

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON MULTICULTURALISM IN EDUCATION

RATNA GHOSH *McGill University*

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It is with great pleasure that I thank my colleagues in the Faculty of Education, and McGill University, specially its Board of Governors for appointing me to the Macdonald Chair. I succeed Dr. Margaret Gillett and know that hers will be a tough act to follow. I am glad that Dean Wall has explained what the Chair means. I had realized, of course, that the Chair is not something I can sit on, nor is Macdonald associated in this case with fast food — rather, it is connected with the generosity of William C. Macdonald and represents a position of honour and prestige. In true McGill tradition, it is honorific without an honorarium!

I will speak today briefly about some new theoretical perspectives on multiculturalism in education. As we all know, multiculturalism is not a new concept but it is still hotly debated and highly controversial. In recent times it has been misconstrued as political correctness. It stands for a wide range of social ideas and practices and its meaning is still evolving. As such, it is a dynamic concept — to fix its meaning would be to delimit its possibilities.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Why multicultural education?

Although all immigrant societies such as Canada, United States, Australia, and Britain have multicultural education, Canada was the first country to have a policy of multiculturalism at the federal level (1971) which was followed by an Act eighteen years later. The impact of

multicultural policy in education has varied widely across Canada because the legislation is federal, while education is a provincial responsibility. In societies where education has been monocultural and assimilationist, multicultural education is a recognition of ethno-cultural diversity, and a response to the equality issue in modern democracies. While multiculturalism policy in Canada is aimed at a "just" society, multicultural education programs are an attempt at reducing the school-performance and achievement gap between the dominant group and minority ethno-cultural groups.

In its initial stages, multicultural education programs emphasized cultural pluralism (knowledge of other cultures), and remedial education (mostly language learning) for minority group students, consistent with the traditional concept of education as passive learning. While programs such as the "sarees, samosas and the steel band approach" have been concerned primarily with superficial expressions of a static view of cultures, many of the other approaches are criticized for depoliticizing culture, focusing on "minority ethnic groups" or "cultural communities" as add-ons to a monocultural concept of education. Over time, the shift in focus to equity and anti-discrimination measures have widened the meaning of multicultural education through programs such as anti-racist education and feminist pedagogy. These programs, strengthened by policy initiatives and legislation both at the federal and provincial levels, have been effective in bringing about some changes in opportunity structures for minority groups.

The impact of 25 years of multicultural policy in Canada.

In 1965, John Porter depicted Canadian society in *The Vertical Mosaic* as one of hierarchy based principally on ethnicity, class, and gender. Recent studies in the 1990s indicate that the impact of multicultural legislation has been negligible in Canadian society — ethnicity continues to exert its influence on academic and occupational achievement. The penetration of members of some ethnic groups into elite professions has not changed ethnic and gender stratification in society. Here I want to make a distinction between social inequality (a universal phenomenon) from ethnic and gender stratification (group hierarchy) which are also very much a reality.

Traditional multicultural practice is seen as obscuring the persistence of inequality in society, while anti-racist education is criticized for being reformist, not transformative. A major criticism of existing concepts of multiculturalism is the exclusive concern with the Other, i.e., those

who are different. These issues have brought about an effort to redefine multiculturalism and its practice in education.

The concept of critical multiculturalism from which a transformative multicultural education is emerging involves notions of voice and representation, identity and empowerment of all students, male and female, and not only students of ethno-cultural groups.

The attempts at redefinition have been made possible as a result of dramatic changes, mainly in two spheres. The first, a crisis in contemporary social and literary theory which began in the 60s, is represented by a wide variety of developments known as postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial theories, as well as feminist theories. Although diverse in their range and interpretation, their influence for multicultural education and a critical pedagogy has been significant. Out of these theories have come new notions of knowledge, culture, difference, identity, and fragmented subjectivity.

Second, shifts in the global political economy and a global consciousness have challenged traditional cultural boundaries and made possible the emergence of new perspectives in cultural transformation. The globalization of identity politics based on international economic position and interest defy national boundaries and traditional class affiliations. The shifts in identity are organized around global survival and these bring issues of environment and sustainable development to the forefront, making social justice and liberation issues critical.

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Dramatic shifts in the concept of knowledge.

The crisis in epistemology (theory of knowledge) challenges the very basis of how knowledge of the external world is acquired. This has revolutionized thinking both in the social and natural sciences. What is knowledge? How is it acquired? What counts as knowledge? These questions are very significant for education because pedagogy is the process through which knowledge is produced and acquired.

What is knowledge? Traditional education insisted on one truth because there was one way of knowing. Knowledge was produced by experts and thought to be "value-free". Contemporary theories have uncovered the relationship between knowledge and power. They point to the highly political and subjective nature of knowledge because it serves the interests of the group in power and represents a world-view which is

predominantly Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian, middle-class, White, and male-oriented. Knowledge is now seen increasingly as being historically located and socially constructed. The recognition that school knowledge is far from neutral provides a significant explanation as to how it serves students of different groups unequally. As Pierre Bourdieu (1973) noted, the “cultural capital” or the knowledge of schools is related to social stratification. If knowledge is politically based, historically embedded, and socially constructed, and therefore, subjective, then questions arise as to what constitutes acceptable “knowledge”.

Feminists were the first to challenge the traditional theory of knowledge or epistemology in which the white, middle-class male “colonize definitions of the norm” (Giroux, 1991, p. 225) and represents all human experience as universal. Feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern scholars assert that the claim of “universal” is largely inapplicable to the historical experiences of women (and peoples of other races, ethnicities, and classes). They reject the idea of universal or overarching philosophies (called metanarratives) which are meant to represent “universal truths” and maintain, to quote Giroux, that “there is no tradition or story that can speak with authority and certainty for all of humanity” (Giroux, 1991, p. 231). It should be pointed out that this is not an assault on Europeans but on Eurocentrism (1). Nor is the idea to replace traditional knowledge, but rather to validate and learn about other forms of knowledge.

How is knowledge acquired? Knowledge characterizes the way we look at the world. This suggests different ways of knowledge construction representing different world-views. As such, students are active knowers at the centre of the learning process, rather than at the receiving end acquiring knowledge as objects. As Freire (1970) has pointed out, knowledge is not an object to be transmitted from the teacher who has the commodity (knowledge), to the students who do not.

What counts as knowledge? Schools promote specific notions of knowledge and power by rewarding specific forms of behaviour. But if truth is based on different ways of knowing, then student experiences — their historical, social, and cultural conditions — must be viewed as primary sources of knowledge so that they can be involved actively in the educational process.

THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

Audrey Lorde (1984) points out that it is not the differences in themselves but the social construction and *conceptualization* of these differ-

ences that divide people. Those who are different become the Other and their histories, cultures, and experiences are denigrated and/or eradicated. Jacques Derrida (1973) coined the neologism "différance" to imply the "unheard" and abstract element in conceptualizing difference because the *a* in "différance" is only seen and not heard.

The Oxford Dictionary defines difference as "that which distinguishes one thing from another". "Difference" is a comparative term, it is relational and it is created. The creation of the Other implies deviance from the "norm" — in standards of excellence, achievement, evaluation. Different from what? This requires definition of the norm: those at the centre of power, the dominant group (namely, the white, male, middle-class, European, heterosexual who represents the "standard of and the criteria for rationality and morality" [Rothenburg, 1990, p.47]). All those who are not in that image are different and the universal norm denies the legitimacy of other expressions of culture. Differences in race, ethnicity, gender, and class are social constructions. For example, contemporary science, based on advanced DNA, analysis shows that biologically there are no races. However, that does not mean there are no racists. Race is very much in our social consciousness and the markers of race for Canadians are now more cultural than biological. Similarly, gender is a social construction based on differences of sex. The significant point is that there is as much variance **within** as **between** groups. As sociological concepts, race, gender, and class have changed over time and are not fixed entities. Inherently political because they veil domination and exclusion, they are symbolic of some form of underlying power struggle (Goldberg, 1992).

The operative concepts in theorizing difference are both power and identity. The implication of the above for pedagogy is that educators should have a theoretical comprehension of the social and historical construction of difference and the effects of practices which label, devalue, and exclude the Other. The question involves how schools organize differences in social and pedagogical interactions which influence the way teachers and students define themselves and each other. The central issue is not merely to acknowledge difference. Multicultural education should enable us to express our differences.

THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

In his powerful essay, "The Politics of Recognition" (1992), Charles Taylor defines identity as a person's understanding of who he or she is, of her or his fundamental defining characteristics as a human being.

Contemporary conceptions of identity are influenced by postmodernist writers who reject the notion of identity in terms of units which can be measured. Rather, they see identity development more in terms of relations, as a social process because human beings are always in the making. To quote Stuart Hall:

Identities are different names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past . . . (identity) is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. . . far from being fixed in some essentialized past they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (1990, p. 225)

Where we are located in society affects how we understand the world. Adrienne Rich (1986) has explained how the politics of location confines people because they are located in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The effect of difference on identity is one's *location* in relation to others, but more importantly, how that location produces a concept of self in relation to the way others identify and define us. In this construction, schools play a significant role in perpetuating racial, gender, and class differences.

The dynamics of identity and identification in modern society is complex. The daily experiences which shape the identity of minority group students, the psycho-social impact of prejudice, and discrimination based on race and ethnicity, gender and class, are of great significance with increasing ethnic and racial tension in schools and society. Key questions relate to the implications of identity for self-esteem and school achievement, and of ethnic identity for integration and relationship to the dominant culture. The development of oppositional identities is a rejection by some minority group students of dominant culture, knowledge, and norms.

FUSION OF CULTURES

Postmodern thought resists the idea of culture as an organizing principle which creates borders around ethnicity, class, and gender. Creating borders homogenizes cultures within a culture although neither dominant nor minority cultures are homogeneous. Taylor points out that we cannot judge other cultures: "for a culture (which is) sufficiently different from our own we have only the foggiest idea of what its valuable contribution might consist. . . (because) the very understanding of what it is to be of worth will be strange and unfamiliar to us" (p.67). So, what has to happen is a "fusion of horizons" (a term Taylor borrows from

Gadamer), which involves a broader horizon in which we negotiate what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space". (Homi Bhabha here is the literary critic, not the well-known Indian scientist.) This means developing new ideas and vocabularies which will enable us to make the comparisons partly through transforming our own standards. Three points need to be made:

(a) The third space is not an extension of established values — it is rather a re-negotiation of cultural space. I like the word *syncretic* to imply the union of opposite principles and practices; in this case, the harmonization of cultures, not their dissolution, disappearance, or disintegration.

(b) The fusion of cultures does not imply difference-blindness, which is neither desirable nor possible. Human beings are different from each other in various ways, and this does not translate into deficiency or deviance when they differ from a traditional norm. It simply means that they are different, and also that they have the right to be different. Indeed, the validation of their cultural, social, and gender differences, and the development of their individual identities should be a focus of multicultural education. The aim of multicultural education is, thus, to empower all students with an ethical and democratic vision of society within which they can make a variety of contributions appropriate to their talents, needs, and aspirations.

(c) Fusion does not mean homogenization, rather it emphasizes identity because individuals see the world from their own perspectives and have multiple identities some of which may be contradictory. This makes their experiences dialectical. The best example I can think of is being bilingual or multilingual: we do not forget one language when we speak another, rather we are enriched by the knowledge of the other. Diversity will diminish in importance not because we will be the same but because it is natural.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion let me note that the implication of these new perspectives on multicultural education is that it transforms the process of teaching. It also changes the student-teacher equation. Multiculturalism is the right to be different. Multicultural education should enable us to express differences. If culture is a way of seeing the world, then it is essential that we confront our ways of seeing (Dirlik, 1987, p.13). The

purpose of multicultural education is to confront the ways in which we see the world.

NOTE

1. Defined as: envisioning the world from a single privileged point, attributing to the "West" an almost Providential sense of historical destiny which bifurcates the world into the "West and the Rest" to use a term by Stuart Hall.

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RATNA GHOSH is Macdonald Professor of Education at McGill University and is currently Acting Director of McGill International. She has published several books and journal articles on intercultural and international education.

RATNA GHOSH, titulaire de la chaire Macdonald de sciences de l'éducation à l'Université McGill, est actuellement directrice par intérim de McGill International. Elle a publié plusieurs ouvrages et articles de revue sur l'éducation interculturelle et l'éducation internationale.