CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES ON MULTICULTURALISM AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: A SURVEY OF THE FIELD

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ABSTRACT

This paper will undertake a survey of the various conceptual perspectives from which scholars and practitioners engaged in educational research and practice in their attempts to understand the dynamics of multiculturalism policy. These include: conservative multiculturalism, liberal and left-liberal multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism, anti-racist education, and anti-oppressive education perspectives. While these do not represent the entire range of perspectives that scholars and practitioners employ, it must also be kept in mind that these are not monolithic and/or consensual perspectives, and that there are debates internal and intrinsic to these perspectives that require separate research endeavors. This article takes the Trudeau era policy of Multiculturalism as its point of departure and examines how various provinces have adapted and implemented the official policy in their educational programs.

Forty years ago, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, the then Prime Minister of Canada, announced the Multiculturalism Policy on the floor of the House of Commons. Since then, multiculturalism has become an integral part of policy debates in Canada, but it has also become a marker of the Canadian identity discourses. Although education in Canada is under provincial jurisdiction, it has not been immune to the influence of the national Multiculturalism Policy nor the debates surrounding it. Most of the provinces have incorporated the policy into their educational systems to varying degrees. In one way or another, the notion of multiculturalism in its various articulations has been instrumental in the overall design and implementation of educational policies, curricula, teacher education, etc., in Canada.

Despite the prevalence of multiculturalism in almost all walks of life in Canada, there is no consensus on the definition of the concept. Broadly speaking, it has been understood as a public policy, ideology, cultural diversity, or as a quasi-analytical academic concept (Li, 1999). In Quebec, there has been an official rejection of the notion of multiculturalism on the grounds that it does not reflect the cultural reality of the people of Quebec. The province's policy and educational equivalent is the idea of "interculturalism," which entails a coming together of various cultures with the French language providing the common bond. The scope of this essay does not permit us to delve deeper into the definitional aspects of the issue. Thus, for the purpose of this essay, I will use the notion of multiculturalism in a generalized sense to denote a range of policies and practices – including those pertaining to education – that are broadly favorable to the social inclusion of cultural diversity

With this in mind, I aim in this paper to undertake a survey of the various conceptual perspectives from which scholars and practitioners engaged in educational research and practice attempt to understand the dynamics of multiculturalism policy. These include: conservative multiculturalism, liberal and left-liberal multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism, anti-racist education, and anti-oppressive education perspectives. I must mention that these do not represent the entire range of perspectives

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There is a sizable body of literature that seeks to explain the potential of education in addressing issues related to multiculturalism, interculturalism, and diversity in Canadian schools. These scholarly works emanate from multiple conceptual foci, such as liberal (Kymlicka, 2007), left-liberal, critical, anti-race (Mansfield and Kehoe, 1994; Dei and Bradford 1999; Dei, 1999, Klassen and Carr, 1997; Bonnett and Carrington, 1996), and anti-oppressive perspectives (Kumashiro, 2002) on multiculturalism. It operates at various levels of analysis, such as theory building (Kymlicka, 2007, Hale (1997), Djebrane, Barciaga, et al., 2007, Heng-Borkhorst, 2007), policy analysis (Kymlicka 2007, Li, 1999, Mosquera and Mosquera, 2005; Carr 1999, 2007), teaching and learning (Winchester, Ian, Matuk and Ruggirello, 2007; Jacob, 1995, McKay and Sakyi, 1994; Gilborn, 1996; Li, 1996; Salili 2003; Young, Jon and Buchanan, 1996; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; Ghosh, 2004), issues related to identity (Harper, 1997; Riviere, 2005; Hassmann-Howard, 1989; St. Denis 2007), citizenship (Heath, 2004; Strickland 2010; Aponuik and Bruno-Jofre, 2002; Johnes, 2000; Martins, 2008; Sears and Hughes, 1996), curricula (Ghosh, 2008), evaluation and implementation and measurement (Levin, 2008; Ungar, 2007; Hill-Jackson 2007). Similarly, this body of literature employs various methodological approaches, such as surveys and other quantitative approaches, narrative inquiry, document analysis, ethnography, etc.

This article takes the Trudeau era policy of multiculturalism as its point of departure and examines how various provinces have adapted and implemented the official policy in their educational programs. An initial review of this literature shows that the majority of the work has been done in the areas of identity, citizenship, and the pedagogical aspect of multiculturalism and education, followed by historical and policy analysis. In geographic terms, the majority of the studies inform this article's focus on Ontario and, to a lesser extent, British Columbia. There are relatively fewer studies that have Quebec as their focal point of analysis (Ghosh, et. al, 1995; Ghosh, 2004; Bouchard, 2009; Belhachmi, 1997; Martins, 2008; Mc Andrew and Lamarre, 1996; Naseem, forthcoming). In the following space, I survey some of the major perspectives that provide the conceptual anchors for these studies.

LIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM

As a conceptual framework, liberal multiculturalism is primarily concerned with the relationship between the individual and the state in the overall context of diversity and multi/interculturalism. In the Canadian context, the proponents of liberal multiculturalism focus on the response of state and societal institutions to complex and intersecting demands of an increasingly diverse population. Considering pluralism in a sociopolitical context as a necessary feature of a liberal society with individuals as autonomous actors, the central argument of this school of thought is that the complexities of Canada's increasingly diverse population will be played out in the courts of law and in federal and provincial legislatures, in turn resulting in political and social rules and rights for both the minority and the majority groups (Kymlicka, 2007). This line of reasoning places immense trust in the workings of the liberal democratic state; it argues that it is the existing state and political institutions where the tensions inherent to a diverse population will be addressed.

In other words, liberal multiculturalism is predicated on the belief that there is a natural equality between the members of different groups (dominant and the subordinate) in a given society. Building on this premise, liberal multiculturalists argue that the absence of equality between these groups can only be due to the relative lack of social, economic, and educational opportunities. This line of reasoning assumes that the system can be reformed and that once it is reformed these inequalities will vanish.

LEFT-LIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM

While sharing the same epistemic grounds, left-liberal multiculturalism differs from liberal multiculturalism in that it holds that the latter obfuscates cultural differences between ethnic, racial, gender, and other cultural groups in the society. Left-liberal multiculturalism foregrounds difference without contextualizing it in the historical and cultural situations in which it was formed. Thus, difference is understood as a *historical* signification of one's positionality and experience. In this sense, it becomes an essence or an essentializing marker. The subject of this essence is understood to have an epistemic privilege that only the subject can have. One's lived experience becomes the sole basis for the voice that can tell the subjects' stories. It forms the credentials of one's identity. While admittedly, one's location, position, and experience in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, history, etc., are important in the overall understanding, according to a left-liberal multiculturalism perspective they must be open to questioning in order to reveal the ideological and/or discursive influences that have shaped them. It is argued that this perspective does not assure all voices from the group will be equally heard. As is often the case, some powerful members of the group that have experienced marginalization assume the role of representative in the name of epistemic privilege and

present their voice as being that of the entire group. The marginalized members of the group, such as women, are often left unrepresented. Thus, in a diverse society, the dialogue between the groups, if it exists, is often a dialogue between the powerful members of the dominant and the subordinate groups.

CONSERVATIVE MULTICULTURALISM

Conservative multiculturalism is predicated on the belief that multicultural societies must strive for a pluralism that fosters a rich common culture. This perspective is said to have provided the basis for the American melting pot model, where cultural groups are expected to forego their distinctive identities, culture, language, and values and merge into the larger host culture. In other words, it is based on the idea that the immigrant populations must accept the social and political values of the host society in order for the society to work in a harmonious way. To them, the principal purpose of immigration, and therefore of multiculturalism, is the promotion of economic growth. Some proponents of this school of thought (Ravitch, 1991) have argued that those who immigrate should leave behind the values of their homeland, as these are precisely the values and value systems from which they fled. They oppose the multicultural educational models on the grounds that they preach relativism, i.e., that no one group has the right to judge any other group. They further reject what they view as relativistic multiculturalism on the grounds that all societies must have a set of basic values on the basis of which the notion of right and wrong can be established.

The conservative multiculturalism perspective is often critiqued for being assimilationist or, at best, for wanting ethnic groups to be add-ons to the dominant culture. It is also critiqued for promoting a superfluous, consensual view of culture and society. In the overall context of education, this perspective advocates a standardized educational model that is often based on the dominant epistemology, ethics, and value system – which seeks a harmonious citizenry and an ideal of a consensual nationalistic unity.

CRITICAL MULTICULTURALISM

Critical multiculturalism has emerged as a counter discourse to the mainstream liberal and left-liberal articulations of multiculturalism. While a number of scholars working in this tradition (Ghosh, Sleeter, Egbo) operate from a Freirean base, others, such as McLaren (2000), Giroux (2000), and Duarte and Smith (2000), draw upon Foucauldian post-structuralism, anti-racism, and post-modern feminism in addition to Freire. In its Freirean incarnation, critical multiculturalism seeks to challenge the hegemonic, white, Anglo-American bourgeois worldview without being naively idealistic (Duarte and Smith, 2000, p. 18). In its Freire-Foucault orientation, critical multiculturalism aims to develop school as a site from where the hegemonic and assimilationist knowledge constructions and pedagogical practices can be challenged and eventually undermined. It is important to note that critical multiculturalism is skeptical of liberal multiculturalism's attempt to create societal dialogues without really creating conditions in which parties could enter the dialogue on an equal footing. As Duarte and Smith (2000) note, "…a Freire/Foucault synthesis enables the critical multiculturalism to recognize that while it may have the potential to be liberatory, dialogue also has to the potential to be a vehicle for enforcing norms and rules of communication; while it has the capacity to liberate, dialogue is often a mechanism for displacing consensus and silencing difference (pp. 18-19). However, the anti-dialogue stance of the liberatory critical multiculturalism based in Frankfurt school's anti-fascist critical theory—Isaiah Berlin's notion of negative liberty and Rosaldo's notion of borderlands—is not uniformly adopted by all scholars working in the field. As mentioned earlier, a number of prominent critical multiculturalism educators and scholars still believe in the power and importance of dialogue, introspection, and consciousness-raising as vehicles for negotiating and reaffirming diversity in multicultural societies.

Proponents of critical multiculturalism argue that the liberal trust in the institutions of the liberal democratic state is misplaced. They cite the history of ethnic and racial relations in countries such as the US, Britain, and Canada to argue that the existing institutions have not been able to deal with issues of diversity in a just and equitable way due to the unequal power relations in these societies (Giroux, 2000; McLaren, 2000). This line of reasoning suggests that the dominant, mono-cultural conceptions of history and society, which are ethnocentric or even racist, need to be rejected. They further suggest that only a framework based on a critical examination of power relations in the society can provide insight into how to address issues of diversity in society.

ANTI-RACIST EDUCATION

Anti-racist education focuses on race and the intersections of social difference (class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity) to question power relations in the school and society (Dei, 1999). It recognizes the importance of personal experience and lived realities as a source of knowledge and explores the perspectives of different groups in society. Anti-racist education shares the neo-Marxist orientation and the critical theoretical epistemic base of the critical multiculturalism. Like critical multiculturalism, it purports to politicize education in order to uncover the social, economic, and structural roots of inequality in a

given society. Also, like critical multicultural perspectives, it aims to provide students with a space in which they can acquire/develop political agency to challenge the prevalent inequitable social and economic distribution of resources (Fleras and Elliot, 1992). While the critical multicultural perspective foregrounds class as an analytical tool, the anti-racist education perspective prioritizes race as a robust and comprehensive analytical and explanatory concept. However, it is important to note that the anti-racist education perspective understands racism not just as a personal prejudice. Rather, it understands racism as structural, institutional, embodied, and ideational. For scholars working in this tradition, education should not only aim at providing alternative explanations, but must help in looking at alternative ways of bringing about social change.

ANTI-OPPRESSIVE EDUCATION

Finally, anti-oppressive education as a conceptual framework is grounded in the notion that traditional education may actually contribute to oppression in educational and societal contexts. In other words, some of the so-called educational reforms may actually mask the oppressions that need to be challenged (antioppressiveeducation.org). Proponents of anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2002; Schick, 2000, 2003) argue for a focus on changing how we think about and engage in many aspects of education, from curriculum and pedagogy to school culture and activities to institutional structure and policies. More importantly the application of anti-oppressive education in relation to issues of diversity suggests that it is a mistake to look at groups, both dominant and minority, as monolithic entities. Oppressions of various kinds are present at various intersections of marginality (gender, sexual preference, race, class, etc.) in both the dominant and the minority groups. These oppressions work through various mechanisms, such as curricula, textbooks, pedagogical strategies, etc. It is these mechanisms and how they contribute to various forms of oppression that researchers of diversity must focus on. Central to this perspective is the belief that education must aim to challenge multiple forms of oppression that include racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, ablism, colonialism, and other "isms" (antioppressiveeducation.org, also see Kumashiro, 2002). Similarly, it is argued that there is not just one form of anti-oppressive education. The field of anti-oppressive education is broad and welcomes any approach to education that actively challenges different forms of oppression. It draws on multiple intellectual traditions and purports to bring together theoretical and practical insights from traditions such as feminism, critical theory and pedagogy, queer theory, postcolonial theory, and other movements aimed at social justice. "As it moves forward, the field of anti-oppressive education constantly problematizes its own perspectives and practices by seeking new insights, recognizing that any approach to education — even its own — can make certain changes possible but others impossible" (antioppressiveeducation.org). Anti-oppressive education draws upon scholarly bodies of literature that focus on a) education for the other; b) education about the other; c) education that is critical of privileging and Othering, and, d) education that changes students and society.

CONCLUSION

From the time that Pierre Elliot Trudeau introduced the multiculturalism policy, diversity in Canada has increased tremendously. There is a general impression that Canadian multiculturalism policy has worked well. At the same time, the policy has also been a subject of scholarly and societal scrutiny and critique.

A measure of the veracity of Canadian multicultural policy is that it has provided the language and the space within which societal debates and contestations over multicultural coexistence and rights can take place at almost all levels of the Canadian society. Canadian classrooms are microcosms of Canadian society. These debates, tensions, and contestations have also found their way into our educational system. At this level, the policy and its ensuing debates have largely been grounded in the liberal and left-liberal articulations of multiculturalism. However, some believe that in the past five years, the conservative discourse on multiculturalism has made serious headway in the Canadian policy discourse. The conceptual perspectives discussed above provide insight into various ways in which issues related to diversity can be understood. These perspectives are intellectual locations or modes of consciousness each with its own normative questions, answers and solutions for pluralistic societies such as Canada. It is quite clear that, for the foreseeable future, there will be no change in the institutional and structural landscape of Canada as suggested by the proponents of critical and anti-racist education. It is equally clear, however, that conversations on pluralism and multiculturalism from these perspectives constantly redefine the landscape by posing questions and challenging the normative set of assumptions and prescriptions that other perspectives advocate. As long as the space is open to conversations and contestations, the hope for a peaceful settlement of cultural tensions remains possible.

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