Teaching from a range of perspectives will prepare students from diverse groups to work together in a truly unified nation.

Schools today are rich in student diversity. A growing number of American classrooms and schools contain a complex mix of races, cultures, languages, and religious affiliations.

Two other sources of diversity are becoming increasingly prominent as well. The widening gap between rich and poor students is creating more social class diversity, and an increasing number of gay students and teachers are publicly proclaiming their sexual orientations.

Toward an Authentic Unum

The increasing recognition of diversity within American society poses a significant challenge: how to create a cohesive and democratic society while at the same time allowing citizens to maintain their ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and primordial identities.

Our ideal as a nation has been and continues to be *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one. In the past, Americans have tried to reach this goal by eradicating diversity and forcing all citizens into a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture (Higham 1972).

This coerced assimilation does not work very well. An imposed *unum* is not authentic, is not perceived as legitimate by nonmainstream populations, does not have moral authority, and is inconsistent with democratic ideals. To create an authentic, democratic *unum* with moral authority and perceived legitimacy, the *pluribus* (diverse peoples) must negotiate and share power.

Even with its shortcomings, the United States has done better in this regard than most nations. Still, citizen expectations for a just *unum* are far outpacing the nation’s progress toward its ideal. Many citizens of color, people with low incomes, or speakers of languages other than English feel alienated, left out, abandoned, and forgotten.

Our society has a lot to gain by restructuring institutions in ways that incorporate all citizens. People who now feel disenfranchised will become more effective and productive citizens, and new perspectives will be added to the nation’s mainstream institutions. The institutions themselves will then be transformed and enriched.

In the past two decades, multicultural education has emerged as a vehicle for including diverse groups and transforming the nation’s educational institutions (Banks 1994a, Banks and Banks 1992). Multicultural education tries to create equal educational opportunities for all students by ensuring that the total school environment reflects the diversity of groups in classrooms, schools, and the society as a whole.

Considering the Dimensions of Multicultural Education

The following five dimensions of multicultural education can help educators implement and assess programs that respond to student diversity (Banks 1993, 1994b).

1. The first dimension, *content integration*, deals with the extent to which teachers illuminate key points of instruction with content reflecting diversity. Typically, teachers integrate such content into curriculum in several different ways (Banks 1991b). One common approach is the recognition of contributions—that is, teachers work into the curriculum various isolated facts about heroes from diverse groups. Otherwise, lesson
plans and units are unchanged. With the additive approach, on the other hand, the curriculum remains unchanged, but teachers add special units on topics like the Women's Rights Movement, African Americans in the West, and Famous Americans with Disabilities. While an improvement over the passing mention of contributions, the additive approach still relegates groups like women, African Americans, and disabled people to the periphery of the curriculum.

2. A second dimension of multicultural education is knowledge construction, or the extent to which teachers help students understand how perspectives of people within a discipline influence the conclusions reached within that discipline. This dimension is also concerned with whether students learn to form knowledge for themselves.

3. The prejudice reduction dimension has to do with efforts to help students to develop positive attitudes about different groups. Research has revealed a need for this kind of educa-

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4. The equitable pedagogy dimension concerns ways to modify teaching so as to facilitate academic achievement among students from diverse groups. Research indicates, for example, that the academic achievement of African-American and Mexican-American students improves when teachers use cooperative (rather than competitive) teaching activities and strategies (Aronson and Gonzalez 1988).

5. The empowering school culture and social structure dimension concerns the extent to which a school's culture and organization ensure educational equality and cultural empowerment for students from diverse groups. Some of the variables considered are grouping practices, social climate, assessment practices, participation in extracurricular activities, and staff expectations and responses to diversity.
Knowledge Construction and Transformation

I would like to suggest an alternative to the contributions and additive approaches that are used in the content integration dimension. This alternative, the transformation approach, changes the structure, assumptions, and perspectives of the curriculum so that subject matter is viewed from the perspectives and experiences of a range of groups. The transformation approach changes instructional materials, teaching techniques, and student learning.

This approach can be used to teach about our differences as well as our similarities. Teachers can help students understand that, while Americans have a variety of viewpoints, we share many cultural traditions, values, and political ideals that cement us together as a nation.

The transformation approach has several advantages. It brings content about currently marginalized groups to the center of the curriculum. It helps students understand that how people construct knowledge depends on their experiences, values, and perspectives. It helps students learn to construct knowledge themselves. And it helps students grasp the complex group interactions that have produced the American culture and civilization.

Reinterpreting the Montgomery Bus Boycott

The history of the Montgomery (Alabama) bus boycott, which began on December 5, 1955, can be used to illustrate how the transformation approach works. Viewing this event from different perspectives shows how historians construct interpretations, how central figures can be omitted from historical records, how history can be rewritten, and how students can create their own interpretations.

Textbook accounts of the Montgomery bus boycott generally conclude that: (1) when a bus driver asked Rosa Parks to give up her seat to a white person, she refused because she was tired from working hard all day, and (2) the arrest of Rosa Parks triggered the planning and execution of the boycott.

Two important accounts by women who played key roles in the boycott contradict important aspects of the textbook conclusions. The two memoirs are those of Rosa Parks (with Haskins 1992) and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson (Garrow 1987). Robinson was an Alabama State College English professor and president of the Women’s Political Council.

Students can compare mainstream accounts of the events (such as those in textbooks) with transformative accounts (such as those by Robinson and Parks). This activity presents an excellent opportunity both to learn content about diverse groups and to gain insights about the construction of knowledge.

According to Robinson, professional African-American women in Montgomery founded the Women’s Political Council in 1946 to provide leadership, support, and improvement in the black community and to work for voting rights for African Americans. Many council members were Alabama State College professors. Others were black public school teachers.

In 1953, the council received more than 30 complaints concerning bus driver offenses against African Americans. For instance, black people (even when seated in the “Negro” section of the bus) were asked to give up their seats to whites. Further, blacks often had to pay their fares in the front of the...
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bus, exit, and reenter through the back door—and sometimes when they stepped off the bus, the driver left them.

Robinson and other council members worked with city leaders to improve the treatment of black bus riders, but to no avail. African Americans continued to experience intimidating, demeaning, and hostile encounters with bus drivers.

As the negative pattern of incidents persisted, the council concluded that only a boycott against the bus system would end the abuse of black bus riders and bus segregation. A boycott was thought to have good potential for success because about 70 percent of Montgomery’s bus riders were African American. The council planned the boycott and then waited for the right time to launch it.

The year 1955 presented three choices for the “right time.” On March 2, 1955, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old high school student seated in the “Negro” section of a bus, was arrested after refusing to give up her seat to a white rider. Next, Robinson said:

They dragged her, kicking and screaming hysterically, off the bus. Still half-dragging, half-pushing, they forced her into a patrol car that had been summoned, put handcuffs on her wrists so she would do no physical harm to the arresting police, and drove her to jail. There she was charged with misconduct, resisting arrest, and violating the city segregation laws (Garrow 1987).

Claudette Colvin was later found guilty and released on probation. The conviction enraged the African-American community. Six months after the

Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat. She gives quite a different reason for her insinuence than has commonly been reported:

People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me being old then. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.

The driver of the bus saw me still sitting there, and he asked was I going to stand up. I said, “No.” He said, “Well, I’m going to have you arrested.” Then I said, “You may do that.” These were the only words we said to each other.

... People have asked me if it occurred to me that I could be the test case the NAACP had been looking for. I did not think about that at all. In fact if I had let myself think too deeply about what might happen to me, I might have gotten off the bus. But I chose to remain.

Fed up with mistreatment, the African-American women of Montgomery, led by their council, called for a boycott of city buses. Robinson described the preparations for the boycott:

I sat down and quickly drafted a message and then called a good friend and colleague, John Cannon, chairman of the business department of the college, who had access to the college’s mimeograph equipment. When I told him that the WPC was staging a boycott and needed to run off the notices, he told me that he too had suffered embarrassment on the city buses. Like myself, he had been hurt and angry. He said that he would happily assist me.

Along with two of my most trusted students, we quickly agreed to meet almost immediately, in the middle of the night, at the college’s duplicating room. We were able to get three messages to a page, greatly reducing the number of pages that had to be mimeographed in order to produce the tens of thousands of leaflets we knew would be needed. By 4 a.m. on Friday, the sheets had been duplicated, cut in thirds, and bundled (Garrow 1987).

Part of Robinson’s leaflets read:

Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down.... This has to be stopped. Negroes have rights, too. If for Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate.

Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop the arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be your, your daughter, or mother. This woman’s case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don’t ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere else on Monday (Garrow 1987).

Reinterpreting the Past

Robinson’s and Parks’ accounts of the Montgomery bus boycott reveal that significant players in historical events can be virtually ignored in written history. For instance, most textbook accounts of the Montgomery bus boycott emphasize the work of men (like Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph D. Abernathy) or organizations headed by men. The work of women like Robinson and her female colleagues in the Women’s Political Council simply cannot be found in most textbooks.

Further, Rosa Parks’ stated reason for refusing to give up her seat helps students understand that recorded history can be wrong. Students can also see that when people who have been excluded from the construction of historical knowledge begin to
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Activism helps students apply what they have learned and develop a sense of personal and civic efficacy (Banks with Clegg 1990).

Action activities and projects should be practical, feasible, and attuned to the developmental levels of students. For instance, students in the primary grades can take action by refusing to laugh at ethnic jokes. Students in the early and middle grades can read about and make friends with people from other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Upper-grade students can participate in community projects that help people with special needs. Lewis (1991) has written a helpful guide that describes ways to plan and initiate social action activities and projects for students.

When content, concepts, and events are studied from many points of view, all of our students will be ready to play their roles in the life of the nation. They can help to transform the United States from what it is to what it could and should be—many groups working together to build a strong nation that celebrates its diversity.

References

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