



EDUCATION IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

Multicultural education is an approach to teaching and learning that is based on democratic values that affirm cultural pluralism within culturally diverse societies in an interdependent world. There are currently two viewpoints or perspectives of multicultural education in the United States, namely the assimilation or “melting-pot” perspective and the pluralism or “global” perspective. The assimilation perspective of multicultural education is that micro cultures must give up their original culture and identities in order to blend in or become absorbed into the predominant Anglo-Western European culture. The global perspective of multicultural education recognizes cultural pluralism as an ideal and healthy state in any productive society and promotes equity and respect among the existing cultural groups. It extends beyond equity pedagogy. With the rapidly increasing interconnections among all nations, particularly now, as we face global issues related to the ecosystem, nuclear weapons, terrorism, human rights, and scarce national resources, institutions of higher education need to embrace the global perspective of multicultural education if we are going to remain models of democratic societies in a pluralistic world and stay academically competitive in relation to the rest of the world. The purpose of this article is to explain the global perspective of multicultural education and how institutions of higher education can use it to remain models of academic excellence in pluralistic and democratic societies.

Introduction:

Multiculturalism centers on the thought in political philosophy about the way to respond to cultural and religious differences. It is closely associated with “identity politics,” “the politics of difference,” and “the politics of recognition.” It is also a matter of economic interests and political power. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Despite the fact that

multiculturalism has mainly been used as a term to define disadvantaged groups, including African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled, many theorists tend to focus their arguments on immigrants who are ethnic and religious minorities, minority nations, and indigenous peoples.

Dewey, probably the most influential thinker and philosopher in progressive education, strongly opposes putting students into fixed categories or classes and treating them as a member of a class or group.¹ In other words, the school must provide a good balance between the curriculum, the teachers, and the administrators, as well as ensuring physical and moral conditions

What is multicultural education?

A good place to start is with a workable definition of what is meant by the terms “multiculturalism” and “multicultural education.” Multicultural education is a progressive approach for transforming education which holistically critiques and addresses current shortcomings, and discriminatory practices in education.² It is based on social justice, educational equity, and respect for thought. More specifically, the components required in ensuring a multicultural education are: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social culture.³ It seems apparent that each element, somehow, is related to the others, and each requires considerable attention, particularly when thinking about the efforts of conflict resolution in the world. In this paradigm, to be tolerant in social interactions, to give value to every opinion, and to not criticize and object to others seems to be the distinguishing features of a multicultural society. When people are overly harsh the result is destruction, while people who are trying to be constructive bring richness and reflection.⁴ The idea of “if you do not like something, make a better one” fits very well with the idea of multicultural education, in which the main task is to reduce the form, stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination between in-groups and out-groups.⁵ The same is true in education, as teaching has become a multicultural experience. Instead of fearing or ignoring the diversity in the classroom (and society), teachers can use diversity to enrich instruction. Multicultural education helps teachers to use diversity as a resource that can bring more meaning, tolerance, and opportunity to multicultural classroom. Both teachers and students belong to diverse groups distinguished by variables such as age, social class, gender, race, and ethnicity

Why do we need multicultural education?

We live in a world in which interracial conflicts and tensions seem to have become an inevitable phenomenon of daily life. On the positive side however, the last millennium has made us more knowledgeable about the nature of global acceptance, the equal-status situation, and mutual expectations. In today's society, as we enter the 21st century, the deepening ethnic background of nations, diversity within societies, and an increasing percentage of people who speak a second language have made multicultural education crucial. Multicultural education is seen as an opportunity to improve race relations and to help all students gain the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to take part in cross-cultural interactions. Children learn the difference when playing with one another.

For more than a century, education has been considered the linchpin of modernity and intimately linked to the development of both the nation and the individual citizen. During this time educational debates have also underlined the crisis and obstacles in organizing and transmitting the "right" kind of education in 'Multicultural' Societies" contributes to the critical analysis of education. Broad in its scope, it covers areas such as the challenges in multicultural education, educational institutions and identity formations, strategies for empowerment and topics including gender, informal education, religion and education, nationalism, ethnicity, youth and adult education, sociology, religious studies, linguistics, anthropology, folklore and cultural studies

A changing student body and atmosphere requires new tools, new strategies and resources. Teachers must be encouraged to look past the test scores to the identity of each student. In conceptualizing the individual, teachers must first acknowledge that his or her own distinctive character is shaped by gender, race, ethnicity, SES, language, religion, sexual orientation and other factors. Self concept or identity development begins early within the family unit and soon includes the interactions between these and learned/shared beliefs, values, customs and practices. These elements not only contribute to and construct individual identity they also impact the way individuals perceive the outside world. Multicultural education helps both teachers and their students develop a positive self-concept through shared knowledge about the histories, cultures and contributions of diverse groups teachers must have not only a firm command of their subject, they must have deep and thorough understanding of cultural differences in their students. Without such knowledge too many

teachers from the majority population are inclined to believe and to state openly that they "treat all students the same and that they themselves are "color blind. While such statements may be well-intended" in reality they often become a defense and an excuse against really understanding cultural difference. It isn't just a matter of being blind to color, it is a matter of becoming blind to culture as if it does not exist and makes no difference.

Should immigrant children be taught in their mother tongue? Should all be guided towards the same ideals, the same aspirations, and the same identity? Indeed, what is meant by 'common identity'? What leeway should be given for teaching or practicing different religions in schools? Should compensatory programs be established if ethnic differences result in social inequalities? How should teachers be prepared to deal with problems that did not even exist when they themselves went to school? Each one of these pertinent questions leads to many more. Educational planners may have their own answers. But they are not alone in wanting to influence decisions – parents and politicians also have their legitimate say. So, whoever says 'choice', says 'conflict'. There is no single right answer and views are often stronger than the evidence shown. Mixed populations often generate mixed emotions. Hence, educational planners who confront the choices and dilemmas of increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural societies must take stock, not only of the situation but also of policies others have put to test and the outcomes they have produced. If the first obligation of education – like medicine – is to do no harm, it follows that the first priority of educationists should not be to repeat the mistakes of others, but to learn and benefit from their best practices. This is this issue of the IIEP Newsletter provides a glimpse of the recent Policy Forum on Education in multi-ethnic and multicultural societies held at the IIEP Headquarters in Paris to mark its 40th Anniversary, which showed how widely policies vary among nations providing a great diversity of real life experiments, with a mixed bag of outcomes. At the same time this is the best point of departure for learning: variation produces information. The glimpses also illustrate a more general point, namely how IIEP goes about its mandate: by taking stock of a situation, mapping out the problems generated and evaluating the solutions attempted in order to identify best practices and guidelines that could be applied in diverse settings Multicultural Education is an idea which has reached its time. Carrying the legacy of the 1960's and 1970's, a period of profound social change when the people of the United States were forced to reexamine their cultural heritage, multicultural education has emerged in the 1990's to address the educational needs of a society that continues to struggle with the

realization that it is not monoculture, but is an amalgamation of many cultures. Some European Union countries have introduced policies for "social cohesion", "integration", and (sometimes) "assimilation". The policies include: compulsory courses and/or tests on national history, on the constitution and the legal system (e.g., the computer-based test for individuals seeking naturalization in the " values. In Baden-Württemberg immigrants are asked what they would do if their son says he is a homosexual. (The desired answer is that they would accept it).prohibitions on Islamic dress — especially the niqab (often misnamed as burqa).

Much of the overt and covert national conflict about race, ethnicity, social class, and gender in the U. S. has been based in the mythology of a superior culture into which all others must be assimilated. The imbalance of power between the dominant culture and subjugated cultures has created centuries of aggression, antagonism, and resistance. Fortunately, the concept that cultural differences enrich, rather than diminish, our society is increasingly acknowledged. It is the suppression of cultures that weakens the society. The ongoing discourse and practice of multicultural education is an effort to mine the possibilities of plurality through education Ethnic minorities and women of the 1970's confronted the racism and sexism of society reflected in monoculture education. Ethnic studies and women's studies were developed to add their traditionally silenced voices to the analysis and development of the culture of the United States. Multicultural education of the 1990's continues that tradition on the K-12 level and takes five, sometimes interconnected, directions. Sleeter (1996) delineates five approaches to multicultural education:

Many people today, even those who already live in a multi-cultural society, have problems dealing with "others," and blame each other for certain issues blaming each other because of our origins or culture is not the solution. Rather, trying to understand and analyze people for their personal values and cultural diversity will help to mobilize and construct a caring society. As a matter of fact, religion teaches us to tolerate others and accept that people live in different groups and societies. The beauty and uniqueness of diversity is expressed in the Holy Qur'an and in the New Testament

Racism in the U.S. has created an educational system which continues to ignore the culture of students of color in learning and tracks many of them into continued subordinate positions in society. A restructuring of schools to meet their needs is essential. However, children of color

do not live in a vacuum. In a democratic, multicultural society all children must be educated about the multiple strands of the past that have created the webs of the present

Multicultural education also provides a perspective for math and science. Ethno-mathematics (Nelson-Barber & Estrin, 1995; Tate, 1995) presents a view of mathematical thinking that incorporates the ways in which culture and mathematics are intertwined. Math is an aspect of all cultures. In the sciences there is the opportunity to study environments from the perspectives of the diversity of cultural knowledge, to approach nonwestern science as legitimate knowledge construction, or to include social justice as an aspect of science (Sleeter, 1996; Harding, 1998)

It is the breadth of multicultural education which makes it such a profound change in the ways we think about education. Banks (1997b) describes the dimensions of multicultural education in five overlapping areas in which researchers and practitioners are involved. Content integration is the inclusion of materials, concepts, and values from a variety of cultures in teaching. Knowledge construction is the recognition that all knowledge is socially constructed, created in the minds of human beings to explain their experience and thus, can be challenged. Ideas that shape society do change.. Equity pedagogy is involved when teachers alter their teaching methods to accommodate the various cultural differences of diverse students to stimulate academic achievement. Prejudice reduction concerns, changing the students' attitudes towards differences of race and ethnicity teaching tolerance about religion, physical and mental abilities, and sexual preference. An empowering school culture is the dimension of multicultural education that enables the other four dimensions. Educators must examine the structures of education that impede learning and empower students and families from "diverse racial, ethnic, and gender groups". The aim is to create schools that encourage the full development of all students. Multicultural education is about social change through education. It requires deep and critical thinking, imagination, and commitment to another tomorrow, inclusive of the wealth of all of our stories and peoples. It is another aspect of the continuous human journey toward justice and pushes us toward the fulfillment of the promises of democracy. It gives us new questions to ask and directions to follow to uncover human possibilities in the new millennium. (Greene (1995),)

Conclusion

Multicultural education is a new trend and it will become incorporated into most school curriculums in future years. Several prestigious universities in the world today require students to take social studies. Thus, by using multicultural education, teachers, in particular, can help children value the significance of treating all people with self-esteem and not judging groups of people for the actions of a few. More importantly, teachers must model tolerance and compassion in their words and behavior. They should also encourage children to explore their feelings about prejudice and hatred. In doing this, the society will secure a better chance to stop any further destruction and will be able to present potentially powerful opportunities for the next generation to learn and integrate respect and dignity for all people

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