

Guest editorial: Navigating diversity: multicultural education in divisive times

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Introduction

A resurgence of nationalist movements, a rise in hate crimes and a polarization of public discourse have been spreading across the globe. Consequently, educators today confront the increasingly difficult task of teaching in times and communities marked by heightened social and political divisions, including those related to issues of race, ethnicity, religion and nationality, among others. Yet, as tensions around potentially polarizing topics abound, so, too, does the need to prepare students for a diverse, increasingly globalized world, underscoring the urgency of promoting multicultural education for its capacity to support students in becoming effective citizens in pluralistic, democratic societies (Banks, 1995; see also Gorski and Swalwell, 2015; Novotney, 2023; Verkuyten *et al.*, 2019).

Multicultural education scholars (e.g. Banks, 2017; Sleeter, 2018) have extensively discussed the challenges – and imperatives – of addressing cultural diversity and social justice issues within educational settings. Banks's (1995) seminal work defines multicultural education as an idea, a reform movement and a process. At a basic level, Banks argues that all students should have “equal opportunities to learn, regardless of the racial, ethnic, social class or gender group to which they belong” (p. 391). Subsequent scholars, drawing on Banks's foundational work, have expanded the field toward more explicitly justice-oriented and anti-racist frameworks (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2018; Paris and Alim, 2017; Pollock, 2008; Sleeter, 2018). It is this intersection – the belief in the power of multicultural education, both within and despite the current politically challenging climate – that is at the heart of this special issue.

The promise – and precarity – of multicultural education was brought into sharp view by a 2025 USA Supreme Court hearing. In *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, the court ruled that parents could opt their elementary school children out of lessons involving LGBTQ+ narratives. The court cited that these lessons violated parents' First Amendment rights to the exercise of religion. The majority opinion argues that the books distributed to elementary school children are “designed to ‘disrupt’ children's thinking about sexuality and gender” (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2025, Majority Opinion, p. 1) and that this “poses a ‘very real threat of undermining’ the religious beliefs and practices parents wish to instill” (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2025, Majority Opinion, p. 2). The court's decision – that exposing students to new perspectives is dangerous, and parents have a right to shield their children from ideas that challenge existing beliefs – strikes at the core of multicultural education and meaningful learning. In a powerful dissenting opinion, Justices Sotomayor, Kagan and Jackson spoke directly to the power of public schools and multiculturalism. They argue that public schools are a cornerstone of our democracy in the USA, offering children of all faiths and backgrounds an “opportunity to practice living in our multicultural society” (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2025, Dissenting Opinion, p. 1). This language directly echoes Banks's early writing about the democratic potential of multicultural education. The ruling in *Mahmoud v. Taylor* dealt a blow to the opportunity for implementation of powerful and meaningful multicultural education in US schools. It is a stark reminder of how important – and how fragile – this work is at this pivotal political moment.

Thus, this special issue explores the multifaceted dimensions of multicultural education and its role in fostering inclusivity, empathy and understanding in diverse societies, including the USA and beyond. The papers in this issue vary in their conceptualization of what it means to exist and teach in divisive times. They offer innovative and timely insights into how



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multicultural education can be applied across different contexts, shaped by policy, geography and social realities.

Despite challenges, the authors featured in this issue emphasize a vital thread: *agency and hope*. While each author acknowledges the weight of political polarization, tension and division, they also illuminate possibilities – ways educators, communities and students can resist division and cultivate more inclusive, equitable spaces. Across the issue, hope emerges not as a passive sentiment but as an active, grounded force – a belief that even in contentious times, multicultural education offers tools for transformation. These contributions remind us that fostering belonging, understanding and justice within classrooms and communities is not only necessary but also possible.

Contributions to the issue

We think of this special double issue as being comprised of four subsections or collections that each take up a different context or topic while focusing on multicultural education in divisive times. The first subsection draws particular attention to *race, power and curriculum in divisive contexts* and includes the first three articles. These papers uniquely consider circumstances that are often ignored or not fully engaged in the framing of “divisive” educational contexts, and each offers practical implications for educators who seek to further the important work of justice-aligned approaches in potentially hostile, or at least inhospitable, environs.

Larissa Malone’s “Diversifying Curricula in the Deep North: Experiences of Educators of Color During Divisive Times” addresses the experiences of educators of color in the demographically whitest state in the USA, Maine, as the state seeks to racially diversify the curriculum. Even as their schools discursively embrace multicultural inclusion efforts, Malone’s participants describe meeting reluctance and opposition from colleagues. Malone calls out the importance of fostering belonging for educators – not just students – of color.

Sabrina Ross and Calvin Walton’s “Teaching against Antiracism within Divisive Educational Contexts” documents their professional learning work with cohorts of predominantly Afro-Caribbean teachers hired to teach in the US state of Georgia at the same time that the state passes legislation barring diversity-related language from educational curriculum. The authors offer practical implications for teacher educators desiring to cultivate teachers and teacher candidates’ socio-political consciousness, even in states with anti-diversity legislation and in a way that supports educators of color.

The final paper in this first collection, Melanie Waller’s “Navigating Political Polarization: The Challenges of Teaching Controversial Topics in Suburban Social Studies Classrooms” considers the choices US suburban teachers make in deciding when and how to incorporate hot-button topics into their history teaching. Waller importantly highlights the increasing political polarization in suburbs and offers a heuristic illustrating the factors that bound her participants’ pedagogical choices – including the influence of social media.

The second collection introduces *global and indigenous contexts* with two papers that take up issues related to community and family partnerships and relationships amidst contentious settings and present research that spans national borders. The first paper, “Impact of Geopolitical Conflicts on Education: Challenges for Mixed and Immigrant Families in East Asia,” by Zeljana Zmire and colleagues, considers how immigrant and multicultural families in Korea and Japan support their children’s education in light of geopolitical conflicts and related prejudices and challenges. The authors demonstrate the ingenuity and resilience of their participant families and offer implications for ways to continue supporting such families and young people in schools.

Christine Keller Lemley and colleagues' article, "Building a School Profile for Indigenous Students to Achieve Equitable Educational Outcomes," is a "notes from the field" piece that describes a school-community-university partnership in the US southwest supported by an international collaboration with a community in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The multinational research team shares their framework for how schools, communities and universities can work together, *relationally*, to ensure the academic success of students from Indigenous backgrounds specifically, and all students generally. In this paper, the divisive context addressed is the US schooling system that, from its inception, has perpetrated Indigenous erasure.

The third subsection addresses the specific question of what the role of *formal teacher education* is in preparing educators who are skilled at implementing multicultural education in divisive contexts. Katherine Cumings Mansfield and Brenda Rubio's "The Precarities of Teaching 'Race, Gender, and Class Issues in Education' in a State that Limits DEI Initiatives" presents a case study of how the authors navigated teaching a course on topics that were subsequently limited by state law. Helpfully, the authors walk through their process of considering the new legislation and the ultimate outcomes for their work.

Just as Mansfield and Rubio reveal what university educators know and do not know regarding their state's anti-DEI legislation, in "Teacher Perceptions of Critical Race Theory and Multicultural Education in 'Dangerous Times,'" Haniyeh Kheirkhah and Brittany Aronson present research on what teachers know or do not know about multicultural education and critical race theory. Kheirkhah and Aronson's work, also informed by their first-hand teacher education experience, illustrates the nuanced ways in which understandings or lack thereof impact teacher practice in "dangerous times."

Christina Dobbs and Madora Soutter's paper, "'I Don't Know Where to Start': A Self-Study of an Approach to Organizing Critical and Multicultural Pedagogic Approaches with Teachers," continues the focus on their own practice as teacher educators contending with the confusion of their teacher education students. Using duoethnographic methods, the authors describe their creation and use of a "continuum of change framework," included in the article, that they use to support educators' development of multicultural practice.

What pre- and in-service teachers do not know is a theme across the papers in this subsection that is also taken up in Dyce and colleagues' "I Didn't Know What I Didn't Know: Assessing an Innovative Teacher Education Certification Program Centering Interculturalism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion." The paper presents quantitative findings demonstrating the effectiveness of a particular approach to teacher education that supports educators' intercultural development, while also describing key aspects of that program.

Rounding out this collection of papers is Jeffrey Shengjun Ji and colleague's "Preparing Future Teachers for Multicultural Classrooms: The State of Play in Australia." Ji *et al.* provide a systematic review of the literature on multicultural education in Australian initial teacher certification programs, ultimately joining the voices of the other scholars in this subsection by demonstrating a gap in sufficient understanding and training for pre-service teachers.

The final collection of papers focuses on *multicultural and critical pedagogies in practice*. Each of these five papers offers very practical insights for K-12 and college educators seeking to do the work of forwarding multicultural, inclusive education in divisive times. Interestingly, two of these papers offer storytelling (and "story-listening") as promising approaches.

In Kushya Sugarman's "'I'm Just Becoming Okay with Being Incomplete': How an International, Multiracial Teacher Research Group Pursued a Nonexclusionary Whole Through Storywork," the author argues that to bridge divides in our present times, educators

must upend the certainty that characterizes our field. Instead of presenting, for instance, so-called “best practices” to aspiring educators, focusing on questioning and listening can be more generative in transforming practice. Sugarman specifically offers the method of “cascading stories” as one helpful approach in an international teacher inquiry group she led, writing: “The task for teacher educators is not to script what should be said, but to listen for what teachers’ stories are already asking.”

The second paper, Linsay DeMartino’s “Radically Supporting LGBTQIA2S+ Youth: Harnessing the Power of Storytelling for Critical Inclusivity in Pre-K-12 Schools” offers a conceptual argument for incorporating storytelling in Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). De Martino aptly describes how storytelling as praxis is uniquely suited to cultivate “brave spaces” in GSAs that can be radically inclusive.

The next two papers focus on civics or social studies education. Daicy Diaz-Granados’s “Standing in the Gap with students: Amplifying Multicultural Education with Culturally Sustaining Civics (CSC)” introduces her conceptualization of “Culturally Sustaining Civics.” As she argues, CSC is an orientation to civics education that supports students in becoming active participants in democratic processes. Diaz-Granados uses present – student protests and aftermath in Teaneck, New Jersey, USA – and historical – Puerto Rican educational activism in the USA in the 1970s – examples to demonstrate the promise and potential pitfalls of CSC versus other approaches.

In “Empathy, W. E. B. DuBois, and Us: A Process for Understanding People’s Experiences in the Past and Present,” Jay Shuttleworth focuses on developing historical empathy among his teacher education students through a specific instructional model. Namely, Shuttleworth offers a lesson plan model guided by the question: “How do we talk about our identity-based experiences, and how can that help us to empathize with the experiences of others in the past and present?”

We deliberately conclude the issue with Sheeba Jacobs’s “Cultivating Hope in Uncertain Times: Middle School Teacher Practices for Students and Themselves.” While all the papers in this issue focus on the work that educators, families, communities and students can engage in to support multicultural education in divisive times, we felt it key to explicitly close the issue with a piece that offers a framework for inculcating hope. Jacob both offers a broad review of the literature on hope in schools and then connects this with the experiences of eight middle school humanities teachers who center hope in their practice.

Aliza Greenberg’s review of Marit Dewhurst’s *Social Justice Art Education: A Framework for Activist Art Pedagogy* (2nd edition) is also included, given the promise of the book in presenting unique approaches to multicultural education in contentious times and places.

Concluding thoughts

Our goal for this special issue is to examine how educators working within the field of multicultural education can thoughtfully and effectively navigate increasingly divisive societal contexts while continuing to foster inclusivity, critical engagement and mutual understanding within their classrooms and school communities. At a time when political tensions and social fragmentation are on the rise, and confusion abounds, educators are often tasked with negotiating complex dynamics that extend far beyond the classroom. This issue brings together theoretical insights and practical strategies that respond to these realities, offering innovative and context-sensitive approaches to multicultural education.

The contributing papers emphasize the importance of holding tension between the local and immediate context of students and schools within the broader political and cultural landscape. As political divisions intensify – particularly in the USA – some of the

possibilities for engaging in meaningful multicultural education have become increasingly constrained by legislation, school policies and public discourse. These limitations underscore the urgency of situating multicultural education within its specific temporal, geographic and political moment. By doing so, educators can more effectively respond to the needs of their students and communities and resist approaches that flatten or depoliticize the work of multicultural teaching.

Finally, we would like to thank the contributors and reviewers who gave their time and energy to this special issue. Each article in this issue highlights the spaces for hope, agency and opportunity around multicultural education. We are so grateful to be engaged in this important work with these scholars.

Sherry Deckman

*Middle and High School Education, Lehman College and the Graduate Center,
City University of New York, Bronx, New York, USA, and*

Melanie Waller

Urban Education, Queens College, City University of New York, New York, USA

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