

Multicultural Education

"In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue now we say for a fact, he did invade the Arawak." It's not the rhyme I learned in school, but, then, my schooling was BME — Before the Multicultural Era.

Multicultural education makes headlines these days, but it is not a new idea or policy. One book on the subject several years ago characterized the debate about it as already "interminable." Multicultural education has been official national educational policy in Australia, Canada, and Great Britain for more than a decade, and in this country it has been a part of state education frameworks, college accreditation rules, and federal education policy since as early as 1972. Implementation and practice lag behind mandate and theory, however, and it is only in more recent years that momentum has built for quite specific classroom interventions and that effective coalitions have matured around a number of contentious programs.

It is very hard to separate the wheat from the chaff in the multicultural argument. The core concepts and ideas in multiculturalism allow for quite divergent interpretation and development. As a consequence, very different programs and aims get called "multicultural," embracing quite different pedagogical strategies and theories, and supported by quite different educational and social diagnoses. Moreover, matters are further complicated by the fact that arguments about multicultural education often cannot be disentangled from the larger political wars in this country about affirmative action, ethnic representation, and group entitlements.

Described most simply, multicultural education trains children to live in a multicultural society. The fact that in the next century forty percent of American students will be minorities and ninety-five percent of their teachers will be white speaks to the double aim of multiculturalism: (1) to help teachers understand and communicate with students who come from different cultural backgrounds, and to guide changes in curriculum and school routine, so that differences in race, language, religion, and folkways don't become barriers to student success, and (2) to create in students from diverse backgrounds mutual understanding and respect, so that as citizens they both appreciate the pluralism in American life and cherish the common political values that sustain it. Multicultural education would seem on this account both desirable and inevitable.

Why, then, the headline-making controversies? There are two sources of dispute in multicultural education. The first arises out of multiculturalism's central aim, which encourages and supports cultural difference contained in a larger framework of common political commitments. This goal of diversity within unity is inherently in tension with itself and will

always generate disagreements about how much cultural difference is compatible with common political core values, and how common the core must be.

The Vocabulary of Multiculturalism

The second source of controversy is not inherent in multiculturalism but arises out of special ways of conceiving and expressing its goals. The current school curriculum is too *Eurocentric*, according to multiculturalists. Students have to be taught to avoid *ethnocentric* judgments about other cultures. America must reject the ideal of *assimilation* for its cultural communities and embrace *pluralism*. Behind this language lurk many snares and pitfalls. For one thing, it is often used, or perceived, as code for other language. "Eurocentric" means "arrogant;" "pluralism" means "on our terms, not yours;" "ethnocentric" means "chauvinistic;" and so on. In the larger cultural wars disputants give and take offense with this vocabulary. More important, however, than controversial formulations are the differing special conceptions of multiculturalism that can march behind them.

The most slippery term of all is "culture" itself, which has the accordion-like capacity to expand or contract to suit any occasion. We think of culture most readily in the context of a people with a distinct language, customs, and history. Certainly, a principal stimulus of multicultural education is the presence in the United States of many immigrant communities. The idea of culture gets extended from this context to cover, as well, groups like African-Americans whose special history and self-identification set them apart somewhat from the rest of the population. Finally, "culturally different" also encompasses organized "alternative" or "counter-cultural" groups such as gays and lesbians, feminists, and others.

The common thread running through these different examples is group self-identification. People explicitly and self-consciously identify themselves as African-Americans, evangelical Christians, gays, or Irish, and demand that this identity receive social acknowledgement and respect. Multiculturalism might more accurately be described as *multi-groupism*, its pluralism extending to nearly all important differentia involved in self-identification. Naturally enough, controversy about appreciation of, and mutual respect for, "cultural difference" is bound to emerge when the "differences" stretch to include values, practices, and beliefs whose acceptability and respectability are socially contested.

Next, consider "assimilation" and "pluralism." Multiculturalism repudiates assimilation as an ideal. Even the best multicultural writings, however, do an inadequate job of characterizing assimilation. One leading work initially describes minorities who

assimilate to the majority culture as undergoing "complete abandonment of their cultural differences." Within a few pages, however, its author is endorsing *some* assimilation for minorities but not too much. The paradigm case of undesirable assimilation is easy enough to tease out of multiculturalism: it is changing or hiding central and valued aspects of one's history and identity to conform to a dominant style or fashion, under threat of social devaluation or exclusion if one doesn't. So, for example, the immigrant changes his name, learns English, adopts prevailing conventions of dress, entertainment, habitation, diet, and religious observances because he particularly wants to, but in order not to suffer hindrances and discrimination. If we define pluralism in contradiction to this paradigm of assimilation, then surely pluralism is the better ideal but then the contrast between assimilation and pluralism is uninformative. "Pluralism" will turn out to encompass a continuum of nonconforming behavior ranging from retaining one's "foreign" name to demanding social validation of one's membership in the North American Man-Boy Love Association. Different multiculturalisms will mark different cutting-off points along that continuum. Not all socially non-conforming behavior can be approved, nor should all conforming behavior be deplored.

One requirement of "pluralism" is that school curricula reflect the cultural diversity of the nation. The heritages and experiences of minorities, women, and previously marginalized groups should have a respected place in the texts, lessons, and activities of the school. One common multicultural justification for this requirement is pedagogical: minority children will develop better self-esteem from seeing their heritages acknowledged and appreciated. Heightened self-esteem, in turn, will translate into better school performance for these children. Multicultural writings seldom offer a persuasive account of the bases of self-esteem or its relation to performance. Even so, improving self-esteem is multiculturalist gospel.

A quite distinct justification for the representation of formerly excluded groups in the curriculum derives from multiculturalism's civic aim of creating in students mutual understanding and respect. Exclusion from the curriculum represents a kind of invisibility that officially signals insignificance, inequality, inferiority. Children can't make an effort to understand what is not there to be understood, or to respect what isn't treated as worthy of notice. Finally, a third ground for representation in the curriculum is simple fairness. Children ought not feel they have been left out or ignored, even if they are not thereby harmed.

The Varieties of Multiculturalism

The curriculum should represent various social and cultural groups, but from whose point of view? Two answers to this question divide multiculturalism into "integrationist" and "separatist" versions. A notable defender of the integrationist version is Diane Ravitch. In her view, multiculturalism aims to "expand the understanding of American culture into a richer and

more varied tapestry." It "seeks a richer common culture." But a richer, expanded story of America remains a story — a story told from a unified or dominant point of view, a "Eurocentric view" in the eyes of many separatists, and that is unacceptable to them. The various cultural communities in the United States must be represented in the curriculum in their own voices, from their *own* point of view.

Tangled up in this debate are several important epistemological issues. What we believe is what we see, and what we see is a matter of perspective. Because there are many possible perspectives on an issue, our beliefs about it are likely to be partial and flawed unless we take pains to factor in the view from vantage points not our own. Through a social process of mutual discussion and testing, we can work toward *constructed* points of view that filter out particularistic biases and limitations, as much as this is possible, and from which widely acceptable judgments can be made. In actual practice, socially evolved points of view can fail to be as comprehensive or synthetic as they might or pretend to be, and may need the addition of previously excluded voices. In this spirit, the integrationist multiculturalism of Ravitch aspires to the reconstruction of the American story.

Those who reject her project and insist that each group should be represented in the school curriculum by its own perspective might do so for two very



different reasons. The *weak separatist* might believe that Ravitch's project is ultimately the right one but not practicable here and now. The "official" American story is so entrenched and so one-sided that any "corrective" enrichments from excluded points of view are bound to be subverted into mere emendations and embellishments, indeed, subverted even into buttresses for the story's main themes. For the present, previously excluded points of view need their own undiluted voices, their own uncompromised forums.

A *strong separatist*, in contrast, would repudiate the very aspiration for a reconstructed common story of America and Americans. There is no common perspective to be found, there are only diverse independent

perspectives. Strong separatism poses a radical challenge to Ravitch's project but at the same time, ironically, seems to weaken the argument for adding new voices to the curriculum. Consider the case of Christopher Columbus: did he discover America or invade it? From the perspective of fifteenth century Europe, he discovered it. From the perspective of the Arawak and other indigenous American populations, he invaded it. As descendants of the European immigrants of America most of us take (or took) the perspective of Europe. Why should we give it up or modify it? Because it is inadequate in some way? Saying it is amounts to measuring it against something outside itself, some more comprehensive and better point of view.

However, the strong separatist denies there are any overarching perspectives, just *other* perspectives. Now, no other perspective can claim to supersede our own merely by being *other*. If an Arawak-centered perspective is no better than a Eurocentric perspective or no part of a more comprehensive synthesis, why bother to re-write the books on poor Columbus? The ironic implication of strong perspectivism is that the label "Eurocentric" ceases to be a charge, complaint, or criticism; it becomes merely a description.

The issues embroiled in the arguments between integrationists and separatists re-emerge in the question whether multiculturalism should actively preserve cultural differences or merely acknowledge and respect them as it carries out other educational aims, including educating students in a common civic culture. Multiculturalism's leitmotif, of course, is the value of cultural diversity, but the argument for explicit preservationist policies in schools requires premises that go beyond that value. Religious diversity, for example, is valued in the United States but the public schools are not thought the appropriate agents for preserving it.

Not only do multiculturalists disagree over issues about perspective and preservation, they disagree over their theories of society and their pedagogical assumptions. A liberal, integrationist multiculturalism like Ravitch's looks for common ground among students and cultures upon which to build shared and deepened commitments to the political and moral ideals in the "official" American creed. Our history's checkered record with respect to the ideals of justice, equality, the common good, political participation, personal and communal liberties, and the like is not downplayed, nor are serious contemporary social problems ignored; but they are studied to illuminate the meaning and implications of the credal values.

More radical multiculturalists reject some or all of the liberal approach. The history of groups in our country, they argue, has to be understood in terms of

domination and subordination; the "official" norms and self-understandings of American society must be seen as the "social constructions" of dominant groups to "legitimize" their domination; and the most important "problem" in American society should be reckoned to be its "institutionalized" racism. Now, there is an important duality in these claims. The radical might be proposing that multicultural educators base their pedagogy on an understanding of American society in terms of domination/subordination, social construction of knowledge, and institutional racism, or she might be proposing that their pedagogy teach students in these terms.

The radical's *theory* of social relations in the United States is, of course, itself controversial. It means to be since it sets itself in opposition to the "ideological mystifications" of the common view of things. The radical's *pedagogy* is, then, doubly controversial. Even if the radical's concepts best explain American life, it doesn't follow that they are the best, or even appropriate ones, for bringing children to an accurate understanding of society or one another. They may simply be too divisive or confusing as a device for educating young children. One need not reject the radical's theory in order to reject his pedagogy.

Multicultural education, then, can generate controversy along several axes: integrationist/separatist, preservation/acknowledgment, theory/pedagogy, and others as well. There would be much to debate about multiculturalism were its various proposals all delivered to us in limpid, precise, and economical prose. But they aren't. Often written in a numbing "education-speak," they frequently blur or ignore crucial distinctions, erect straw men, and use tendentious definitions. Still, multiculturalism is an idea whose century has come. It behooves all of us, in good pluralist fashion, to add our voices to the debate.

—Robert Fullinwider

This essay draws from Sohan Modgil et al., eds., *Multicultural Education: The Interminable Debate* (Falmer Press, 1986); James Lynch, *Multicultural Education: Principles and Practices* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); Diane Ravitch, "Multiculturalism," *The American Scholar* 59 (Summer 1990), pp. 337-54; Donna M. Gollnick and Philip C. Chin, *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society* 3rd Ed. (Merrill Publishing Company, 1990); Christine I. Bennett, *Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice* (Allyn and Bacon, 1986); Christine Sleeper, ed., *Empowerment Through Multicultural Education* (SUNY Press, 1991); and Anthony DePalma, "The Culture Question," Calvin Sims, "World Views," and Isabel Wilkerson, "Blacks Look to Basics," all in *The New York Times Education Life*, November 4, 1990, pp. 22ff.



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STAFF:

Mark Sagoff, Director
Robert K. Fullinwider, Research Scholar
William A. Galston, Research Scholar (on leave)
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David Luban, Research Scholar
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Robert Wachbroit, Research Scholar
David Wasserman, Research Scholar
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Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy
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