
A Review of *Rethinking Multicultural Education***Amy E. Delaney**

According to educator Enid Lee, “If you don’t take multicultural education or anti-racist education seriously, you are actually promoting a monocultural or racist education. There is no neutral ground on this issue” (as cited in Au, 2009, p. 10). The book *Rethinking Multicultural Education* begins with this challenge to educators. The articles in this collection of work, edited by Wayne Au of Rethinking Schools, encourage teachers to look beyond the bias often found in curriculum and do more than simply “celebrate” diversity with food and festivals. Instead, educators should guide their students in exploring and researching meaningful topics of social justice. The book makes a strong argument for a type of multicultural education that is rigorous, student-centered, inter-disciplinary, and promotes critical thinking about topics of oppression and justice in our Eurocentric classrooms.

The articles in *Rethinking Multicultural Education* are grouped into four sections. The first section describes the problem with the current surface level, “celebration” approach to multicultural education. The authors in this section tackle difficult topics such as the achievement gap, defining the term “race,” and cultural bias in standardized testing. This chapter, more than any, grabs the attention of the reader with an acute focus on the disparities facing minority cultures today. The second section of the book explores the use of language to give students a voice against oppression and to validate the home languages of students. Topics in this section include the linguistic study of Ebonics, the importance of bilingual education, and strategies for encouraging Asian American students to use their voice in the classroom. Two poignant prose essays are included in this section titled “And Then I Went to School” and “My

Mother's Spanish." Both are written by authors who, at a young age, had to negotiate life between two different cultures. The third section of *Rethinking Multicultural Education* provides lesson ideas and strategies for dealing with difficult global issues such as immigration, globalization, and even arranged marriages. The fourth section of the book addresses many domestic issues affecting U.S. classrooms such as race relations, the beauty of skin color, combatting racial stereotypes, using math to explore data on racial issues, and bias in classroom resources.

Though the book is a collection of lesson plans, essays, research, and interviews, which may seem disjointed, *Rethinking Multicultural Education* succeeds in weaving common threads throughout the material. There are three components of multicultural education that we as educators can learn from this book. First, multicultural education should explore deep, life-changing and world-changing issues such as social justice, oppression, racism, slavery, and imperialism. Hilliard writes, "I believe that we must know the history, purposes, consequences, and structure of the racial paradigm. And we must dismantle that evil paradigm brick by brick. Then it is our obligation to go about the process of healing ourselves" (as cited in Au, 2009, p. 28). Hilliard also quotes Dr. John Henrik Clark, "It is impossible to continue to oppress a consciously historical people" (as cited in Au, 2009, p. 24). Multicultural education must dig deeper into the issues that often divide us in order to empower our students to improve them.

Second, multicultural education should be student-centered and rigorous. Sokolower writes about the difference between a class who requested a unit on Africa and the next year's class who was taught the unit without request. After reflecting on the lack of passion from the second year's class she writes, "Being receptive to student need and allowing space for students

to think about and express what they want to learn is critical to education as a liberating experience, as a component of social justice” (as cited in Au, 2009, p. 360). In addition to being student-driven, multicultural education should be rigorous and promote critical thinking and critical evaluation of texts. Peterson writes about how he encourages his students to be “textbook detectives” and develop a “healthy skepticism” (as cited in Au, 2009, p. 303) as they evaluate bias in their books. Most of the lessons described in the book involve students researching, completing various types of writing assignments, and creating projects to share their new knowledge. True learning occurs when curriculum is student-focused and when academic expectations for students are high.

Third, multicultural education is for all age groups and should be interdisciplinary. Many of the articles in the book come from high school teachers, but several stories such as “Brown Kids Can’t Be in Our Club” by Tenorio, “What Color is Beautiful?” by Segura-Mora, and “Welcoming Kalenna” by Negri-Pool offer inspiring ideas for helping early childhood and elementary students explore the topics of skin color and race through art, movement, and song. Several stories discuss how multicultural lessons became interdisciplinary units. Speaking about using math during a multicultural lesson, Peterson writes, “Knowing how to figure out things like averages and percentages, being able to use mathematical data in arguments, and making clear graphs became more than just preparation for next year’s math class, but a means by which one can help figure out and change the world” (as cited in Au, 2009, p. 367). *Rethinking Multicultural Education* unifies these three themes with successful coherence.

Rethinking Multicultural Education has several strengths as a book. It calls attention to an important and often neglected topic in U.S. education. Teacher education programs seem to

provide evidence of the negligence toward multicultural education. Wayne Au expresses his frustration about working daily with pre-service teachers who know little about the students they are teaching (p. 254). In fact, this book may be very eye-opening for the European American teacher who does not perceive there is a problem, nor does she know what to do about it in the classroom. Not only does the book call attention to an important component of education, it does so with great honesty. The book paints a clear picture of the problem, and does not give teachers an easy way around addressing the issue. The authors of the book are not afraid to tackle controversial issues such as the true story of Christopher Columbus, the history of Eugenics, and even arranged marriages among students. Many of the teacher-authors write honest reflections about what worked in their lessons and what they would change in the future. They describe the extensive background research they did and how they found materials for the multicultural lessons they taught. The honesty, courage, and creativity of the real teachers in this book are refreshing.

Rethinking Multicultural Education defines the current problem with many multicultural lessons and provides real-life solutions. One weakness of the book, however, is the first section of articles. This opening section offers a harsh, pointed critique toward current educational practices and may put many teachers on the defensive. Because the opening chapters criticize Eurocentric educational practices from the perspective of the African American, the reader mistakenly gets the impression that the book will only deal with African American issues. It would be wise for the editors to include multiple perspectives in this opening section so that readers get a sense of the variety of cultures represented by both the rest of the book and in U.S. classrooms today. There is no doubt that the editor and contributors wanted to capture the attention of the reader and point out the magnitude of the problem from the very beginning of the

book, but the harshness of the opening chapters may cause some to stop reading the book and miss the important material relayed in subsequent sections.

I am one of those readers who had a hard time with the first section of the book. It made me feel guilty and made me want to defend my country and the efforts of many teachers like me who strive to educate *all* students in the classroom every day. I worried at the beginning that the book would only offer complaints and no solutions. I am glad, however, that I kept reading. I found a wealth of solutions, ideas, and perspectives. I quickly became a convert and became engrossed in the material. I found myself constantly reflecting on how I can incorporate multicultural lessons in my classroom during this upcoming school year. I am currently in a more diverse school than I have ever taught in before, and I feel it is critical that I use information from this book to strengthen my teaching. My school, like many, faces the challenges of the achievement gap, racial stereotypes, and behavior issues that result from students trying to negotiate the differences between home and school culture. I know many educators across the United States are in a similar position as I and could benefit from the perspectives and ideas in this book.

With its variety of topics, age levels, and cultural perspectives, *Rethinking Multicultural Education* provides a broad look at the topic of multiculturalism, but it also succeeds in focusing our attention on a few critical points: multicultural education must critically explore deep issues of social injustice; multicultural study must be rigorous; it must be student-centered; and it should be taught to all grade levels in an interdisciplinary approach. If we do not do this, our future will be more of the oppressive status quo. Wayne Au expresses his frustration with the current state of multicultural education. “Every institution I’ve ever worked in has been resistant

to multicultural education in some way, shape, or form, and I'm tired of having to justify it, tired of having to prove its worth. As a person of color I take offense at the idea that my history, my perspective on the world as an individual and a representative member of a community does not matter" (p. 254). As educators, we must make sure that *all* of our students and their unique backgrounds *matter* to us.

References

Au, W. (Ed.). (2009). *Rethinking multicultural education: Teaching for racial and cultural justice*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, Ltd.



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