

“...It is important that teacher education students be allowed avenues to explore core knowledge about the history, culture, and foundations of any society.”

# Multicultural Education: Life Styles or Chances?

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## Introduction

During the first class meeting of the multicultural education course I teach, I ask my second-year teacher education students to define the term multicultural education. I am usually surprised by their responses. Some responses describe food and a hero's day as definitions. Other responses elicit statements such as speakers and field trips. Still others refer to superficial teaching about ethnic groups, for example, tepees for native Americans and jerk chicken for Jamaicans. Accordingly, many of the students point out food and field trips as being the substance of multicultural education in their public schools and in their Introduction to Education course in college. Banks (1994) refers to this style of teaching as an ethnic additive approach or teaching from a “life styles” perspective. He argues:

*This additive approach to the study of ethnic content emanated from several assumptions that preclude substantial curriculum reform, perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions of ethnic cultures and life-styles, and prevent teachers from dealing effectively and comprehensively with such concepts as racism, class stratification, powerlessness, and the reforms needed to empower ethnic groups. (p. 181)*

In supporting Banks's perspective, Bennett (1995) recommends that educators are clear that minority

perspectives are not built only from the success stories of heroes or from an emphasis on foods, fads, and festivals. Issues of race, class, gender, oppression, and colonialism are life-forming experiences that have shaped cultures. In life styles teaching, the depth of understanding of what one culture brings to another is traditionally viewed as insignificant, focusing on elements such as food. Manuel Duarte and Smith (2000) argue that the festive approach to cultural diversity is becoming a progressive first step for many schools. However they point out that it can initially harm ethnic groups by actually reinforcing dominant assimilationist thinking by viewing cultural traditions as “exotic, alien, and foreign-others,” (p. 174). Conversely, “life chances” teaching critically analyzes the political and social factors of how the culture evolved and its significance in a global economy (Banks). Without the life chances perspective, educators are missing the point of multicultural education, which is, according to Banks, to “*acquire the knowledge, skills, and commitments needed to make their societies and the world more responsive to the human condition*” (p. 61).

Hanvey (1975) argues for the development of a cultural consciousness by recognition of multiple historical perspectives. Hanvey believes individuals must understand the life styles perspective approach in order to be able to reduce their own ethnocentrism. Bennett (1995) contends that argues teachers are “obligated” to become knowledgeable about new ethnic and national perspectives. This ethnic approach toward a multicultural curriculum should encompass not only the life styles perspective but also the life chances. Nieto (2000) believes if that the life styles approach is merely limited to lessons in human relations and sensitivity training, the potential for substantive changes in schools becomes severely diminished.

There is a necessity in understanding the cultural background of diverse ethnic groups. Drawing from the principle that teacher education students need to become social critics, this paper attempts to explain the differences between life styles and life chances teaching. It explains why life styles teaching still exists. Finally, it explains why life chances, although more difficult to teach, offers a more effective outcome than life styles teaching. Additionally, this paper presents a sample lesson plans using the life styles and the life chances approaches to teaching.

## Differences Between Life Styles Teaching and Life Chances Teaching

Life styles teaching is a scraping of the surface; it introduces a cultural indicator but not its historical or

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social significance. For example, as a Jamaican, when I speak with my students about Jamaican culture, they associate culture with jerk chicken and dreadlocks. To limit the dialogue to food and hairstyles, at this point, is an example of life styles teaching. Unfortunately, many educators do leave the discussion at this point. A few students might ask why jerk chicken represents Jamaica; but unless the educators know the answer, jerk chicken becomes the framework from which students draw their knowledge about the island country. An examination of the history and social conditions in Jamaica and how they affect the foods of a culture are not explored. See Appendix A for a sample lesson plan of the life styles approach.

Life chances teaching promotes research in understanding the social and political significance of consuming jerk chicken in Jamaica. Banks's (1994) notion of life chances teaching includes "*the ways structurally excluded ethnic groups are victimized by social, economic, and political variables such as institutionalized racism, class stratification, and political powerlessness*" (p. 181).

A life chances approach to teaching asks, for example, What is the significance of jerk spices to the Jamaican community? Under what circumstances was this food eaten and prepared? What social conditions brought on the use of the strong spice? Why has this cooking style been transferred to a country outside of its origin? Conducting in-depth research on this subject would call for a greater investment in time by educators.

One underlying historical explanation regarding jerk food preparation is slavery. Slaves who did not have any access to refrigeration began to heavily spice the chicken to store it for days, buried in the ground for warmth. As recent as 50 or 60 years ago, Jamaicans still may not have had refrigeration and continued to keep the meat this way.

The life chances approach would ask educators to critically examine how one aspect of the culture, slavery, affected food preparation. Yes, Jamaicans eat jerk chicken; but the social and political history tied to the food is what is not "served" to students in today's classrooms. See Appendix B for a sample lesson plan of the life chances approach.

### **Why Life Styles Teaching Still Exists?**

Serving food and representing cultures by wearing traditional ethnic attire are methods used to teach culture that are easy and fun and do not create divisions in classrooms. The life styles approach does not require critical thinking. By critical thinking, I refer to taking a specified

subject and looking at it from different perspectives, not necessarily accepting what has been presented. It involves examining underlying issues of causation and why things happen. It calls for data research and analysis, referring to multiple sources of information. It calls for the researcher to question presented material and the researcher's own position on the topic. Rote memorization of "facts" instead of critical thinking exercises is encouraged in the classroom.

### **Life Styles Teaching is Work**

In life styles teaching, some educators will follow the curriculum handed to them without making any changes. Following the given curriculum does not create any controversy. In this context, no parents will fight them; students will not challenge them; and educators will keep their jobs. It is not because educators are lazy necessarily, but many were not taught in college to think critically or to question a given curriculum. When educators look at a regular classroom and what an educator's day entails, as well as the time they are allotted to accomplish these tasks, it is very daunting. It is a lot of work in a short time. To do outside research seems overwhelming. In effect, life styles teaching is comfortable for educators. It is basically cultural rote memorization.

### **Life Chances teaching Offers a More Effective Outcome**

The numerous factors that affect cultures and how those cultures evolve into their current status can be taught in the life chances method. As seen with jerk chicken, a background of slavery, oppression, occupation, and poverty forced Jamaicans to use this method as one means of cooking. To merely eat the food in a classroom and presume that this represents the Jamaican culture ignores the history and development of jerk chicken from a social and political context. However, from a life chances perspective, educators are asked to look at the different facets of a given culture and to really experience it, feel it, and research it.

To teach from a life chances perspective is difficult to do because educators have to acknowledge their own ignorance of cultural history. More important, life chances challenges educators to conquer their ignorance and change their notions of culture as more than what people eat. This act requires a shift in consciousness and a willingness to open up to different cultures.

## Life Chances As a Skill Builder for Educators

Life chances also asks educators to delegate research responsibilities to students. Learning is a two-way process, an interaction between students and educators. As classroom mediators, educators should give students proper direction. This is not to say that educators should lose control of their classes or not have their own personal convictions. However, students gain a broader scope of knowledge when they are allowed to participate in the learning process.

Life chances methodology forges interdisciplinary curriculum in college and classrooms. In conducting outside research, teacher education students are assigned extra material to read and are given guidance in discovering different sources and literary approaches. Perhaps they will find a biography in addition to encyclopedias. Some students who have never visited a library may now be required to do so and to learn to explore various sources. Their technology skills are important and can be developed as they research a given topic on the Internet or World Wide Web.

In assembling their findings, teacher education students hone their writing skills. They learn how to write a bibliography. They practice outlines for their presentations and can be creative in how they deliver their projects to their classmates. In group work, students research together in a cooperative setting and build interdependence, a necessary function in a multicultural environment. Many presentations involve films, slides, and data analysis.

Life chances teaching introduces teacher education students to an in-depth understanding of other cultures. For example, one research project I assign involves concentration on one ethnic group and its contemporary academic achievement. The students primarily choose a foreign country to study and gain a different perspective, shaking their beliefs and assumptions about the group. Life chances curriculum forces teacher education students to take a position and to become social activists. In life styles teaching, students are passive receptacles.

## Conclusion

If educators are to be change agents and social critics, they need to learn life chances and how to implement them and teach them to their students. Educators need to change how they teach and how they prepare teacher education students. On the one hand, life styles teaching does introduce one part of a culture, such as food, which is essential. However, life chances teaching explores the

nature of that food and its significance in the culture. It is this aspect of multicultural education that is lacking. To take culture to the next level, beyond food consumed, to why they are consumed in a certain way, is an introduction to the history and social conditions affecting a culture, shaping it into the form it is today. In the context of understanding the need for multicultural education, it is important that teacher education students be allowed avenues to explore core knowledge about the history, culture, and foundations of any society.

Life chances teaching gives depth to multicultural education, where life styles teaching leaves students without a context from which to understand the goals and foundation of multicultural education. If educators are to effectively fulfill these goals, multicultural education should be taught as more than food and clothing but as the framework for understanding the political and social context of a culture and how those factors have affected its people.

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## Suggested Reading

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## **Appendix A**

### **Life Chances Approach Lesson Plan**

*Description:* Food is often used to represent a given culture. However, within one culture can exist several different ethnic groups, as in the Jamaican culture. The different ethnic groups that have existed at some time or the other in Jamaica are the Arawak Indians, Africans, Chinese, Hindus, Jews, Germans, English, Scottish, and Irish. They have all impacted the culture, bringing with them their foods, celebrations, religion, music, and art.

An educator attempting to examine the cultural significance of jerk chicken should examine it in the context of the Jamaican culture and investigate several issues:

1. What is jerk chicken and from where does the name originate?
2. What prompted the use of jerk spice and how was it originally prepared?
3. Which ethnic group initiated the use of jerk spice?
4. How has the preparation of jerk chicken survived?
5. What political and social significance does jerk chicken have in relationship to the varying social classes in Jamaica?

Using a life chances approach allows teachers to perform in-depth analysis of cultural norms which can yield an understanding of the culture.

The lesson plan below demonstrates how a life chances approach can be used to teach about one aspect of the Jamaican culture.

*Grade Level:* College/University

*Duration:* One week

*Goal:* Students will gain an understanding of how different ethnic groups in Jamaica impact the culture.

*Objectives:*

1. Students will research and present their research on the different ethnic groups in Jamaica.
2. Students will examine what each ethnic group brought with them when they arrived in Jamaica.
3. Students will research the significance of certain foods, especially as they pertain to ethnic group of origin.

*Background Information for the Teacher:* This activity can be used as a way to teach Jamaican history and culture. More important, this activity should shed light on the contribution of the different ethnic groups to Jamaican society, as demonstrated through a Jamaican staple.

*Materials:*

Map of Jamaica

World map (Focusing on countries of origin for Jamaican ethnic groups)

Map of slave trade routes

Films on the history of Jamaica portraying slave life

Spice samples

Books (examples)

*Procedures:*

1. Students compile a timeline detailing the arrival of different ethnic groups from the 17th century through the 19th century.
2. Students read about the history of Jamaica, and list the different contributions that each ethnic group brought to the country.
3. Students will present their presentations and the evolution of jerk preparation for meats.

*Assessment:* Students will be assessed on how well they can analyze the impact of each ethnic group's input on the culture, using the example of the historical and cultural significance of jerk chicken.

## **Appendix B**

### **Life Styles Approach Lesson Plan**

*Description:* Food is often used to represent a given culture. In order to accommodate the different groups of students in a class, the teacher will assign a food day. Each student is asked to bring in the food from his or her native country or parents' native country. In order to accommodate Jamaican students, the teacher will ask the Jamaican students to bring in Jamaican food for all the students.

*Grade Level:* College/University

*Duration:* One week

*Goal:* Students will become familiar with the Jamaican culture by preparing and sharing Jamaican food items in class.

*Objectives:* Students will become familiar with Jamaican food to understand the culture.

*Background Information for the Teacher:*

1. Sharing food in class is an accepted demonstration of cultural sensitivity and understanding.
2. As students eat food, the teacher, without a historical context.
3. Students will present the food without presenting any kind of history behind the food.

Jerk chicken then represents the culture, without the historical context of why it is eaten in Jamaica.

*Materials:*

Map of Jamaica  
Ingredients for food  
Paper plates, plastic cutlery, napkins, beverages, and cups  
Jerk chicken

*Procedures:*

1. Have the teacher request volunteers to bring in jerk chicken to share with the class.
2. Tell the students the quantity of jerk chicken required to serve the class.
3. Tell the students when the "Food Day" is.
4. Allow students time before the "Food Day" to decorate.
5. Recruit students to prepare the food.

*Assessment:*

1. Have the students set up their decorations for "Food Day."
2. Have other teachers come in and judge the food.
3. Have students write about what they learned from "Food Day."
4. Give praise to students who prepared food for "Food Day."