

# Effective Multicultural Education: What Today's Teachers Want



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## ABSTRACT

*This article reports valuable research findings summarizing survey responses from 120 practicing preK-12 teachers reflecting their understanding of effective multicultural education and identifying what today's teachers want. Prior to course instruction, participants were asked to define multicultural education specifying what they want for themselves as professional educators and what they want for their learners.*

*The array of teachers' responses was synthesized into five significant, yet interconnected, themes offering a multitude of global applications. Teachers reported that effective multicultural education should:*

- (1) offer natural and authentic learning experiences;*
- (2) balance integration and emphasis of concepts, content, and processes;*
- (3) create caring communities and solid citizenry;*
- (4) apply powerful pedagogical theories and practices; and*
- (5) promote growth, development, and transformative change in both educators and their learners.*

*Details accompanying each theme provide clear guidance and pragmatic suggestions from today's practicing teachers beneficial to teacher educators, preK-12 classroom teachers, school administrators, and staff developers.*

University courses specializing in the study of multicultural education were incorporated into teacher education programs beginning in the 1980s (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Although many teacher educators espoused concepts and incorporated practices valuing cultural diversity within their curriculum, instruction, and assessment prior to that time, this particular field of study has been formalized for only a few decades. Today, multicultural education constitutes a substantial body of teaching, scholarship, and service, simultaneously playing a significant role in most teacher education programs, evident pri-

marily through an assortment of courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels of study at universities across the United States (Bennett, 2001).

To guide both their units' programs and course objectives, teacher educators have adopted rigorous sets of academic standards and guiding principles established by various professional organizations and governmental agencies. These standards and principles provide conceptual frameworks frequently referenced as the 'hallmarks of excellence' informing and supporting both preservice and practicing teacher edu-

cation. Notably, each of the standards and principles applies the tenets of multicultural education through their statements of commitment in helping educators to understand and teach their dynamic communities of diverse learners (Sleeter, 2002).

Multicultural education has been endorsed strongly by most governmental departments of education, higher education accrediting agencies, and preK-12 school districts. During the last two decades, administrators within many of these divisions have selected personnel to craft and oversee infusion of policy statements, academic standards, and pedagogical activities promoting multicultural education. Specifically, preK-12 school personnel have established an extensive range of multicultural education goals, programs, and resources for their faculties, staffs, and students (ASCD, 1995).

Many of today's preK-12 classroom teachers have completed only one course in multicultural education as a requirement toward successful completion of their teacher preparation and/or graduate school programs of study. In general, teachers seem aware of the ever-changing community demographics and educational expectations impacting U.S. classrooms and pedagogical approaches. Teachers state that they want all children to achieve academically and to be accepted socially; they purport striving for culturally responsive and responsible education (Gay, 2000) that fits the contemporary sociopolitical context (Nieto, 2000).

Yet, even with teacher education programs offering dynamic coursework clarifying the standards and modeling the principles set by professional organizations and agencies, and with governmental departments and school districts developing equitable policies and inclusive programs, many preK-12 educators are not practicing effective multicultural education (Gallavan, 1998; Sleeter, 2001). *Effective multicultural education tends to rely predominantly upon an individual classroom teacher's understanding, motivation, and manifestation of important concepts and meaningful practices.* Independently, the classroom teacher defines effective multicultural education; designs and facilitates culturally diverse curriculum, instruction, and

assessment; and provides information and support for both themselves and their preK-12 learners.

The focus of the research presented here examines teachers' descriptions of effective multicultural education specifically investigating what today's teachers want for themselves as professional educators and for their preK-12 learners. The teachers' responses have been synthesized into five significant, yet interconnected, themes that frame teacher education and guide preK-12 teachers, administrators, and staff developers.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at a major university located in the southwestern United States where approximately 600 new teachers are prepared each year and an additional 400 practicing teachers earn master's degrees within the fields of Curriculum and Instruction annually. Most undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in the College of Education complete an introductory course in multicultural education.

Four graduate courses of Multicultural Education with approximately 30 students enrolled in each courses participated in this study. The students were administered a written survey on the first day of class prior to any course instruction. The survey consisted of 10 quick-response questions preceding 2 major open-ended prompts that supplied the significant research findings. These 2 major open-ended prompts asked participants to:

- Describe effective multicultural education specifying what today's teachers want as professional educators, and
- Describe effective multicultural education specifying what today's teachers want for their learners.

Students were given approximately 20 minutes to respond independently and return their surveys. Upon completion of the data collection, the university instructor incorporated the questions and prompts into the first class session's conversations. Students were invited to share their responses, and additional time was allo-

cated prior to the end of the first class session for students to offer more responses sparked by their class conversation. The instructor recorded the additional responses to enrich the initial data collection and to help guide the multicultural education course throughout the semester.

Surveys were tabulated to produce frequency counts of the responses. Constant-comparative analysis was conducted on the open-ended items to derive emic categories and themes (based on the data rather than pre-existing in the literature) related to effective multicultural education strategies (Merriam, 1998). As stated by Merriam, the process of coding qualitative data consists of marking it "according to whatever scheme is relevant to your study" (p. 165). Respondents' statements were read and data was coded in relationship to the schemes of effective multicultural education. Coding led to the construction of interconnected categories, allowing us to see the relationships among the statements. The categories developed into five major themes characteristic of effective multicultural education based on what the teachers want for themselves and for learners in their classrooms. For illustrative purposes, we selected responses that most represented these characteristics, and we present their examples to define effective multicultural education and what today's teachers want.

### FINDINGS FROM THE QUICK-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

The 120 teachers responding to this survey reported that most of them (92%) had completed a multicultural education course as part of their teacher education programs (89% at the undergraduate and 11% at the graduate level of study). The 10 teachers (8%) who reported they had not completed a multicultural education course explained that a multicultural education course was neither offered nor required when they were enrolled in their teacher preparation programs. All 10 of these particular respondents had been teaching for more than 15 years.

The 92% of respondents who had completed a multicultural education course reported learning a broad range of concepts and practices while

enrolled in those courses that they continued to value and utilize over time. The most frequently given illustrations of these concepts and practices were generalized into these three overarching beliefs. Teachers need to be aware that:

1. their own personal backgrounds, beliefs, language, and behaviors comprise their individual cultural characteristics that significantly influence their teaching and interactions;
2. their learners live in and reflect many different cultural settings, belief systems, and home environments that constitute factors that significantly influence learning styles and peer interactions; and
3. effective multicultural education encompasses much more than international education, special holidays, and single-day events; effective multicultural education includes both formal and informal interactions incorporated into daily curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as community building and classroom management.

All (100%) of the respondents reported that their school districts have a written multicultural education policy in place, and 96% of the respondents reported that their schools include some form of multicultural education. The remaining 4% responded that they "didn't know" if their schools include multicultural education; these respondents were all first-year teachers.

The most frequently reported examples of multicultural education practices found in the schools included:

- learners and teachers participating in school wide special events and holiday celebrations, fairs, and festivals (featuring other countries, specific races, and/or ethnic groups);
- learners and teachers creating and presenting culturally diverse music, dance, and artwork displays;
- teachers serving on multicultural and international educational committees;

and,

- teachers attending occasional professional development inservices related to multicultural education.

All (100%) of the respondents reported interacting with diverse populations of learners as well as 100% stating that they believe that they practice multicultural education. The most frequently reported examples of the respondents' classroom practices entailed teachers:

- contributing to the special multicultural and/or international education events;
- adding multicultural and/or international literature to their literacy and language arts classes;
- including some form of multicultural and/or international education (teaching about other countries) during social studies; and
- helping learners to understand and appreciate their individual similarities and differences so they behave cooperatively with one another.

Describing the respondents, all (100%) of the teachers reported that they had been teaching at least one year with 72% having taught between 1 and 6 years. The distribution of respondents included 55% elementary school teachers and 45% secondary school teachers; 62% females and 38% males; 82% Anglo, 10% Hispanic, 5% Asian-American, 2% African-American, and 1% Native American.

The findings from these 10 quick-response survey questions confirmed that teachers are gaining important yet varied foundational concepts from their introductory multicultural education courses, and that their districts and schools are establishing vital policies, programs, and practices. However, the respondents verified that schools and teachers are continuing to implement multicultural education via imposed and disconnected approaches often intertwined with international education and single-day celebrations that limit both the teaching and the learning of authentic multicultural education.

### FINDINGS FROM THE OPEN-ENDED PROMPTS

Similar concerns surfaced among the re-

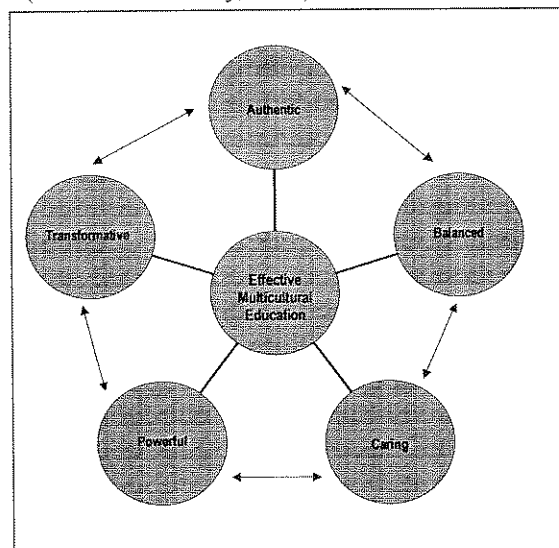
sponses to the two open-ended prompts, affirming the holistic nature of the teaching/learning processes. From the teachers' reoccurring responses, five significant themes were noted. It is important to understand that none of the accompanying illustrations reported here is unique or applies to only one theme. Reflective of effective multicultural education, most of the statements interconnect with all five themes and offer a rich variety of guidance beneficial for all teachers and their learners.

Today's teachers want effective multicultural education to:

1. offer natural and authentic learning experiences;
2. balance integration and emphasis of concepts, content, and processes;
3. create caring communities and solid citizenry;
4. apply powerful pedagogical theories and practices; and
5. promote growth, development, and transformative change in both educators and their learners (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Five themes of effective multicultural education (Gallavan & Putney, 2004)



## 1. Offer Natural and Authentic Learning Experiences

This first theme was evident most frequently from a variety of words and phrases stated in both positive and negative terms. *Teachers want comfortable multicultural education teaching strategies and learning experiences that are customary and commonplace characteristics of schools and classrooms.* Experiences should be endemic throughout the curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Multicultural education must be clearly visible through the everyday conversations and typical learning activities in ways that are safe and meaningful to learners and their teachers. Teachers do not want multicultural education that feels unnatural, is imposed or forced upon the curriculum, instruction, and assessment, or seems to make no sense to them or their learners.

Teachers want effective multicultural education to:

- offer natural and authentic teaching strategies and learning experiences that happen both purposefully and spontaneously, guiding and enriching the usual curriculum, instruction, and assessment with knowledge, skills, and dispositions conveying humanistic qualities and mindful curiosities relevant to real life and living;

*“When we discuss current events and contemporary issues, we are infusing multicultural education realistically across the curriculum. Today’s young people want to know about and understand themselves and others...near and far.”*

- engage both teachers and learners in understanding today’s world (locally to globally) incorporating the learners’ and their families’ cultural characteristics as a regular and customary pedagogical practice through active, safe, and honest involvement rather than organizing a unique, one-time-only event, celebration and/or passive presentation;

*“I try to model to my third-graders that I truly care about them as culturally diverse and valuable people of today as well as contributing citi-*

*zens of tomorrow. Knowing their world must involve their sincerely learning about themselves and one another in both everyday living and special events. Multicultural education should be the heart of everything we say and do at school and with children; it should happen with comfort and ease.”*

and

- incorporate genuine interest, understanding, and acceptance of people, places, and events evident in both formal and informal interactions among the teachers and learners (families and communities) during and outside the class.

*“Effective multicultural education requires respect of individual differences and integrity for the learning process. Teachers must ensure that the school day offers their students unlimited opportunities to see themselves in all that is taught and caught.”*

## 2. Balance Integration and Emphasis of Concepts, Content, and Processes

Respondents fueled this second theme as strongly as the first theme. *Teachers feel that the time has arrived for effective multicultural education to have a visible, viable, and valuable presence found regularly throughout the curriculum, instruction, and assessment.* Multicultural education can no longer be relegated to disjointed lessons and occasional events with special emphases. Although teachers reported that some special events teach important lessons, prominent events must be taught meaningfully in classrooms with genuine relevance to learners and curriculum. Multicultural education concepts, content, and processes must be integrated honestly and intelligently while reflective of today’s interdependent global society.

Teachers want effective multicultural education to:

- balance integration and emphasis of concepts, content, and processes by including appropriate and logical multicultural education outcomes with currently adopted academic standards and expectations;

*“The world is a multicultural experience. Classrooms should look and feel like the world.”*

- value the diversity of humanity by demonstrating theories and practices in all books, materials, resources, displays, technology, teaching strategies, learning opportunities, etc., in ways that are obviously discernible, identifiable, and equitable without prejudice or tokenism;

*“I encourage my students to pose critical questions investigating how they know what they know accompanied by what they think and feel about the information. I want them to explore where information comes from, who is making a particular statement, and why a particular statement is made.”*

and

- inform and support holistic teaching and learning that empowers both teachers and learners scholastically and socially fulfilling everyone’s goals to improve academic achievement while developing lifelong learners.

*“Multicultural education can no longer stand alone or be something we do only on special days. These lessons and events tend to separate rather than unite students and learning. I wish we could just start with multicultural education, what I call ‘human education,’ and simply build our curriculum around it. My students must be ready for their future global society.”*

### **3. Create Caring Communities and Solid Citizenry**

The third theme emanating from the survey responses conveyed an emerging and significant insight associated with effective multicultural education. *Teachers want to create caring communities and solid citizenry not only in their own classrooms but scholar citizens equipped with knowledge, skills, and dispositions applicable to their daily living today and as adults of tomorrow.* This theme provoked a healthy discussion related to critical learning theory and appropriate classroom practices connected with prejudice, discrimination, equity, and human rights—locally and globally. Survey responses identified a broad range of examples describing

the ideals and importance of integrating democratic principles, social justice, and cultural competencies (Gallavan, 2002) authentically across the curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Teachers want effective multicultural education to:

- create caring communities and solid citizens by introducing and using the theories and practices of multicultural education as intricate aspects of their learning communities to collaboratively establish and maintain classroom expectations and cooperative etiquette;

*“I have heard that the main reason people leave their jobs rests is due to not getting along with others. If we can establish feelings of multiculturally honest care and concern for one another within our young people’s classrooms, perhaps they will carry these qualities into their adult work worlds.”*

- guide the development and application of democratic practices that promote fair and just classroom management clearly evident in classroom governance (meetings, decision-making, etc.) and operations (rewards, discipline, etc.);

*“All students should feel safe and wanted, not just at school but in their own neighborhoods and social circles. It seems to me that multicultural education is not just about understanding and accepting; our classrooms must model and practice what we want and should be doing in the world around us. We are creating the future, so if we don’t establish these hopes and expectations, who will?”*

and

- connect their classrooms with their neighborhoods and cities through a variety of long-term and relevant social action and service-learning endeavors with learners leading and conducting student-centered projects, not with educators and/or parents orchestrating disconnected, peripheral events.

*“Multicultural education prepares today’s learners as tomorrow’s adults. These are our leaders, teachers, voters, etc. We should all want*

them to be ready for the work, play, and lifestyles they pursue.”

#### 4. Apply Powerful Pedagogical Theories and Practices

This theme was sparked by several strong responses and contentious discussions among the teachers as they reflected upon their pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices in relationship to their multicultural education values and aspirations. *Teachers emphasized that multicultural education is effective pedagogy.* Yet, the respondents in each of the four graduate courses noted how they are challenged in creating caring communities of learners and meeting their learners’ diverse needs to improve academic achievement while implementing programs in compliance with the administrators’ and parents’ expectations. Issues of standards, time, support, materials, resources, access, and opportunities frequently were reported as major concerns teachers want to investigate and resolve collaboratively with administrators, colleagues, and parents.

Teachers want effective multicultural education to:

- support effective pedagogy by enhancing their authority and responsibility while planning their curricula, facilitating their instruction, and assessing student progress further advancing their learners’ scholarship and stewardship;

*“Multicultural education seems like the right thing to do, but I feel like I don’t have enough time, resources, or the knowledge—especially related to my subject area. I need to cover the curriculum quickly; my students may or may not be able to read, write, or understand the content. I want to value them as culturally diverse individuals and develop an inviting classroom environment, but the administrators are not totally invested in helping me. Good teaching and learning should be multicultural in both process and product.”*

- establish a focus for teaching and learning that promotes student-centered approaches employing constructivist and cooperative learning strategies applicable to critical decision-making

and authentic problem-solving processes;

*“My students like it best when I give them a problem and get out of their way. I never cease to be amazed how well they manage and how creative they can be when the learning is for them and about them. I need to do this more often!”*

and

- model strategies germane to examining information based on culturally accurate knowledge for investigating multiple perspectives and ways of knowing while encouraging higher order thinking skills and construction of new knowledge rather than having “the one right answer.”

*“Most teachers could learn about multicultural education by observing today’s young people. They seem to function quite comfortably and successfully in today’s multicultural world; they like probing many different viewpoints and approaches to answering a question or solving a problem.”*

#### 5. Promote Growth, Development, and Transformative Change in both Educators and their Learners

The fifth theme was identified from a collection of survey responses related to transformation. Respondents reported an assortment of concerns focused on growth, development, and change advantageous for teachers, preK-12 learners, families, and the educational system. Many of the respondents revealed that they continue to reconcile their personal cultural characteristics (backgrounds, beliefs, language, and interactions) with their perceptions of expected professional demeanor. They strive to model and mentor their learners to challenge societal attitudes and actions in becoming better citizens. *Confronting stereotyping while ensuring equity (particularly evident in language and interactions) necessitates understanding and using tools of empowerment and change that teachers want for themselves and their learners.*

Teachers want effective multicultural education to:

- promote growth, development, and change in both educators and their

learners by providing teachers with meaningful and pragmatic professional development opportunities exploring multicultural education theories and classrooms practices applicable to today's curriculum, instruction, and assessment contextually appropriate for their specific communities of learners (McIntyre, 2002);

*"I like taking a semester long course in multicultural education much better than a one-hour or half-day inservice at school. This way I can read, write, and think about my practices in-depth over time and truly try to make significant changes."*

- model and reinforce personal cultural conscientiousness expressed through socially just language and democratic actions and evident in all interactions among students, families, and educators both in and out of classrooms with global application and understanding;

*"The more I read and hear about effective multicultural education, the more I realize how much guidance I need to include all children in the learning process."*

and

- organize and promote educational reform influencing educators' knowledge and attitudes, school wide programs, and classroom practices through professional study groups and institution leadership to reinforce their commitment to multicultural education (Paccione, 2000)

*"I see the changes my eighth-grade students start to make as we explore multicultural education topics and issues in my geography class especially when we conduct our community-service projects. I know there is much more that would benefit them if multicultural education were integrated into their other classes. I recognize the changes that I have experienced in myself (and continue to experience); I want these outcomes and benefits for all students and my colleagues, too."*

## SUMMARY

The findings of this research study verify that many preK-12 teachers, particularly in the southwestern United States, are completing multicultural education courses as part of their teacher preparation and graduate education studies, and from these courses they are gaining some important pedagogical concepts. This study confirms that multicultural education has established an important presence in many school districts, schools, and classrooms evident through sundry practices. Yet, the individual classroom teacher ultimately defines effective multicultural education; designs and facilitates culturally diverse curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and provides information and support for both themselves and their preK-12 learners, formally and informally. Teachers want more guidance and assistance as they confront ambiguities and take psychological risks associated with our ever-changing global society (Dee and Henkin, 2002)

Teacher educators in partnership with educational administrators and staff developers can incorporate the findings from this research on effective multicultural education into their work to better prepare new teachers and to support the practicing teachers of today—the educators we want in schools with our preK-12 learners, the citizens of tomorrow.

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