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# Teaching for Multicultural Literacy, Global Citizenship, and Social Justice

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## Abstract

Literacy as defined and codified in the high-stakes tests that are being implemented in most states is often interpreted as basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics. It is essential that all students acquire basic literacy and computational skills. However, it is not sufficient. Students should also acquire the skills, attitudes and commitments needed to be reflective, moral and active citizens in a troubled global world. In addition to teaching basic literacy skills, the schools should help students to acquire multicultural literacy, which consists of the knowledge, skills and commitments essential to take action to make the world more just and humane.

## Biographical Information

James A. Banks is Russell F. Stark University Professor and Director of the Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington, Seattle. He is a past President of the American Educational Research Association and a past President of the National Council for the Social Studies. Professor Banks is a specialist in social studies education and in multicultural education, and has written many articles and books in these fields. His books include *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum and Teaching*; *Teaching Strategies for the Social Studies*; *Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society*; and *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives*. Professor Banks is the editor of the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (Jossey-Bass) and the "Multicultural Education Series" of books published by Teachers College Press, Columbia University. He is a member of the National Academy of Education. His e-mail address is: centerme@u.washington.edu.

## Multicultural Education and the Arts

I am very pleased and honored to be a speaker in the 2003 Charles Fowler Colloquium on Innovations in Art Education. My presentation will focus on multicultural literacy, global citizenship, and social justice. I want to briefly discuss how my presentation relates to the theme of this conference. I am a multicultural and not an arts educator and consequently will not speak directly about the arts. You, as arts educators, will need to apply my ideas about multicultural global citizenship education to your work. However, I think that the goals of multicultural education and arts education are highly compatible and complementary and that one of the most effective ways to actualize multicultural education is through the arts.

In his presentation at this conference, Benjamin R. Barber noted an important connection between education for democratic citizenship in multicultural nation-states and the arts. He stated that the arts do not need democratic nation-states to survive and prosper, but that democratic societies need the arts because they foster autonomous actions by citizens. I will describe several brief examples of ways in which the arts can be used to teach and reinforce knowledge that is needed by citizens in order to function effectively in multicultural democratic nation-states:

1. The blues can be used to teach powerful lessons about the experiences of African Americans in the United States. Billy Holiday's moving and trenchant song, "Strange Fruit," will give students an image and experience with the lynching of Blacks in the South that is more memorable than most textbook accounts.
2. B. B. King's "The Thrill is Gone," conveys the ways in which the personal and romantic lives of African Americans were affected in adverse ways by racism and segregation in the South. Students can examine the extent to which the blues grew out of the political economy in which African Americans were forced to function in the South.
3. The Negro spirituals were used by African Americans to send coded messages about escaping from slavery to the North as well as to envision a life after death that was considerably more satisfying than the one they experienced on earth. Students can discuss the latent messages in the song, "Get on Board Little Children."

## Cultures in Counterpoint: The Arts as Intercultural Dialogue

In her exquisite and informative multimedia presentation that opened this conference, Carolina Robertson discussed several concepts and themes that my presentation will reinforce:

1. She stated that arts education creates a forum for change. I believe that global citizenship education in multicultural nation-states should teach students to know, to care, and to act to make the world more just and humane.
2. Robertson discussed the role of identity in culture. I will discuss three kinds of identifications that multicultural citizenship education should help students to develop: *cultural, national, and global*.

3. Robertson described *al-Andalus*, an era of “dynamic coexistence among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in medieval Spain.” [Quote is from conference program]. Al-Andalus inspires us to think about ways in which we can construct a democratic and just society today in which groups from diverse religious groups in the United States can experience equality and social justice and live in peaceful coexistence. Since the devastating attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, a politics of fear has emerged in the United States and “terrorism” has become a vehicle for national unity and patriotism. Arabs and Muslims have become victims of xenophobia, bias, and discrimination. Amy Gutmann (2004) argues that democratic education should foster civic equality, toleration, and recognition for all racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups within democratic nation-states. Civic equality and toleration for Muslims and Arabs are greatly threatened in the United States today. An important project for democratic education in the United States is to help students to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and values needed to participate in a nation that fosters civic equality for all groups. We must also find ways to balance justifiable concerns for terrorism with the protection of the rights of citizens.

### A Narrow Conception of Literacy

Literacy as defined and codified in the high-stakes tests that are being implemented in most states in the U.S. is often interpreted as basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. I am very concerned about a conception of literacy that defines it only as basic skills. Although it is essential that all students acquire basic skills in literacy, basic skills are necessary but not sufficient in our diverse and troubled world. Literate citizens in a diverse democratic society should be reflective, moral, and active citizens. They should have the knowledge, skills, and commitment needed to act to change the world to make it more just and democratic. The world’s greatest problems do not result from people being unable to read and write. They result from people in the world—from different cultures, races, religious and nations—being unable to get along and to work together to solve the world’s intractable problems such as global warming, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, poverty, racism, sexism, and war. Examples are the conflicts between the United States and Iraq, North Korea and its neighbors, and the Israelis and Palestinians.

### Multicultural Literacy

In addition to mastering basic reading and writing skills, literate citizens in a democratic multicultural society such as the United States should also develop *multicultural literacy* (Banks, 2003). Multicultural literacy consists of the skills and ability to identify the creators of knowledge and their interests (Banks, 1996), to uncover the assumptions of knowledge, to view knowledge from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives, and to use knowledge to guide action that will create a humane and just world. Paulo Freire (1970), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, states that we must teach students to read the word and the *world*. Reading the word requires basic knowledge and skills. However, reading the world requires

students to question the assumptions of institutionalized knowledge and to use knowledge to take action that will make the world a just place in which to live and work. Freire also states that we must teach students to combine critique with hope. When we teach students how to critique the injustice in the world we should help them to formulate possibilities for action to change the world to make it more democratic and just. Critique without hope may leave students disillusioned and without agency.

Education for literacy should include a focus on democratic citizenship and social justice because highly literate individuals, groups, and nations have committed some of the most unconscionable acts in human history. Germany was one of the most literate nations in the world when its leaders presided over the killing of 12 million innocent people. Victims of the Nazis included six million Jews as well as people with disabilities and people who were gay. In his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963/1994) wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (p. 2-3). When a society sanctions injustice toward one group, other vulnerable groups become potential victims. Consequently, students need to understand the extent to which their own lives and fates are tightly tied to that of powerless and victimized groups in society. Wrote the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, "Je suis un autre" [I am an other] (cited in Todorov, 1987, p. 3).

## Balancing Unity and Diversity

Citizens in a diverse democratic society should be able to maintain attachments to their cultural communities as well as participate effectively in the shared national culture. *Unity without diversity results in cultural repression and hegemony. Diversity without unity leads to Balkanization and the fracturing of the nation-state.* Diversity and unity should co-exist in a delicate balance in a democratic multicultural nation-state. The attainment of the balance that is needed between diversity and unity is an ongoing process and ideal that is never fully attained. It is essential that both mainstream groups and groups on the margins of society participate in the formulation of societal goals related to diversity and unity. Both groups should also participate in action to attain these goals. Deliberation and the sharing of power by mainstream and marginalized groups are essential for the construction and perpetuation of a just, moral, and participatory democratic nation-state in a culturally diverse society.

## The Development of Cultural, National, and Global Identifications

A new kind of citizenship is needed for the 21st century, which Will Kymlicka (1995) calls *multicultural citizenship*. It recognizes and legitimizes the right and need of citizens to maintain commitments both to their cultural communities and to the national civic culture. Only when the national civic culture is transformed in ways that reflect and give voice to the diverse ethnic, racial, language, and religious communities that constitute it will it be viewed as legitimate by all of its citizens. Only then can they develop clarified commitments to the nation-state and its ideals.

Citizenship education should help students develop thoughtful and clarified identifications with their cultural communities and their nation-states. It should also help them to develop clarified global identifications and deep understandings of their roles in the world community. Students need to understand how life in their cultural communities and nations influences other nations and the cogent influence that international events have on their daily lives. Global education should have as major goals helping students to develop understandings of the interdependence among nations in the world today, clarified attitudes toward other nations, and reflective identifications with the world community.

Non-reflective and unexamined cultural attachments may prevent the development of a cohesive nation with clearly defined national goals and policies. Although we need to help students develop reflective and clarified cultural identifications, they must also be helped to clarify their identifications with their nation-states. However, blind nationalism will prevent students from developing reflective and positive global identifications. Nationalism and national attachments in most nations are strong and tenacious. An important aim of citizenship education should be to help students develop global identifications and a deep understanding of the need to take action as citizens of the global community to help solve the world's difficult global problems. Cultural, national, and global experiences and identifications are interactive and interrelated in a dynamic way.

*Students should develop a delicate balance of cultural, national, and global identifications. A nation-state that alienates and does not structurally include all cultural groups into the national culture runs the risk of creating alienation and causing groups to focus on specific concerns and issues rather than on the overarching goals and policies of the nation-state. To develop reflective cultural, national and global identifications, students must acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to function within and across diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, language and religious groups.*

## Multicultural Literacy and Global Citizenship Education

Education for multicultural literacy should help students attain the skills, attitudes, and commitments needed to become citizens who will work for social justice in their nation-states and in the world. A literacy education that focuses on social justice educates both the heads and hearts of students and helps them to become thoughtful, committed, and active citizens in their nation and the world (Banks, 2002). Because of the growing ethnic, cultural, racial, language and religious diversity throughout the world, citizenship education needs to be changed in substantial ways to prepare students to function effectively in the 21st century (Banks, 2004). A literacy education that focuses on social justice can make a major contribution to preparing students to be thoughtful and active citizens of their nation and the world.

Citizens in this century need skills in literacy as well as the social knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to function in their cultural communities and beyond their cultural borders. They should also be able and willing to participate in the construction of a national civic culture that is a moral and just community. Their national community should embody

democratic ideals and values, such as those articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

Citizenship education in the past, in the United States as well as in many other nations, embraced an assimilationist ideology. In the United States, its aim was to educate students so they would fit into a mythical Anglo-Saxon Protestant conception of the “good citizen.” Anglo conformity was the goal of citizenship education. One of its aims was to eradicate the community cultures, languages and values of students from diverse groups. One consequence of this assimilationist conception of citizenship education was that many students lost their first cultures, languages, ethnic identities, and values. Some students also became alienated from family and community. Another consequence was that many students became socially and politically alienated within the national civic culture.

Citizenship education should be transformed in the 21st century, and should help prepare students to be thoughtful and informed world citizens. Literacy in the 21st century should include a focus on global issues and problems as well as action on that can help to resolve them. Several worldwide developments make a new conception of literacy and citizenship education imperative (Banks, 2004). They include the deepening ethnic texture of nations such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan. The large influx of immigrants who are now settling in nations throughout the world, the continuing existence of institutional racism and discrimination in various nations, and the widening gap between rich and poor nations also make the reform of literacy and citizenship education an imperative.

The schools should help students acquire multicultural literacy, which will enable them to develop a delicate balance of cultural, national, and global identifications and a commitment to act to change the world to make it more just and humane. If we teach students to be literate without helping them to develop a commitment to construct a just and humane world, we will foster a nation and world in which there is a “threat to justice everywhere.”

## Notes

Parts of this paper are adapted from: James A. Banks, “Introduction: Democratic Citizenship Education in Multicultural Societies.” In James A. Banks (Editor). *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives* (pp. 3-15). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004; and from James A. Banks, “Teaching Literacy for Social Justice and Global Citizenship, Language Arts,” 81 (1), September 2003, pp. 18-19.

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