

RECONCILING MULTICULTURALISM FROM A CRITICAL RACE PERSPECTIVE

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Racial conflicts are at the forefront of America's media and sociopolitical context from local, state, national and international perspectives. Nieto (1999) explains "A socio-political context in education takes into account the larger social and political forces operating in a particular society and the impact they may have on student learning" (May, 192). Recent events of racism in America include incidents from localized acts by two Texas whites who dragged James Byrd, an African American, down the streets of their city just because he was black, to institutionalized forms of racism like the long-term neglect of the levees in New Orleans and the slow response to the numerous victims of Hurricane Katrina stranded by their own national government. In the War on Terror, in Iraq the battle is fought like other American battles: by disproportionate numbers of poor people and people of color compared to the numbers of sons and daughters of wealthy white American U.S. forces. In America race and education still dictate how individuals are judged in society and remain indicators of potentials for success.

The quality and even the purpose of children's existence in schools is shaped through their educational environment and personal experiences. Within each experience, a person's cultural beliefs and values play an intricate role in how the experience will be interpreted by others. Dewey (1938, 7) points out, "It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even activity in experience. Everything depends on the quality of the experience which is had." Today, in America's public schools, children are educated based on the No Child Left Behind Act and curriculum decisions that are driven by individual state standards. Research shows these policies directly affect students from lower socioeconomic statuses and those from diverse cultural backgrounds. According to Mafucci (2006), Gerald Bracey, an independent, highly regarded education researcher, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is deceptive in social and economic ways because it affects the incredible amount of poverty in America that is concentrated in

rural and urban areas. The demands of NCLB leave most teachers with little time to devote to multicultural curriculum. By ignoring the need to take multiculturalism in education seriously, we risk overlooking the diverse needs of the student population. Educators can begin to address the social situations of their students and use the implications to enhance both what they learn in school and how these conditions will continue to exist in America through multicultural education. It is time for America's schools to reconcile (accept) the importance of multicultural education and emphasize race in education in order to avoid the slippery slope toward total evasion of the importance of ethnicity for all hyphenated Americans.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theorists recognize race and ethnicity are the primary determining factors that affect a person's status in American society, and they are dedicated to researching, writing, and exposing racism to society. They are content with using radicalism and liberalism as frameworks for addressing America's racial problems. Tate (1997) pointed out that within multicultural education there is a need to address racism up close and personal and use it as an analytical tool rather than a biological or socially constructed one. Banks (1994) points out one dimension of multicultural education is to reduce prejudice and race through the curriculum so children can learn about and relate to experiences of the past or ones they may encounter in the future. He discusses multicultural education goals address racism and the focus is on practice skills, curriculum reform, assessment and evaluation tools, educating teachers and pre-service teachers to be culturally responsive, and reducing discrimination against children of color.

Both critical race theory and multicultural education focus on particular groups that have been the target of racism in America. The focus is on people of color and minorities who have historical experiences with racism

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and oppression. "Critical race theory aims to reexamine the terms by which race and racism have been negotiated in American consciousness, and to recover and revitalize the radical tradition or race-consciousness among African Americans and other peoples of color" (Delgado, 1995; p. xiv). While multicultural education analyzes the myths, presuppositions, and perceived wisdoms about societies' views of racism it does not exclude the Western view, but incorporates it with other cultures so students can get a broad perspective of experiences, histories, cultural values, and beliefs.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is the inclusion of the study of different cultures within the classroom environment. Without it, in the spectrum of education, children are deprived of important learning practices and understandings. Multicultural education is for all children. To effectively integrate multiculturalism into the curriculum, teachers must be aware of the nature, quality, and value of how to implement it in ways that are relevant to students across all subject areas and not just during social studies.

Over the years, multicultural and other educational scholars have been concerned with the academic achievement problems among low socioeconomic students and children of color. Banks (1993) explains a main goal for multicultural curriculum is to help students develop cross-cultural understandings of others, and learn how each ethnic group can get along in society. Gay (2000, 62) explains, "Caring teachers are distinguished by their high performance expectations, advocacy, and empowerment of students as well as by their use of pedagogical practices that facilitate school success." Teaching effective multicultural education requires cultural accountability because it constructs a framework for a student and community centered classroom. When teachers combine deep content knowledge, sound teaching techniques, positive perceptions of themselves as professionals, and affirming relationships with all students, they are practicing culturally relevant teachings (Ladson-Billings, 1994). They will gain knowledge that shows them being different is a part of being an American.

In order for students to learn multiculturally, teachers must be prepared and able to effectively implement a multicultural curriculum. Teacher education programs are requiring pre-service teachers to take courses in multicultural education. In many programs, teacher education students must complete at least one field experience with a diverse student population (see for example, Kahne and Westheimer, 1996; Sleeter and Montecinos, 1999). Moreover, May (1999) found "teacher education [programs] needs to make available experiences that help them [pre-service teachers] to politicize their understanding of racism, help them understand how formal schooling can be connected to the home and community life of their students, and help them understand how to translate their cultural knowledge into pedagogical practices" (128). Implementing an effective multicultural curriculum can bridge gaps among different cultural groups. Focusing

on multiculturalism and diversity are two components teacher education programs must continue to require of their pre-service teachers. May (1999) points out how research indicates "Teacher preparation programs in the United States are increasingly discussing the use of community based learning experiences as a part of preparation for cultural diversity" (p. 125). Within the training of multicultural education for pre-service teachers, the issue of racism needs to be addressed up close and personal and used as an analytical tool.

Banks (1995) explains, "Multicultural education undermines students' prejudices through a transformation of the curriculum... and as a result, the knowledge that is constructed more closely reflects the experiences of traditionally disenfranchised groups. Rather, it may help students understand the intellectual and moral roots of racism and weaken it" (p. 289). Within this explanation, it is evident racism is a key component being addressed in multicultural education. From the range of meanings and pedagogy attached to multicultural education derive two other dimensions that primarily focus on racism as a social entity in American education and link multicultural education to critical pedagogy. Antiracism strives and encourages individuals to be without racist attitudes and work against racial injustice in society more generally with a focus on culture. Critical multiculturalism links racism to political action and community/student awareness while the implementation is taking place through curriculum development in the classroom.

Critical Multiculturalism

Many contemporary scholars of multicultural education often examine the pedagogy without connecting it to power or critical analysis of racism. According to McCarthy (1990), critical multiculturalism links the micro dynamics of the school curriculum to larger issues of social relationships that occur outside the school environment. Similarly, May (1999, 7-8) stated critical multiculturalism "incorporates postmodern conceptions and analyses of culture and identity, while holding onto the possibility of emancipator politics."

Critical multiculturalism is a social action and change. It is an outgrowth of multicultural education and an analysis of the inequities in the community from the minority perspective. It is the most radical and political form of multicultural education because it links the dimensions of the school curricula to larger issues of social relations outside the school, and it combines culture, identity, and lived experiences with an analysis of power structures and pedagogy. In addition, it systematically supports experiential learning approach, employs critical thinking skills, and can permanently institutionalize positive changes to a community (McLaren, 1995).

Ross and Pang (2006) discuss three areas when teaching critical multiculturalism that include: enabling students to hear discursive voices which conflict with and struggle against the voices of academic authority; urging them to negotiate a position in response to these colliding voices; and asking them to consider their choice of position in the

context of the socio-political power relationships. These relationships are within and among diverse discourses and in the context of their personal life, history, culture, and society can and will impact the way they learn to cease to exist in society and in America's schools.

Race at the forefront of curriculum development has to be reconciled with education in a standards based educational environment informed by No Child Left Behind. May (1999) explains using critical multiculturalism with a focus on race can directly impact students' lives. Race issues in education address self-esteem and place emphasis on diversity in public schools. The implementation of critical multiculturalism within a classroom setting influences students' learning and the likelihood they will do well on tests. It empowers them in terms of self esteem and socialization.

In the Classroom – Effective implementation of critical multicultural curriculum

The implementation of multicultural education can help unify a divided nation (Banks, 1994; Derman-Sparks, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000). The outcomes of the lessons taught demonstrate how students can benefit from direct connections and confrontations with racism, social interactions, and community change.

In 2001, a fourth-year fifth grade teacher (with a M.Ed. and academic concentration in multicultural education) in a southeastern state, was confronted with an inclusive classroom of twenty-nine students from diverse backgrounds. Nine were special education students, seven were African-American, six were bi-racial/multi-ethnic (four African-American/Caucasian, one African-American/Japanese and one Thai/Caucasian), two were Latina and ESL learners, three were Asian, eight were Caucasian, ten had parents on active duty in the United States military, and seven were living in single-parent households. Parental involvement was approximately 75 percent. Community issues ranged from poverty to middle class. There were a number of incidents of racism among the diverse groups living within the local community of civilians and military personnel. Teachers were supported by the principal with regard to making curriculum adjustments, although the school was governed by NCLB. The school environment was a safe haven for many students. The school curriculum included pre-packaged curriculum, standards based lesson plans, and very few multicultural connotations. Although the school hallways included a diverse array of cultural posters, the students were not immersed in multicultural education curricula prior to having this teacher.

During the first week of school the teacher connected with the students by identifying personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and beliefs. She surveyed students for suggestions of what they wanted to learn and achieve in fifth grade. She began the first day of school with the questions: Do you consider yourself a cultural being? Why or why not? What is your race and ethnicity? Why are these attributes and cultural inferences important to you as an individual with regard to what you want to achieve in school?

After a week of getting to know the students on a one-on-one personal level, the teacher began to reach out to the parents and community. She encouraged her students to discuss racial incidents in the community and in the world. There was an array of multicultural textbooks, activities, lesson plans, and implementations the students accessed on a daily basis. The teacher encouraged parents to come into her classroom unannounced, and she contacted parents to report both positive and negative behaviors of their children.

During the first month of school something unexpected happened. One of her students was the unintended victim during a drive-by shooting at a local teen club. Some local high school students were in conflict with one another. Evidently a white female was dating a black male and there had been tension amongst the students for the past two weeks. It escalated, and on that particular night, white students decided to shoot the black student for dating the white girl. Unfortunately, the fifth grade student, 11-years-old at the time, was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The teen club, for 13-20 year olds, did not card students, so the entire situation was a disaster waiting to happen.

The teacher had to make a conscious decision on how to address the matter at hand: a racial incident, under-aged children attending a club, gun violence, and a community in an uproar with the local government for allowing such a club to exist. The teacher decided to create a critical multiculturalism unit to address the social and learning needs of her students. She anticipated the unit would run concurrent with the standard curriculum, capitalizing on available teaching moments, for six to eight weeks. The first lesson was to organize a town meeting, however she wanted to address the issue with her class first.

The students were upset. They wanted the club to close. They expressed how upset they were that racism could cause so much harm to innocent bystanders. The teacher gathered information about the teen club from the community. The students contacted the school board, city council, and local government officials and began writing letters protesting what happened at the club. Parents were actively involved and came into the classroom to discuss and debate issues. Finally the students managed to organize a town meeting. The teacher made her classroom into a community space that could address multicultural community concerns. The principal and parents from the high school attended, and so did local officials and parents of the children from the community.

Social action was in action and the students were learning and excelling in school. Grades in all subject areas were rising. The teacher integrated reading, writing, math, science, social studies, and technology into the project. It lasted four months. While other fifth grade classes were engaged in daily routines and pre-processed school curricula, these particular classes were emotionally, personally, and academically informed with social action addressing issues of race and politics of a community.

As result of the effectiveness of unit, the teacher continued to integrate critical multiculturalism throughout the year. At the end of the year, the teacher's entire fifth grade class passed the state's standardized tests. They were talking with their parents about world views and events. They were talking amongst themselves about race and ethics in America. And most importantly, they were learning through critical multiculturalism. Knowingly, the teacher proved critical multiculturalism can be effective in an American public school driven by standards and NCLB. Students' cognitive abilities were being grown along with their meta-cognitive capacities.

Reconciling the importance of critical multiculturalism

The dynamics of racial politics affect people on individual and institutional levels. The effort to reconcile critical multiculturalism with classroom methodology can be helped by reframing teacher and curricular conceptions of the role of race in education. Much like the way sociologist Orlando Patterson suggested scholars of freedom, slavery, and other forms of domination stop thinking of power as a rock (which few can wield and which encourages the impulse to choose separate sides) but instead conceive of it as a rope (which many can pull on, weak or strong), we can reframe our views of how race fits into and informs teaching and learning. If we see race as DuBois's veil, it hides or covers only. If we see it as a tool, like the critical multiculturalists, we see opportunities for removing its charged nature, and see it is not only there for us to cover over things. It can be used to help us hammer out solutions to today's problems, and tighten screws of progress made since *Brown vs. the Board of Education*.

The fifth grade teacher in the narrative put her multicultural education expertise and training into action and taught her students using race and social action as tools to create a critical multicultural unit. In this particular situation, students learned and achieved more in school when they were allowed to express themselves and connect with real life events and situations. Sleeter and Montecinos (1999) discuss critical multicultural techniques linked to social movements are effective strategies for students and "The social movement metaphor brings into focus concerns with group rights and agency and the commitment to teaching students how to exercise power and responsibility as they materialize democratic ideals" (116). In addition, critical pedagogy would encourage this reconciliation of integrating critical multiculturalism as a natural part of America's public school system.

Reconciliation is acceptance. Once America's educational system fully accepts the notion race is a factor in student learning, critical multiculturalism can be naturally incorporated and implemented into classroom environments.

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