

Article Summary: “Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform”

According to James A. Banks in chapter ten of his book, “Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives”, mainstream-centric curriculum has negative consequences for all students and therefore, reform is necessary. He opines that, “Ideological [and political] resistance is a major factor that has slowed and it still slowing the development of a multicultural curriculum. But he goes on to offer four approaches aimed at combating those barriers and introducing multicultural content in to the curriculum. They are as follows:

- The Contributions Approach
- The Additive Approach
- The Transformational Approach
- The Social Action Approach

The **Contributions Approach**, or level one of Banks’ curriculum reform, is characterized by the introduction of key figures, artifacts, writings without any deep investigation into the importance of historical significance of those contributions to the mainstream collective. Advantages of this approach include the speed and ease with which change can begin to take place in the classroom. However, a significant disadvantage of this approach is the continued marginalization of non-mainstream issues. The multicultural contributions are often viewed as peripheral rather than key components to understanding the material presented.

Banks’ level two, or **Additive Approach**, consists of adding some multicultural substance (a book, lesson, unit, video) without really changing the format or delivery method of the mainstream-centric course. Problems however still arise with simply adding multicultural materials without context or connection to larger learning objectives. In my opinion, students

can tell when something feels forced, last-minute, or out of sync with the rest of a class. If the teacher is not actively pursuing real change in the classroom than the Additive Approach alone will cause more controversy than clarity.

Level three, the **Transformation Approach** begins to shed the add-on nature of the first two approaches in favor of integration of multiculturalism into the core curriculum by changing the “fundamental goals, structure, and perspectives of the curriculum” (250). Here we begin to ask teachers to really redesign their curriculum to include thought and focus on the marginalized influences in a given content area. Essential questions, benchmarks for understanding, and learning objectives will begin to see new light. From my experience, this approach is where the push-back from some teachers will begin. This is where we begin to ask teachers to step out of their mainstream-centric comfort zone and into new light.

The final approach, or **Social Action Approach**, builds on the strides taken by teachers in the previous phase but adds the element of student-centered instruction into the multicultural curriculum equation. This approach “requires students to make decisions and take actions related to the concept, issue, or problem studied in the unit” (253). Teaching for social action or social justice requires a great deal of groundwork to be successful. Finding teachers willing to relinquish some control over topic selection and discourse can be difficult. Adding that new instructional format to a new curriculum focus can be overwhelming for some teachers.

Although presented in linear fashion, Banks admits that all four approaches “are often mixed and blended in actual teaching situations” (255). He offers a table outlining each approach, as well as its description, examples, strengths, and problems with each. And follows that chart with a list of fourteen guidelines designed to help educators successfully integrate

multiculturalism into their curriculum. And while I will not list them all here, I can say that the recurring theme of the educator as the conduit of reform in a classroom has proved true in my classrooms since reading this book over a decade ago.

Nearly all of Banks' fourteen guidelines on how to integrate his previously stated four approaches revolve around the teacher's ability to unpack some of their own cultural baggage and create an environment conducive to speaking power to previously marginalized voices throughout the current curriculum. Educators must know themselves, know the diverse history that exists within their subject area, and model the celebration of difference.

As an incoming secondary school administrator my role in this process will be to encourage the process school-wide. What that means to me is that, as a principal, I will work to include some element of Banks' multicultural curriculum reform into my staff development plans, teacher evaluations, and classroom visits. I will model the types of inclusive language I expect to hear in those classrooms. I will mentor teachers willing to begin the process of change and I will allow time for my more resistant teachers to dabble in Banks' approaches until they become comfortable enough to move forward substantially. It is both comforting and disheartening to see that a textbook and concepts that I have worked for ten years to incorporate into my classes is still relevant today. It is comforting to know that I have made progress toward a more multicultural curriculum but disheartening to see that teachers and administrators still need to be confronted with the truths that Banks' uncovered so many years ago.

Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. (2007). Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform. In *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 242-263). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.