

Antiracist Education, Multicultural Education and the Interpretive Approach

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In the UK in the 1970s the term '*multiracial* education' was used, and there was a thriving National Association for Multiracial Education. It gradually became apparent that there were two key positions embraced within this group. One faction was primarily interested in antiracism (seen fundamentally as addressing the issue of imbalance and misuse of power) and the other in what became known as '*multiculturalism*'. In the 1980s, multicultural education (or multicultural approaches to particular curriculum subjects), associated with a '*liberal education*' philosophy, came under strong attack from some in the '*antiracist*' camp (eg Mullard 1984). The following is a summary of some of the key criticisms of multicultural education from the standpoint of the type of antiracism noted above.

- In multicultural education, a culture was often perceived as a closed system, with a fixed understanding of ethnicity.
- The treatment of '*cultures*' in the language and practices of multicultural education was usually *superficial*, partly because of a well meaning attempt to celebrate diversity. Such superficiality reinforced platitudes and stereotypes, and hence helped to maintain racism intact.
- An emphasis on discrete cultures allowed them to be perceived as rivals to the national culture which, through its tolerance, allowed them to express themselves to some degree.
- Multicultural education emphasized the exotic, the other, the different, perpetuating the approaches of early social and cultural anthropologists.
- The superficiality of multicultural approaches resulted in a lack of attention to hierarchies of power *within* different cultural groups. Cultural and religious groups were perceived in simplistic terms as holistic and unified communities.
- Racism was perceived (by multiculturalists) psychologically in terms of personal attitudes that could be changed through knowledge and learning the value of tolerance. The power structures and established social practices within

institutions, which were principally responsible for the perpetuation of inequality, were ignored.

For antiracists, individual beliefs about 'race' and the content of cultural traditions were not perceived as the central issue. According to antiracism it is 'structures of power' – institutional and social practices – that produce racial oppression. Racist ideas reinforce and legitimate unequal distribution of power between different groups. Racism, it is argued, needs to be tackled by challenging and changing these structures, not by presenting information about cultures or religions in the classroom.

Because of its primary concern with changing structures, antiracism (especially during the 1980s) was limited in its suggestions with regard to the school curriculum. Some writers offered ideas to promote a more critical stance with regard to awareness of 'institutional racism' and strategies to promote racial justice in the school. However, the issue of how to teach about 'culture(s)' was largely ignored by this group. Having criticized multicultural education's approaches to cultures in the curriculum, antiracists were short of ideas for dealing with *complex* issues of culture, ethnicity and religion. In attacking superficial and closed accounts of culture and ethnicity, some antiracists themselves underestimated the importance of questions of cultural and religious representation, transmission, hybridity and change. This point is recognized by writers who, in various ways, attempt to synthesize antiracist and multicultural education (eg Leicester 1992) or to address issues of culture and 'race' together (Donald and Rattansi 1992). Thus an important issue from this debate is not so much to question whether school education *should* deal with the representation of cultures, but rather to find more flexible ways of representing and interpreting cultural material which take on board key elements of the antiracist critique.

The interpretive approach Jackson (1997) draws on recent social anthropology as a key source for sophisticated models of culture(s), cultural transmission, cultural change, hybridity and cultural identity to replace 'static' models. Instead of seeing a multicultural society as one in which different, clearly distinct cultures exist side by side, the interpretive approach builds on Edward Said's idea that we should think of cultures, less as organically unified or traditionally continuous, and more as

negotiated, ongoing processes. The symbols of a culture do not dictate that its members share exactly the same world view. Rather, cultural symbols offer a language with which *to construct* a world view. Symbols are malleable, making coherence and dissent possible within 'communities' simultaneously. Despite conflict, the use of shared symbols by dissenters expresses a sense of belonging to the group. There can be no 'whole picture' of a culture. A culture is neither a scientific object nor is it a discrete and stable symbol system which can be interpreted definitively. A culture is internally diverse and is actively contested. Moreover, the representation of a culture is inevitably deeply influenced by those attempting to interpret it, whether through their intellectual presuppositions or gender or whatever.

The interpretive approach stops well short of a postmodern deconstruction of cultures, however, employing metaphors that try to capture the complexity, vibrancy and constantly changing character of cultural traditions. This position reverberates with ethnographic research showing that there is a good deal of fluidity and inter-influence in which individuals may draw upon a variety of cultural resources in shaping their own identities. Østberg describes this kind of formation as 'integrated plural identity' (Østberg 2003), while Jackson and Nesbitt refer to the young people's 'multiple cultural competence' (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993).

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