Multiculturalism and Art Education: Myths, Misconceptions, Misdirections

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Multicultural art education theory and practice has been the subject of much discussion, debate, and curricular innovation in the past decade. Interest in expanding the content of art curricula to include diverse aesthetic and artistic perspectives has gained some acceptance among teachers and academics, and a variety of educational approaches have emerged. Yet educational practice is confounded by misconceptions or myths, as Banks (1993) calls them, about multiculturalism. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the manner in which myths about multiculturalism have permeated thinking in art education, to discuss alternatives to these myths, and to reinforce the democratic principles upon which multiculturalism is based: equity, diversity, and social justice.

MYTHS ABOUT MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

With any effort to reform social practices and challenge established ways of thinking about human endeavors, there occurs a predictable, reactionary backlash. In his recent work, James Banks (1993) discusses the backlash against multiculturalism, identifying and examining four myths, or misconceptions, about multicultural education. These misconceptions include: (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. According to Banks (1993), these misconceptions are the result of lack of understanding, fear, hidden racism, and an unwillingness to share (which, for Banks, means giving up) privilege and power. Banks describes each of these misconceptions in greater detail, and indicates why these misconceptions are wrong. In doing so, Banks also explains and clarifies what multicultural education is.

Banks' observations about the backlash against multicultural education are useful to art educators in considering similar concerns in art education theory and practice. Misconceptions about both multicultural education and multicultural art education pervade the literature, the conference halls, and the classrooms. Some of these misconceptions about multicultural art education theory parallel those mentioned by Banks. Others are unique to our field. Each of the myths identified by Banks, along with misconceptions about multiculturalism that are unique to art education, is discussed in the following paragraphs.

1. Multiculturalism is for the "Others." According to Banks, teachers and critics who feel that they do not need to include the diverse perspectives and contributions of individuals and groups who make up this country, because their own classrooms are mostly white, are
mistaken. Banks argues that multicultural education is for everyone. It is not about “them,” it is about “us,” all of us, how we interrelate, and how our fates are intimately tied together.

The corollary in art education to this first myth identified by Banks is that multicultural art education is for minority and ethnic school populations. Art educators who feel that multicultural art education is about and for non-white school populations are mistaken. Multicultural art education is about and for all students, for us, as Banks would claim. Multicultural art education is built on the premise that the United States is informed by and made stronger by its diversity of customs, artistic practices, aesthetic design systems, social functions, and beliefs, sacred and secular, that are embodied in the symbolic and artistic expressions of the people who make up the nation (Bersson, 1987; Blandy & Congdon, 1987).

2. Multicultural education is against the West. Banks believes that this misconception rests on two incorrect assumptions. The first is that blacks and Hispanics are not “the West.” Asking, “Who is the West?,” Banks makes the point that the very notion of multicultural education is based on Western ideals of democracy and equality.

The second incorrect assumption is that black history and literature is “taking over the classroom.” Banks notes critics’ claims that multiculturalists are seeking to displace the curriculum with “Afro-centric” views. Banks points out that Western classics have not been dropped or displaced in public schools; at best, some literature anthologies now include a few works by women and writers of color. Banks suggests that the conception of “takeover” is being promulgated due to ignorance and racist fears.

For Banks, multicultural education is about truth, a more authentic truth about the many contributions and stories of the people who make up America. These stories and contributions have been left out of the history books and literature anthologies until recent times. Everyone needs to know the reconstructed histories of this country in order to have a more realistic picture of how this country developed.

This second myth identified by Banks has two related corollaries in art education: Multicultural art education is against Western art and Multicultural art education is against the notion of excellence. The belief that multicultural art education seeks to displace Western art in the curriculum is unfounded and unsupported in the literature on multicultural art education. Multicultural art education seeks to broaden, not narrow, the art curriculum to include more diverse aesthetic and artistic traditions and conventions.

The second corollary, that multicultural art education is against the notion of excellence, standards, or the study of exemplary works of art is also not supported in the literature. This claim incorrectly equates pluralism with nihilism (Hart, 1991). The criterion of excellence is central to multicultural art education. The notion of excellence suggests that certain cultural beliefs, practices, and products are more significant or worthy than others. What multicultural art education teaches is that there is no single universal aesthetic (Hamblen, 1991; Hart, 1991) or artistic definition of excellence beyond the recognition that all cultures define their ideals according to their own stringent criteria; that all cultures sanctify those activities that embody those ideals; that different cultures may have varying ideals; and that the imposition of one single standard on all art is incorrect, misleading, and oppressive.

3. Multicultural education will divide the nation. According to Banks, this misconception assumes that “we are united.” He believes that, instead, we are deeply divided along racial, gender, economic, religious, and class lines. Contrary to the misconception that multicultural education will balkanize the nation, multicultural education is about uniting a deeply divided nation. In this connection, Banks makes the point that multiculturalism is itself a Western conception, based on the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Banks further argues that with regard to the notion of “e pluribus unum,” the concept of unum is a constructed, and unauthentic unum, based on a white anglo-saxon protestant hegemonic ideal that never
existed. The “unum” Banks favors is one based on the idea of all people participating in a process of negotiation, debate, and power sharing. For Banks, power sharing means the investment of money, and a sharing of economic privileges.

Critics in our field who suggest that notions of multicultural art education and cultural pluralism may balkanize the nation by artificially sub-dividing and isolating cultures on the basis of ethnicity (Hernandez, 1993; Marantz, 1993), or divide and divert the field of art education from its unified mission (Feinstein, 1989) fail to recognize, as Banks observes, that our nation is already deeply segregated ethnically, racially, and by gender and class. They fail to acknowledge the fact that educational opportunities, incentives, and outcomes are not equally available to all students.

Multicultural art education seeks to unite and address those deep divisions by teaching children and teachers about the lives and concerns of the people who make up this nation (Bersson, 1987). This is done by studying their art as extensions of their lives, both formally and contextually, in terms of shared and unique meanings and purposes.

4. Multiculturalism will pass, we’ll wait this one out. Banks argues that multicultural education is not a fad, it is a lifetime process. For Banks, multicultural education is education for freedom, needed as much by the minority as it is by minorities.

Multicultural education teaches children to understand and affirm their own identities and to reach beyond their own cultural borders. Its goals are to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good, and to teach children to participate in civic action to make the nation more democratic and free (Banks, 1993).

Multicultural education, for Banks, teaches children and teachers to know, to care, and to act responsibly on behalf of a common larger culture.

Those who believe (or hope) that multicultural art education will just go away fail to recognize that multiculturalism is a movement that is three decades in the making, with roots that were firmly established in the early part of this century. The democratic ideals that became part of the law of the land when this nation first defined itself continue to manifest themselves in the new voices of emerging scholars, intellectuals, writers, musicians, artists, and educators from previously disenfranchised cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, including the powerful and persuasive voices of feminists (Banks, 1993). For defenders of the status quo, Pandora’s box has been opened. For everyone else, robust rational dissent and vigorous reconceptualization are fueled by the taste of intellectual freedom and the pedagogy of emancipation.

5. Multicultural art education means teaching about the art and artifacts of all cultures everywhere. Some individuals take multicultural education to mean “teach all cultures everywhere.” Issues regarding content selection, the familiar breadth-versus-depth debate, have always plagued art education. These issues are made more pronounced by the inclusion of diverse artistic traditions and innovations. The mandate for diversity or pluralism challenges educators to make new decisions about what to include and what to exclude in an already crowded curriculum. We simply can’t teach everything, and we certainly can’t teach it in depth. But such issues are not a reason to ignore diverse artistic and cultural traditions. Rather, they are an opportunity to re-assess what we believe art is, what it means and stands for, which art is good, and what art is good for, for children and for adults, and to make our selections on the basis of these decisions.

A related misconception about multicultural art education is that multicultural art education means teaching the same things, but with more diverse examples of art. Adding a unit or using more diverse examples of art is not multicultural art education. Multicultural art education is a reconceptualization of the nature of art itself and our manner of interacting with it. Appropriate models and guidelines have been developed in recent years to guide art educators in this task (Ambush, 1993; Collins & Sandell, 1992; Spruill-Flemming, 1988; Spruill-Flemming, 1990; Spruill-Flemming, 1991; Stuhr, Petrovich-Mwanik, & Wasson, 1992; Sullivan, 1993).

6. Multicultural art education is not about art. The claim that multicultural art education is not about art is really an observation that the content of study in a multicultural art education program is not solely about a certain honorific or stipulated definition of art promulgated in this century and reinforced in schooling at all levels. Multicultural art education acknowledges modernist Western formalist aesthetics, but also looks beyond form, medium, and techniques, the current preoccupation of much of the art education curriculum. Multicultural art education considers the function and content of art, as a symbolic expression of belief about the nature of the world and one’s place in it (Bersson, 1987; Chalmers, 1987; Sullivan, 1993). Multicultural art education is also concerned with the
context of art making and art viewing, those social, religious, political, and individual spaces where meaning is contemplated and brought forward in visual form (Hart, 1991), and where meaning is reconstructed in the vernacular of viewers (Hamblen, 1991). Multicultural art education teaches students and teachers that art is purposeful, intentional, situational, and multidimensional.

FROM MISCONCEPTIONS TO MISDIRECTED PRACTICES
Myths and misconceptions about multicultural art education confuse and confound educators who are committed to re-forming their curricula. Some misconceptions lead to the entrenchment of questionable practices, wherein art educators are led to believe that they should do nothing, teach as they always have, and ignore efforts to reform programs of study. Other misconceptions lead to poor or misdirected multicultural curricular practices, such as culture-hopping, cultural appropriation (the superficial and inappropriate copying or mimicking of cultural artifacts and symbols), redefining non-Western art along Western notions, disregard for cultural context, and the exclusion of problematic subject matter. These practices perpetuate racial and ethnic stereotyping, teach students little about the nature and value of art, decontextualize art, and further erode the role and value of art education. Despite a lack of conceptual clarity over aims and strategies, though, the practice of multicultural art education is growing (Daniel & Delacruz, 1993; Tomhave, 1992).

WHY MULTICULTURAL ART EDUCATION?
General education serves many goals: to inform students about the nature and content of various disciplines, to transmit the cultural heritage of a person, and to educate for an enlightened, productive citizenry. Art education has always seemed to serve these goals. The instrumental purposes of art education have received a great deal of attention in recent years.

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Concern for citizenry has become more pronounced due to increasing racial and religious tension, violence, illiteracy, and economic strife, and to the growing recognition that we may be wasting our most important national resource, our people (DePillars, 1990). Demographic forecasts of the changing face of America bring into focus a clearer picture of what America really is: a composite of profiles reflecting a range of talents and possibilities.

The relevance of education in light of the realities of life in America can no longer be ignored. Lanier’s biting criticism of art education is as timely today as it was 25 years ago:

Almost all that we presently do in teaching art in the secondary schools today is useless. In fact, almost all that we presently do in the secondary schools is useless. For the children of the middle class and the employed working class (and by no means for all of these), today’s education, and art education, provide little more than the baggage of successful participation in a business-oriented society. For those students euphemistically called the disadvantaged, the schools are more than simply useless. They are, indeed, alien and hostile environments from which these youngsters can do little better than escape. (1969, p. 50)

It took this country one hundred years to abolish institutionalized slavery; it took another one hundred years to abolish institutionalized racial segregation in the schools. Continuing efforts to eradicate racism, sexism, homophobia, and prejudice are slow to coalesce. Yet this country, according to Banks, is one of the best able countries to accomplish such a goal.

Multicultural education is in its infancy. Rather than a passing trend, it is a reconceptualization of who we are and what kind of people we want to be. The refinement, redefinition, and reformation of education is a slow process. For art education, notions central to multiculturalism should guide this process as we revise our premises, our aims, and our practices. Our views of our art, our culture, and our children, along with our notions of what knowledge is and how it is influenced by educational institutions, shape reform efforts. For Banks and many others, reform is based on the construction of more authentic knowledge and a pedagogy of liberation and social responsibility.

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REFERENCES


