

**Multicultural Art Education**

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**Abstract**

This paper will critically analyze misconceptions regarding multiculturalism. Through expelling misconceptions, I seek to define multiculturalism within educational settings, specifically the art classroom. The reader is provided with evidence and opinions from leading scholars over the past forty years. This paper briefly discusses the evolution of multiculturalism and the importance of a multicultural curriculum in 2021.

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### **Multicultural Art Education**

The core premise of multicultural education is the eradication of discrimination and prejudice against minorities in the American public school system. Since the late 1980s multiculturalism has evolved beyond general education to encompass art education. Opponents of multicultural education, such as Stosky (1992) view this approach to art education “to be more of a political movement than a forum for true educational reform” (Adejumo, 2002, p. 33).

To better understand this complex topic, one must first create a working definition of *culture*. In this context, I will draw upon Macionis (1997), “Culture entails human-constructed environment and behavioral patterns within a defined group or society” (Adejumo, 2002, p. 35). It is important to note, this definition is inapplicable to cultural boundaries dissolved or eradicated through internet avatars, or digital representations of oneself. Within a VR learning environment, the definition of a group can be extended beyond geographical boundaries. Adjumo (2002), writes, “Members of a culture rely on symbols systems to communicate vital ideas and emotions” (p. 35). One could argue with the advent of virtual and augmented realities, symbolic systems become disrupted and inter-cultural exchange occurs, thus eradicating culture-specific symbols, for universally accepted systems, such as Emoji.

### **Why Multiculturalism?**

To gain insight into the past, one must look further back. During the 1960’s and 1970’s new ideas surrounding gender, sexuality, race, and religion developed. Billings (1995) writes, This was a logical outcome of the 1954 Supreme Court decision " Brown vs. the Board of Education", which mandated racial integration in the public schools (p. 23) These movements developed to rectify social inequalities (Adejumo, 2002, p. 33). Haynes (1997) writes, the concept of multicultural education evolved from (these) social and educational movements.

## RUNNING HEAD: Multiculturalism

Issues of desegregation and bilingual education paved the way for greater and just access to education. The effects of desegregation have been gradual and slow, at best. Many communities are still separated and affected by prior segregation laws.

Multiculturalism seeks to challenge the dominance of the Western, white-male cultural tradition. Within this perspective of western culture, it is guilty of “sexism, racism, classism, ageism, elitism, essentialism, homophobia, and ethnocentrism” (Collins & Sandell, 1992, p. 8). Historically, the art education curriculum has not represented a wide gambit of cultures, and ways of being. A traditional curriculum is rooted in the idea of the *old masters* and grounded in predominantly white-male thoughtforms that idealize the white gallery space. This flawed approach to art has resulted in the absurd idea of the *melting pot*.

Smith (1994) writes, The United States was founded during the so-called Age of Enlightenment, and white Americans, in general, have internalized certain enlightenment notions (p.14). Smith further elaborates on this internalization of white Americans by sharing the hesitancy of open discussion by a non-American graduate student, “Open-ended discussions, he informed me, are an expression of our open society” (p. 14). This shows the vast differences among education and cultural systems globally, and how national cultures can influence one’s own beliefs regarding their own free will.

### **Politics and Misconceptions**

One issue of debate is the question, “Who is most qualified to teach the contents of minority cultures?” (Adejumo, 2002, p. 34). Proponents of multicultural art education, such as Banks (1989) argue, representation of minority groups in the art curriculum will have life-enhancing impacts on students, such as improved social and cultural awareness and enhanced ability to make informed decisions in the process of social actions (Adejumo, 2002, p. 34). I can

draw upon my own teaching experience to attest to the importance of a curriculum that reflects the cultures, interests, and traditions of each student. During my fieldwork at Wyandanch High School, I developed a series of projects and lessons that guided students through an exploration of traditional Japanese Suminagashi techniques. This lesson evolved from an exploration of traditional culture, outside the realm of western culture to an exploration of the student's cultural tradition. This acted as an entry point that led to a guided exploration of cultural markings made from natural pigments. Several students explored adding Henna, and the meaning of different marks, along with the cultural significance of mark-making and celebrations.

One major dilemma to multiculturalism is the fact that within any liberation movement, some opt for integration, those who argue for separatism, and those who choose pluralism as the best route to liberation (Collins, 1981).

Elizabeth Delacruz (1995) identifies four main misconceptions about multicultural art education (a) the belief that multicultural education is for victimized minorities, (b) the claim that multicultural education is against the West, (c) predictions that multicultural education will divide the nation, and (d) speculations that multicultural education will pass (p. 57). The first two claims can be dismissed, as expanding the breadth of one's study beyond the immediate culture of the surrounding geographical location can only benefit the student. By irradicating an "us" vs "them" mentality we can come together as one species to better understand our differences and unique similarities. On the third claim, I can't imagine a more divided nation than we are experiencing in 2021, so this critique is invalidated. Delacruz (1995) mentions the ideas of Banks (1993) who believed, "we are deeply divided along racial, gender, economic, religious and class lines" (p. 58). The fourth claim is also invalidated by the fact multiculturalism is still taught and

discussed in academia today, and the ideas of multicultural education are present in the National Visual & Media Arts Standards of 2014.

### **Multicultural Society and Identity**

Through the exploration of culture and cultural objects, one can better understand the people who created the culture. The term cultures encompass actions, ideas, and beliefs that inform how people act and think within our shared reality. Young Imm Kang Song (2009) writes, working with students with a dual cultural identity can be challenging. (p. 19). Challenges arise when students identify with one culture by ethnicity and family but live in a different cultural context. Other ideas of identity arise through non-ethnic identities such as contemporary ideas surrounding gender and sexuality. It is important for art educators to allow students to explore their own identities and to manifest their persona.

Artmaking can act as a bridge to promote exploration of one's own identities within society. Kang Song (2009) writes, art became another language allowing student's realities to take on new meanings. (p. 23). Through the process of artmaking, students can form new connections and create meaningful ideas that encourage meaningful conversations. Conversations surrounding identity can act as a bridge towards creating a more peaceful and positive society.

### **Multicultural Connections**

A contemporary approach to multicultural art education, according to Adjumo (2002), is concerned with promoting cultural pride and equal learning opportunities in the art for all children in the American school system (p. 34). Davenport (2000) further elaborates on the need for multicultural connections, "In the United States, dominant values reproduced in curricula often reflect a culture not shared by an ever-growing number of students" (p. 367). One approach

to multiculturalism is community-based art education. In art education, community-based approaches invite the cultures of the students and the local context into the spotlight (Davenport, 2000, p. 370). Within this approach the cultures and identities of the students are explored through the artmaking, the themes explored and materials used are guided by community interest. Katter (1995) writes, “Our local community is our neighborhood, village, or town –the environs in which we have daily interaction, the community that feeds our classrooms (p.11).

For a non-American, yet western perspective on this issue I look towards, Anna M. Kindler, an Assistant Professor in Vancouver, Canada suggests children should move beyond ethnic roots to develop a cultural identity. Kindler (1994) writes, I suggested that by providing children with a rich, culturally diversified visual environment reflective of the composition of contemporary Canadian society, we may begin to contribute positively to the development of the “multicultural culture” by broadening the base from which young children construct their own cultural heritage (p. 60).

### **Solutions or Possibilities**

To evaluate the effectiveness of a multicultural curriculum teachers can evaluate the knowledge of the students, and the quality of the work produced through processes and styles that evoke minority ideals, ideas, and themes. Adejumo (2002) writes, “The current approach should be reviewed to focus on the benefits of exposing all students to a diverse range of artworks for the purpose of enriching their knowledge of art on a global scale (p. 36). This can be accomplished far more successfully through connecting students with websites and online resources that allow students to see the creation process and learn about site-specific installations of contemporary artists. Cahan and Kocur (1994) write, “Yet within the movement for multicultural education, curriculum materials that address contemporary art are virtually absent.

## RUNNING HEAD: Multiculturalism

Most multicultural art texts, slide sets, and reproductions include art made “long ago” or “Far away” (p. 26). One solution to this information divide before the widespread acceptance and use of Web 2.0, was to create site-specific installations “that recognize the sacredness of a place, resonating with its history and rechoreographing history in the African Diaspora with an impulse towards freedom” (Cahan and Kocur, 1994, p. 27). With modern technology: Web 2.0, wireless internet devices, and social media connections between geographically separate communities can be eradicated. Students can connect with Art through *Zoom Artist Talks, Virtual Tours, and Images and Video of Artists working*, and the final artwork.

Stinespring (1996) notes the importance of moving beyond *first-stage* multiculturalism, “while first stage scholarship includes the previously excluded, those admitted must endure comparison in terms of criteria upon which the previously admitted had been recognized” (p. 50). Stinespring (1996) continues, “second-stage scholarship can serve to define the direction art curricula need to develop” (p. 50). In other words, once a multicultural classroom represents the culture of the students, culturalism can encompass multiple perspectives beyond cultural identities and toward understanding identities.

### **Conclusion**

Multiculturalism is a reaction to the opposition of the “melting pot” theory, or the rise of monocultural ideas that seek to eradicate boundaries between distinct cultures. To best combat the most dangerous misconceptions regarding multiculturalism, the art educator can first find the uniqueness of each individual and create a curriculum that allows for exploration across cultures. The study of artists and activists should not reflect the culture of the individual alone, but rather encompass the interests beyond a cultural analysis. Through this approach the study of non-



## RUNNING HEAD: Multiculturalism

western culture is not limited by the color of one's skin, the interest and fascination of a culture can be formed through the intellect of one's mind.

Boundaries between cultures can be formed by looking at similarities in traditions, and by creating a curriculum that reflects human culture regardless of preconceived notions, or geographic circumstances. The second stage multiculturalism seeks to further promote a multitude of perspectives and identities. The most groundbreaking action an art educator can take is to create a space that allows for different cultures and traditions to be expressed and valued, a curriculum that explicitly allows for representation of all.

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RUNNING HEAD: Multiculturalism

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