September 2013

Who and What Should We Educate Our Students To Be? An Inquiry into the Curriculum of Multiculturalism in Education

Liping Wei

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/taboo>

Recommended Citation

Wei, L. (2017). Who and What Should We Educate Our Students To Be? An Inquiry into the Curriculum of Multiculturalism in Education. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 13 (2). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.13.2.10>

Who and What Should We Educate Our Students To Be? An Inquiry into the Curriculum of Multiculturalism in Education

Liping Wei

"I'm American, not Chinese! Don't mistake me as Chinese! I'm fed up being thought by others to have anything to do with Chinese!"

Upon hearing these words, intuition may tell you that this is a person who has been wronged many times in terms of who he is, swollen with grievance and indignation, and nearly driven beyond the limit of his endurance! Nevertheless, are his words true? Let's pause and ask: Does he really have nothing to do with Chinese in any way?

Actually, the student was born in China and immigrated to the United States of America with his parents at eight years of age. Having received his school education all in (U.S.)America, in his late 20s now, the language he speaks has turned into English-only from Chinese-only. He has become antipathetic towards associating with Chinese or being identified as Chinese, though he grew up in a Chinese immigrant family, was raised on Chinese cuisine, with all his relatives still in China, and all his parents' friends being Chinese. This is Allen, the only son of our friend Lao Zhang, who feels hurt, but more helpless. (All names are pseudonyms.)

As a former educator and a current doctoral student of education who is an immigrant myself, I couldn't help but wonder: Why does an immigrant child enter the (U.S.)American educational system as an immigrant and exit as only "an American"? Why hasn't this immigrant child grown up taking pride in where he comes from? Why can't he composedly proclaim "I'm American with my roots in another place?" Do immigrant children have to abandon their connections to their points of origin to better integrate into (U.S.)American culture and fit into that society? What role has (U.S.)American education served and continues to play in cultivating in children from various ethnic backgrounds the self-identification of who and what they are? Is (U.S.)American education aiming to uphold diversity or dilute the diversity and Americanize everyone regardless of where they are

originally from, ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously? These are the questions that deserve the consideration of every educator.

Multiculturalism: A Call from Assimilation

In a letter to the president of the American Defense Society in 1919, Theodore Roosevelt made the following statement:

There can be no divided allegiance here. Any man who says he is an American, but something else also, isn't an American at all. We have room but for one flag, the American flag... We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, and American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house; and we have room for but one soul loyalty, and that is loyalty to the American people. (Theodore Roosevelt, 1919)

What turns out as reality doesn't disappoint Roosevelt: American education has been doing well at Americanizing its diverse population from generation to generation, which can even be traced back to the early times of New England when the earliest public, tax-supported school system took on the responsibility of transforming the children of European immigrants and Native Americans into American citizens (Frey & Whitehead, 2009). Since then, public schools have become the primary institution charged with assimilating the heterogeneous masses and creating a suitable workforce for a developing American nation (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Assimilation, aesthetically named "melting pot," has remained the dominant strategy in (U.S.) American schools, with a ruling White Protestant elite setting the curriculum, standards, and assessments for each succeeding generation, imprinting students with white middle class values (Ferguson, 2001). Those students who resist this assimilation are doomed to go through psychological and emotional struggle and are frequently labeled "at-risk," leading to their educational marginalization and subsequent failure.

Fortunately, a growing body of educators is rising to challenge the ingrained "assimilation," appealing to public education to foster multiculturalism within schools. However, despite an increasing voice for questioning the validity of assimilation and advocating multiculturalism in education as never before, the effects in schools are far from transparent. An important reason is that a false, rather than a more genuine, multiculturalism is being implemented.

False Multiculturalism

Many educators, while espousing the ideals of multiculturalism verbally, actually think and act in contradictory ways. The words most often heard with reference to "multiculturalism" may be "respect," "appreciation," and "tolerance,"

with the most commonly used pedagogical strategy being to expose students to a wide range of customs, traditions, and religions different from their own. This approach may help promote students' awareness of cultural differences, but with "White dominance"—the most fundamental ideal of "assimilation"—left untouched and unquestioned, it does little to contribute to multiculturalism in a real sense, because the assumption underlying such an approach to multiculturalism is that Anglo Americans are representative of the norm, and that others, although deviant from this norm, should nevertheless be acknowledged too.

Rather than cultivate multiculturalism, this mentality actually cements existing divisiveness and inequality. As Banister and Maher (1998) pointed out, what should be called into question is not whether to celebrate non-Anglo Americans, but the notion always taken for granted: There is only one choice standard, entitled, and desired; it is the dominance of Whites, Christianity, heterosexuality, English language, and loyalty to America.

To perpetuate the existing system conferring power and privilege on Anglo Americans, students, regardless of who and what they originally are, are "educated" to take on whatever is "filled in" by teachers and completely internalize without question whatever image is projected onto them. Consequently, education in the interests of the "mainstream" only results in the "non-mainstream" adapting to the world as it is and identifying with the "mainstream." This is how Allen, and probably many other "Allens," have come into being. With few educators realizing and reacting to it, (U.S.) American education will continue to mold countless "Allens" who will be stamped with the same identification regardless of race, ethnicity, home language, culture, gender and sexual orientation, religion, and social class.

Remaining blind to or in denial of taken-for-granted White norms denies the potential of policies and practices of multiculturalism to function as a genuinely democratic equalizer. How should educators implement a true multicultural education?

Ways to Move toward True Multiculturalism

Encourage students to challenge the concept of "assimilation."

As a vital driving force of multiculturalism, educators should engage students in a critical investigation of the deep-seated system that features homogeneity rather than diversity, and Euro-centered values without equal acknowledgement of other contributions to human civilization. Unless young people are empowered to critically investigate "assimilation," question the false perceptions of "reality," quest for the truth, and fight for transformation upon critical reflection, they will not realize the structural inequality underpinning the ideals of "assimilation," and multiculturalism cannot be advanced radically.

Help immigrant students develop a positive self-identification.

Schools are an important venue in informing students about their ability, showing how other people see them, and ultimately contributing to the development of complex student identities. Educators should help students see that people may come from different ethnic backgrounds, speak different languages as their mother tongue, hold different religious beliefs, form different gender and sexual identifications, and develop different ways of thinking and approaching the world. Formal education needs to promulgate a view that no particular trait is superior or inferior to, or more or less entitled or desired than others. With diligence and talents, all can bring a contributing force to make the United States of America a better place. Only on this basis can immigrant students develop a genuine appreciation of their origin and a positive identification with who and what they are.

Teach multiculturally rather than multiculturalism.

Multicultural education should be conducted as a critical perspective embedded throughout the curriculum rather than as a separate subject. This means teaching itself should be and can be multicultural, which is reflected in how each student is treated, how teaching content is presented, and how dialogues are engaged. Multiculturalism should be incorporated into the existing curriculum; no matter what content a teacher teaches, multicultural perspectives should constitute a primary theme.

Who and What We Seek Our Students To Be

Who and what we seek to educate our students to be are informed citizens who take pride in the diversity they bring to this country. Educating immigrant children to be simply American without maintaining their original languages and cultures is not an indication of how successful American education is. Instead, it is a roadblock to the sustenance of the prosperity of the nation.

Education is a battleground of the larger war for civil rights and social justice. It is also the best hope for the fulfillment of all individuals, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, social class, gender, ability, and language. In order for all “Allens” to be able to see who they are and what they are positively without sliding into extremes, it is incumbent upon educators to construct “an empowering school culture” by “creating a learning environment in which students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social groups believe that they are heard and are valued and experience respect, belonging, and encouragement” (Parks, 1999, p.4). This is not a goal individual educators in isolation can attain. Only when the entire society—policymakers, community, parents, together with educators and students—commit to this undertaking can the change occur to cultivate true multiculturalism in education.

References

- Banister, J., & Maher, M. (1998). Recentering multiculturalism: Moving toward community. *Urban Education, 33*(2), 182-218.
- Ferguson, A. (2001). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Frey, C., & Whitehead, D. (2009). International education policies and the boundaries of global citizenship in the US. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 41*(2), 269-290.
- Parks, S. (1999). Reducing the effects of racism in schools. *Educational Leadership, 56*(6), 14-18.
- Roosevelt, T. (1919, January 3). [Letter to American Defense Society]. Retrieved from <http://www.snopes.com/politics/quotes/troosevelt.asp>
- Tyack, D., & Hansot, E. (1982). *Managers of virtue*. New York: Basic Books.

Liping Wei is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction of the School of Education at the University of Houston, Houston, Texas, and a graduate assistant in the "International Education Task Force" responsible for facilitating the Department's international education projects.