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Multicultural Teaching: Critical-reflective approaches

Abstract

There has been a growing recognition of the need for teachers to examine and to come to greater understanding about multicultural policies in Canada. What is less clear, however, is the kind of approach which best facilitates multicultural awareness. It is argued that Critical Pedagogy (as developed by Giroux, following Freire) provides a promising new framework for the consideration of multicultural ideology and for comparison between this and alternatives such as the anti-racist ideology being currently promoted within the British educational system. It is concluded that the processes of critical reflection are crucial to greater understanding of multiculturalist ideology, in the context of which multi-ethnic education in Canada is currently being developed.

Many educators have recognized for some time that all Canadian teachers will benefit from some in-depth understanding of the issues underlying multicultural policy and the implementation of such policy in the multi-ethnic classroom. What is less clear and more debatable than this, however, is the question of what is the best way to bring about such understanding, of what are the central issues, and of how background knowledge and classroom practise are related to each other.

Various proposals have been made recently about what should be included in teacher preparation programs. Banks (1986), for example, argues that teachers need training which relates to their individual positions on a spectrum of personal awareness having six stages as follows:

1. *Cultural-psychological captivity*: where individuals internalize negative beliefs about their own ethnic groups,

2. *Cultural encapsulation*: where individuals practice ethnocentric separatism,
3. *Cultural identity clarification*: where individuals accept themselves and have clarified their attitudes towards their ethnic groups,
4. *Biculturalism*: where individuals have skills and attitudes to participate in two ethnic or cultural groups,
5. *Multiculturalism and reflective nationalism*: where individuals have reflective knowledge about their ethnic and national identities and the ability to function in a range of groups, and
6. *Globalism and global competency*: where individuals have reflective and positive identifications and the ability to function world-wide (see Banks, 1986, p. 18).

Banks' stages may be helpful for conceptualizing the gradual development of individuals towards an ideal point of multicultural maturity, but they are less informative when it comes to describing the details of the developmental process, to describing, that is, either what kinds of activities and knowledge will contribute most effectively to such development or what kinds of thinking underlie the stages. For example, do the "reflective identifications" at stage 6 mean that all thought of racial or ethnic distinctions, exorcised in favour of a version of multiculturalism, admits of no intercultural division, or does it mean that, while such divisions are perceived, they are simply not recognized in overt behaviour? Does such an ideal level of attainment, moreover, imply the absence of internal conflict and doubt? Banks himself recognizes the need for "[m]ore research and theory . . . about the kinds of training strategies and teaching techniques that work best with different kinds of teachers and students" (p. 19), and he acknowledges the full complexity of the issues when he calls for a "multi-factoral" multicultural paradigm to be implemented in the schools which takes account of attitudes, values, assessment procedures, curriculum, and racism, along with matters of status and individual motivation (p. 23).

What seems clear from all of this is the need to involve both **cognitive** and **affective** knowledge in developing multicultural awareness. There is little use in knowing everything about cultural history, or about the politics of multiculturalism, on the one hand, without some parallel development of sensibility towards cultural identity – one's own and other people's – on the other. There is every reason to suppose, moreover, that feelings which remain consistent and strong in the face of cultural variation in the classroom will develop most effectively in company with at least some knowledge of the historical, political, and psychological background to multicultural society. It seems that coming to understand more about multiculturalism involves both the heart and the mind; it involves both self-reflection and empathy, together with some more objective work on cultural theory. In reviewing the models so far proposed for helping teachers come

to grips with multiculturalism, Gay (1986) reflects these requirements when she finds that what is common to them is that they all emphasize "some combination of content and process, knowledge and skills, cognition and affect, personal growth and professional development" (p. 163). According to Gay, there are four components to preparing for multiculturalism: "understanding different theoretical conceptions and ideologies of ethnic pluralism and multiculturalism," the study of philosophical assumptions concerning multicultural education, study of the different characteristics and sociopolitical experiences of ethnic groups, and the learning of "skills and techniques for teaching ethnically different students, and for teaching multicultural content to all students" (p. 173).

If developing multicultural awareness involves both cognition and affect, it also involves thinking in ways that are both **critical** and **reflective**. This, in turn, implies that multicultural policy and philosophy themselves must be subject to critical inquiry. Certainly, there are alternatives to multiculturalism which can be considered, alternatives which, although they may be aimed like multiculturalism at achieving some acceptable, morally appropriate and workable form of pluralism, yet differ with multiculturalism on what are the best ways of achieving such a goal. In the Canadian context, there have in fact been several kinds of attack launched against multiculturalist policy. Mallea (1984) identifies six general sources of objection: first, it is illogical to have, on the one hand, an official policy of bilingualism which emphasizes two main linguistic and cultural groups and, on the other, a multicultural policy which emphasizes the equal importance of all ethnic groups; second, multicultural policy denies the aboriginal rights of native peoples; third, the policy treats Canada's non-official language groups as homogeneous, when there are substantial differences between them – for example, some wish to intensify cultural maintenance, while others are disinterested in it; fourth, multiculturalism is insufficiently well defined; fifth, as a result of unclear definition, the policy works towards maintaining groups rather than individuals in a way which erodes individual mobility; and sixth, the policy has duplicity in that it "enables government to praise the values of individualism and pluralism simultaneously" (pp. 10-11).

It is possible, then, that a well-developed critical understanding of the issues might lead to some dissatisfaction with multiculturalism, perhaps even to a complete rejection? Or can teachers work within a framework of acceptance of the general aims of multiculturalism while remaining skeptical about some individual aspects of the policy? Confronting these questions leads us to consider some of the more exacting problems associated with multicultural classroom teaching. In particular, it forces us to recognize some foundational questions in the field of multicultural education, and even to some logical contradictions that are difficult, if not

impossible, to resolve. What I will attempt to do in the rest of this paper is to specify some of these conceptual challenges in concise form, and to place them within the context of a critical pedagogy. Finally, it will be possible to return to consider the question of the range of viable interpretations of multiculturalism for classroom practise.

Critical Pedagogy and Multiculturalism

Freire (1973) described the state of "critical consciousness" in a true democracy as follows:

The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's "findings" and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them . . . (p. 18)

Giroux and others have more recently developed these ideas into a "critical pedagogy" intended to heighten levels of critical awareness about the educational process both in the classroom and during teacher preparation (Giroux and McLaren, 1986).

Some of the central ideas in critical pedagogy have particular significance for the education of minority group students. First, Giroux insists on the importance of helping students in oppressed social groups to think about thinking itself – that is, to think about how they have come to feel oppressed and how, by way of this thinking, they may have become "accomplices to their own subjugation" (1983, p. 35). Second, what this also involves is thinking about the **dominant ideologies** in society through which social groupings are structured and through which cross-cultural relations are established. Giroux sees cultural relations as "problematical": i.e., they require critical attention since such relations are legitimated differently across cultures and are inseparable from particular forms of political and social control. Third, schools should be seen as "cultural sites that embody conflicting political values, histories, and practices" (1983, p. 37), as places where student groups, together with teacher and administrative groups, struggle for social identity and position, where groups are quite naturally both formed and protected. Fourth, cultural minority groups need to affirm themselves, to affirm their own cultural histories and their internal relationships in everyday life (p. 37). Fifth, ideologies are to be seen as potential teaching tools, which they can use to initiate open classroom discussion about matters of culture and power and to stimulate active critical inquiry rather than passive acceptance. (A critical pedagogy treats ideology as the "terrain for self-reflection and transformative action" [p. 145].)

Finally, this "transformative action" involves high levels of critical consciousness which lead to the development of students and teachers as "engaged" citizens, capable of asking critical questions about their environment and of generating resistance when necessary. Teachers, further, are described ideally as "transformative intellectuals," who are able to engage their students in discussing the most appropriate questions in the classroom about society and about how knowledge is distributed through the "hidden curriculum" (see Giroux, 1983, pp. 60, 66, 71; Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 215).

These critical pedagogical principles clearly have bearing upon the interpretation of multiculturalism, since multiculturalism, like democracy itself, is an ideology which has potential for establishing and maintaining social control. The language of multiculturalism calls for the peaceful coexistence of minority and majority cultural groups, for the separate development of minority groups within the framework of a benign pluralism, and yet, as we have seen, many critical questions have been raised concerning the actual outcomes of such an ideology (see Mallea, above).

Giroux calls for the open confrontation of critical questions such as these statements above. At a practical level, this might involve students in discussing topics ranging from that of how different cultures are described in social science textbooks to that of the implications of holding ethnic celebrations in their schools. A critical pedagogical approach interpreted within the Canadian context, then is one which both stimulates open questioning of multiculturalism and validates justified resistance to it. It is an approach which would seem to have potential for yielding heightened levels of cultural awareness in both students and teachers and, ultimately, one which has potential for helping to achieve a brand of pluralism which is sufficiently robust to stand the tests of intercultural conflict and of time. What, then, are some of the more specific issues that will focus critical awareness about multiculturalism? It has been my own experience that three issues, in particular, that have great impact on individual interpretation of multicultural ideology have surfaced in classroom discussion with teachers. The first concerns the dangers of multicultural ideology *per se*, the second concerns the comparative merits of a "multicultural" as opposed to a more overt "anti-racist" stance, and the third concerns what might be called "the paradox of pluralism."

The problem of multiculturalism as ideology

Some of the major sources of danger with multiculturalism are well expressed in the six points of counter-attack presented by Mallea (above). In addition to these, however, is the even more invidious possibility that

Canadian multicultural ideology is nothing more than a well-conceived plot to exploit ethnic diversity for purposes of economic gain. Part of this has much to do with the idea implicit in Giroux's program that ideology can sometimes act as a kind of anaesthetic to political consciousness, a process leading in the end to depoliticization.

Some vibrant criticisms of the depoliticizing nature of Canadian multicultural policy, indeed, have been put forward by Moodley (1983, 1984), who argues that:

Canadian multiculturalism greatly resembles the emperor's new clothes. Only unlike the emperor's audience, Canadian professional ethnics, cultural entrepreneurs and a coterie of academics are more directly and amply rewarded for their fantasies. It is they who benefit most from multiculturalism and the big business of culture. (1983, p. 321)

The principal danger seems to lie in the fact that once a policy such as multiculturalism has been developed and disseminated, it becomes a *status quo* which reflects neither the true feelings of cultural sub-groups nor the constant dynamic changes in society. On this point, Moodley argues that the character and motivations of recent immigrants to Canada have substantially changed in the direction of a need for upward mobility and to put aside what are seen to be the limiting obstacles of minority ethnic identity (pp. 325-327).

Another major problem, according to Moodley, concerns the continued dominance of the official bilingual policy allowing only English or French in education, broadcasting and business, thus reinforcing a linguistic political hierarchy rather than equality of multicultural opportunity. Perhaps the greatest danger of all, though, lies in the gradual change from an ethnically inspired version of multiculturalism towards one based upon economic and pragmatic criteria in which "[t]he instrumental value of multiculturalism is seen in better serving external markets and improving the country's sales image" (p. 326). In this sense, multiculturalism serves to tap the source of foreign expertise in its ethnic minorities for purposes of economic negotiation abroad, negotiation further supported by a strong image of equality at home. In this way, multiculturalism promotes unity in the service of its international image, covering up any underlying problems of discrimination and inequality in the interests of affording "external legitimacy to a heterogeneous state" (p. 330). Moodley's overall view of the ideological distortion produced by multicultural policy is perhaps best summed up in her critique of the federal government's report entitled *Equality Now*, in which she charges that the image of Canada as "one big happy family" does not truly represent the underlying reality, and that:

Such a utopia obfuscates the reality of wealth, differential power and political conflict generally. The image deflects criticism away from the dominance of the few and the manipulation of the many to the false sentiment that everyone is equal if he or she is only made to feel welcome. Despite the professed concern for more active political involvement, the ideology of equal opportunities and harmonious partnership (in the report) in fact depoliticizes the newcomers. (Moodley, 1984, p. 797)

It is clear, both from the criticisms identified by Mallea and from those more detailed charges of Moodley, then, that there is much substance for critical discussion by teachers and the students having to do with the foundations of multicultural ideology and with how such ideology can be manipulated and used for economic benefit abroad and social control at home.

It is not only in Canada where serious concerns have been raised about these ideological characteristics. Comparison with the British experience is especially enlightening here, just as it is concerning anti-racist ideology (see below). Over a decade ago, Troper (1976) wrote that faith in multiculturalism in Britain had "virtually become an end in itself . . . One suspects that almost any program can get approval, and any expenditure authorized, if it is done in the name of multiculturalism" (p. 3). A recent review of anti-racist teaching practise, by Brandt (1986), is directed "in crucial opposition to the white multicultural tradition," in the context of a field "dominated by the liberal outpourings of mainly white multiculturalists," and in the interests of challenging "both the edifice of liberal racist 'scholarship' and the racist educational system in which this 'scholarship' is embedded, legitimated, and perpetuated" (p. vii).

The next critical question of interest, then, lies in asking why Canada continues to pursue multiculturalism, rather than exposing and politicizing racial disharmony, and in asking whether or not anti-racist policies are warranted. A useful way of focusing the issues here is to be found in some further reference to Britain and, in particular, to recent developments within the Inner London Education Authority.

Multiculturalism vs. Anti-racism.

In reviewing the politics of race in Britain over the 1960s and '70s, Ben-Tovin and Gabriel (1982) present a picture of growing government restriction on immigrants from the "New Commonwealth," together with public alienation of black workers who managed to settle in Britain. They refer to these immigration policies themselves as a form of "state racism"

leading to the public perception that "black people are in themselves a problem and the fewer we have of them the better" (p. 146). In the present decade, concern in liberal political and academic circles about the black experience in Britain has grown considerably, and this is especially evident in responses to racism in schools. Husband (1982) presents transcripts of interviews with black immigrants to Britain which represent some of their typical kinds of experiences. A teacher, for example, describes the "daily tide of abuse from his pupils" as follows, where each of the movements in British society mentioned is founded on racism:

... they call me, you know, "Paki" and "Paki out," and they scrawl on the door of my teaching room. I mean, I've been in the school for seven years but now things are deteriorating. They may say, well, we're doing it for a laugh or something like that, but then they are influenced by the older people you see, because in that area where I live there are, you know, lots of demonstrations organized by the British Move-ment. . . . They write on my blackboard, they write BM, and then they have these Nazi signs you know under their lapel and they show it to me and they ask me to read their leaflets, they carry them around. Oh, yes, I know – the leaflets from these various movements, the New National Front, the National Front, the British Movement, kids now start saying to me, oh, you have taken our job: suddenly they have found that I have taken their job, so why don't I go back, you Paki, you see, they shout. (p. 190)

Evidence abounds that these are by no means isolated instances. (See, for example, other interviews in the same collection, and the extensive transcripts in the study by Sherwood, 1980.)

In an attempt to confront racism head-on, many British Education Authorities and, in particular, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) have replaced benign multiculturalism with overt anti-racism. The growing realization of the racial factor in education has led the ILEA (1983) to issue formal anti-racist statements and, more generally, to politicize race at every level of schooling. In particular, the Authority has demanded that:

... all educational establishments, through their staff and governing or managing bodies and in association with the committees they serve, prepare and publicize carefully thought-out statements of their position. This must be seen as part of the Authority's legal and educational commitment. (pp. 3-4)

This ideological orientation, then, provides a stark alternative to Canadian multiculturalism and a significant contrast through which it can be better understood.

One possible reaction to the British position might be to argue that such anti-racist ideology is appropriate in Britain but not in Canada, where history, immigration policies, and demographic distribution are simply different and have not led to inter-racial tension. Such an idealistic interpretation, however, seems to be quite unjustified in light of recent Canadian analyses of racism. Barrett (1984), for example, describes in some detail the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in major Canadian cities, as well as those of other racist groups like the Western Guard. Both Barrett and Wyatt (1984) support the general conclusions about Canadian racism drawn by Patel (1980), who stresses the need for greater attention to racism and the danger of assuming that "if we ignore racism it will go away" (Wyatt, 1984, p. 96). D'Oyley (1984) further describes racial minority groups in Canada as having come to realize how "many majority race-managed institutions operate with very little caring for the survival of minority individuals from some particular strands" (p. 161). While the situation in Canada may not be as severe as that in Britain, then, there seems, in light of a growing number of racist incidents in major cities (see Barrett, 1984) and of the presence of organized anti-racist groups, every reason to suppose that vigilance is necessary if a similar development is to be avoided. Comparison with Britain reveals the danger of the obfuscation and oversimplification of racial issues in multiculturalist policy, and it suggests that much more overt recognition of social conflict may, indeed be warranted in at least some educational arenas.

The paradox of pluralism

The dilemma faced by educators pursuing multiculturalism is easily stated; it lies in working at one and the same time for ethnic **separation** (by encouraging ethnic affirmation) and for social **integration**. In discussing various pluralistic options in education, Appleton (1983), however, describes the version of pluralistic ideology taking complete autonomy and self-determination of ethnic groups for its main objective as only one of several possibilities. Another possibility is to treat ethnic affirmation as a matter of free choice (pp. 92-93). Arguments about multicultural pluralism, though, can be seen to be part of an even more fundamental debate about "cultural relativity."

Whorf (cited in Fishman, 1982) suggested that each culture is unique and that thought and language are culture-bound (or relative to different cultures). The deep paradox here is that if this idea be accepted, at least in its extreme form, it means that cultures cannot be understood "from the outside" – that Canadians, for example, cannot come truly to know other cultures represented in its immigrant population such as Chinese, Italian, or Punjabi. And, conversely, that immigrants can have no understanding of "Canadian culture" – be it English or French. What this potentially leads to

in classroom policy is the complete separation of cultures, a form of fragmentation in which integration is totally abandoned as an objective. Obviously, this is as unacceptable an educational response to the fact of multi-ethnicity as is any form of total assimilationism by which no acknowledgement is admitted of separate ethnic identity.

Fortunately, several theorists have suggested ways to find a middle or compromise position between these extremes. Fishman (1973, 1982, 1983) has argued, for example, that Whorf's true intention, an intention that he did not make clear enough, was not to stress the "unknowability" of other cultures but rather to stress the need to recognize ethnic diversity as the basis of cultural sensitivity and learning. Fishman (1983) argues that this was the spirit of Whorf's cultural relativity hypothesis, a version which he calls "Whorfianism of the Third Kind."

Zec (1981) finds another way out of the paradox by developing the notion of "cultural respect," or the kind of respect for other cultures that involves "someone who from where he stands seeing something in another culture and valuing it" (pp. 35-36). Critical evaluation of the paradox, then, can lead to workable compromises for teaching.

Summary and conclusions

Following a review of some representative prescriptions for teachers' multicultural awareness as put forward by Banks (1986) and Gay (1986), it was argued that critical reflection about multiculturalism, together with acknowledgment of some of its ideological dangers and drawbacks, will be necessary if the cause of pluralism is to be served properly. While ideologies such as multiculturalism and anti-racism may each be elaborated in the attempt to attain similar political and educational objectives, they may differ substantially in their expression of how such objectives are to be achieved. Reference was made to several well-known objections to multiculturalism identified by Mallea (1984). To these could be added, as the review showed, the objection that the reality of inter-racial tensions as they are to be found in Canadian society is both obfuscated and ignored in such a policy. It was argued that the model of Critical Pedagogy, as developed by Giroux and others, gives further direction and impetus to teachers' critical and reflective examination of multiculturalism, and that there were three perspectives in particular that are of use in focusing such an examination: (1) recognition of the potential of multicultural ideology, as ideology, to become exploited by political and economic interests; (2) recognition of the alternative overt approach of anti-racist; and (3) recognition of the paradoxical nature of any policy-making (together, of course, with classroom decisions and curriculum design) that is founded in the perception of cultures as separate and of culture-bound thought as "relative."

Contrasts with Britain are particularly pertinent to a critical analysis of the Canadian scene, both for the reasons already stated and also, it could be added, in light of the recent placement of additional restrictions on refugees from Central America. Comparison with Great Britain provides insights both at the level of educational systems and at that more general level by which immigration policies have a tendency to exacerbate public discrimination more generally. Consideration of all of these themes contributes to a critical understanding of multiculturalism.

Apart from the need for critical examination of these issues within the Canadian educational context, several other conclusions seem possible. First, it seems that there can be no "set" definition of multiculturalism that will be appropriate to all educational situations; sometimes affirmation of ethnic groups may be a viable objective, while on other occasions such emphasis may be contrary to the motivations of particular groups of students. Second, it may in some situations be necessary to emphasize anti-racist ideology with an explicit recognition of racial conflict if progress is to be made either in particular educational settings or, more generally, towards a balanced pluralism.

The overall conclusion from the above review is that teachers, if they are to be the "transformative intellectuals" described by Giroux and McLaren, must remain sensitive to and able to analyze various educational situations in ways which permit these different approaches and emphases. Multiculturalism is an ideology which it is sometimes tempting to accept without critical reflection. In extreme cases, such critical reflection on issues such as those outlined here may entail completely rejecting multicultural dogma; at the very least, it involves constant recognition of the dangers of generalizing such ideology across all Canadian educational situations. Attention to minority students' own reactions to multiculturalism may in the end be our best guarantee of avoiding the pitfalls of ideological anaesthesia.

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