



Understanding Multicultural Education

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With the shifting cultural texture and demographics of the United States (Banks, 2006b; Irvine, 2003), redefining multicultural education has become imperative. There are many views on the benefits and/or shortcomings of the multiculturalization of education. The question is not whether a multicultural education should be adopted but it is rather what we understand from multicultural education and how we are going to initiate such a reform within an educational system when we cannot even define 'multicultural.' "The awareness of one's own assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes is a first step to be able to positively interact and learn from others. In this process lies the essence of intercultural learning" (Martins, 2008, p. 203). This paper attempts to define (and redefine) multicultural education, explain its shortcomings, and offer recommendations for further discussion.

Keywords: multicultural education, intercultural communication

With the shifting cultural texture and demographics of the United States (Banks, 2006b; Irvine, 2003), redefining multicultural education has become imperative. According to the data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), between 1979 and 2008, the number of school-aged children (children ages 5-17) who spoke a language other than English at home increased from 3.8 to 10.9 million, or from 9 to 21 percent of the population in this age range (NCES, 2009). NCES (2010) reports that in 2007-2008, 58% of public school teachers of grades 9 through 12 are females with 83.5 % defined as belonging to "White" race/ethnicity. Hispanics constituted the 6.6 % and Blacks 6.9% of all teacher population of public school teachers of grades 9 through 12. The implications of the difference between the number of students with diverse backgrounds and the number of diverse teachers available to meet the needs of these students are certainly worth exploring. Rhoads (1995) argues that the ever-increasing diversity that students bring to classrooms produces mass confusion about how to teach, what to teach, and even who to teach. "Clearly, multiculturalism has significant implications for how we

think about and structure pedagogy" (p. 262). In order to further understand these implications, this paper, evoked with an "epistemological curiosity" (Freire, 1997), attempts to define (and redefine) multicultural education, explain its shortcomings, and offer recommendations for further discussion.

Multiple Definitions of Multicultural Education

Many researchers have explained and defined the cultural difference paradigm with regards to creating classroom interventions and strategies to support the learning of students of color. With the idea of further understanding the diverse populations, pedagogical strategies such as multicultural education (Banks, 1979; Banks & McGee, 2001; Gay, 2000; Grant & Sleeter, 2003; Nieto, 1996), cultural responsiveness (Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Gibson, 1976) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) are grounded and justified. However, with the multiple definitions and explanations, there is not necessarily an agreed definition of multiculturalism and multicultural education among scholars and practitioners. What all agree is that there is room for further discussion about the definition and

application of multicultural education in nation's schools. Therefore, through a thorough review of the current and relevant literature, the author further tries to shed light on the understandings and applications of multicultural education and offers recommendations for educators and policy makers.

Review of Current Definitions

Even though Ogbu (1992) had suggested that multicultural education has yet to be defined by the scholars, there has been a sufficient number of definitions to justify an action. Banks (1993) explained that multicultural education started in the United States during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Since then, there has been a wealth of interest and research on multicultural education (Banks, 1993; Banks, 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2006a, 2007; Banks & Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1999a, 1999b; Ladson-Billings, 2003, 2006; Perry, Moore, Acosta, Edwards, & Frey, 2006; Sleeter, 2008, 2009; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005; Sleeter, 1991, 2001, 2008; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004).

Banks and Banks (2001) define multicultural education as:

An idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school (p. 1).

They further explain that, "the term multicultural education describes a wide variety of programs and practices related to educational equity, women, ethnic groups, language minorities, low-income groups, and people with disabilities" (p. 6). Multicultural education may mean making changes within the curriculum in one school but a total change in leadership in another school.

Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (2004) defined multicultural education as adopting a culturally responsive pedagogy with trained instructors facilitating it. Nieto (1996) defined multicultural education as "antiracist education" which is "a process important for all students" (p. 307). Jay and Jones (2005) defined multicultural education as "the common term used to describe the type of pluralist education" where "its advocates are seeking for all children receiving an education, pre-K through college" (p. 3). The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) described multicultural education as a "philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity as acknowledged in various documents, such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence, constitutions of South Africa and the United States, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations" (National Association of Multicultural Education, 2011). Kahn (2008) described multicultural education as a "process, a philosophy, a concept, which is dynamic, multifaceted, and polemic" (p. 531). With the emphasis on minority learning,

Gibson's (1976) survey outlined five models where culture and education are explored in a combined fashion. 1) Multicultural education for cross cultural understanding was designed to teach that there are differences among cultures and that the teaching should be designed so that the emphasis on respecting one another's culture is apparent. 2) Culturally responsive education was developed mostly for K-12 education to include the cultures of the minority students in the curriculum and adapt teaching strategies accordingly to fit the needs and expectations of these students. 3) Bicultural education was adopted mostly to emphasize the importance of teaching languages and the skills needed to be able to function in the other cultures efficiently. In this, the language and culture of the minority students are reinforced in the curriculum and through the teaching methods used. 4) Cultural pluralism was specifically designed to strengthen the socio-cultural, political, economic, and educational participation of minority students within societies. In this, it is important to note that the cultures do not mix but simply find a way to live with each other through providing equal opportunities to every member of the society. 5) Multicultural education as an experience of the individuals in the society designed to help the society to work well harmoniously and respectfully. In short, there is no clear and agreed definition of what we understand from "multicultural education" but a variety of context-specific definitions.

Benefits and Shortcomings of Multicultural Education: An Overview

Nieto (2004) explained that the increase in cultural/ethnic diversity has caused many educators to recognize and own the need to expand their understanding of multicultural education, especially in public schools. With a very long history of immigration of people from many different cultural groups, the need for multicultural education and embracing diversity has become increasingly urgent. Smith (2009) asserted that success or failure of multicultural education depends on the effective preparation of teachers and administrators. When the teachers and administrators understand the learning needs of students and recognize how these needs can be different than the needs of the students from the dominant culture, then the actual learning occurs. That is, when "we really see, know the students we must teach" (Delpit, 1995, p. 183), we start making a difference in the lives of these students. In order to achieve this, teacher preparation programs are responsible for designing programs that are appropriate and in line with the needs of these teacher candidates. These programs do not only need to challenge teacher candidates to leave their "comfort zones" but the programs themselves need to examine and expand their knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures these teacher candidates will serve (Ball, 2000; Cruz, 1999; Garcia & Willis, 2001; Gay, 2002).

Schugurensky (2002) argued that when the cultural diversity and global tolerance are promoted within

Understanding Multicultural Education

multicultural education, traditional elitism (of having Eurocentric curriculum) and its shortcomings would be overcome. Bernstein (1994) argued that multicultural education hinders the assimilation efforts and creates a divisive society. Ravich (1990) argued that multiculturalization pose a threat to the best of what U.S. education has to offer the values, beliefs, and traditions of Western civilization. Dirlik (1997) quotes the poet Russell Leong as stating, "Multiculturalism = postcolonial Eurocentrism" (p. xi). Pon (2009) further stated that "Cultural competency resembles new racism both by otherizing non-whites and by deploying modernist and absolutist views of culture while not using racialist language (p. 59). Some claim that a good liberal education embodies a rather mono-cultural education, where national origins and race are not confused with culture as a learned attribute (Bernstein, 1994; Bloom, 1994; Souza, 1991; Grant & Graham, 1994; Chavez, 1994). Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol (2001) further argue that, under the guise of multicultural education, a deeper agenda lies, "How do we Americanize minorities...? How do we prepare them for a competitive economy?" (p. 91).

Critical Multiculturalists (Chicago Cultural Studies Group, 1992) explain that the study of multiculturalism is vulnerable because of its weaknesses in its own rhetoric: An overreliance on the efficacy of theory; a false voluntarism about political engagement; an unrecognized assumption of civil-society conditions; a tendency to limit grounds of critique to a standard brace of minoritized identities (for example, race, class, and gender); and a forgetfulness about how its terms circulate in "Third-World" con-texts, which are often expected to provide raw material for integration in Western visions of multicultural pluralism (p. 531).

Hooks (1994) explains that these weaknesses cause a return to narrow nationalism, isolationism, and xenophobia rather than developing a world perspective respecting multiple viewpoints and perspectives. It is an attempt to return to an idealized past. Bensimon (1994) argues that the current understanding of multiculturalism downplays the role of human relations. This is because the focus is simply the reduction of tension among diverse groups. Rhoads (1995) defines this as "mainstream multiculturalism" (p. 265). The

attempt to change mono-cultural institutions into multicultural democratic communities is treating cultural diversity as a subject matter and not attempting to reform the ways of thinking and doing in the society. Critical multiculturalism emphasizes the very nature of teaching itself. It is not only involved in discussing the content and the curriculum, but also involved in defining what the relevant knowledge is (Rhoads, 1995). Its purpose is to transform educational institutions and organizational structures to reflect diverse cultures and perspectives.

Educational anthropologists have highlighted the role of communication styles (Cummins, 1986; Mehan, 1979) and how societies interact within their defined cultural norms (Au, 1980; Foley, 1991; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991). One significant shortcoming of intercultural communication competence research and the multiculturalization of education attempts is that it focuses on majority interacting with minority groups (Giles & Evans, 1986; Glaser, 1994; Taylor, 1998). Exceptions to this include Sigelman and Welch (1993) and Sigelman et al. (1996) studying the racial attitudes of Blacks toward Whites and Powers and Ellison (1995) studying Blacks' convictions on interracial dating and friendship. All these studies focused on Black/African American and White/European American populations. Many ethnic and racial groups (Black/African Americans, Latino, Asian Americans, and White/European Americans, etc.) that form the basis of today's multicultural environment are ignored (Stein & Rinden, 2000; Hood & Morris, 1997).

Advocating for multicultural education, as it is defined and practiced today in U.S. schools, whether K-12 or higher, has become a shallow application of a bicultural education. Bicultural, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as interactions between African-Americans and European-Americans in certain states (within the U.S.) and Hispanics and European-Americans in certain states. 'Shallow' in this context is defined as the poor and misguided attempts to multiculturalize the education. One example of the underestimation of the significance of a multicultural education is even though multicultural education is a necessary ingredient of quality education, it is perceived by most educators as to be embraced only in times of crisis or simply as a luxury if time in the school day allows (Banks & Banks, 2002).

A scholar and practitioner Nieto (2000) limits the shortcomings of the multicultural education to the "color-blindness":

Many teachers and schools, in an attempt to be color-blind, do not want to acknowledge cultural or racial differences ... Although it sounds fair and honest and ethical, the opposite may actually be true ... color-blindness may result in refusing to accept differences and therefore accepting the dominant culture as the norm (p. 138).

It is the lack of the ability "to relate and communicate effectively when individuals involved in the interaction do not share the same culture, ethnicity, language, or other salient variables" (Hains, Lynch, & Winton, 2000, p. 2). We identify ourselves better and more easily with those who resemble us but we are generally not aware of how mono-cultural patterns influence our ways of thinking. Another strong advocate of so-called multicultural education is Lisa Delpit. She argues that educational reforms are not designed with children of color in mind (Delpit, 1995).

Delpit (1995), Nieto (2000), Banks and Banks (2002), Fuller (1992), and many other scholars argue that it is rather the mono-cultural curriculum and the shortcomings of teacher education programs that are mainly composed of female European Americans that create the achievement gap. Fuller (1992) compiled statistics revealing that the majority of students in teacher education programs are European-American, middle-class females, products of suburbs, small cities or rural areas. Dilg (1995) warns that white teachers' approach to multicultural education (mostly the curriculum aspect of multicultural education) as an outsider carries the danger of ignorance.

Despite increasing ethnic diversity in the United States, many educators do not seem to understand that multicultural education is the broader understanding, involvement, and appreciation of more than two cultures. Jay (2003) explained that "Despite a tendency to equate 'Americanness' with 'Whiteness' by individuals both outside and inside the United States, the United States is comprised of many different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups" (p. 3). And in some instances, an artificial implicit connection between nationality and culture is created. This is artificial in the sense that it does not emphasize originality but pushes children into social constructs by encouraging them to learn about Asian food or the Mexican fiesta.

Contrary to the popular discourse of creating equity within the current education system, King (1991) argued that culturally relevant teaching that is successful helps produce a relevant black personality. His argument is relevant in the sense that culture is significant for individual and group identity. It "gives people a sense of who they are, of belonging, of how they should behave and of what they should not be doing" (Harris & Moran, 1991, p. 12). However, for all we know, while individuals foster positive self-appreciation as belonging to a specific group, they may also perceive the prejudice and stigmatization from other groups and experience exclusion and isolation.

With all the shortcomings of the application of so-called multicultural education, the author argues, that the focus, as it is presented in the current literature, is on why the children of African-American population in the U.S. schools are not excelling in their classes comparable to the children of European-American populations. There are facts and the author does not argue against these facts where African-American students score low on the standardized tests. For example, Garcia (1994) argues that research on African-American students tends to focus on dropouts, literacy gaps, and educational delinquency. Another example to arguing the dominance of the White race is Critical Race Theorists' argument that official school curricula are designed to maintain a "White supremacist master script" and they are "culturally specific artifacts" (Delgado, 1995, p. 21). Regarding instruction, Delgado argued that the "current instructional strategies

presume that African-American students are deficient" (p. 22). When the African-American/Black students are given tests, Gould (1981) argued that it is a movement to legitimize African-American students' deficiency. Tate (1997) further commented that the current multicultural paradigm, currently popular in the U.S., exists to benefit Whites. The question here is whether Whites are promoting advances for Blacks when only Blacks promote White interests (Bell, 1980).

In order for learning to occur in classrooms, we need to examine a wide variety of perspectives, including our own (Curtis, 1998). Martins (2008) argue that "the awareness of one's own assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes is a first step to be able to positively interact and learn from others. In this process lies the essence of intercultural learning" (p. 203). Lawrence (2005) claimed that for an antiracist multicultural education to be more than superficially effective, it must go beyond the lack of multicultural ingredients in the curriculum, policy and structure issues within schools and how school personnel, specifically teachers, interact with students and with each other (see also Banks & Banks, 1995; Lee, 1995; Nieto, 2000). It is the innate rejection of culture difference as threatening as it is because "it challenges an individual to reconsider ethnocentric views of the world and negotiate each intercultural encounter with an open mind and as a unique experience" (Mahoney & Schamber, 2004, p. 312). Furthermore, learning about other cultures and cultural competencies is rather difficult and bothersome because it entails acknowledging "how we are all implicated in contradictory relationships of oppression" (Pon, 2009, p. 69). When educators claim the need for cultural competency or the need for a more comprehensive understanding of culturally responsive teaching, they are not necessarily exercising self-reflexivity but simply shielding themselves from criticisms of racism.

Through this study, the author postulates that the solution to the challenges of establishing a multicultural education lies in the understanding of the relationship between the individuals rather than implementation of a policy model or educational reform within an educational system. An education system, which does not recognize its problems and challenges as they exist but instead creates superficial challenges and solutions, is bound to fail in the long run.

However, it should also be noted that intercultural communication and thus research is problematic as members of cultural groups may be blinded to significant aspects of their own culture. This is also a limitation of an education system where educators "represent ethnically diverse individuals and groups in all strata of human accomplishment instead of typecasting particular groups as dependent and helpless victims who make limited contributions of significance" (Banks & Banks, 2002, p. 33).

Discussion

Bennett (1993) argued that, “Probably one of the most threatening ideas encountered by students is this concept of difference and the implications this concept brings along with it” (p. 181). That is, how we perceive the differences determine the scale and limit of our interactions with other cultures. Hitlin, Scott, and Elder Jr. (2006), claim that when individuals choose from social categories that are structurally available to them, they tend to internalize the symbolic and cultural meanings attached to these categories. This internalization may cause an increase in self-appreciation or result in self-depreciation. Further, Park (1931) does not believe the outcome differences between Whites, Blacks, or other ethnic groups are a result of biology, but a function of social environments. Stonequist (1935), too, argued that individual’s self-perception stems largely from his ability to view himself from multiple, if not conflicting, perspectives. In this context, intercultural communication competence is the first big step towards creating a culturally sensitive education. “Exploring the construct of cultural difference is fundamental to learning about other cultures” (Mahoney & Schamber, 2004, p. 311) and we need to start with a close look at our intercultural communication competence. Are we communicating our sincere attempts to understand other cultures effectively, or are we simply blinding ourselves with our own convictions on what is right for the students?

We should also note that to understand the reason behind using the “White” as the excuse for failure, one must look to the society from a deeper perspective. The reason behind this argument might lie in self handicapping (arranging to perform under conditions that impair performance). By providing an excuse for poor performance, self handicapping makes people feel better in situations where they might fail (Drexler, Ahrens, & Haaga, 1995). Zuckerman, Kieffer, and Knee (1998) explain that self handicapping is mainly a problem when it becomes habitual. When it does, it typically leads to poor adjustment and lower self-esteem. And, self handicapping is the current tendency among African-Americans and among some European-Americans for the justification of African-American children’s failure in American schools.

It is also not necessarily the information provided by the schools that will enhance our intercultural communication competence but an understanding of “why we do what we do”. Gudykunst (1998) explained that intercultural competence includes not only knowledge of the culture and language, but also affective and behavioral skills. Examples to such affective and behavioral skills are empathy, human warmth, charisma, and the ability to manage anxiety and uncertainty. There is no question that racism is a big concern and dominance of a single culture and presents a real threat for any education system. However, not belonging to the mainstream culture should not justify the failure of the education for minorities.

From a pedagogical point of view, cultural sensitivity provides a road map to the multiculturalization of education and thus equality. From a political point of view, ‘divide and rule’ style of management applies where schools, through singling out the differences (unique characteristics), are creating culturally distinct groups. Through these divisive policies, it becomes easier to focus on a problem where political sensitivity becomes a handicap. School management focuses on maintaining a superficially equal education rather than focusing on the learning outcomes of students from all cultures within the system. In order to have a better understanding, we need to take a close look at the policies as how an educational ideology is transferred to procedures, and regarding application, and how these procedures are practiced.

The solution is not simply to create a culturally responsive pedagogy with a curriculum designed with children of color in mind, and turning young, female, white suburban teachers into culturally competent and responsive educators. The author does not argue the relevance of such discourses in the current education system. However, what is being argued here is that these do not constitute the essence of the solution but it is, rather, an understanding of ‘who I am’, and ‘why I do what I do’ as to start the ‘change’.

Conclusion

To achieve multiculturalism in education, we need to have a clear definition of what we understand from ‘multicultural education’. Through a clear definition, we can make the necessary changes in the policies. After we make the necessary changes in the policies, we need to have leaders with strong intercultural communication skills in order to communicate the vision of a multicultural education. The process of defining multicultural education, making the necessary changes in the policies, and finding a leader to communicate these can be achieved through serious and sincere applications of each of these steps, respectively. The intense focus on the mastery of other cultures within the multiculturalism is overambitious and self-satisfying, for the lack of a better word. Understanding and respecting other cultural viewpoints and behavior is essential to the promotion of intercultural understanding. However, before we start to ‘change’ the world, we need to understand ‘why I do what I do.’ Whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever you want to accomplish, it all begins with an understanding of ‘I’: “The awareness of one’s own assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes is a first step to be able to positively interact and learn from others. In this process lies the essence of intercultural learning” (Martins, 2008, p. 203).

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Understanding Multicultural Education

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Understanding Multicultural Education

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