

ECONOMICS, EDUCATION, RACE & GENDER

Multicultural education: How schools teach it and where educators say it falls short

Below, we provide a sampling of academic research that looks at how multicultural education has changed in recent decades and inconsistencies in the way today's teachers teach it.

by Denise-Marie Ordway | January 25, 2021



(Editorial Åse Elin Langeland)

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As American public schools have grown more diverse, educators have introduced multicultural education programs to help kids understand and appreciate the differences among them — differences in terms of race, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual identity and other personal characteristics.

Multicultural education, broadly, is a range of strategies educators use to help students “develop a positive self-concept by providing knowledge about the histories, cultures, and contributions of diverse groups,” according to the nonprofit [National Association for Multicultural Education](#).

These programs, which vary by state and even within individual school districts, “should directly address issues of racism, sexism, classism, linguicism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, religious intolerance, and xenophobia,” [the association explains](#) on its website. One goal of multicultural education is developing the attitudes, knowledge and skills students need to function in different cultures and join a global workforce.

Below, we provide a sampling of academic research that looks at how multicultural education has changed in recent decades and inconsistencies in the way today's teachers teach it. We also included studies that reveal problems in how U.S. colleges and universities train teachers to do this work.

At the bottom of this page, we added a list of resources to help journalists better understand and contextualize the issue, including federal data on how student and teacher demographics have changed over time and links to organizations with expertise in multicultural education.

It's important to note there are significant differences between multicultural education and anti-racist education — two types of education discussed with greater frequency in recent years. Unlike multicultural education, anti-racism education focuses on race and race-related issues. Anti-racist teachers “create a curriculum with black students in mind” and “view the success of black students as central to the success of their own teaching,” [Pirette McKamey](#), the first Black principal of Mission High School in San Francisco, [writes in *The Atlantic*](#).

Many educators and researchers argue that schools serving predominantly white communities benefit tremendously from multicultural education. [Sheldon Eakins](#), a former teacher and school principal who founded the [Leading Equity Center](#), [writes about this](#) for the [Cult of Pedagogy](#) website:

“It's not uncommon for White people to say, *Oh, I'm just White. I don't have a culture*. We need to teach our White students about what their cultural background is and their ethnic backgrounds so they can understand and think about their language and religions going back to their ancestry. Lessons on their culture may help them start to understand how privilege and White supremacy began.”

At the same time, Eakins and others, including education professor [Wayne Au](#) of the University of Washington Bothell, have criticized multicultural education for falling short in preparing youth to confront and dismantle racism.

“Yes, multicultural education is important, but in the face of the hateful violence being visited on so many of our students and communities, it is simply not enough,” [Au writes in a paper](#) published in *Multicultural Perspectives* in 2017.

A brief history of multicultural education

[Thirty Years of Scholarship in Multicultural Education](#)

Thandeka K. Chapman and Carl A. Grant. *Gender & Class Journal*, 2010.

This paper offers a broad overview of what multicultural education is in the U.S. and how it changed over three decades. The authors rely on academic research to chronicle the trend, beginning in the 1960s, when scholars argued that the histories and contributions of people of color should be part of the public school curriculum.

[Thandeka Chapman](#), a professor of education studies at the University of California, San Diego, and [Carl Grant](#), a professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explain how multicultural education evolved to include discussions about gender, physical disabilities, age and sexual identity and orientation.

The authors also describe how critics of the trend actually helped it.

“Advocates used these attacks to develop more meaningful and appropriate ways to help teachers and students in classrooms,” Chapman and Grant write. “These criticisms of MCE [multicultural education] have further advanced discussions of equity, equality, and social justice in ways that would not be possible if opponents had remained silent.”

Challenges in teaching multicultural education

[Multicultural Education and the Protection of Whiteness](#)

Angelina E. Castagno. *American Journal of Education*, November 2013.

In this yearlong study, the author spotlights problems in the way an urban Utah school district teaches multicultural education. She finds that instead of dismantling “whiteness” — she defines this as “structural arrangements and ideologies of racial dominance within the United States” — multicultural education, as offered in this school district, protects it.

[Angelina E. Castagno](#), an associate professor of educational leadership and foundations at Northern Arizona University, writes that her findings should not be surprising considering the teachers she observed and interviewed “were predominantly White, middle-class individuals who, for the most part, have little reason to disrupt the status quo and the current relations of power.”

“Most educators are well intentioned and want what is best for their students, but whiteness is protected despite (and sometimes through) even the best intentions,” Castagno writes. “Part of the problem is that most educators are not aware of whiteness. But in addition to this lack of awareness, most educators are also invested in the status quo of whiteness.”

She notes the importance of getting a better understanding of how teachers are teaching the topic.

“All teachers, administrators, multicultural education scholars, and teacher/administrator educators need a better understanding and awareness of how multicultural education is understood by teachers in schools across the country,” Castagno writes. “While there is much research highlighting the efforts of some teachers who seem to have embraced more critical forms of multicultural education, these teachers probably do not represent the majority of teachers in most schools.”

Problems in how colleges train teachers

[Supporting Critical Multicultural Teacher Educators: Transformative Teaching, Social Justice Education, and Perceptions of Institutional Support](#)

Paul C. Gorski and Gillian Parekh. *Intercultural Education*, 2020.

This study looks at how college instructors teach multicultural education to students in the U.S. and Canada who are studying to become schoolteachers. It finds that college instructors who teach a more conservative version of multicultural education perceive their higher education institution to be more supportive of their work.

The researchers analyze data collected from a survey of 186 people who teach multicultural education to future teachers, conducted in 2015 and 2016. Researchers recruited participants by reaching out to instructors individually and by posting invitations on social media platforms used by instructors. About 90% of survey participants taught at institutions in the U.S.

Instructors answered questions related to the ideological approach they took in their multicultural teacher education courses — whether they took a conservative, liberal and critical approach.

The authors explain that the conservative form of multicultural teacher education, or MTE, “is assimilationist; it prepares teachers to help marginalized students conform to “mainstream culture and its attending values, mores, and norms.” Meanwhile, liberal MTE “prepares teachers to celebrate diversity but, like conservative MTE, fails to prepare them to understand or respond to ways power and inequity are wielded in schools,” write [Paul Gorski](#), founder of the [Equity Literacy Institute](#), and [Gillian Parekh](#), an assistant professor of education at York University. “Critical MTE prepares teachers to participate in the reconstruction of schools by advocating equity, confronting issues of power and privilege, and disrupting oppressive policies and practices.”

Gorski and Parekh find that multicultural teacher education classes “tend to have a conservative or liberal orientation, focused on appreciating diversity or cultural competence, rather than a critical orientation, focused on preparing teachers to address inequity.” That might be because instructors believe their institutions are less supportive of courses that take a critical approach, the researchers write.

“Our results indicate that multicultural teacher educators’ perceptions regarding whether the values they teach in their MTE courses are supported by their institutions is correlated with the criticality with which they design and teach those courses,” Gorski and Parekh write.

Instructors who take a conservative approach “pose no real threat to the injustices MTE ought to disrupt, perceive significantly greater institutional support for the values they teach in their MTE courses,” according to the authors. “Contrarily, those who employ a critical approach perceive significantly less institutional support.”

[What We're Teaching Teachers: An Analysis of Multicultural Teacher Education Coursework Syllabi](#)

Paul C. Gorski. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2008.

This study, which Gorski also authored, looks at course syllabi to see how U.S. colleges were teaching multicultural education to future teachers. Even though it is an older study, it offers insights into how colleges approached the issue at the time. The gist of Gorski's findings: “The analysis revealed that most of the courses were designed to prepare teachers with pragmatic skills and personal awareness, but not to prepare them in accordance with the key principles of multicultural education, such as critical consciousness and a commitment to educational equity.”

Gorski analyzed 45 class syllabi from college courses designed to train teachers in multicultural education. Of them, 30 were undergraduate courses and 15 were graduate courses. Gorski finds that “only twelve syllabi (26.7%) seemed designed to prepare teachers to be what might be called authentic multicultural educators.”

[Social Foundations and Multicultural Education Course Requirements in Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States](#)

Richard Neumann. *Educational Foundations*, Summer-Fall 2010.

In this study, [Richard Neumann](#), a professor of education at San Diego State University, looks at whether teacher colleges in the U.S. require students to complete coursework in multicultural education. The key takeaway: At the time, fewer than half of the 302 universities studied required students wanting to become teachers to take a course in multicultural education.

Among programs that train students to work as elementary school teachers, 45% required at least one course in multicultural education. For programs that train secondary school teachers, 45% required students to complete at least one multicultural education course. Neumann learned that a larger percentage of public university programs required a multicultural education course than did programs offered at private universities.

[Self-Efficacy and Multicultural Teacher Education in the United States: The Factors That Influence Who Feels Qualified to be a Multicultural Teacher Educator](#)

Paul C. Gorski, Shannon N. Davis and Abigail Reiter. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 2012.

This paper looks at which educators feel most qualified to teach multicultural education to students studying to become teachers. The analysis, based on a survey of 75 college instructors, indicates that Black educators tend to feel less qualified to teach multicultural teacher education courses than their counterparts of other races and ethnicities.

Heterosexual educators felt more qualified to teach multicultural teacher education courses than their LGBTQ counterparts, according to the paper, of which Gorski is the lead author. The other two authors are [Shannon N. Davis](#), director of the PhD program in sociology at George Mason University, and [Abigail Reiter](#), an assistant professor in the sociology and criminal justice department of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

The study also indicates that instructors' experience with schools — as elementary, middle or high school teachers — or their work as education activists “had no significant influence on their feelings of being qualified to teach MTE [multicultural teacher education] courses.”

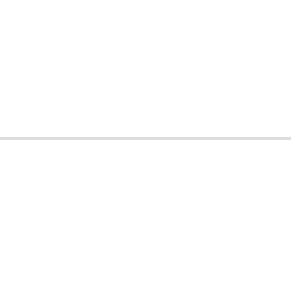
Key resources

- This [May 2020 report](#) from the National Center for Education Statistics shows how student demographics have changed over time and are predicted to change by 2029.
- This [February 2019 report](#) from NCES finds that in fall 2015, the majority of white public school students were enrolled at schools where minority students comprised 25% or less of the student population.
- This [September 2020 report](#) from NCES examines public school demographics. More than three-fourths of teachers working in U.S. public schools — 79% — were white as of 2017-18, the most recent academic year for which the federal government has complete data.
- Here is [a list of the country's top education schools](#), ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*.
- Kansas State University's [Tilford Group](#) is a research organization that focuses on multicultural education.
- The [National Education Association](#), one of the nation's largest teacher unions, offers educators various types of training through its [Center for Social Justice](#).
- The nonprofit [National Association for Multicultural Education](#) provides a range of relevant resources. The organization's president is [Lisa Zagumny](#), who also is the dean and director of doctoral studies at Tennessee Technological University's College of Education.

About The Author

[Denise-Marie Ordway](#)

She joined *The Journalist's Resource* in 2015 after working as a reporter for newspapers and radio stations in the U.S. and Central America, including the *Orlando Sentinel* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Her work also has appeared in publications such as *USA TODAY*, the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Post*. She has received a multitude of national, regional and state-level journalism awards and was named as a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2013 for an investigative series she led that focused on hazing and other problems at Florida A&M University. Ordway was a 2014-15 Fellow of Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism. She also serves on the board of directors of the Education Writers Association. [@DeniseOrdway](#)



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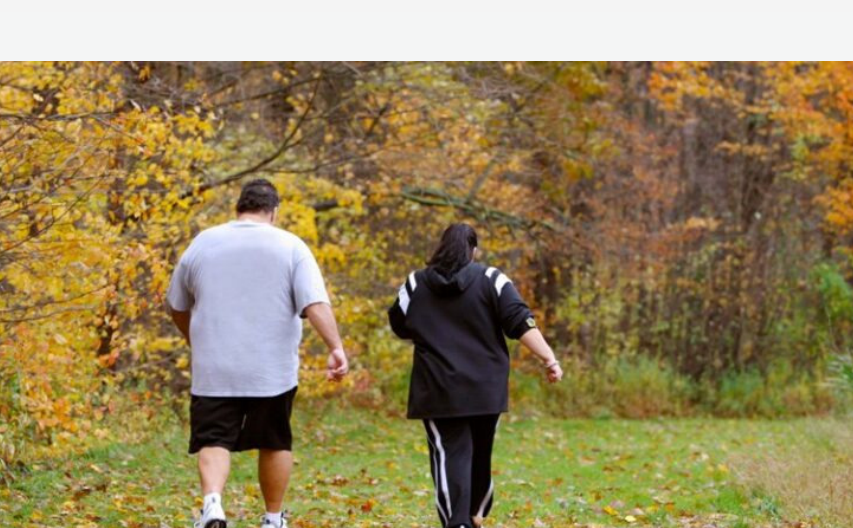


EDUCATION, HEALTH, RACE & GENDER

Empathy 101: How medical schools are using improv theater, virtual reality and comics to help physicians understand their patients

December 21, 2023

In this research-based explainer, a comics journalist explores the use of the arts in medical education.

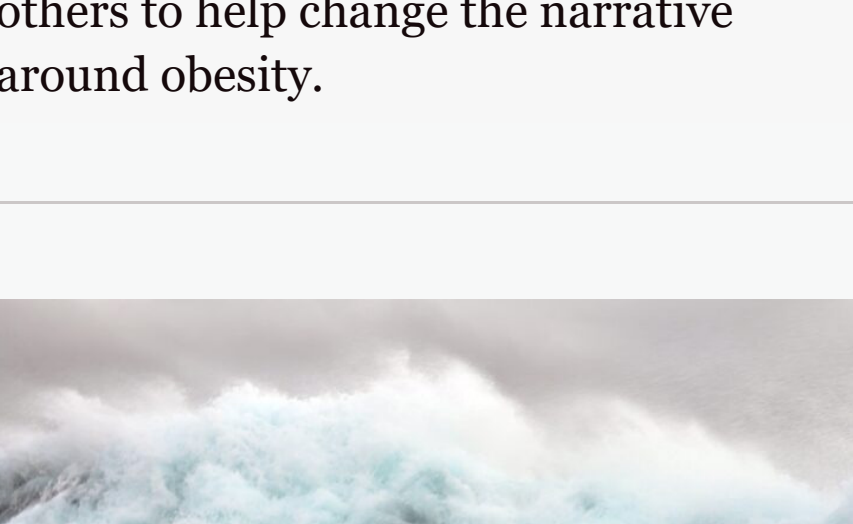


HEALTH, RACE & GENDER

Weight bias, common in health care, can drive weight gain and prompt people with obesity to avoid doctors, research finds

December 18, 2023

Weight bias is so damaging, 36 experts issued a consensus statement that asks health care providers, journalists and others to help change the narrative around obesity.



ECONOMICS, ENVIRONMENT

El Niño: What it is, how it devastates economies, and where it intersects with climate change

November 29, 2023

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