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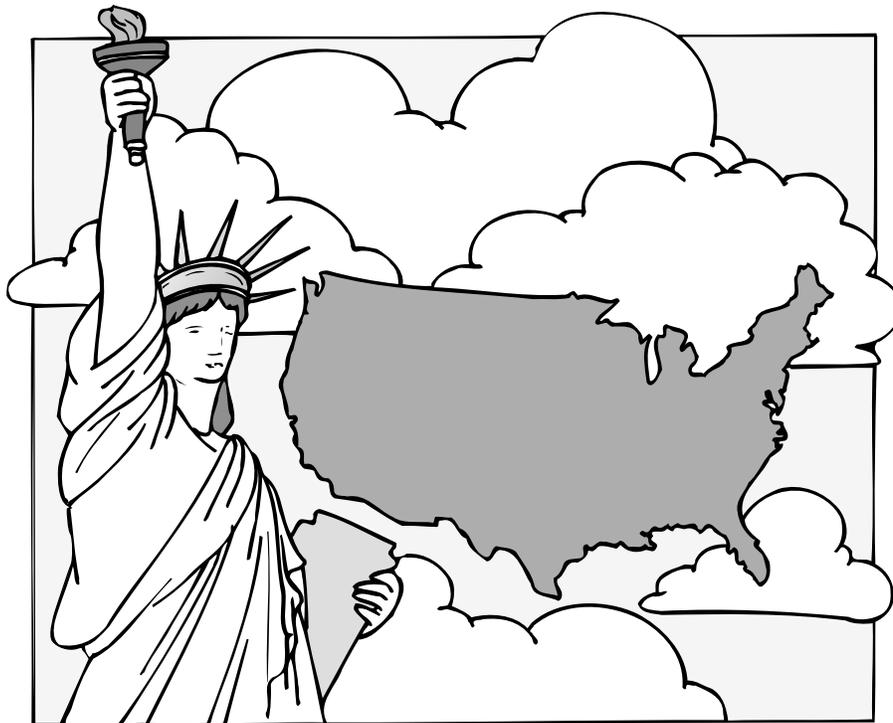
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UNDERSTANDING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

*I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible;
I would have each one be very careful to find out and preserve his own way.*

—Henry David Thoreau

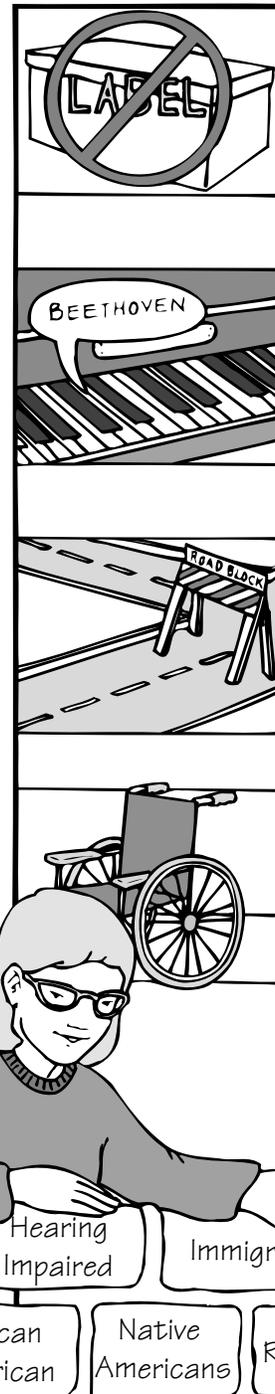
MELTING POT VS. TOSSED SALAD



What exactly is multicultural education? And what exactly is multicultural education for? Is it to help ensure that ethnic groups are to remain intact with their distinctive ways of knowing and behaving? Or is it to mix or dilute all cultural groups until they fit into the mainstream? Multicultural education is an effort to facilitate and enhance global interconnectedness. But there are differing opinions as to how that should be accomplished.

Basically, there are two modes of thought concerning multicultural education: (1) assimilationism and (2) cultural pluralism.

Education and the prevailing attitude in our country has traditionally been assimilationist. *Assimilationism* means that diverse cultures simply melt together into the dominant culture. Advocates of this way of thinking believe that this “melting” leads to better relationships among ethnic groups. This way of thinking also enables the dominant or mainstream culture to select and adopt significant diverse cultural accomplishments to highlight or celebrate. When using this approach, teachers would attempt to create activities to help outsiders melt into the pot of mainstream America. In the process of doing this however, divergent cultures leave behind a part of their identity and heritage.



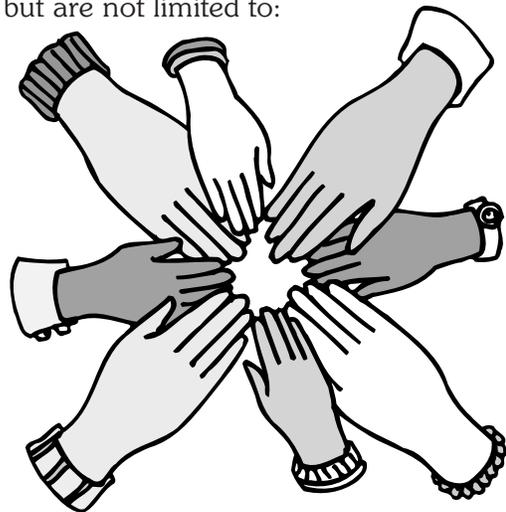


On the other hand, advocates of cultural pluralism believe that having one set cultural code, belief or moral system amounts in essence to the subjugation of diverse cultural groups. Cultural pluralists believe that multicultural education should develop a tolerance, or going even further, an acceptance and appreciation for the values of diverse cultural understandings, beliefs, customs and traditions. Cultural pluralism is not separatism, rather it includes a sharing and mixing of different cultures that constitute the shared mainstream American culture while also supporting cultural groups as they enjoy and continue to develop distinctive group cultures. Cultural pluralists believe that divergent groups should not have to give up their identity, sense of solidarity or beliefs and traditions to be accepted as American and to participate fully in American society. Cultural pluralism essentially means that there is no one best way to be American, and equality for the individual must also mean equality for the cultural group to which that individual belongs. When using the pluralist approach, teachers learn with their students in an effort to construct meaning to create a classroom environment that empowers rather than melts down.

WHAT GROUPS OF PEOPLE ARE INCLUDED IN MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION?

Typically, many educators have commonly misconceived that multicultural education concerns only minorities and persons of color, but multicultural education involves many more groups than just these two. Inclusive and effective multicultural education programs and materials also embrace those groups whose members suffer social, legal or economic discrimination. Therefore, in addition to culture, ethnicity and race, there are many special needs and concern groups that also come under the guardianship of multicultural education. These groups include but are not limited to:

- Abused or abandoned children
- AIDS sufferers
- The homeless
- People from different social classes
- People who practice various religions
- People with differing sexual orientations
- Physically or mentally challenged people
- Senior citizens
- Teens
- Women



WAYS OF TEACHING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION



A major theorist in multicultural education, James Banks, from the University of Washington has outlined four ways or approaches to implement multicultural education in the classroom: The contributory, additive, transformative and social action approaches. Let's take a look at the characteristics of these four approaches.



ACKNOWLEDGING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF OTHERS

When incorporating the contributory approach, the teacher's job is to simply recognize and highlight the contributions and offerings of various heroes and holidays from diverse cultural groups. This means that the curriculum and your units remain basically unchanged, but you might include a side activity that brings awareness of the contributions of an individual or holiday from a culture outside the mainstream.

ADDING A ANOTHER CULTURE FOR A DAY

With the additive approach, the curriculum remains structurally unchanged, but rather than also leaving the lessons or units the same, the teacher would now add on special multicultural units dealing with content, concepts, themes and perspectives of various cultures. Topics like the Women's Rights Movement, African Americans in the West and Famous Americans with Disabilities would be included. This approach is considered to be better than the contributory approach, but it still relegates diverse cultural groups to the periphery of the curriculum. The cultural groups continue to stand on the shore of the mainstream. In our teacher resource guide, *Learning About Cultures*, we provided an abundance of activities from various cultures that facilitate both contributory and additive approaches.

