What is multicultural education? Is it a separate program, a unique course, a particular curriculum to be added to the other school offerings available to students? Or is it a process, a philosophical orientation, an instructional theory for the delivery of quality education? Is the most efficient way to implement multicultural education through a product or a process conceptualization?

These questions are neither trivia nor mere semantics. They are critical in that how a person or school district answers them represents a particular philosophy of education, and is indicative of their level of development relative to multicultural education. Their answers also create the parameters for the expressed forms — the programmatic articulations — multicultural education is likely to take in actual practice.

Initially, most people have conceived multicultural education as a separate program, whether it be a unit, a course, a lesson or some other particular body of content whose presence or absence is readily identifiable in school instructional offerings. Early advocates of multicultural education — and school practitioners who are faced with the daily routines and politics of implementing educational programs — tend to find this conception of multicultural education quite agreeable. They understand, only too well, the practical advantages of having “tangible” products to sell to taxpayers, politicians, parents and other publics, as opposed to the difficulties inherent in selling educational theories and concepts that do not have sensory visibility, or are not materially tangible.

Some other people, however, conceptualize multicultural education broadly enough to encompass instructional methodologies, school climates, and assessment and evaluation procedures as well as curricula. They represent an “intermediate” stage in the conceptual development of multicultural education. Compared to the first group, these advocates are smaller in number but are more vocal in the professional arenas. Their perceptions of multicultural education tend to be more a broadening of the conceptual framework of the views held by the pragmatists than a fundamentally different viewpoint. They talk about systematic change, but their targets and tools still emphasize “tangibles” — changing the composites and components of testing devices, classroom climates, curriculum alternatives, teaching styles, et cetera — such that they are inclusive of cultural and ethnic lifestyles, value systems, behaviors and habits. They function largely at a distance from K-12 classrooms, with conceptual and theoretical models as the planks of their espoused educational platforms. More frequently than not, they concentrate on what should be done and why it should be done. Their suggestions on how it should be done are based on ideological speculations and claims to professional judgment, as opposed to experiential data based upon insights derived from involvement in actual practice.

Still another school of thought on multicultural education is emerging. Its proponents are even less in number than the group described immediately above — but they are growing. They see multicultural education not as a single product, nor as a comprehensive program comprised of individual products, but as a certain orientation which permeates the entire teaching-learning enterprise. It is a process for changing the educational delivery system such that it excludes cultural diversity in all its dimensions and manifestations. It is a way of being and behaving in the context and act of teaching and learning that responds to the many aspects and expressions of cultural and ethnic diversity which exist in our schools and our society. To these educators, who might be described as philosophical eclectics, multicultural education is a pedagogy — a process of total educational reform — which aims to revolutionize the entire educational process, and revitalize the promise and potential of education for all students, whatever their ethnic identity and cultural backgrounds. They are evolutionary, philosophical trailblazers in that most of them have ascribed, at one time or another, to the beliefs of the other stages in the development of multicultural education, and have moved on to exploring new frontiers of conceptualization. Their current thinking is the result of developmental and progressional conceptual maturation.

These comments about the categorical conceptualizations of multicultural education are not intended to be unnecessarily critical or judgmental, or to pit one school of thought against another; they are
intended merely to remind us of (1) the proverbial gap between theory and practice, between an idea conceptualized and an idea realized, in education; (2) to indicate the impracticality and impossibility of dichotomizing conceptualizations of multicultural education into mutually exclusive categories of "product" and "process" and (3) to create a more adequate contextual frame of reference for placing the wide diversity of multicultural programmatic efforts in better perspective. They also are offered as a reminder to us of the natural growth and developmental potential of educational ideas, trends and concepts.

In fact, multicultural education is both "product" and "process." This viewpoint has both descriptive and analytical utility for it helps us to understand the wide variety of programmatic activities in practice, recognize the relationship between the different theoretical conceptualizations of multicultural education, and comprehend the fact that, as a concept, multicultural education is developmental and emergent. For multicultural education to be conceived as "product" and "process" simultaneously, and to see both conceptions operating in existing programs are understandable phenomena. They are indicative of the tentativeness, the formativeness, and the differential developmental character of the concept.

They also are indicative of the fact that different people enter the field of multicultural education at different points in time and with different levels of conceptual sophistication. Entry usually has occurred at the most rudimentary levels and conceptual movement beyond that point generally has been characterized by evolvement and developmental progression.

Thus, it is only natural that the conceptualizations of many of these people — and schools — who have been involved in the multicultural education movement since it began in the late 1960s have evolved from primary emphasis on one-dimensional "product" to multidimensional "process." Too, some attrition has occurred, given that this is a phenomenon natural to the developmental process of educational trends and social programs; and multicultural education, when viewed from a broad operational perspective, has been characterized by staggered and overlapping differentiations, given the various developmental levels of the people conceptualizing, designing and implementing multicultural education programs.

How We Got Where We Are
The natural physiological maturation process of living organisms can be used as an analogy to explain the
emerging character of multicultural education in the United States, and to understand its naturalistic conceptual movement from simple, fragmented units in the educational system, to more comprehensive products to be incorporated in different instructional programs, to processes for impacting upon the totality of the educational enterprise. Like living organisms, multicultural education was “conceived and given birth;” it has gone through the stages of “childhood,” and is now into its “adolescent” development. The time and conditions of its initial conception and “prenatal formation” influence the subsequent character and course of the development and implementation of multicultural education in school programs. At this time, whether one conceives multicultural education primarily as “product” or “process” is indicative of its “stage of development” and “age” of the idea for that person. Although not mutually exclusive, three “stages” or phases in the conceptual development of multicultural education are identifiable.

STAGE I
Various conceptions of multicultural education exist simultaneously among educators throughout the country because of its differential stages of development. The idea of multicultural education was conceived initially in the height of the 1960s civil rights movement and its demands for social and political equity for ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities “parented” the idea and gave it its first “personality characteristics.” In its infancy and early childhood stage, multicultural education was conceptualized and shaped in terms of “basic needs,” one of which was: responding expeditiously to political pressures. The primary purpose of the early programs was to improve self and societal perceptions of ethnic minorities through the development of ethnic and cultural consciousness. This stage was characterized by the appearance of units, courses, programs and instructional materials, such as Black History, Sociology of Mexican Americans, and Japanese-American Literature, which dealt with factual information about the historical experiences and cultural contributions of ethnic minorities in America. The first multicultural education programs were designed to be implemented in only certain areas of the school curricula, and with specific student populations. Units and lessons on ethnic minorities were developed for inclusion in secondary social studies and language arts curricula, and in university departments of arts and sciences in the form of behavioral science, literature and history courses. At the public-school level, the celebration
of conventional holidays and heroic events was extended to encompass some of those specific to different ethnic minority groups instead of being limited exclusively to Euro-American traditions. These changes appeared primarily as additions and supplements to existing school programs, rather than as integral parts of the core of the educational system.

The first multicultural education programs were student population-specific and geographically or regionally-bound. By merely mentioning the names of specific programs one could anticipate, with a high degree of accuracy, the parts of the country and the ethnic composition of the student populations where these were most likely to be found. For instance, courses in Mexican-American History were found most predominately in public schools with large concentrations of Mexican-American students in the Southwest, and courses about Japanese Americans were rarely taught in schools except on the West Coast where there were a sizable number of Japanese-American students in attendance. In higher education, though, the implementation patterns were somewhat different. Large, predominately white colleges and universities with relatively small ethnic minority enrollments led the way in creating ethnic studies programs. Such programs usually occurred on campuses where ethnic student organizations, such as the Black Student Unions, were politically active. It is indeed appropriate to refer to these early experiments in multicultural education as single-focused, product-oriented ethnic minority studies. A cursory review of the literature on these programs of the late 1960s substantiates this observation. The descriptive language used most consistently is Black Studies, Mexican-American Studies, Asian-American Studies, et cetera.

STAGE II

The passage of time and the application of the natural laws of development caused the conceptions, needs and purposes of multicultural education to take on different meanings and forms. By 1970-71 a gradual shift in the conceptualization of multicultural education began to appear in the professional literature. Like the intermediate stage of development for living organisms, multicultural education became more "refined," its programs broadened in complexity, and the concept became more definitive. More educators and a greater variety of ethnic groups began to support the idea, more schools began to participate in the venture, and emphasis began to center on incorporation into existing programs. Advocates of multicultural education augmented their original pleas by demanding that white students be included in the programs on ethnic minorities, and that elementary students, too, receive instruction in cultural diversity; that other parts of the school curricula, along with language arts and social studies, be revised to accommodate multicultural content; that multicultural education become an integral part of school experiences rather than being additive and supplementary; and that schools teach about many different ethnic groups, instead of only those represented in their student populations and immediate communities.

Therefore, the second phase of the conceptual development of multicultural education can be described as serialized, or multiple, ethnic studies programs. The focus of attention within the study of the separate ethnic groups was on historical events, heroes and cultural contributions. The purposes of the programs were to "set the historical records straight" by correcting the sins of omission committed toward all ethnic minorities; to improve the self-knowledge and self-concepts of students from a wide variety of ethnic groups through the study of their historical experiences, and to help students acquire valid information about ethnic groups other than their own as a means of combatting ethnic illiteracy, prejudices, racism and ethnocentricism, improving social conditions, and increasing racial harmony.

STAGE III

Around 1973 some multicultural education advocates began operating on the premise that the educative process, relative to cultural differences, must encompass more than the mere acquisition of cognitive information, and culturally pluralistic school programming must include more than instructional materials and curriculum designs. Maximizing the learning potential of students requires equal attention to instructional strategies and learning activities, the environments in which they live and learn, the structural organization of the school, and the institutional values, commitments and academic policy priorities of schools. Thus, multicultural education must be conceived in gestalt or eclectic terms.

This view of multicultural education recommends that students be exposed to a broad range of multifaceted, interdisciplinary content and experiences about many different ethnic groups, both minority and majority; that sensitivity and responsiveness to different ethnic lifestyles
penetrate the core and totality of the teaching-learning enterprise; and that culturally pluralistic content and perspectives be incorporated into all educational experiences, whether formal or informal, for all students in all grade levels. It argues that the effective implementation of multicultural education resides as much in teachers' attitudes, interpersonal relations with ethnic students, and instructional examples and techniques as with carefully conceptualized and well-planned multicultural curriculum designs. Similarly, the creation of classroom environments and school contexts which exhibit, prize and promote positive attitudes and values toward ethnic and cultural diversity is an indispensable component of a total or comprehensive approach to making education responsive to cultural pluralism. A "new process of education" instead of an "educational program" is a more fitting description of these conceptions of multicultural education.

The gestalt or eclectic view of multicultural education is based upon such fundamental principles as: every American belongs to some ethnic group; ethnicity is a critical determinant variable in the identification process of many Americans; America is indeed a culturally pluralistic society; pluralism is potentially a vital force in the personal and social growth of America and Americans, and the behavioral patterns, attitudes and values of individuals are reflective, to a large extent, of their ethnic experiences and cultural conditioning. It proclaims that the study of ethnicity and ethnic groups should include white ethnics — such as Polish Americans, Italian Americans, Irish Americans and Jewish Americans — as well as ethnic minorities. More attention needs to be given to the cultural characteristics, value systems, the impact of socio-political problems and the status of different ethnic groups in American society in both historical and contemporary perspective. Concerted efforts must be undertaken to change school structures, programs and processes to accommodate students from different ethnic backgrounds, and to interface school experiences with their "home experiences." School personnel need to do more careful cultural analyses of ethnic values, customs and expectations to determine and/or interpret the behavioral patterns of ethnic students within the context of schooling, and to more adequately prescribe appropriate learning experiences. The curriculum focus should be on process skill development, concept mastery, applicability of comparative analyses, and interdisciplinary, multiethnic examinations of socio-political events, problems, issues and situations. The goal of the eclectic conceptualization of multicultural education is to develop skills necessary for facilitative and total growth of ethnic students from different cultural backgrounds and increase their social functional ability in our culturally pluralistic society.

Where Are We Now?
Eclectic, or process, conceptualizations of multicultural education are on the incline today. Increasingly, it is being described as a new emergent pedagogy that has the potential for reforming the entire educational process, instead of as merely a separate program of studies to be taught. This pedagogy recognizes the viability of different ethnic lifestyles, and it advocates being responsive directly to the needs and learning styles of a wide variety of different ethnic students. It seeks to respond to demands for relevance, developing individual potential, personalizing education, and providing equal educational opportunities relative to ethnic students by matching teaching styles and instructional alternatives with different ethnic learning styles, value orientations and behavioral patterns.

Conceptualizing multicultural education as a process of educational reform demands a systemic approach to total educational change. Changes in curricula, staff training and professional development, instructional strategies, school climates, and assessment/evaluation techniques are to occur conjunctively and interactively such that each embraces multicultural content, sensitivities and perspectives. These are implemented in relation to each other in order to maximize their impact upon the total learning environment and experiences available to students.

The focal point of multicultural education as instructional processing is interpersonal interactions. How student-teacher and student-student relationships are structured, and the substantive quality of the interactions that take place across ethnic and cultural group lines within the context of schools form the core of multicultural teaching and learning. It is more important to concentrate on how to teach and relate to students from different ethnic groups than on what specific content about ethnic diversity and cultural differences is taught and learned. Students, teachers, materials, and institutional policies and programs are so sensitized to and embracing of cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity that they radiate diversity as a natural modus operandi. This diversity is reflected in communication exchanges, student-counselor relationships, testing techniques, culturally-specific and ethnically-differentiated teaching strategies, learning
options and alternatives, the physical plant of the school, the food served in the cafeteria, the bus ride to and from school, discipline techniques, curricular materials, et cetera.

The premises underlying these arguments are: (1) qualitative, rewarding and facilitative interethnic interactions among students and teachers require the application of multicultural knowledge and skills; (2) the natural emersion of students in multicultural contexts, environments and interactions during learning encounters broaden considerably the human growth potential of each individual; (3) the constant interweaving of ethnic and cultural diversity into all things done in the teaching-learning enterprise is a fait accompli of cultural pluralism valued, accepted and promoted, and (4) the probability of achieving instructional effectiveness with ethnically different students is heightened considerably by using data derived from cultural analyses of ethnic lifestyles and cultural conditioning to make decisions about educational programming.

The Promise of Multicultural Education as “Process”

We know that the public-school system of education in the United States has been disastrous for many ethnically-different students. It has not only been ineffective in helping them develop intellectual skills, but, in too many instances, has had a negative impact upon their self-esteem and psychological well-being. For too long schools have perpetrated the sins of society by making many ethnic students ashamed of their ethnicity and encouraging them, in both overt and subtle ways, to reject and/or deny it. Yet, emerging research indicate that however hard we may try to repress our ethnicity, it cannot be done entirely. Throughout life ethnicity continues to be a critical variable in our identification process, whether through affirmation or rejection. We also know that cultural conditioning and ethnic experiences are instrumental in determining the values, attitudes, behaviors, perceptions and relational styles exhibited by students from different ethnic groups. The new data emerging on ethnic lifestyles and cognitive learning patterns present convincing arguments that, although conflicts between different ethnic and cultural expectations and the normative systems of schools are inevitable, with knowledge, foresight and conscious planning these conflicts can be minimized, and ethnic experiences can be used as formative bases for instructional decisionmaking on a broad scale. This is the essence of the idea of multicultural education as a process approach to educating culturally different students.

We have learned from experience that fragmented, single-dimensional attempts at creating multicultural education programs are too limited in focus and influence to bring about the wide-scale changes needed to have a significant impact on the quality of education available to students. Therefore, it seems logical to posit that if we are to change the core and instructional structure of the educational process such that they reflect and embrace ethnic and cultural diversity, we need to institute multifaceted, multidimensional, comprehensive, systemic and interactive reform measures. Using a process approach to multicultural education is a plausible strategy for guiding our efforts in the achievement of this goal. One of its most attractive qualities is that it demands that multicultural content and perspectives penetrate the inner-core of all aspects of the educational enterprise, rather than multicultural education being an appendage, existing on the periphery of the institutional structures and instructional programs of our schools.

Anything less than a process conceptualization of multicultural education as an instructional delivery system, designed to affect the total educative process, is prone to limited utility and rapid obsolescence. The magnitude of the task of providing relevant, qualitative educational opportunities to all students, fully cognizant of their unique ethnic experiences, demands nothing less than a total approach to multicultural educational reform. The recent explosion of knowledge on ethnic groups, ethnicity and cultural diversity, the constant evolvement of multicultural school programming, and the spread of the revitalization of ethnic consciousness among groups and individuals in the United States overtax more restrictive conceptualizations of multicultural education. Furthermore, multicultural education is still an emergent concept and to view it as process provides the flexibility, the elasticity and the adaptability needed to embrace new data, new analyses, new interpretations and new experimentations which are bound to occur before it reaches pedagogic maturity.

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