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Does Multicultural Education Really Benefit Various Cultures?

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Abstract

This study is a reflection on the theory and practice of multicultural education after almost 40 years of development. After reviewing many recent works on multicultural education, the author found that, basically, there is not much difference in the definition and content of the various forms of multicultural education, even though there may be some variation in terms of the purposes of multicultural education. The author also found that two issues need further clarification. First when there are limited educational resources, there will always be a problem of fairly and accurately distributing those resources to those who need them most. Second, in terms of the direction of the reform for multicultural education, constructing knowledge with the constructivist theory is the main trend. However, the author believes that there are other ways of learning and teaching, especially for the purpose of advancing our understanding of education. To discuss these two primary issues, the author concluded that if we understand multiculturalism through the perspective of environmental education, we can resolve some conflicts based on the problems of fairness and inclusion.

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論多元文化教育誰獲益

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摘 要

多元文化教育由 1960 年代的大力提倡到 21 世紀，已經有 40 餘年，但在理論與實踐上，仍有許多問題需要澄清，本文將省思其中的兩個問題。首先，在理想的理論之下，如何達到公平與正義？其次，以建構主義的方法建構知識，是多元文化教育的主要改革方向，但若以永續教育作為教育目標，為延續我們的文化，與永續的生存，是否須保留一些其他的學習與教導方式？為探討上述兩個議題，本文將多元文化教育放在環境教育的思考下，期望有更寬廣的討論與實踐空間。

關鍵詞：多元文化教育、環境教育、原住民知識

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I. Two arguments stated

It is not disputed that multicultural education grew out of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The overall intention of the Civil Rights Movement was to eliminate the social discrimination that African Americans faced on a daily basis in pre-1960 U. S. As time passed, however, the list of U. S. minority groups has expanded to include many other groups such as women, Mexican or Asian immigrants, people of different sexual orientations, and handicapped people among others. All of these groups began to ask for their own equal opportunities of representation and treatment and for their rights guaranteed under the Constitution. As a result of its socializing power, education is clearly heavily significant in shaping cultural views. Through education, a person can develop his (her) understanding about cultural plurality, gain insights through criticism, become conscious of new cultural perspectives, and learn how to serve as a member of society.

Despite the amount of ink spilled over the past four decades, there is still no agreement on the definition of multicultural education and ways of integrating students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In the 1980s and 1990s, though far from universal, multicultural education bowed to the concerns of a diverse list of social groups, including women, homosexuals, people with special education needs, and people of various age groups including the very young and the elderly (La Belle & Ward, 1994: 25).

After reviewing many recent works on multicultural education, I have found that, basically, there is no much disagreement among the definitions and content in the various iteration of multicultural education. Some different orientations of educational purposes do exist. For instance, J. Banks and his followers pay more attention on fairness and justice of school curriculum and learning, and H. Giroux and P. McLaren put their emphasis on pursuing social justice (Giroux & McLaren, 1994). In this paper, I focus my attention on Banks' theory. Among many experts in multicultural education,

one name appears in almost every book and article is Banks. He is one of the most prominent figures in the field of multicultural education. In considering what should be suitable curriculum design for students of various cultural background, it is appropriate to focus on his thought.

At this point I would like to reflect for a moment upon the theory and practice of multicultural education after almost 40 years of development, and I have found that two issues need clarification. First, when there are limited resources for education, there will always be a problem of fairly and accurately targeting resources to those who need them most. Second, in terms of the curriculum reform movement, knowledge by constructive process is the main trend in developing knowledge. My belief is that there are other ways of learning and teaching, especially with the purpose of continuing our cultural understanding. In discussing these two primary issues, I will also argue that when we set environmental education like Lynch (1989) advocated as an ultimate goal of multicultural education, we can resolve some conflicts based on the problems of fairness and inclusion. However, if we insist on constructive process of forming knowledge that being taught in schools, this process is in conflict with theories that many ecological cultural conservatives who are trying to preserve indigenous ways of teaching and learning. Some cultural traditions are worth keeping in spite of personal experiences. I will discuss them accordingly.

II. Issues on fairness

Ideally, in a multicultural education program, we would give equal or a fair share of consideration to each cultural group, however, in actual practice, we confront many problems. First, according to Banks (2003: 20-21), there are five dimensions that guide a school when implementing a multicultural education program, such as the integration of cultural content, and the reduction of prejudice to name only two. There is nothing wrong with these dimensions, they look very nice in theory, but in educational practice,

there will be conflicts among them. For instance, the question of cultural identity continues to get more and more complex and vague (Strathern, 1996), in that very often, one person belongs to more than one cultural group. J. Dewey already pointed out about 100 years ago that for each American if we can identify what an American is there are too many hyphens among their cultural origins (Putnam & Putnam, 1993: 362). When a teacher chooses school materials intended to include as much content from various cultural groups as possible, the limited class time might limit the amount of ground that can be covered. How many perspectives and how much content can teachers possibly integrate?

There is another problem. The purpose of multicultural education, according to Banks (2003), is for teachers to reduce prejudice and help students develop positive attitudes toward different racial, ethnic and cultural groups. One problem not addressed is that there seems to be an assumption that all teachers in multicultural education program are above holding onto their own prejudice. However, when we discuss issues of personal cultural identity, “each person’s life experience differs from those of other people, and every person lives in a variety of social situations each day (Erickson, 2003: 52),” thus we cannot expect our teachers to have personal views without their own internal prejudice in their educational position or be very objective in order to help students to reduce prejudice. For instance, if one teacher is raised from a certain religious family situation, it is expected that his (her) students through their connections to the teacher will be more religious conscious, or have a greater appreciation for that religious cultural tradition. In fact, this idea is shortsighted as both teachers and students are in an interactive relationship, both of them will learn from one another.

Another element in multicultural education is the knowledge construction process. For Banks (1996), one of the key aspects of multicultural educational development is the transformative knowledge in classroom-based learning. By using school materials that emphasize critical thinking and analysis “teachers help students to understand how knowledge is constructed and how it reflects the social context in which it is created,

and enable them to develop the understanding and skills needed to become knowledge builders themselves.” (Banks, 1996: 22) This also is an ideal situation. However, La Belle and Ward (1994: 30) state at least three questions underlying multiculturalism and education: 1. Which group(s) determines and defines what counts as knowledge? 2. Which groups should determine what knowledge is to be transmitted through educational institutions? 3. Which groups controls access to formal education institutions and the certification which are crucial to upward mobility in the job market? I tend to agree with the thought process behind these questions. Though there has been great improvement in terms of knowledge transformation for black students in the U. S. When we consider situations of other cultural or ethnic groups in America or other countries, I think that above three questions become eminent.

Let us take ethnic cultural situation in Taiwan as an example, the number of formally recognized aboriginal tribes has recently expanded from nine to twelve. One of the reasons is that since different groups of one tribe live in two sides of a mountain area, while part of the reason for claiming their rights to be independent cultural groups maybe financial, in that they can receive more government funding, in other ways, these tribes, which live on two sides of a mountain are quite different culturally. They might develop different living habits and dialectal accents, and thus each of them would like to be recognized as an independent tribe. Officially recognized as aboriginal tribes, they can enjoy special treatment in the educational process, which includes enjoying advantage in test scores, financial help from local or national government as well as preferential hiring practices. In addition, the groups will have the rights to demand that their cultural knowledge be included in school materials. This expansion raises the question: if there are too many ethnic groups to compete one another for limited educational resources, how far an educational consideration for each ethnic group should go? It is not just limited time but also limited resources to be considered. When you have enough money and time, you can provide materials and manpower to satisfy all requests from every ethnic group. However, under the financial situation in our

educational department, it is not possible to satisfy everyone.

Lynch (1989) expands the realm of multicultural education further and calls for the inclusion of cultural specific environmental education. I would admit that there are quite a lot of aboriginal cultures that retain their own cultural views on sustainable ecology. However, I suspect that this is not what Lynch means by environmental education. I would also agree with Lynch, who defines “multicultural education as a global strategy for educational development and extends its basic ethnic beyond national boundaries.” (Lynch, 1989: xi) From his discussion, I believe that he does not have cultural sustainable environmental in mind, either. In terms of fairness and inclusion of student groups, disregard of its orientation, being from social minority or ethnic, Lynch means that all need to be considered in multicultural education in a global sense. I will not put environmental education in the realm of multicultural education in above sense, and there might be some groups that feel left out and different views on deconstructive and preserving traditional knowledge. I will argue that we need to be selective in providing resources for various groups, and culturally ecological sustainable of environmental education is a good standard to be based on. My reasons link to my second question and concern the overall theme of this paper.

III. Multicultural education and environmental education

According to Banks & Banks (1995), multicultural education should be educational program that fights for various cultural groups and recognizes their cultural knowledge within the scope of classroom-based learning. Thus, they emphasize that this learning is not a static base of knowledge, but is in flux based on constant criticism and analysis of school materials. Many scholars follow Banks’ lead and develop their own working definition of multicultural education. For instance, Gorski (2003) maintains his own working definition based on the principle that the ultimate goal of multicultural education is the transformation of society. He explains that schools are essen-

tial for laying the foundation for the elimination of oppression and injustice, and that student-centered pedagogy, critical thinking, and a diversity of learning styles are key elements in school learning that help drive this broad transformation. I would characterize most of these theories as progressively oriented, even the deconstructionist viewpoint with a constructivist theory of learning. Regarding this I would discuss two points.

First, Banks and his followers view multicultural education with the same lens as Dewey, who argues that education is important in the formation of a democratic community, in that, through the education system students learn to be independent and express their viewpoints freely. Developing an egalitarian community sensitive to social inequities would benefit every ethnic group, other minority or cultural groups, and school teaching and learning is the route toward this idealized destination. The principle of liberal teaching and individual learning style are characteristics of progressivism and reconstructionism, and though this philosophical doctrine has been in our educational scene for almost a century, there is question of whether it achieves the purpose of educating a whole person or students with global, transnational competitive ability. In her work, Mitchell (2001) discusses one situation in Canada. She argues that there is an inherent “illiberalism” of liberalism in multicultural education practice.

What is unacceptable within the parameters of a procedurally based conceptualization of liberalism is to step outside the discourse and argue for separateness as being more advantageous for the cultural survival of certain minority groups and for the nation. (Mitchell, 2001: 70)

Her discussion shows that the critique of liberalism from “outside” the liberal project “disrupts unspoken assumptions such as the idea that the rhetoric and policies of multicultural education always benefit immigrants and people of color.”(Mitchell, 2001: 70)

In Taiwan, there is a similar situation. Although there are no official statements

concerning promoting multicultural education programs by the Minister of Education (Mitchell & Salsbury, 1996: 319), the Taiwanese government offers financial support to various programs in public schools that provide education for minority groups and aboriginal tribes. One of these programs' primary goals is to maintain aboriginal languages and/or tribal dialects for the purpose of sustaining tribal cultures and traditions. In my opinion, however, this reason seems rather weak; a few studies conducted over the past few years have revealed a dilemma. On the one hand, aboriginal children are required to learn the national language, the local dialect and more importantly, English in order to be competitive in Taiwan's job market. Some students might not understand why they have to learn so many different languages some of which will not help them in their future career. Besides their schoolwork, there is no time available to learn tribal dialects that they use infrequently. On the other hand, these same students, through their language study, are made aware of their cultural heritage. They realize that they are a necessary component for keeping some of their traditions alive. With people from the older generations getting few each day, there is a pressing question of how to put those tribal dialects many of which exist only in oral form into a textual format for future generation to learn.

Although multicultural education programs are set up idealistically and are meant to benefit the people of all minority groups as well as aboriginal tribes, one actual consequence is that most aboriginal students, after completing their education, feel ill prepared to compete with other students for positions that require academic knowledge (Banks, 1996: 14-16) and English language skills.

Second, Banks strengthens transformative knowledge and uses terms such as 'challenge', 'revise' and 'replace' in place of mainstream knowledge in school curricula (Banks, 1996). Gorski also states that in terms of student learning and instruction, the theoretical foundation is constructive and critical pedagogical (Gorski, 1999). He asks educators, researchers and cultural theorists to "deconstruct traditional models" of instruction and learning and "reexamining both school and society from a progressive

and transformative framework.” (Gorski, 1999)

There is a long history of debate between student-centered and teacher-centered approaches to teaching and learning. Examined from a post-modern and deconstructionist viewpoint, the former approach has emerged dominated in recent years. However, it also raises a great deal of criticism. In addition to Matthews’ critical view of epistemological argument (Matthews, 1993), other scholars argue that knowledge created by personal experience cannot replace and in fact supersede all else. It is misleading if students and teachers believe that “sophisticated knowledge and skills can be attained by relying only on students’ constructive efforts without teachers’ systematic and deliberate efforts to help all students to adopt cultural knowledge (em Tech-Constructivism, 2004).” I would agree that in terms of learning, appealing to students’ experience as a way of helping him (her) make sense of one’s living world is a positive approach. However, when we think about this approach further, it should be the teacher who initiates learning circumstances, to help or guide one’s experience in creating knowledge in the classroom. In other words, we cannot apply a constructivist approach alone in our school learning.

In multicultural education, I would think that there is more than one way of teaching and learning. In Taiwan’s educational tradition, based as it is on Confucian teaching, there are two kinds of teachers: one is a teacher of virtue or learning, the other is a teacher of classics. The status of the former is higher than that of the latter. In practice, this means it is better for students to learn from someone who is virtuous and knowledgeable than from someone whose sole concern is to impart book learning to students. Right now maybe times have changed, perhaps, in our study of western educational traditions we have lost some of our own traditions, and do not value the both as we used to. However, both ways of teaching and learning are coming back in school practice. It is getting popular that many young children are asked to recite the Trimetric Classic, even though they have been taught not to memorize text. Even in university, there are courses that required students to recite and write from memory the old classic

articles such as poems, historical text and the Four Books. Also, in Chinese medicine, list of plants and animals of medicinal value (本草綱目) still need to be memorized by students in Chinese medication field. In a school that has produced many great chefs who have worked in big hotels and restaurants in Southeastern Asia in recent years, even though students' previous experience is not necessary, when new students enroll the school, they have to follow the old tradition of formally bowing down to their teachers in a solemn ceremony. As knowledge should have a solid academic foundation, any new creative knowledge can be developed after a students' graduation and after the fundamentals have already been taught.

Constructing knowledge based on people's experience and personal judgment should not be the only way in acquiring classroom-based knowledge, and traditional way of knowing and learning should not be replaced by critical thinking only for the sake of transformation. In an article titled "Knowledge Construction, Language Maintenance, Revitalization, and Empowerment" published in 2003, the authors show that many ethnic cultural groups try to revive their native linguistic traditions by retaining their traditional cultural ways of teaching and learning (Ovando & Gourd, 2003).

Also, in environmental education, many environmental educators such as C. A. Bowers are asking not only for social justice, but for eco-justice (Bowers, 2001). Thus, teaching cultural heritage and history with ecologically sustainable viewpoints is important in developing a student's ecological consciousness. As Palmer (1998: 138) states, "pupils should recognize the value of indigenous knowledge and technology in the past." If this ecologically conceptualized indigenous knowledge is accepted by all students, they are more likely to stay in specific multicultural educational programs such as language or history. For instance, on the island of Taiwan, hunting was the main source of food supply for aboriginal tribes about 100 years ago. Before hunting started, tribal people had to worship heaven and ask for a fruitful result and thank it for providing them food. The tribes would catch what they needed and trade any surplus for living necessities. Thus, through the tribe's tradition of sustainable consumption,

nature would be able to exist forever. However, there was also seemingly violent side to their respective cultures. In Atayal tribal custom, there was a custom of killing people to demonstrate clansmen's bravery. If their territory was invaded, there was epidemic in their tribe, or for simple inter-tribal animosity, they would go out for a few days either to kill or be killed.¹ Once there was one chief who went out to kill and brought back fifty human heads and hung them in front of his house as a violent trophy (田貴賓, 1999). As educational programs go, while we cannot romanticize indigenous cultures, we can teach the former concept of letting nature to take its natural course, while deemphasizing the violence and brutality of many traditions and customs.

In a way, I would not extend the realm of multicultural education to include environmental education as Lynch does. His advocate of environmental education is not what we understand as environmental education, and I would like to have environmental education included multicultural aspect. In another, I would be very cautious when we develop knowledge that being taught in school and not to emphasize only one way of learning and teaching. My argument for this final point is based on Orr's statement — all education is environmental education (Orr, 1992: 90). If liberal arts education is with a holistic or a whole person as our educational aim, it should not exclude the dependency of our existence on our relation and connections with other people as well as nature. Specific culture and cultures will be formed through our connection with them. Later, he further developed this statement in his second book, *Earth in Mind* (Orr, 1994) and then practiced this concept in actual teaching environment (Orr, 2002).

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, I agree with Banks, educational reform movement is an ongoing

¹ There are not many records of this kind left. I will mention one that I have definite reference of it.

process. There are always problems no matter what form you choose. There are always groups of people that claim to have rights which they do not have and who claim they are being treated unfairly. Multicultural education programs need to consider both inclusion and fairness, but both can hardly be accomplished at the same time. We will have to continue being fair as much as possible and providing equal educational opportunities for everyone even as we constantly confront questions about who determines and defines what counts as knowledge. Some groups will remain unsatisfied and continue to call for more benefits.

In terms of learning and teaching, transforming students with a teacher's personal experience should not be the only strategy. Constructivism may have many advantages, but it also shows a distrust and ambiguity toward some traditional cultures, some of which hold cultural ideas about nature that are ecologically sustainable. When we develop multicultural education with ecologically sustainable foresight, students from many cultural and even ethnic groups will benefit.

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