

A brief discussion of the socio-political context of multiculturalism in the USA

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This paper addresses what is happening in multicultural education in the United States. It is important to understand the context of multicultural education and the multiple ways in which it is addressed in the schools in that country and in the training of educators there. After providing that context, the article briefly reviews the multiple approaches and forces that are advocating for multicultural education in the United States.

Keywords: multiculturalism, decision making, legal demands, accreditation requirements, curriculum

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I want to begin with the caveat that I am a sociologist who studies education as a system of relationships and structures. I am not directly involved in teacher training, but rather a researcher who observes the patterns and practices within schools. Any direct involvement in teacher training comes from teaching a Sociology of Education course (primarily undergraduate, but occasionally graduate students in teacher training take this course to fulfill a foundation of education requirements in their degree programs) and as co-author of a text/reader (Ballantine & Spade, 2015) that is used in graduate courses in the United States and other countries.

First, in trying to understand the context of multicultural education in the United States, it is important to understand the dispersed decision making structure relating to system-wide decisions in the education system there. The United States does not have an educational system of strong central governance, instead primary authority for elementary and secondary public schooling is centered in local school districts. However, the financing of schools is diffuse. Therefore, virtually all school districts must respond to state and federal restrictions that are attached to funds that the districts receive from these outside sources. For example, school districts with a large proportion of low-income students receive funds specifically targeted to reduce inequality in educational achievement through the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA). However, as with all funding from state and federal sources, these monies come with restrictions and requirements, particularly, in recent years, standards for accountability.

In addition to legislation coming from both the state and federal levels, United States school districts must respond to legal demands that have and continue to affect the multicultural context of education for minority groups. The most famous legal edicts are those that led to the desegregation of schools in the 1970s, and, more recently the resegregation of schools since the 1980s and 1990s (Orfield, 2007). While not directly related to the content of multicultural education, these court orders shaped the racial composition of schools in that country and the multicultural contexts of schools.

Influence over curriculum, while technically, the responsibility of local school districts, is complex with many outside influences. New York State, for example has, for many years, had standardized tests for most high

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school courses that students must pass in order to get credit for taking a “Regents” exam. Today, as required by the ESEA under a reauthorization related to the No Schools Left Behind initiative, states must create instruments assessing student learning, across grades resulting in a form of standardization of curriculum within states. This results in a “Report Card” for districts and schools. In many cases, teachers are now being evaluated based upon how well their students score on these exams. Thus, teachers are more likely to teach to the test and districts are developing curriculum around these standardized exams. Yet, no national curriculum guidelines have been established and/or tied to the funds that school districts receive from the United States government.

To further complicate curricular decisions, individuals such as parents or local community members try to influence what is taught in schools and how it is taught. Parents demand that certain subjects be taught or not taught in their children’s schools and individuals from religious, racial, or gender groups ask that their groups be represented in the curriculum. In addition, there is considerable pressure on what is included in textbooks and what can or cannot be taught from these individuals as well as groups representing specific political points of view (*DelFattore, 1992*). Needless to say, responding to the demands of these groups are more spontaneous and difficult to plan for or deal with, which leads to a patchwork curriculum and/or a bland curriculum designed to not offend anyone. Such demands have essentially sanitized textbooks in the United States of any controversial issues that are not in the best interest of developing a strong multicultural understanding for U.S. students.

To summarize, curricular decisions are dispersed across many levels in the United States and, unlike Hungary and many European countries, is far more decentralized and fluid, with many actors seeking to influence what is taught and how it is taught in schools in that country, as described by the examples above.

Second, the context for decision making in formulating teacher training is also diffused, residing primarily within accreditation organizations, who hold the power to shut down individual university or college degree programs by denying the legitimacy of the degrees offered if certain requirements are not met; professional organizations, who recommend criteria and practices for training educators; or curricular decisions made within individual universities or colleges. Therefore, while teacher training programs respond to many pressures and expectations, any attempts to promote new practices come either from (1) demands or perceived demands of accreditation, now centralized into one system, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation – CAEP (see *NCATE, 2014; TEAC, 2014*); (2) suggestions from professional organizations that are primarily local or state-level, or national unions (see *AFT, 2014; NEA, 2014*); or (3) structural demands within individual colleges or universities. As a result, teacher education and curricular training is also decentralized in the United States.

Third, practices in the classroom in the United States, as in all countries, are individual, or, in some cases, team decisions. Teachers are trained to deliver multicultural education in their teacher training programs (sometimes only in one course) and there are multiple workshops and teacher training days scheduled across the school calendar throughout the school year. The latter, however, are typically only one-day workshops, which are devoted to a variety of topics, not just issues related to multicultural education.

Fourth, there is a long history of research on pedagogy relating to multicultural education, with considerable attention to the social psychological dynamics of desegregating schools. One of the more famous early pedagogical tools coming of the 1970s is the “jigsaw classroom” developed by *Elliott Aronson (1978)*. The jigsaw classroom is structured to engage students in a team by placing everyone, despite cultural or other subgroup differences, on an equal footing to solve the group task by making each team member an “expert” in a critical

part of the group solution. This technique has been around for a long time and is available to educators via a website (Aronson, 1914).

Research has changed over the years and multicultural educational research has expanded to include inequality on multiple levels since that time. Multicultural research now has a solid base in theories such as critical pedagogy (created by *Pablo Freire* and developed and used by people such as *Henry Giroux*, *Michael Apple*, *Bell Hooks*, and *Peter McLaren*); whiteness studies (*Peggy McIntosh*); and many other theoretical frameworks for developing multicultural pedagogy. Unfortunately, some of the current research at the theoretical level is better suited to understanding the issues surrounding multicultural education than to providing practices that teachers can employ in the classroom.

I am reluctant to organize the research further as I am stepping beyond the focus of my expertise. There are many journals in the United States devoted to multicultural education and diversity in the classroom. However, these are typically targeted to educators of teachers, therefore, teachers in classrooms are more likely to have access to these resources when they are training to be teachers than when they are teaching in the classroom themselves.

As alluded to earlier, the current emphasis in education in the United States right now is focused more on assessment than on multicultural pedagogies, particularly since the reauthorization of the ESEA with No Child Left Behind (*George W. Bush* administration) and Race to the Top (*Barack H. Obama* administration). Individual teachers are trained in multicultural education, but once in the classroom, it is up to them to negotiate the treacherous crevices of difference and inequality using whatever resources may be available to them. As noted earlier, research is available and there are multiple professional associations where resources can be found, including teachers' unions. One professional organization solely focused on improving multicultural education in the United States is the National Association for Multicultural Education (*NAME*, 2014). This group is led by distinguished researchers and provides a plethora of resources, including an annual meeting that in 2014 will feature speakers such as *Angela Davis* and *James Banks*.

Within this context, I can conclude by stating that multicultural pedagogy, training, and research studies are not only inconsistent across the nation, but also not a priority in the United States at this time. The reasons for this are complex, and I hope this brief analysis provided a better understanding of the forces that shape multicultural education in the United States.

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