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# Considering Multicultural Art Education

**S**everal art educators and educators in general have written extensively about the merits of a culturally inclusive curriculum that would represent the ways-of-life of disenfranchised minorities in U.S. classrooms (Grant & Sleeter, 1992; Banks, 1989; Chalmers, 1996). This approach to the school art curriculum is widely known as multicultural art education (Stuhr, Petrovich-Mwaniki, & Wasson, 1992; Grant & Sleeter, 1992). But what are the benefits of multicultural art education, and how can we maximize such advantages?

**BY CHRISTOPHER O. ADEJUMO**

For art educators to understand and maximize the benefits of multicultural art education, we must engage in a critical and honest dialogue about its potentials and limitations. This article examines the purpose, functions, and implications of multicultural art education through a critical review and analysis of the concept, which had its genesis in general education as seen in the work of James Banks (1989). Eradicating discrimination and prejudice against minorities in U.S. public schools has been the core of the premise for multicultural education. However, some of its opponents consider multicultural education to be more of a political movement than a forum for true educational reform (Stotsky, 1992). Does the perception of multicultural education as a trendy euphemism or political cause undermine its pedagogical values? This question and related issues are addressed here.

## **Historical Overview**

Most of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States were marked by insurgent social concepts espoused by feminist and Civil Rights movements. These movements were developed for the purpose of rectifying social inequalities. One of the most divisive and heatedly contested issues during this period was "equal access" to education. The Civil Rights movements advocated school desegregation and bilingual education as initiatives for equal access to educational opportunities. The concept of multicultural education evolved from these social and educational movements (Haynes, 1997).

Despite its broad-based popularity among advocates of educational reform through curriculum diversification, the effectiveness of multicultural education as pedagogical approach has been controversial. Opponents of multicultural education criticized it for having ambiguous

objectives, poorly defined process of application, and speculative results (Stotsky, 1992). Conflicting views about multicultural education undermine its core import, which is to expand students' understanding of the history and cultural traditions of minority groups in the United States. Informed knowledge about these cultures is expected to generate better appreciation and tolerance of difference. Ultimately, it is assumed that all students would be treated with equal dignity and respect in the school environment, due to the recognition of cultural diversity as a source of cultural enlightenment and not a condition for discrimination (Petrovich-Mwaniki, 1997). For this reason, several academic disciplines have explored multicultural education. One such discipline is art education.

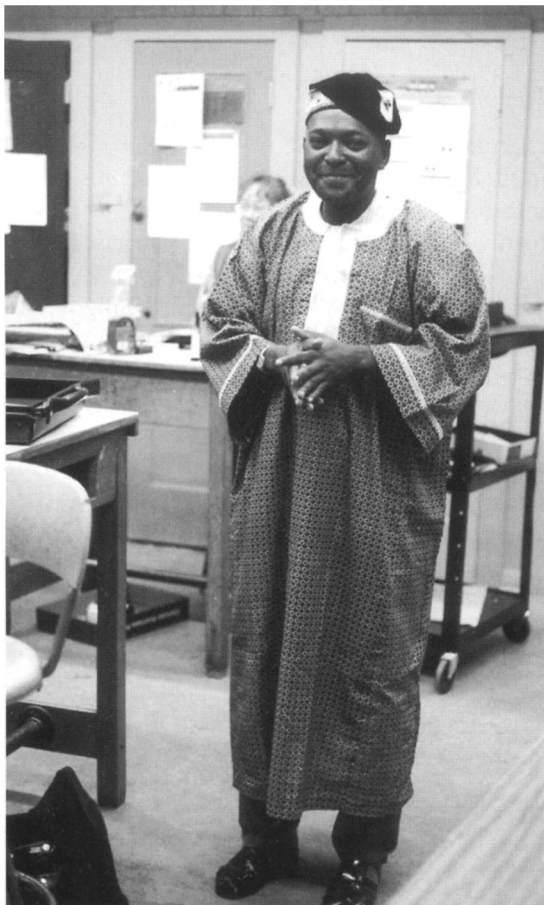
### **Contemporary Views on Multicultural Art Education**

The current approach to multicultural art education is concerned with promoting cultural pride and equal learning opportunities in art for all children in U.S. schools through a diversified art curriculum. However, this approach to the art curriculum continues to be controversial among art educators. Based on a review of art education literature, art educators engaged in multicultural art education discourse have debated the

**The question of who is most qualified to teach the contents of minority cultures is especially problematic because all cultures have implicit and explicit components... Unless one actively participates in a culture, it will be difficult to impart accurate knowledge about the implicit aspects of the culture.**

pragmatic values of a culturally diverse art curriculum and the challenges of implementing such curriculum. Its proponents perceive multicultural art education as an instrument of school and social reform. For example, Stuhr (1994) and Daniel (1990) believe that representing the cultures 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 action (Banks, 1989). Some advocates have gone beyond theoretical discourse to highlight examples of successful multicultural art education experiences (Cho, 1998) and make practical suggestions on how to implement multicultural art education in the school curriculum (Daniel & Daniel, 1979).

**In a more complex approach**, some proponents of multicultural art education espouse its virtues while simultaneously pointing out its shortcomings or challenges. For example, Chalmers (1996), who is an influential advocate of multicultural art education, stated that the art curriculum in North American schools must address the needs of students from minority cultures. In the same breath, he expressed concerns about the complexity of processes involved in the implementation of suggested approaches. Along the same line of thought, Davenport (2000) acknowledged that multicultural art education would provide students with exposure to diverse cultural groups, but at the same time, observed that art educators often confuse the concept of multicultural education with global education, thereby becoming incompetent at both. Davenport suggested "intercultural art education" (p. 371) as a less problematic alternative, in that it will address cultural, global, and community contexts in arts appreciation. Similarly, Anderson (1996) posits that the National Standards for Arts Education should reflect the interests of students from minority cultures, although "not ... to the exclusion of the Western canon—but in an integrated sense" (p. 56). Anderson reminded us that "From a (multi)cultural point of view, certainly these Standards could be better. But they could be worse too" (p. 59). In a slightly different view, Stout (1997) agrees that the art curriculum should be integrated with diverse cultural contents, but suggested that the process should emphasize the acquisition of critical thinking skills as opposed to social equality as demanded by social reconstructionist views. Variance in suggested goals and methods of curriculum implementation as



Above: Visiting art educator to a secondary art class demonstrates a traditional African method of producing multiple prints from a single block. Courtesy of Lanier Bayliss.

Left: Visiting educator modeling African textile and clothing design in a secondary art class. Courtesy of Lanier Bayliss.

discussed here have continued to expand the boundaries of discourse on multicultural art education.

Art educators who favor autonomy of art from social issues have been critical of emphasizing pluralism in the art curriculum (Smith, 1992). Due to the political nature of the issues that led to the introduction of multicultural education, its acceptance as a viable instructional approach has largely depended on which side of the political argument one is sympathetic towards. Art educators must avoid the danger of polarizing the various schools of thought on multicultural art education as based on White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture versus ethnic or minority cultural interests. Divergent views on the concept are more reflective of philosophical distinctions between formalistic (Smith, 1992) and pluralistic positions (Desai, 2000) in art appreciation. As a result of polarized views on the concept of multicultural education, art educators may have been distracted from a thorough investigation of the merits of a culturally diversified art curriculum. A good place to start such investigation is a clear understanding of the concept of multicultural education and problems of its application.

## Concept and Problems of Application

To understand the complexity of the concept of multicultural education, it is important to define "culture." A clear understanding of culture as a concept will enhance one's ability to relate to it in plural terms. Culture entails human constructed environment and behavioral patterns within a defined group or society (Macionis, 1997). Members of a culture rely on symbols to communicate vital ideas and emotions. These symbol systems are structured under the categories of material culture (architecture and clothing for example) and non-material culture (such as habits and beliefs). From an ethnographic perspective, culture entails a complex range of human traits, such as customs, norms, morals, and values. The established ways-of-life within a culture are usually transferable from one generation to another.

Many educators agree that the representation of minority cultures in the school curriculum will enhance the feeling of pride and positive self worth in students from those cultures (Grant & Sleeter, 1992; Banks, 1989). However, educators have raised questions about which of these diverse cultural heritages should be integrated into the curriculum. Who is most qualified to

**...teachers may be able to assess students on knowledge acquired on art produced by minority cultures, but it would be difficult to measure the amount of respect that such knowledge might have generated for students from minority cultures.**

teach the contents of these cultural heritages? (Grant & Sleeter, 1992), and how will the integration of these cultures into the curriculum generate respect for students from minority cultures? Because several countries around the world are represented in America's minority groups, it is not feasible to include all of these diverse cultures in the curriculum. As a result, some minority cultures will be left out. Such omissions would be antithetical to the primary goal of multiculturalism. The question of who is most qualified to teach the contents of minority cultures is especially problematic because all cultures have implicit and explicit components. The implicit aspects of a culture entails unspoken and non-obvious assumptions and behaviors, while the explicit components consist of observable patterns. Unless one actively participates in a culture, it will be difficult to impart accurate knowledge about the implicit aspects of the culture.

**Another problem of multicultural education** is that its objective of imparting cultural appreciation may be difficult to evaluate. As culture essentially entails lived experience, it is impossible to teach the entire content of a culture to students for full appreciation of its internal workings and aspirations (Desai, 2000). Therefore, the respect that multicultural education is expected to generate for minority students may be unachievable under the current approach.

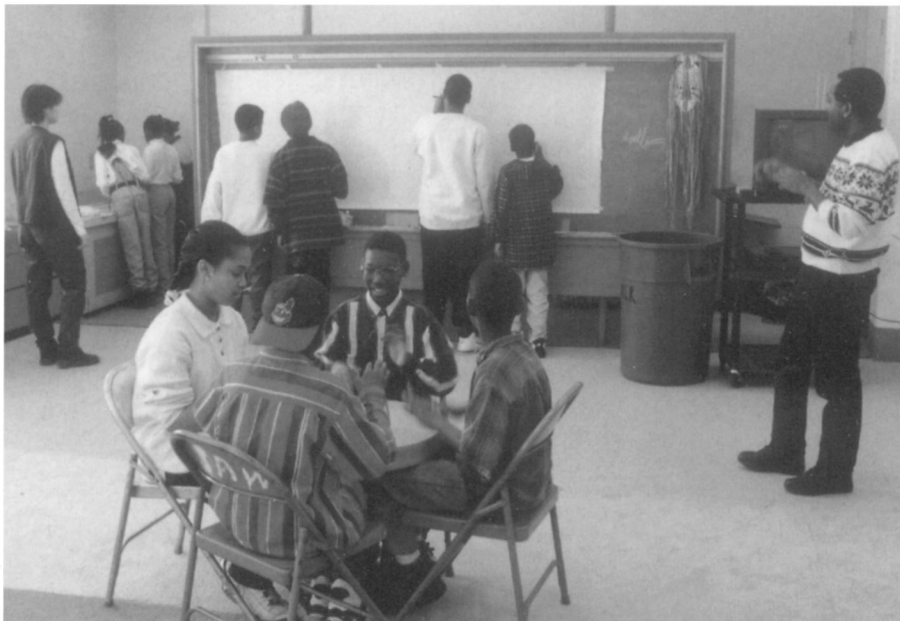
For recent immigrants in the United States, memory of lived experience may influence their continued affin-

ity for cultural heritage (Gans, 1979). The complexity of helping students attain cultural pride through exposure to their cultural heritage is complicated by the fact that the majority of minority students in U.S. public schools are not children of recent immigrants (Gans, 1979). This calls for a clearer definition of the notion of "cultural heritage." For example, in view of the fact that African-American and African cultures are cognate cultures, should one define the cultural heritage of an African-American student as including the African-American experience and all the cultures of Africa? Assuming that this is so, how would an educator know which aspect of such diverse cultural heritage to explore for the purpose of generating respect and cultural pride for the African-American student? These questions are not without answers, and the tasks involved in their implementation are not unachievable. However, a critical review of the processes involved in the implementation of a truly multicultural approach to pedagogy may prove to be overwhelming as suggested by Chalmers (1996).

### **Analysis and Suggestions**

On the challenges of representing works of art from diverse cultures without profound knowledge of the contexts of their production, Stuhr (1999) suggested that "...looking to other disciplines might inform us of the options for understanding the difficult issues that multicultural education raises" (p. 188). Eisner (1998) cautioned that an interdisciplinary approach to art education may result in the undermining of the distinct contributions of the visual arts to children's education. Desai (2000) posits that all representations are biased, and therefore: "All representations in multiculturalism are positioned in relation to unequal power dynamic... since we all speak from a particular mediated location and position, it is impossible to represent a culture authentically" (p. 117). However, she maintained that contextual information "...will enrich student discourse about artwork and encourage their appreciation of the social, cultural, economic and political environments in which art is situated" (p. 121). Although several art educators have offered broad-based suggestions on the problem of accurate representation of non-Western art in the curriculum, they have not provided any specific guidelines for ameliorating the problem.

On the evaluation of the outcomes of multicultural art education, teachers may be able to assess students on knowledge acquired on art produced by minority cultures, but it would be difficult to measure the amount



Young participants in a weekend art program engaged in cross-cultural art activities. Photographs by Christopher Adejumo.

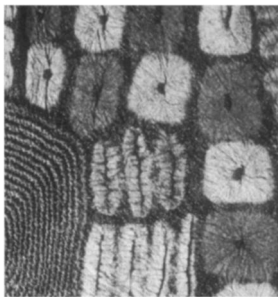


of respect that such knowledge might have generated for students from minority cultures. This seems to indicate the need to rethink the objectives of multicultural art education. Eisner (1994) pointed out that "...one of the aims of art education is to enable all our students to gain meaningful access to what the peoples of all cultures have created" (p. 191). In fact, emphasis on the expansion of art knowledge to include images from non-Western cultures as noted by Eisner (1994), may be a more desirable and measurable goal for multicultural art education.

**The current approach should be reviewed to** focus on the benefits of exposing all students to a diverse range of art works for the purpose of enriching their knowledge of art on a global scale. To develop true appreciation for minority cultures and their art, and respect for students from those cultures, the target group may have to be exposed to the cultures and their art through direct and extensive interaction. This could be done through student-exchange programs (which may be local, national, or international) and peer or adult mentors (sharing of cultural knowledge with an individual or a group over an appreciable period of time). In multicultural art education, Artists-in-Schools programs could be designed to facilitate extended visits by experts in certain cultural or traditional art forms. Teachers may also invite parents to share their knowledge of specific cultures, especially about art, in their children's classrooms. Although these suggestions might be helpful in integrating art works from diverse cultures, they do not provide answers to the problems of which cultures to include or how to assess knowledge acquired.

It is expected that students will find knowledge acquired about the art works of various minority cultures useful in their interaction with U.S. citizens from those cultures. Through these experiences, students will appreciate the contributions of diverse cultures to the artistic traditions of the United States and the world at

large. Respect for individuals and cultures will be based on meritocracy and potential to contribute positively to society. The suggested approach is expected to facilitate positive interaction between students from various cultures, encouraging open



and honest dialogues among them. This atmosphere of exploration and cooperation has the potential to promote better cross-cultural relations in the schools and ultimately in society. When students have positive experiences of other cultures in school, they are likely to share what they learned with members of their own culture. Ultimately, demonstration of appreciation and respect for minority students and their cultures will be generated by the experiences, insights, and testimonies of those who made honest efforts to understand the cultures.

To realize the benefits of the approach to multicultural art education suggested here, art educators must challenge themselves to seek deeper understanding about how to provide every student with a culturally and socially relevant experience in visual art. This goal could be achieved by assisting students with transfer of cultural knowledge acquired in society to the classroom and vice versa.

## Conclusion

Multicultural art education has emphasized the need to diversify the art curriculum to include contents from minority cultures as a means of providing equal learning opportunities in art and respect for students from such cultures. However, the effectiveness of multicultural art education in meeting these objectives remains questionable. Art educators need to unite in finding ways to maximize the contribution of art education to the social and cultural development of all children.

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