

**The Importance of Multiculturalism
in 21st Century Art Education**

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Introduction

This paper will touch on the history of Multicultural Art Education, suggest practices, and guidelines. Educators have had to adapt to learning newer teaching techniques in our current times during a Global Pandemic and Racial Justice Movements. With this came relevant lessons such as inclusivity, helping students build their own self identity, and the merge of technology with social and political justice. Our country as a whole is at a political and social crossroads. A few articles I have researched from are a few decades old, and still apply wholeheartedly to today's curriculum and classroom structure. The need for Multiculturalism in Art Education is becoming increasingly important, and I will argue this throughout my paper.

Abstract

Multicultural Art Education has been a key topic of conversation and debate in United States schools for decades. Both our society and classroom teaching techniques have undeniably come a long way since this was first introduced during the Civil Rights Movement, but we still have room to learn and adapt to further grow in our teaching practices. While there are a lot of misinformation and hesitation to begin these teachings, there is an abundance of common practices that can help guide teachers to practice multiculturalism.

Teaching practices are constantly evolving to include political and social issues, and help to mold modern students creative practices. “We must not lose sight of teaching students in a way that they understand those in the world around them. Teaching multiculturalism in a classroom provides individuals within the multiple social groups of which they are a part to function effectively in their social and cultural environments, which are constantly changing” (Morris & Stuhr, 2001). Although multiculturalism is a valuable tool for teaching, educators tend to hesitate or question using these practices due to a variety of reasons. Learning about the misconceptions surrounding these fears and reservations is one of the first steps to debunking the myths associated with these practices. Teaching multiculturalism through art-work has a much wider swath of pros than cons, with the cons mostly being made up of anachronistic assumptions.

Key Points Found in Research

When asking someone who doesn't study art education to name an artist, who are they going to name? Would it be Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Van Gogh? Why? In Art Education, we have been taught primarily of white artists from the past through a hegemonic curriculum, while minorities with rich histories and cultures have been systemically pushed aside. After time, the barrier made up of history built on racism and complete contradictions of diversity and inclusion is slowly being broken down. In this paper, I will touch on research found backing up claims showing how it's vital to continue to work to celebrate all artists in our communities, and teach with every culture in mind.

Multicultural education was first introduced to children's learning in the 1960's, in part to make up for the world surrounding it (Stuhr, 1994). Stuhr describes the need for reconstruction in school and society, "...To provide students with an education that was more responsive to the social, political, and economic conditions of the times and to issues of ethnic student diversity. The initial goal of multicultural education was to improve educational achievement for ethnic students who were being disenfranchised by the educational system" (Stuhr, 1994). This idea began as a movement, and has taken decades to get to where it is today. America was filled with racism and inequality, with this reflecting in teachings as well in schools. In the decades since the Civil Rights Movement, the world has worked to deconstruct racism and inequality at large and in the education system, especially for younger generations. Educators have worked hard to incorporate lesson plans that fulfill the needs of multicultural art education and we must continue to build upon this in future teachings.

To understand Multiculturalism as a whole, one must learn about what exactly it entails. As explained in the journal titled *Multicultural Art and Visual Cultural Education in a Changing World*, history, heritage, tradition and culture, “Need to be defined from a social anthropological perspective to facilitate the understanding of multicultural art” (Morris & Stuhr, 2001). These four puzzle pieces building the word ‘multicultural’, are what helps to loosely define the backbone of this practice. Culture, according to the authors, is one of the most misunderstood subjects in this field. Culture is often overlooked as just being “outside of an individuals lived experience.” (Morris & Stuhr, 2001). Realistically, it greatly surpasses this. Culture consists of what we do as people, and what our morals and values represent. Learning about other cultures is valuable, because this also enhances our social group skills. Our learning of those around us and broadening our perspectives of life help us to grow as individuals and helps to expand our own views to construct our personal cultural identities.

Where one resides also has a large impact on livelihood and culture. One example could be comparing how different Europe is to the United States. With different languages, traditions, and heritages, their day-to-day lives look different, and it’s not something that we’re particularly familiar with. Their government systems are different than ours as well. National culture, or macro culture, is what is known as the “larger political system” (Morris & Stuhr). Depending on what your country is going through politically or socially, it can influence the system surrounding it. The Black Lives Matter movement, however, is an example of something that can be felt and understood across borders. This is often digitally, as we have seen, through multimedia films, photography, and digital art. This intersection with technology and art continues to be an incredible tool in helping to squash systematic racism, and help to expand minds that might not

have seen these situations affecting them personally. While it was written more than 25 years ago, Dr. Elizabeth Delacruz's article, *Multiculturalism and Art Education: Myths, Misconceptions, and Misdirections*, the relevance of the points made still resonate with art educators in the present. "We are deeply divided along racial, gender, economic, religious, and class lines. Contrary to the misconception that multicultural education will balkanize the nation, multicultural education is about uniting a deeply divided nation." (Delacruz, 1995). She writes eloquently on how there are positives towards multicultural teaching of art. On the contrast, there are also a lot of reservations and misconceptions.

Teaching multiculturally is important in many ways. Students have the opportunity to learn about cultures, religions, and races other than their own. They can have their voices heard through social and political artwork, and grow in the journey of cultural awareness while reflecting on self awareness. Aside from the positives, the misconceptions still loom about. Delacruz (1995) speaks on the "Myths, Misconceptions, and Misdirections" about Multiculturalism in art education. Her personal accounts in the art educational field are both insightful and necessary. Delacruz writes about James Bank's (1993) concepts on misconceptions, including how "The belief that multicultural education is for victimized minorities, (b) the claim that multicultural education is against the West, (c) predictions that multicultural education will divide the nation, and (d) speculations that multicultural education will pass." (Delacruz). One of the most common and identifiable misconceptions about multicultural art education, is that it is a 'them' complex instead of an 'us'. When teaching in a predominantly white school setting, it is still incredibly valuable to teach multiculturalism, further insinuating the importance of inclusion and diversity of other cultures. The United States has always been made up of an abundance of cultures

and heritages, and each one should be equally celebrated and respected. Revisiting the second claim, that ‘multicultural art education is against the west’ (Delacruz), we must first identify the importance of this answer in a 21st century classroom. Again, this highlights that Western culture is in no way being pushed back or ignored, but rather inviting and uplifting other cultures that have been adapted into our country and ignored in history.

With this applying to Art education, and our culture in general, “the conception of "takeover" is being promulgated due to ignorance and racist fears.”(Delacruz, 1995). Debunking these misconceptions, which I’m sure still have to work to be discredited, should be a crucial point in accepting and understanding the cultures that make up our world. While it is still obvious that this is a work in progress, as educators, it’s imperative to teach, “Children to understand and affirm their own identities and to reach beyond their own cultural borders.” (Delacruz, 1995). The Western ideals and cultures, which are easily identifiable, have notably left out a large amount of stories and details from minorities in history. Curriculum, changing along with the world and its issues around us, should reflect everyone in a classroom, not just white people.

The Politics of Art Education, written by Georgia Collins and Renee Sandell, talks about the ever growing politics and social movements intertwined with art education. Written in these findings is passages about the intersection of multiculturalism and pluralism, and how to navigate the responses that emerge. In order for adaptations of multiculturalism in art education to be politically effective, Collins and Sandell argue that the subject “needs to have integrationist and separatist orientations as well as the pluralist one.” (Sandell & Collins, 1992). The combination of the three will allow cultures to form themselves to the best of their ability, and for the new common culture to emerge into a modern political and social position.

Connecting Past to Present

How can we as educators be best equipped to teaching the concept of Multicultural concepts and principals? In my research, I have found ample practices and recommendations to best prepare and execute these teachings for classroom settings. Multicultural education, along with all of its current resources, "Teaches students how to use social action skills to participate in shaping and controlling their destinies." (Stuhr, 1995). Stuhr in *Multicultural Art Education and Social Reconstruction*, loosely defines the social goals, stating, "The social goals of this approach for all groups are to provide a more equitable distribution of power, to reduce discrimination and prejudice, and to provide social justice and equitable opportunities." (Stuhr, 1995). The curriculum itself in schools is built upon a structure that has long been ignoring the history and cultures of minorities. Since the Civil Rights Movement, there have been a lot of changes in our society, especially in schooling. Although their has been undeniable improvements, there is still much more to be done, and we must continue towards equal representation and respect of cultures, heritages, and races in each lesson in Art Education.

One of the more modern connections I made was found in the 'Curriculum Guidelines for the Multicultural Art Classroom' (Stuhr, Lois Petrovich-Mwaniki & Wasson, 1992). These approaches are esteemed positions and guidelines that can be studied and implemented into curriculum over time. One of the guidelines listed is "Student Recognition of Their Own Power and Their Potential to Mobilize it" (Stuhr, Lois Petrovich-Mwaniki & Wasson,1992). In my own research, I discovered Kehinde Wiley, who painted the presidential portrait of Barack Obama. Wiley was not only the first African American painter to have his art placed on display in the Na-

tional Portrait Gallery, but he had the added bonus of being the one tasked to complete the portrait of our first African American President. As an artist, Wiley is an unbelievable example of utilizing emotion into art as a minority, and implementing his passions for multiculturalism into his artwork. Wiley is known for taking well known classic art with Westernized poses, clothing and styles, and putting his own modern twist on them using African American models. Wiley's piece, *Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps*, parallels Jacques-Louis David's portrait Bonaparte Crossing the Alps (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.). This painting looks identical in many ways to the painting by David, but depicts a "Contemporary black man wearing camouflage fatigues and Timberland boots." (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.). "Wiley's larger than life figures disturb and interrupt tropes of portrait painting, often blurring the boundaries between traditional and contemporary modes of representation and the critical portrayal of masculinity and physicality as it pertains to the view of black and brown young men." (Kehinde Wiley Studio, n.d.). These paintings are an incredible example of recognizing one's power in the art world, seeing what can be questioned and disturbed, and mobilizing it to create a stunning and revolutionary piece.

The Black Lives Matter movement in summer of 2020 jump started my own thinking on my cultural or racial biases and how I needed to expand my education. Having younger siblings who are mixed race made me realize how much minorities aren't prioritized in Art Education. It hurt me deeply to think that they couldn't self identify with many artists being taught, and it made me want to partake in challenging outdated studies when needed. In a time period where barriers are being broken down more than ever before, we have a generation of unapologetic learners that are fueled by a unique fire.

Multicultural Art Education should be implemented throughout most art curriculum at this point in history. Learning from my own personal experiences, I believe recognizing our cultural and racial biases is the first step, along with continuing to administer these practices to move in a direction where inclusivity and diversity are prevalent in every art classroom. Applying these practices to open the discussion of 21st century issues in society is incredibly valuable in the art education field, and I hope this realization continues to be seen across classrooms across the nation in the coming years.

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