Multicultural Curriculum

A core component of effective multicultural education is an inclusive curriculum that represents and respects diverse cultures. Studies show that a curriculum which recognizes and emphasizes cultural diversity is a distinguishing feature of high-performing schools located in low-socioeconomic school districts (Wang, 1998). Transformation of the traditional curriculum into a truly multicultural curriculum that authentically represents the diverse histories and cultures of different ethnic groups typically progresses through the following four stages (Banks, 1993; McIntosh, 2000).

Stage 1. Mainstream Curriculum

   This is the traditional, Eurocentric, male-centered curriculum, which largely ignores the contributions and perspective of non-dominant groups. Such a curriculum fails to validate the culture of minority groups, which can further alienate them from a school culture that already differs greatly from their home culture. In addition, it reinforces the dominant group's "false sense of superiority, gives them a misleading conception of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups, and denies them the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, perspectives, and frames of reference that can be gained from studying other cultures and groups" (Banks, 1993, p. 195).

Student Perspective
"I want to study Asian history and women's history. I'm tired of studying about White people and men.
   —Overheard comment made by a female high school student to a friend at a coffee shop in California

Stage 2. Heroes and Holidays

   At this stage, diversity is "celebrated" by exposing students to cultural information and artifacts from diverse groups (e.g., Black History Month and Women's History Month). Although this stage represents is an advance in curricular reform over the traditional mainstream curriculum, it has two major weaknesses:
(a) It covers non-dominant groups outside the context of the required curriculum, which reinforces the idea that acquiring knowledge about these "other" groups is supplementary, or a secondary "side show" to the "main event;" and
(b) By focusing exclusively on the achievement of heroes or extraordinary people, it fails to cover the common experiences, struggles, and voices of most members of non-dominant groups (EdChange, 2009b).

 "A national culture or school curriculum that does not reflect the voices, struggles, hopes, and dreams of its many peoples is neither democratic nor cohesive."
—National Council for the Social Studies, Curricular Guidelines for Multicultural Education

Stage 3. Integration

   This curriculum moves beyond diversity heroes and holidays to include significant information about non-dominant groups. For example, a course on Women's History or African-

American history may be added to the history curriculum, or a unit on Latin-American music may be added to a music curriculum. This represents a major advance beyond the previous stage because it integrates diversity into the mainstream curriculum; however, its major weakness it that it covers diversity as stand-alone topics or units that are separated from the "meat" of the curriculum covered in the school's textbooks (Banks, 1993).

Stage 4. Structural Reform

At this most advanced stage of curricular transformation, diversity is woven seamlessly into the mainstream curriculum and is presented in the form of multiple perspectives thereby encouraging students learn to view the curriculum's major ideas and events through different cultural lenses. For example, the curriculum's textbook for American History incorporates the history of women, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans (EdChange, 2009b). Science education researchers have demonstrated that diversity material can be readily and seamlessly infused into the science curriculum by intentionally including both a Western scientific value (e.g., control over nature) and a non-Western value (e.g., harmony with nature) in each lesson plan (Aikenhead, 1997, 2001; Lee & Buxton, 2008). Multiculturalism can be readily effectively infused into the existing curriculum "as long as existing knowledge is not presented as facts and doctrines to be absorbed without question, as long as existing bodies of knowledge are critiqued and balanced from a multicultural perspective, and as long as the students' own themes and idioms are valued along with standard usage" (Shor, 1992, p. 35).

At this stage of curriculum, students learn to consider the diversity implications of any topic discussed in the traditional curriculum. They are prepared to use diversity-related examples to support and illustrate their points, and when they research a topic, they're able to choose and examine it from multiple (i.e., multicultural) perspectives. Coverage of Western civilization in the history curriculum can also be infused with diversity by identifying discrepancies between democratic ideals and social realities. For instance, coverage of American history includes the Indian Removal Act in 1830 that forced Native Americans to leave their reservations and move west, as well as the forced internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Failure to include such events not only fails to provide a complete and accurate history of the United States, it can also promote cynicism and alienation among minority youth who are often well aware of the gaps between their nation's ideals and realities (NCSS, 1991).

When students see their ethnic identities represented in the curriculum, they see their cultural history is valued, which serves to promote students' sense of political efficacy— i.e., their belief that participation in their nation's governance may make a difference for them (Bernstein, 1986). This is an important student-learning outcome of a multicultural curriculum because, historically, people of color have not been empowered to influence political policies and institutions, which often leaves them with a sense of societal helplessness and a lack of political influence over their collective future (Ogbu, 1990).

"The multicultural curriculum should help students develop political efficacy for effective citizenship in a pluralistic democratic nation"
—National Council for the Social Studies, Curricular Guidelines for Multicultural Education

An effective multicultural curriculum should also infuse *academic-success skills and effective learning strategies* into coverage of its subject matter. Schools with high percentages of language-minority students that also promote high levels of student achievement are typically schools with a curriculum that integrates academic skills and academic content (Pierce, 1991).

For instance, schools that promote the greatest gains in academic achievement of both minority and majority students are schools whose curriculum includes teaching students how to take notes on what they are learning and how to summarize what they have learned (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock, 2001).

When students acquire effective learning strategies in addition to subject-matter knowledge, they acquire skills with two powerful qualities:

1. *Transferability*—effective learning strategies are portable skills that "travel well" across different contexts and situations, and which can be transferred (applied) across a wide variety of careers, and life roles.
2. *Durability*—effective learning strategies are enduring skills with long-lasting value that can be used continually throughout life.

 "Give a man to fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."
—Author unknown

Equipping students from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds with effective academic learning strategies is particularly critical to their success because they are less likely to have family members at home who can model these skills for them.

Lastly, an effective multicultural curriculum includes courses that prepare students from all ethnic groups to advance and succeed at the next level of education. For instance, a multicultural high school curriculum should prepare both minority and majority students to succeed in college. However, studies show that there is a wide discrepancy in knowledge of college-admissions requirements between families of lower and higher socioeconomic status, one result of which is that less-privileged students often experience a pre-college curriculum that leaves them unprepared for college entry and college success. By age 24, 75% of children from families whose income ranks among the top one-quarter of American families go on to receive a bachelor's degree; in contrast less than 9% of children whose family income lies in the bottom quarter will do so ("Family Income and Higher Education Opportunity," 2005).

This suggests that the course-enrollment patterns of low-income students (and other students groups that have been historically underrepresented in college) should be analyzed and closely monitored. Special attention should be paid to the schedules of these student groups to ensure that they are not underrepresented in college preparatory courses (Conley, 2005). Given the fact that the average student-counselor ratio in American schools is 460 to 1 (American School Counselor Association, 2010), other members of the school community may need to assume a greater role in monitoring the course-taking patterns of underrepresented students and encourage their enrollment in courses that promote college access and success. For instance, teachers can play a powerful role in the college advising process and school administrators can further empower teachers to fulfill this role by supplying them with key information on requirements for admission to local colleges and state universities (Conley, 2005).

Checklist for Evaluating the Quality of a Multicultural Program

* Do campus assemblies, decorations, speakers, holidays, and heroes reflect racial and ethnic group differences?

* Are cocurricular activities multiethnic and multicultural?

* Is the campus staff (administrators, instructors, counselors, and support staff) multiethnic and multiracial?

* Does the campus have systematic, comprehensive, mandatory, and continuing multicultural professional development programs?

* Do professional development programs provide opportunities for learning how to create and select multiethnic instructional materials and how to incorporate multicultural content into the curriculum?

* Does the campus library and resource center offer a variety of materials on the histories, experiences, and cultures of diverse racial and ethnic groups?

* Does the curriculum reflect ethnic and cultural diversity?

* Are ethnic content and perspectives incorporated into all aspects of the curriculum?

* Do instructional materials treat racial and ethnic differences and groups honestly, realistically, and sensitively?

* Does the curriculum examine the total experiences of groups instead of focusing exclusively on "heroes"?

* Does the curriculum include the study of societal problems that different ethnic and racial groups have experienced, such as racism, prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation?

* Does the curriculum help students develop a sense of efficacy (i.e., the sense that by taking action they can influence the outcomes of their life and society?)

* Does the curriculum help students develop skills necessary for effective interpersonal and intercultural group interactions?

* Does the curriculum help students participate in cross-ethnic and cross-cultural experiences and reflect upon them?

In short, a campus that provides effective diversity education:
(a) *acknowledges* differences—is aware of the diversity among its students and their distinctive curricular and co-curricular needs;
(b) *accommodates* differences—treats diverse students in a fair, non-prejudicial and non-discriminative manner; and
(c) *cultivates* differences—capitalizes on diversity within the campus community and in the surrounding (local) community to promote the learning and development of both minority and majority students.