MAKING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION WORK: A PROPOSAL FOR A TRANS-NATIONAL MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I address some of the conceptual shortcomings of the contemporary approaches to multicultural education especially as articulated and understood in teacher education programs across Canada. I make a case for a need to re-conceptualize and re-define multicultural education in accordance with the needs a twenty first century interconnected and globalized world. My argument is that the current model of multicultural education is ineffective and has had limited impact because educators are tangled in a misconstrued framework that essentially focuses on culture in a national context and obfuscates issues of social justice.

In this essay I propose a new framework for multiculturalism and multicultural education. This framework seeks to move away from the 'culture' based understanding of multiculturalism by grounding the issues related to diversity and difference in trans-national social justice. My arguments are premised on the grounds that issues surrounding social justice and multiculturalism cannot be addressed within the contexts of individual nation states. These issues must be considered at the global level. The proposed shift away from the exclusivity of national contexts is necessitated by the recognition that the world is increasingly becoming an unfair place with a stupendously uneven distribution of resources and allocation of values. It is also mandated by the awareness that the actions of individuals are not confined to individual nation states. These actions produce and are reproduced by discourses, institutions and practices that cut across national boundaries and have varying influences on people living in diverse areas of the world. For example, immigrants are often disadvantaged in respect to access to social services as well as to the institutional and financial resources for preservation of their cultural distinctiveness. At the same time they are also active in institutions whose consequence and actions extend beyond national borders. Furthermore, their affiliation to and images of their countries and societies of origin often permeate identities and representations of these individuals. Contemporary migrants live in a state of transnationality that allows them to maintain trans-national communities and interests. Such transnationality also makes them vulnerable to political and financial forces of globalization. It is, thus, imperative to investigate the dynamics of diversity by juxtaposing the seemingly separate notions of multiculturalism and social justice at the trans-national level.

I will start by historically contextualizing the Canadian policy on multiculturalism. I will then problematize the notion of culture that is intrinsic to this policy. Finally, I will present an argument for the need for a trans-national approach to multicultural education that seeks to address issues of diversity in conjunction with the issues of social justice at the global level.

DEFINITIONAL ASPECTS

Trans-national multiculturalism can broadly be defined as a negotiated balance between the value of diverse cultural expressions, and that of global social justice, with education as a mediating factor in such a negotiation. It seeks to move away from the exclusive focus on culture and to invoke an examination of complex interaction of cultural representations and rights in relation to distribution of economic and political resources at the global level. It seeks a reconceptualization of the relationship between the local

and the trans-national spaces in which contestations over identities, representations and distribution of resources take place.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MULTICULTURALISM POLICY IN CANADA

Historically, the focus of the multiculturalism policy in Canada is a continuation of its initial response to difference. Multiculturalism policy was initiated to manage difference and diversity at the national and provincial levels. Canada focused its attention on multiculturalism since the late 1960s. Although the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism appointed by the federal government was initially mandated to deal with English and French relations in Canada it ended up recommending the idea of 'cultural pluralism' to the federal government, which in turn encouraged Canadian institutions including educational institutions to incorporate 'cultural pluralism / multiculturalism / interculturalism' in their policies and programs.

The official policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework was accepted in 1971 and it became a law in 1982. In 1988 Bill C-93 was passed as the Multicultural Act. The Multicultural policy states that under Canadian law all citizens regardless of racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious background should be treated equally and should have equal rights and privileges.

After the establishment of the 1967 Immigration Act, which removed racial identity as a necessary condition of immigration, Canada saw a huge influx of immigrants from developing countries. In fact between 1967 and 1970, there was a 40% increase in immigration from developing countries, with most immigrants coming from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America (Statistics Canada). Under such conditions the policy makers in Canada assumed that cultural equality was necessary to quell the contestations over issues of identity, cultural rights, etc. The policy makers had immense confidence in the redistributive justice mechanisms of the liberal democratic state. It was assumed that once there was better cultural understanding the liberal democratic state would take care of the basic imbalance in distribution of resources. This conceptual orientation has been the guiding spirit behind the design and practice of multicultural policies and education in Canada. However, it is abundantly clear that multicultural education in Canada has failed to bring about the desired cultural understanding between the various groups. Socially, it has led to what can be termed as the 'sari, samosa, and tindrum' multiculturalism (Ghosh, 2003). In the educational realm it has led to a model that aims at managing diversity in classroom by focusing solely on cultural differences. In teacher education programs it has led to alienation for both the majority and minority group student teachers. As I argue below the very idea of grounding the multiculturalism policy (and education) in 'culture' is flawed. It restricts the scope of such policies to cultural negotiations and not on vital issues of social justice and distribution of resources.

PROBLEMATIZING CULTURE

In order to understand why the policy of multiculturalism has been largely ineffective it is pertinent to problematize the idea of 'culture in multiculturalism'. The notion of 'culture' is not organic to the discourses on multiculturalism. As Lentin (2005) has forcefully argued, historically, discourses that form the basis of multicultural policies especially in the Europe and North America sought to replace race (as a categorizing principle) with culture after the Second World War. This substitution of race with culture effectively created a mirage of racelessness on the one hand and a superficial notion of cultural richness on the other hand. However, it must be well-known that this 'culturalizing' was not a bottom up process but a top-down one. For example, in the case of Canada, well-known philosopher Charles Taylor (2004) notes that contrary to the popular assertions the policy of multiculturalism was not historically an outcome of the struggle by minority groups for greater recognition and rights. It was conceived and enacted by the political elite and was based on political motivations.

The concept of culture was introduced to manage difference and not address injustices and inequalities in societies. The colonial conquests rationalized on the basis of racial superiority needed to be erased in the wake of decolonization. In the post World War II Canadian conditions where the majority of the workforce needed was coming from newly decolonized countries, it served the interest of the state to introduce the concept of 'culture' to obscure racial inequality and injustices prevalent in the society. However, it is clear that even though the notion of 'culture' became the centerpiece of policies to understand and manage difference and diversity it does not refute the idea that societies are still organized and categorized hierarchically. The concept of culture itself is problematic and restrictive as it portrays/depicts minority groups as monolithic. Furthermore, the manner in which culture is operationalized ends up restricting the understanding of culture to national contexts and thus depoliticizes and decontextualizes contestations over representation, identity and distribution of resources. Finally, culture as a focal point of diversity management policies is theorized in relation to the dominant culture that largely escapes questioning and challenge.

Such articulation of culture as an organizing principle to manage diversity has serious consequences for teaching about multiculturalism. As is the case with the

policy realm the multiculturalism component in teacher education programs also presents the concept of culture without problematizing it. In the absence of discussions about the problematic nature of culture students do not get a chance to reflect that the concept is socially and politically constructed. Hence in many teacher education programs, culture gets treated as a taxonomy and is used as a checklist to mark the characteristics of a people. The worst is the fact that the culture of the 'other' gets defined as monolithic. It appears as exotic, isolated, rigid and static. This leads to the disengagement of the minority group student teachers in the classroom, as they cannot identify with the cultural practices that are used in class discussions as characteristic markers of their people. With culture as the focal point of multicultural policies and education it is not surprising that the narratives of diversity, identity, and representation, start from the moment when the migrant arrives in the host society. Vital linkages to identity, displacement, relocation and experience and sustenance of complex affiliations and attachments that are located outside the national boundaries never make it to the narrative of multiculturalism (Clifford, 1989). These crucial linkages are often left out and forgotten. Images of Canada and the immigrants from five decades ago still guide the multicultural policies and education.

Unfortunately, the main debates about multicultural education in teacher education programs also obfuscate these vital linkages between the local and the global and still focus on classrooms practices, curricular representations, and cultural differences without going into details about how differences and inequalities are created at the macro level and how they get reflected at micro levels. This leads to celebrating diversity with a superficial understanding of inequality, a 'partial cultural understanding' de-contextualized from actual human relations and a depoliticized version of power relations. An educational framework that is disconnected from the global equity framework only persists in preparing teachers to become one-dimensional multicultural technicians focused on classroom management rather than educating for a conscious citizenship. With the Canadian society and the classrooms becoming more and more diverse there is a need to reconceptualize multicultural education by grounding it in the principles of global social justice. In the following space I sketch some of the main tenets of a new approach to understanding multiculturalism and multicultural education.

TRANS-NATIONAL MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: A PROPOSAL

A trans-national multicultural education has four key elements: **First,** it should be multifocal in that it should move on from essentially focusing on culture and ethnicity as markers of diversity. **Second,** it must have a global vision so as to be able to uncover and connect the extra-national relations of power, structures of oppression and sources of diversity. **Third,** it has to be rooted in a framework of global social justice, and **Fourth,** it must be trans-disciplinary. Each of these elements is necessary to help pupil-students develop a sense of empathy that in turn can help them understand the 'other' and deconstruct the self. Let me briefly sketch these elements and show how these can result in a more robust understanding of diversity and difference both at the social policy and educational levels.

a) Multifocality

There is no denying the fact that culture is an important marker of identity. However, in a world that is increasingly economically interconnected and governed by global laws a sole focus on culture results in an incomplete understanding of the 'other'. What is needed is a trans-national approach to multiculturalism, which can only be achieved by having multiple foci in the analysis of inequalities and injustices. Identity related issues devoid of proper geo-political contextualization, rules of global governance and historicization cannot be fully understood in the current era of unipolar world shaped by developments in information and communication technologies and governed by neoliberal principles. Trans-national multicultural education will help students contextualize identity markers within the proper context of the global economic and political structures that are instrumental in the formation of these markers in the first place.

b) Global scope

A second key element of a trans-national multicultural education is a global scope that can expose the vital linkages to identity, displacement, relocation and experience and sustenance of complex affiliations and attachments located both at the national and the global levels. Modern immigrant communities comprise dense and complex networks across national and political borders. Discourses and structures that affect them in myriad ways are also located transnationally. Both the immigrant communities and discursive and structural factors that affect them have to be understood in a global perspective linked to the national context. Thus, trans-national multicultural education must be global in scope. The expansion of scope from national to global is also important because often students from the majority group understand their counterparts from the minority group not on the basis of their presence in Canada but in terms of the images of their countries and societies of origin. Let me take two recent events and the response of Canadians to these events to make this point. In the aftermath of the deadly earthquake in Haiti last year the Canadians opened their hearts and wallets to help the

disaster struck people. In contrast, similar empathy was not observed when floods of biblical proportions devastated Pakistan. A reflection of these contrasts was also visible in the Canadian classrooms and universities. Most observers agreed that the reason why the Canadians did not feel the empathy for the people of Pakistan was because of the image of the country in relation to the war on terror. This image is also instrumental in the way that the majority group students relate to their Pakistani counterparts in the societal and educational settings.

Similarly, images of students from other groups are also, by and large, reflective of how their originating societies are understood globally through media images, among other sources. The current multicultural education models and practices have little space that could reveal similarities and differences at the global intersections of power and oppression. A global focus will facilitate to foster empathy among the student teachers and at the societal level.

c) Social justice orientation

The trans-national model of multicultural education is based on the normative claim that, as citizens of the world, we have certain duties and responsibilities that in principle extend to all human beings anywhere in the world. That all human beings irrespective of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, global location have a certain moral right to respect and social justice. Such a perspective helps students in analyzing the complex and multilayered issues that need collective responses to achieve justice at the global level. At the same time it also helps students in understanding distant causes of issues related to difference and diversity at home, and helps them come up with socially just and equitable solution within local context.

d) Trans-disciplinarity

Trans-national multicultural education cannot be straitjacketed into rigid disciplinary confines. Trans-national multicultural education is predicated on transdisciplinarity. In order to move away from an exclusive focus on culture as the space for contestations and negotiations between different individuals and groups and to focus on multiple discursive and structural formations it is important that students connect the exegesis of global financial, political, ecological and other discourses to issues of diversity and difference at home. For example, multiculturalism cannot be taught in isolation from the issues of ecological crisis facing the world. The environmental crisis faced by people across the world is an outcome of the anthropocentric humanism that is central to the leading ideologies of modernity and enlightenment.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, one of the reasons for the failure of current multicultural education in leading to the creation of equality or better understanding of difference and diversity is a result of the outdated multicultural education being used in teacher education programs. The current multicultural education is narrowly focused on culture (in the national context) as the categorizing principle. It merely aims to manage diversity in society and within classrooms.

There is a need to develop a trans-national multicultural education with an explicit multifocal, multidisciplinary and a global worldview grounded in the notion of social justice. It must help students to question deeper global inequalities by challenging normative and descriptive premises of global unjust policies and practices that are often reflected at local levels.

A trans-national multicultural education will have the prowess to provide an educational experience, which is liberating in the true sense, as it calls for a broad-based understanding of multi-layered issues that create inequality and 'otherness' and the need to create a democratic citizenship encompassing the globe making connections at various levels involving all countries, uniting in a major thrust: citizens of the world.

Thus, what is needed is a trans-national multiculturalism based on a trans-disciplinary approach, which deals with issues of equity and justice at both local and global levels. Along with the study of historical injustices it is important to understand the wrongs that are being perpetrated today. Such an approach empowers students, as they understand that they have the power to correct unjust practices.

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