

Multicultural Education as a Moral Imperative: Affirming the Diversity of Ideas and Perspectives

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Our system of education is fundamentally based on the rhetoric of equality and justice. Unfortunately, the reality is that there are social, economic, and political conditions that contribute toward, and help to legitimize, inequalities (see, e.g., Apple, 1986; Giroux, 1991; Ogbu, 1978; Spring, 1994). Moreover, public schooling has perpetuated and reinforced social class, racial, and gender stratifications in a number of insidious ways.



Inequities are clearly evident in each of the following ways: unequal allocations of resources to different schools (Kozol, 1991), socially stratified arrangements through which subject matter is delivered (Oakes, 1985), low teacher expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), the biased content of curricular materials (Anyon, 1981), patriarchal relations through authority

patterns and staffing (Strober & Tyack, 1980), and differential distribution of knowledge by gender within classrooms (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). One of the most fundamental questions that needs continuous and vigilant attention is, how can we as teachers, administrators, and professors promote the ideals of equality, justice, and opportunity in our classrooms, schools, and communities?

Gender bias is one striking example of how inequities persist in America's classrooms (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). What expectations do we form regarding students based on gender? What opportunities are not afforded females that are readily made available to males? Tauber (1997), in *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: A Practical Guide to Its Use in Education*, presents a list of questions teachers must pose to become aware of how expectations about gender affect students:

Do you assign tasks on some gender basis? Does it just seem natural to assign heavier and dirtier tasks (i.e., carry this, move that) to the "stronger sex" and the more domestic activities (i.e., wash this, clean that, serve this) to the "weaker sex"? When leaders are selected,

whether for a classroom or a playground activity, are males more often chosen than females? When creative activities (i.e., decorating for an upcoming holiday) are undertaken, are females more likely than males to be called upon?

When you conduct demonstrations, are males more often asked to assist you and females more often asked to be "recording secretaries"? Do you let female students get away with inappropriate behavior that you would discipline male students for? If you are female, do you catch yourself identifying more with the female students than with the male students? And the list goes on and on. (pp. 47-48)

Communicating positive expectations for all students regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, social class, etc. is a primary professional responsibility of all educators.

The inequities mentioned in the opening paragraph of this essay are further exacerbated by a pervasive culture of intolerance and discrimination that remain with us as we are about to enter the 21st century (Miron, 1997). Despite apparent strides among

many underrepresented groups¹, prejudice and discrimination still affect many sectors of society (Allport, 1987). As we approach the new century, we look back at the twentieth with awe for technological accomplishments and trepidation for the enormity of human suffering and oppression. The quintessential catastrophe that has characterized this century has been the Holocaust, the government sponsored systematic attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. In spite of the lessons we have learned, genocides have continued in the latter half of the century in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia.

Notwithstanding a multitude of social and political reforms that are necessary to mitigate the consequences of prejudice and discrimination, we, as educators in the State of New Jersey, must remain vigilant to safeguard the lofty, yet attainable, ideals of justice and equality. The call for and challenge of diversity and multicultural education, particularly during the past twenty years, has emerged as a primary issue in American education and has assumed great importance in many school districts and townships throughout New Jersey. Issues of diversity, according to multiculturalists (Banks, 1994), are embedded in the American democratic ideal that places much value on human freedom in a pluralistic society. Fundamental issues of equality, justice, and opportunity have their origin in this country in documents such as the

Declaration of Independence, the *Constitution*, and the *Bill of Rights*. These perennial issues have found expression in this century during the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and over the past twenty years in the emergence of multicultural emphases in school curricula.



Educators have recognized the importance of a multicultural education given today's ethnically polarized and troubled world (Banks, 1997). For some individuals, multicultural education is an education for freedom and unity (Gay, 1993). Yet for others, multicultural education is not only disuniting America, but merely serving as a vehicle to raise the self-concept of a minority of Americans (D'Souza, 1991; Schlesinger, 1991). Opponents of multicultural education misinterpret and exaggerate its claims. Gay (1993) asserts that the intent of multicultural education is not to destroy the unity of our country

and its European cultural heritages, nor is the inclusion of people of color in a school's curriculum meant to make certain people feel better about themselves. Rather a multicultural curriculum, according to Boyer and Baptiste (1996), transforms "education so that its reality for students includes equity for all, a true spirit of democracy, freedom from prejudice and stereotypes of discrimination, and appreciation for cultural diversity" (p. 2). Multicultural education, with its emphasis on a culturally pluralistic philosophy, is imperative to enable all students to meet the challenges of a "new world order" as we move into the 21st century, and certainly should remain a potent curricular and instructional force in New Jersey as new immigrants move into the state in increasing numbers.

Although issues have found expression in multicultural projects, including developing more inclusive curricula (Banks, 1993) and assuring affirmative action initiatives (Mills, 1994), an important, and perhaps more fundamental, aspect has not received as much attention. The Holocaust and other genocides, all too common in this century, were fundamentally possible because as individuals, as communities, and as a society we have not come to grips with basic belief patterns and attitudes that support and allow prejudice, discrimination, and scapegoating to prevail. The Holocaust was possible, in part, because of racial and religious intolerance and bigotry, and because anti-Semitic dogma was

firmly entrenched in the mindsets and worldviews of too many individuals. Malcom Hay (1981) relates a comment offered by a German general who, when asked at Nuremberg how such things could happen, responded "I am of the opinion that when for years, for decades, the doctrine is preached that Jews are not even human, such an outcome is inevitable" (pp. 3-4)². As John Weiss (1996) documented in his overlooked yet important work, *Ideology of Death: Why the Holocaust Happened in Germany?*, the doctrine of hatred toward Jews was perpetuated not merely for decades, but for centuries.

Such attitudes prevailed and when combined with the systematic involvement of the state sponsored political apparatus in Germany, the consequent oppression, if not inevitable, is to a degree understandable. Daniel Goldhagen's (1996) contribution in his controversial work, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, has documented the pervasive "exterminationist anti-Semitism" that pervaded much of German culture and society. It was this unfettered and unchallenged "mindset" that contributed to the Holocaust. Alternative and dissenting views were silenced.

One-dimensional thinking that undergirds and supports prevalent biased views against individuals or groups must be challenged. If an individual or group espouses a particular view towards another individual or group, counter claims or views must be given voice. Only when multiple perspectives are

allowed to be aired freely and then debated vigorously can democratic ideals of freedom find true expression.³ Too often, however, even within a democratic framework, alternative views are stifled or, at least, unappreciated. The exclusion of multiple voices, frames of reference, and varied perspectives can be tomorrow's educational tragedy.



If we truly espouse constructivist teaching that holds that people learn best when they are given opportunities to construct meanings on their own, then we must ask ourselves to what extent are we providing students such opportunities to form judgments on their own (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). According to constructivist theory, knowledge is defined as temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated, and non-objective. Are we therefore providing students with alternative frames of reference so that they can decide on their own which view is most legitimate? If learning is essentially "a self-

regulated process of resolving inner cognitive conflicts that often become apparent through concrete experiences, collaborative discourse, and reflection" (Kolb, 1984), then we *must* guide students and provide thought provoking questions or frameworks to challenge established dogma and taken-for-granted notions.

Democratic education, within a multicultural framework, means that multiple perspectives are valued and presented so that students can choose which view makes sense to them. Democracy in education is fostered to the extent to which we provide these multiple frames of reference, and the degree to which we allow students to freely choose options, directions, and perspectives. The purpose of education, as affirmed by John Dewey (1902) many years ago, is to teach students "how to think" and not "what to think."

The Importance of Diversity and, More to the Point, Diverse Thinking

I am certainly sensitive to the importance of diversity. My father, a survivor of Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria during the period that has become known as the Holocaust, taught me the effects of racial prejudice and bigotry and warned me "never to treat others, the way the Nazis treated Jews." Integral to his message was that bigotry and prejudice, of any sort, can not and should not be tolerated. "Had only more people stood up against the ravings of Nazi ideologies," (roughly translated from Yiddish) said my father,

perhaps the Holocaust would have never happened.”

Whether or not the Holocaust would have occurred or not, my father, May Peace Be Upon Him, taught me the importance of tolerance, respect, and cooperation as essential principles that mitigate the effects of prejudice and discrimination. Fostering and supporting diversity should not merely be done for political expediency or political correctness, nor should the rhetoric of diversity sway us from our ultimate objective: a truly free democratic society in which equality, justice, and opportunity prevail for all. In this pursuit, diversity is an intellectual, social, and moral imperative.

As educators we recognize the responsibility of providing all our students with educational opportunities that prepare them to function effectively and productively in a multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial and global society. To endorse these notions is to understand and appreciate diversity and difference as positive foci in the continuing development of society that professes a wholesome respect for the intrinsic worth of every individual.

Our challenge is certainly to promote cultural diversity on many levels. We need to infuse diversity into our curricula. We need to see and live diversity. Yet, a “school or district should not simply look diverse (ethnically, culturally, or racially), but should be used to lend perspectives and gain the

richest information possible on how to best educate both minority and majority-students as well” (Glickman & Mells, 1997, p. 342). The very foundation of American democracy is inextricably entwined with the attempt to embrace and achieve diversity.

Yet what about *thinking* diversely, as alluded to by Glickman and Mells? This issue is one of the most fundamental issues for nurturing and sustaining diversity. We can maintain external factors to demonstrate diversity (Nieto, 1996), but unless we deal somehow with fundamental changes in our belief systems and perspectives, then diversity becomes nothing more than rhetoric, and put bluntly, much to do about nothing.

In other words, diversity is more than seeing the right faces and saying the right things, it is thinking in diverse ways. It is thinking in multidimensional or multiframed ways. It involves viewing issues holistically and critically. It is understanding

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that truth is socially constructed. We must deconstruct traditional ways of viewing knowledge, and reconstruct and facilitate a broad perspective that eschews myopic and provincial thinking. One way is to introduce a multidimensional model or paradigm for viewing and understanding issues. Exploring this paradigm briefly may be instructive.

A Multidimensional Paradigm

Controversy can be the basis for change and improvement. Providing a forum for discourse will not only provide a balanced perspective, but will likely prompt the reexamination of any critical issue under discussion. Such discourse may advance understanding of the issues and associated practices and procedures. Students should be encouraged to view issues holistically and critically. Viewing issues in multidimensional ways generally precludes myopia and provincialism that often lead to unidimensional thinking; it engenders clearer insights into critical problems and enables more viable solutions to possibly emerge.

To achieve a more global perspective, we need to remain mindful of the relationship among language, thought, and human behavior. Once a colleague quoted Voltaire⁴ and told a college professor, “There are too many of us present.” To which he replied an incredulous, “What’s that?!” The colleague reiterated, “There are too many of us here.” “But there are only two of us in this room,” the professor responded. “I’m sure there are at least six of us,” he said. “There is what you are, what you think you are, and what I think you are. And there is what I am, what I think I am, and what you think I am.” What did this mean? Momentarily stunned, the professor regained his

composure and realized an inherent truth that he perhaps knew subconsciously but never articulated. He had taken for granted the multifaceted dimensions of reality. His assumptions erroneously shaped his perceptions and behavior. The professor also realized that the picture he had of himself was due to his unconscious assumptions. What he thinks he is is not him - it's an abstraction, a description (map) of his real self (Berman, 1982).

As educators, we are bound by our perspectives and by our unique vantage points. Reality is perceived and understood by our belief systems which are, in turn, based on assumptions gleaned from our experiences or semantic environments. Reality is dependent on our thinking patterns, belief systems, and mindsets, or as Sergiovanni calls them, "mindscapes" (Sergiovanni, 1991, p. 41). Our belief systems are intimately connected to the language we use to articulate and communicate meanings, (Wittgenstein, 1958) which influence our actions and behaviors. How we think shapes the world in which we live. As Arthur Schopenhauer, the German philosopher, once posited, "The world in which a man lives shapes itself chiefly by the way in which he looks at it."

Consider the instructor who begins his course by asking his students to stand and walk over to the window. As they peer through the window he asks them to describe what they see. As they convey their perceptions he records responses on the

board. "Is there anything else you see?" "Is what you are seeing representative of what's out there?" "Is what you are describing an accurate assessment of what you've seen?" After a brief, albeit intense, discussion, it is apparent that the students tend not to have thoroughly examined their assumptions and perceptions, but a discrepancy between the structure of their verbal descriptions (maps) and the structure of reality itself is readily discernible.



Quoting Nietzsche, the instructor then explains that "all seeing is essentially perspective and so is all knowing." The instructor reads *It Looks Like This* (Webber, 1976) to them and has them peruse *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Wolf, 1989). The class discusses the implications of these stories for viewing issues in education from varied perspectives. Students confront the principle that knowledge about something can be

advanced by a global or multidimensional perspective. To investigate the viability of multicultural education, for example, without attending to a variety of reference points will yield an incomplete, if not inaccurate, assessment. Each perspective sheds light on a particular aspect of the problem. Multiple frames or lenses provide a more complete understanding of the issue.

We, as educators, are detectives of sorts. We collect an array of data to inform the conclusions that we can justifiably make. To utilize a few points of view may lead to incomplete analyses, if not misvaluations. All of us must be challenged to view issues globally. One of the ways to accomplish this is to pose key questions that challenge students to think globally. Teaching our students to think critically is perhaps the most important skill we can impart. The benefits of critical thinking are immeasurable:

The ability to think critically is important on a personal level too. Teaching our students how to think can promote their sense of personal empowerment and autonomy. In a culture so dominated by the media, it will be increasingly difficult for individuals to think for themselves, to critically analyze and evaluate the social and political messages that pervade their lives, and to know that they are making their own decisions rather than being persuaded to follow the agendas of others.

Those who are able to critically analyze issues that affect their personal, social, and political decision-making will feel more in control of their lives. In this respect, teaching our students to think critically will help them become empowered autonomous individuals, which presumably will help them lead more successful and fulfilling lives. (King, 1995)

"Yes/no" thinking systems are potentially limiting (de Bono, 1972), but at the same time, "total perspective is an optical illusion" (Durant and Durant, 1968). Yet, by encouraging divergent thinking through questioning that does not presume a dependence upon one right answer and realizes the complexity among knowledge, truth, and inquiry, the student may be better prepared to more fully understand any critical issue. Our capacity to think in different ways at the same time about a specific issue will not only reveal the complex prism through which issues related to multicultural education, for example, can be understood, but will promote critical thinking, a major objective of education.

Conclusion

This essay has tried to indicate that justice and equality can be promoted by encouraging critical thinking and by fostering diverse, multidimensional (rather than unidimensional) thinking. By reclaiming our human and moral connections as a learning community, we can go a long

way towards promoting diversity at its most fundamental and enduring level. Appreciating the diversity of ideas and perspectives is the heart of any multicultural effort.

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Notes

¹I prefer not to use the more commonly referred term "minority." These people are not "minor." Which of us in the "majority" would ever want to be referred to as a "minority?" The social and psychological stigma associated with the term is an anathema. Besides, "underrepresented" is a more

accurate use of the political reality.

²As Adolph Eichmann once said "What's the big deal, they're only Jews."

³This view does not necessarily mean that all views have equal legitimacy. Rather, the point is that all views should be provided a forum so that individuals can make up their own minds. As long as the tenets of a democracy are maintained, alternative perspectives should be welcomed.

⁴Although Voltaire and some others quoted in this article shared many of the anti-Semitic views of their contemporaries, their quotes in this context remain relevant.

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