MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: NOTHING MORE THAN FOLKLORE?

Diane Gérin-Lajoie is a critical sociologist of education and professor in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), at the University of Toronto, She is also a researcher at the *Centre de recherches en éducation franco-ontarienne* at the same Institute. In addition, she is a member of *the Observatoire Jeunes et Société* in Québec. She conducts research on linguistic minorities in the areas of identity, language, race and culture among youth, and on teachers' work and professional identity. She teaches graduate courses in the areas of minority education and qualitative research.

ABSTRACT

The objective of the article is to reflect on the notion of multicultural education. Considered by many as a transformative and critical approach when developed in the 1960's, multicultural education is more, nowadays, about celebratory cultural practices. However, some confusion over the notion of multicultural education remains. Some scholars still associate multicultural education with principles of social justice, while for others it is more about acknowledging cultural differences. But, employing the same term with reference to two very different conceptual views for integrating students from diverse backgrounds can be problematic for policy makers, practitioners, and scholars (including graduate students) as well.

INTRODUCTION[1]

My purpose in writing this short article is to reflect on the notion of multicultural education and, hopefully, contribute to the theoretical discussion on the inclusion of minority students in the educational system. From the perspective of some school stakeholders, a lot has been said and done already about integrating minority students in the schools. School personnel, in particular, often think that linguistic, racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity among their students is not a high priority issue anymore, due to measures implemented to recognize, in one way or another, minority students in their school. References are made specifically to the celebration of differences through specific cultural activities, such as music, dances, food, etc., as well as to the provision of appropriate language training in the instructional language (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008).

From the perspective of some teachers and principals, student diversity has taken a back seat to what they consider more pressing issues that have emerged in the past 15 years, such as being accountable for the work they accomplish with their students. Standardized testing, in particular, has taken centre stage in the educational discourse worldwide. Talking specifically about education in the United States, for example, May and Sleeter (2010) remark that "a rapidly growing standards and testing movement has replaced earlier attention to racial and ethnic diversity" (p. 1).

However, almost 50 years ago, multicultural education was considered as a transformative and critical tool among scholars and practitioners (Banks, 2004). These two ways of looking at multicultural education (celebratory VS critical) have brought some confusion over this notion. Consequently, scholars (and practitioners as well) do not always have a common understanding of what constitutes multicultural education: some still associate multicultural education with principles of social justice, while for others it is more about acknowledging cultural differences. This latter perception has been referred to as "liberal multiculturalism" (May and Sleeter, 2010). It is this liberal notion of multicultural education that continues to prevail in today's schools across North America.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION NOW

Multicultural education has been part of the official discourse for decades, in North America, as well as in other parts of the world, since the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s in the United States. As an educational movement, multicultural education was understood then as a transformative tool that would be used to bring equity for all students in schools. Banks (2004) spoke of multicultural education as a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students. Nieto (2002) attributed specific characteristics to multicultural education, claiming that it was a dynamic process whose

aims were to be inclusive. Among the characteristics listed by Nieto was antiracist education, education for social justice, as well as critical pedagogy. However, in a subsequent article published in 2004, the author no longer used the term "multicultural education", referring instead to "critical multicultural education" to describe inclusive education, although keeping the same theoretical approach.

As illustrated in my introduction and in the paragraph above, multicultural education has been conceptualized from alternative points of view: a) a "transformative" oriented approach is still present in rare instances, and b) a "food and festival" approach where students celebrate ethnic diversity through food, music, costumes from their country of origins. Employing the same term with reference to two very different conceptual views for integrating students from diverse backgrounds can be highly problematic[2] for policy makers, practitioners, and scholars, alike. Over the years, liberal multicultural education has become institutionalized as the dominant approach within the education system, notwithstanding the arguments from proponents of a more critical approach. Multicultural education appears to have lost its critical side in becoming more celebratory of diverse cultural practices than preoccupied by social justice. Harper (1997), referring specifically to the Canadian reality (although, in my opinion, this specific discourse applies to other countries as well), describes multicultural education as being understood as an invitation to celebrate students' cultures, with an emphasis on the folkloric markers of the cultural diversity among students – what critics have referred to as the "food and festival approach." The objectives of multicultural education are representative of a liberal discourse concerned with helping students to understand and appreciate cultural differences and similarities and to recognize the accomplishments of diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. Multicultural education is also understood as being about respecting and showing comprehension towards students' racial, cultural, and linguistic diverse backgrounds.

The issues of equity and social justice have subsided from the stakeholders' discourse, although critics continue to argue that true inclusion will be impossible to accomplish if systemic changes do not take place in schools. The political objective of a true multicultural education approach has disappeared from the discourse of policy and practice, though it remains active within the scholarly and academic discourse in a few instances. Multicultural education is often seen by its critics as a means to assimilate minorities to the host society. These critics point out also that it is not realistic to pretend that all cultures are equal. Relationships between the dominant culture and the "other" cultures should be examined through an analysis of power, in order to better understand persisting inequalities. To attain equity, from this perspective, minorities would need greater access to political and economic power than currently exists. To conclude, the transformative dimension of the concept of multicultural education from its origins in the 1960's has disappeared, or perhaps never really took hold in the world of practice, while the "food and festivals" approach prevails in the educational stakeholders' discourse and practice.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN CANADA

In the Canadian context, the official discourse in educational policy and practice on multicultural education differs little from the rest of the world, referring mainly to the celebration of the diverse cultures in presence, forming what is often called "the Canadian cultural mosaic".

In 1971, Canada was the first country in the world to adopt a federal policy on multiculturalism. The policy was adopted for two main reasons. The first one was in response to an increasing number of immigrants from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds over the years, especially in the 1950's and 1960's. The second reason was a political one: the rise of nationalism in Quebec brought the Canadian government to set up the federal Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. During the audiences, people other than French or English origins became increasingly vocal regarding the role of their respective cultures in the new Canadian mosaic. What resulted from the Commission's work was a federal policy on bilingualism, but no policy on biculturalism. Not long after, a policy of "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework" was promulgated. In this policy, the government recognized the value of all Canadian citizens regardless of their racial or ethnic background, their language, or their religion. It also recognized the rights of Aboriginal peoples and the status of the two official languages, French and English.

Following the 1971 multicultural policy, ministries of education across the country developed their own integration policies in regards to students' diversity. In English Canada, they opted for a liberal multicultural education approach. The official discourse emphasized the need to respect all cultures, which reinforced the treatment of minority cultures as folkloric artifacts, fixed "things" (McCarthy, 1998). This notion remains very present in teachers and principals' discourse across Canada even though 40 years have passed since the 1971 Multiculturalism policy at the federal level (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008), and despite persistent critiques of this understanding and approach to multicultural education as highlighted below.

The most salient critiques of liberal multiculturalism and particularly of the idea that "all cultures are equal" have come from antiracist and critical multicultural education scholars who claim that all cultures are not equal in terms

of their access to power, and that social reality should be examined through a lens where power relations occupy centre stage. It is essential, from this perspective, to work not only toward the cultural integration of minorities but also toward their structural inclusion. If the intention is to lead to more equitable social relations between newcomers and the host society, liberal multicultural education in its present form is far from attaining this objective.

TEACHERS' TRAINING

One cannot reflect on the notion of multicultural education without mentioning teachers' training and the way that the concept of multicultural education gets reproduced or even ignored in several instances. In initial teacher education programmes, the integration of minority students is rarely the centre of attention. Often it appears as one of many topics in a broader course on school and society. When distinct courses focusing on the issue are provided, they are likely to be offered as electives. When it comes to teachers' continuing professional development, workshops might be available to them on pedagogical days, but not necessarily mandatory and with little systematic follow-up to support the transfer of ideas and strategies into practice in the classroom and school. As previously mentioned, attention to students' diversity has been less a priority during the last decade as the concerns of public school educators have shifted to other educational realities.

But what strikes the most when speaking with practicing regular classroom teachers is their almost unanimous claim that they have never been trained in the field of multicultural education, or how to teach minority students (unless they have chosen to seek additional qualifications as English as a Second Language specialists). Their discourse shows low levels of comfort when they talk about what strategies and accommodations they make in response to their work with cultural and linguistic minority student populations. Colour blindness, sameness, and folklore remain at the centre of their discourse. The notion of "difference" is raised when situations described as problematic occur with minority students, otherwise, teachers claim to not "see" them as different from the others in their class (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008). Ignoring the difference means for the teachers that they provide equal treatment to all of their students, on the assumption that equal opportunity serves the purpose of equity.

In the cases where a more critical approach is sometimes used in training future teachers or practising teachers, it is often more the result of individual efforts of committed advocates, than a concerted institutional and collective decision (King, 2004; Sleeter, 2004). When we look at the scholarly literature on multicultural education, at the discourse of educational practitioners on the topic and finally, at teachers' training programs, there is evidence that we remain in the presence of a liberal discourse when it comes to the integration of minority students in schools. Multicultural education is about "celebrating differences" through folkloric activities.

CONCLUSION

I wrote this short paper while reflecting on my continuing contact with graduate students who often have a difficult time differentiating multicultural education from critical multicultural education. This confusion seems to be due in large part to the alternative ways the concept of multicultural education is depicted in the academic literature, sometimes as taking the perspective of social justice and equity, and other times as taking a more folkloric perspective where cultures are objectified as artifacts consisting of alternative beliefs, norms, customs, and material things (e.g., food and clothing), and the emphasis is placed mainly on respect for intercultural differences and perhaps communication between groups. As a result, the notion can be nebulous and easily misinterpreted by the reader.

In recent years however, concerted efforts from critical scholars to deconstruct this concept have contributed significantly to a better understanding of the fundamental differences between the transformative multicultural education of the 1960s and the prevailing liberal multicultural education perspective and approach which has unfortunately persisted as the official discourse on minority students' integration in schools in North America and other countries around the world.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Stephen Anderson for the time he spent revising the article and for his useful comments.

[2] For example, graduate students or scholars entering the field get easily confused when getting familiar with the existing literature, especially the American literature. The way multicultural education is sometimes described is in fact how other scholars have defined critical multicultural education.