societal institutions, daily habits of living, and the individual's fulfillment of psychological and basic needs.

The U.S. macroculture is the dominant culture that is shared by many of the nation's citizens. Historically, U.S. political and social institutions have developed from a western European tradition and still function under the strong influence of that tradition. Nevertheless, many other aspects of American life have been greatly influenced by the numerous cultural groups that make up the U.S. population.

In addition to participating in the macroculture, individuals belong to a number of microcultures with cultural patterns that may not be common to the macroculture. Cultural identity comes from traits and values learned through membership in microcultures based on ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, class, native language, geographical region, and disabling or exceptional conditions. The interaction of these various microcultures within the macroculture begins to determine an individual's cultural identity. Membership in one microculture often greatly influences characteristics and values of other microcultures, especially of race, gender, and class.

Assimilation, the process by which microcultures adopt the macroculture, has been the most prevailing theory used to describe the nature of cultural diversity in the United States. The theory of cultural pluralism promotes the maintenance of the distinct differences among cultural groups. However, the ideology of voluntary cultural choice may better describe the direction in which we would like to move. This ideal allows individuals to maintain their family's cultural identity or develop new ones.

Multicultural education is a concept that incorporates cultural diversity and provides equality in schools. For it to become a reality in the formal school situation, the total environment must reflect a commitment to multicultural education. The diverse cultural backgrounds and microcultural membership of students and families are as important in developing effective instructional strategies as are their physical and mental capabilities. Further, educators must understand the influence of racism, sexism, and classism on the lives of their students and ensure that they are not perpetuated in the classroom.

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Multicultural education is a means for positively using cultural diversity in the total learning process. In the process, classrooms should become models of democracy and equity. To do this requires that educators (1) place the student at the center of the teaching and learning process; (2) promote human rights and respect for cultural differences; (3) believe that all students can learn; (4) acknowledge and build on the life histories and experiences of students' micro-cultural memberships; (5) critically analyze oppression and power relationships to understand racism, sexism, classism, and discrimination against the disabled, young, and aged; (6) critique society in the interest of social justice and equality; and (7) participate in collective social action to ensure a democratic society.

Multicultural education can help students increase their academic achievement levels in all areas, including basic skills, through the use of teaching approaches and materials that are sensitive and relevant to the students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. The voices of students and the community must be heard in order to deliver multicultural education. Educators should develop skills for individualizing instruction based on the needs of students. No longer can we afford to teach all students the same knowledge and skills in the same way. Individualizing the instruction is one way to help all students reach their potential and develop their unique talents. Teachers must make an effort to know all of their students and to build on their strengths and help them overcome their weaknesses.

Multicultural education must be integrated throughout the curriculum at all levels. It can help students to think critically, to deal with the social and historical realities of American society, and to gain a better understanding of the causes of oppression and inequality, including racism and sexism. Multicultural education must start *where people are* and incorporate multicultural resources from the local community.

Positive student and teacher interactions can support academic achievement, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, religion, language, or exceptionality.

Oral and nonverbal communication patterns between students and teachers are analyzed and changed to increase the involvement of students in the learning process. The learning styles of students and the teaching style of the teacher are understood and used to develop effective instructional strategies. However, teachers must be sure that they are not treating students differently based solely on the students' membership in certain microcultures. We need to evaluate our own academic expectations of students, our practices of ability grouping, our own biases, and our attributes to ensure that we are helping all students have access to knowledge.

Educators should be aware of the biases that exist in most classroom materials and be able to draw on supplementary materials to reflect cultural diversity more accurately. In addition, the recognition of biases can lead to discussions about the inclusion of different ethnic, religious, gender, socioeconomic, disabled, and age groups.

Educators will face a tremendous challenge in the next decade to effectively use the cultural diversity that students bring to the classroom. Every subject area can be taught in ways that reflect the reality of cultural differences in this nation and the world. Skills to function effectively in different cultural settings can also be taught. For students to function effectively in a democratic society, they must learn about the inequities that currently exist. Otherwise, our society will never be able to overcome such inequities.

As educators, we must teach all children. The ultimate goal of multicultural education is to meet the individual learning needs of each student so that all students can progress to their fullest capacity. This goal has not been reached in the past, partly because educators have been unable to effectively use the cultural backgrounds of students in providing classroom instruction. As multicultural education reaches into all levels of schooling, the maximum development of all students, regardless of their cultural background, will be supported. Acceptance of the challenge to multiculturalize our schools is vital to the well-being of all citizens.