

Special Issue

Educating the Multicultural Gaze through Leisure

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Abstract

In conversations about education, multiculturalism is commonly understood as a celebration of cultures and of people the world over. To this end, many educators and pre-service teachers believe that the need for multicultural education is satisfied through epistemic practices and acknowledgment of certain holidays and cultural practices in their classrooms. While this understanding is not incorrect, it is only one of the many questions to which multiculturalism may respond. Moreover, this understanding falls short of a more fundamental need to rethink the ethical implications that are at stake whenever we educate with a multicultural view. This paper focuses on the need to guide educators into forming robust ethical ideas in education that invites them to think about their duties and responsibilities to the world in general and to individual students in particular. I will argue that teacher education programs must allow for future educators to seriously consider the current needs of our times and how education can shift from mere implementation of requirements to purposeful and meaningful transformative practices. This end can be achieved, I will argue, through an understanding of the role of leisure in education

Key words : multiculturalism, teacher education programs, leisure, ethics, pre-service teachers

Introduction

Seen from an educational perspective, multiculturalism acquires an importance that could be understood as being primarily foundational. In his book *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey (1916) discusses the important role of the school in presenting new viewpoints from which to regard the world, the self, and each other. Arguing about the impossibility of separating the school environment from that of the community

and the world at large, Dewey points out that education in schools must offer students the possibility to *escape*. The idea of “the escape” in Dewey helps us understand why education must amount to an experience that ultimately seeks to provide individuals with the possibility to imagine and to conceive alternate realities (Greene, 2001). In this sense, a multicultural approach to education provides students and teachers with opportunities to position the self, and various selves, within a world that is constantly in the making. When speaking about education with a focus on multiculturalism, it will later be shown, teaching and learning become processes by which students and teachers practice an attitude of openness that manifests itself in cultural, ethical, and aesthetic experiences.

The need for multiculturalism in education is everywhere present, in both homogeneous and heterogeneous societies (Abrams, 2005). As technological advances render the world closer together, allowing people to communicate with each other in a great variety of ways, the need for multicultural understanding turns to be a priority. In a world that does not cease to present us with images, voices, and information exhorting us to think and to act in manifold ways, how can education provide a reliable platform for understanding to both teachers and students? While I will here argue that multiculturalism provides such a platform and outlook to education, I will make the claim that the multicultural experience in education must be accompanied by what the ancients called *otium* (leisure). The need to adequately experience and imagine the self, others, and alternate ways of being in the world, therefore, becomes facilitated through a disposition for leisure. This disposition, which is challenging to cultivate in our present times, must first find its niche in teacher education programs in a way that teachers will be able to show and model to students.

In what follows I will discuss the current state of multiculturalism in education, the need for incorporating leisure in discussions for multicultural education, and the role and responsibilities for teacher education programs in furthering such discussions.

The Current State of Multiculturalism in Education

Discussions in various fields tend to respond to “trends” or to topics and issues that seem to be in vogue. The field of education is no stranger to this practice. While we cannot alienate ourselves from paying attention to what is, in fact, most notable in the theory and practice of education, educational theorists must be careful not to limit themselves to particular fashionable discussions and to expand on them, leaving aside the human beings which take part in this process. The danger of so doing, especially in “the age of accountability,” is that it will have us look for “quick fixes” in order to achieve tangible results in education (Ravitch, 2010). In the United States, regular national and state assessments have shown that the practice of searching for such quick remedies in education have failed to demonstrate significant gains and value (Ravitch, 2010). Discussions on multicultural education have also shown a disconnection between lofty goals, theory, and practice (Banks, 2011). Beyond discussions on race, culture, ethnicity, class, gender, exceptionality, educational equality, and empowerment, it is necessary that we are able to show how these issues can be incorporated into the daily life of the classroom. The importance of turning the aforementioned issues into living practices resides on the fact that these concepts are often unintelligible or equivocal to in-service and pre-service teachers, as well as to many specialists in the field (Banks, 2011).

In my own practice, when I introduce the concept of “multiculturalism” to a class comprised of students, all of whom aspire to become urban educators, I find it useful to begin with a more fundamental question: “What is culture?” It seems that “culture” is one of those words of which we constantly make use in our everyday conversations, but is also one about which we seldom stop to think. In order to establish a uniform concept I ask students to take a few minutes to come up with a definition, based on what they *think* “culture” means, and to write it down in a piece of paper. Moving on to whole classroom discussion, I begin documenting on the board the various definitions I

can amass from my students. Students normally suggest that culture refers to:

- Traditions passed down from generation to generation;
- Ways of life;
- Language, forms of speech, ways of dressing;
- Behaviors, manners, thoughts, beliefs of a certain group; and,
- Standpoint from which to see the world.

These points of reference are usually enough for us to develop a two-hour long conversation. Based on these points, which we gather as a group, students normally discuss that culture seems to involve both individuals and groups: the individual as a sole representation of a group and the group, in turn, as a larger manifestation of itself. A closer look at the definitions on the board reveals that “culture” also involves living and relating to one another. Culture implies our actions and thoughts we have when we are by ourselves, but also our actions and the decisions we make that impact others in our immediate space, and sometimes those far removed from us. In our classroom meeting we conclude that “culture” refers to ways of life of the individual and groups, which go beyond race and discussions on ethnicity. It now includes generations (such as “the millenials”), sexual orientation groups, learning ability groups, etc.,

- implies participation and activity,
- is dynamic, changing constantly,
- is a form of communication and understanding,
- has an ethical component because it necessarily involves other people, and
- is a form of responsibility

Conversations and discussions about multicultural education, therefore, research finds, tend to focus on issues of diversity (mainly race and ethnicity), on various communities sharing a space and coming into contact with one another, or on holidays, traditions, and customary practices

(Nieto, 2010). In a more prominent place, multiculturalism in education also elicits conversations about how to empower and help advance some cultural groups traditionally marginalized by various societal forms. Further, as is common in many conversations about education in the United States, discussions on multiculturalism tend to be framed within the confines of assessment, namely, how do we know that the curriculum taught is succeeding in providing students with a multicultural perspective to education. Put differently, how can we assess students who are receiving an education in multicultural education?

While there is an intrinsic value in engaging these topics in large group conversations, the variety of questions elicited in the conversations on multiculturalism must be able to lead to more than a mere epistemic conversation or superficial ways to mend shortcomings. Beyond results gathered when collecting data for research and assessment, there is a pressing need to emphasize the often invisible realm of the ethical view that accompanies the perspective of multiculturalism in education. This ethical view regards responsibility, as it questions the duty of education and of educators. Moreover, it seeks to look for ways through which we can educate students in living effectively and efficiently in the world, that is, the effective treatment and understanding of what it takes to live in the world and to engage one another in meaningful ways.

Introducing and initiating students into teacher education programs in order to think about these relevant questions will help them understand the humanistic value imbedded in their chosen professional path. Students will inquire after the purpose of education, and may begin to focus on the idea of having been “called to teach” (Hansen, 1995). An ethical dimension added to traditional topics in multicultural education accounts for a more in-depth engagement with life, action, performance, and human dignity that leads to a reconstructive and transformative endeavor (Gay, 2011). In the following section I will introduce leisure as an important component in the ethics of the multicultural approach to education.

The Multicultural Gaze in Leisure

There are many scholars and philosophers of education who have placed forth the argument that education must not develop solely in the service of accountability, repeated assessment, or even on “what works” in the classroom (Biesta, 2007). Moreover, they have argued that an important part of education can rarely be assessed or observed within a determined time frame (Ravitch, 1983). The reason for this is that education may take longer to become internalized, adapted, or even understood. Further, many aspects in education cannot possibly be quantified or even exhibited in short amounts of time. Whenever we turn to talks about multiculturalism in education, we find ourselves in the realm of that which may remain hidden within the interior life of the student, or that which may need to mature before it can ever be externalized. Unquantifiable education is the sort of education that may go beyond the confines of the classroom and of the academic year because it is rooted in a deep humanistic preoccupation.

Multiculturalism tries to work with developing an understanding of and among communities of people, of bringing people together through understanding and empathy (Delpit, 2006).

If we take as point of departure the question regarding the purposes of education, we may offer several alternatives that have been traditionally offered: education’s goals are focused on the acquisition of knowledge, information, and skills; on developing further understanding in an area or subject; or on education for transformation and social advancement and justice, among many others. Some have argued that as we examine the current state of events, the development of things, and the circumstances in which life unfolds on a daily basis today, we can say that we are living in times of crisis. The nature of the crisis is not new. In 1957, for instance, political theorist Hannah Arendt was already advising us to “stop and think about what it is that we are doing” as the announcement came out that “man would not stay bound to the Earth forever,” following the successful launch of the Sputnik (Arendt, 1998).

At the same time, philosopher Josef Pieper (2009) was arguing that we were living in a world of total work, in which we were becoming detached from ourselves and from each other, to turn, instead, to an unfulfilling life of work that rendered us fatigued and unfulfilled. Just as before, the present crisis may very well refer to an overflow of information, to the unprecedented speed of data traveling in our midst, the bombardment of images and publicity, social and political unrest, wars brought by thoughtless competition and conflicts, consumerism, overwork, stress, etc. The world, as a result of speed and technology, has become more concrete, tangible, and accessible to us at all times, and is at the tip of our fingers but, at the same time, unassailable, incomprehensible, far removed from our reality.

The world becomes overwhelming to those who are not yet prepared to handle themselves and each other in the midst of all this revolution that insists on taking place around us (Turkle, 2011). Things, people, and systems are changing every day, and a multicultural perspective in education may help address and alleviate these concerns by broadening the dialogue and breaking free from convention and from undisputed acquired behaviors. Pieper (2009) argued that a turn to leisure was the key for us to reacquaint ourselves with a sense of respite in education and, thus, in living fully and well.

If education has the purpose of helping students understand the world, to guide them to position themselves in such a way that they are able to look at the world through an educated lens, then multiculturalism holds a privileged role in helping to accomplish this goal. In this context we would seek to strengthen students' orientation to the world based on critical thinking and understanding in the service of more effective communication and dialogue. Furthermore, we would also be seeking new ways to create opportunities for building bridges among people and communities, as well as forms of empathy. When part of education focuses on helping students stand their ground in developing an awareness of what goes around them, helping them process all of the information and stimuli that are constantly aimed at them, while work-

ing collaboratively with one another, then multiculturalism acquires a new ethical dimension: a dimension of responsibility for the students and for the world. This conception may imply that teachers necessarily enjoy a more active and prominent role.

An orientation towards multiculturalism in education can seldom be separated into simple units or be turned into carefully crafted lesson plans. Incorporating this kind of education implies weaving it into many lessons, into everyday conversations and classroom discussions, through practicing literature, independent reading, and reflective writing, among other activities. An ethical component requires constant modeling and exemplification in daily encounters. The teacher who wants to make multiculturalism part of his or her daily dealings in the classroom must also receive an education that will facilitate conveying the impact and importance of this education.

Teacher education programs across the United States try to keep up and respond to current social, political, and educational needs. Culturally responsive curricula, as well as issues in diversity, are topics presently debated across the nation. However, these topics are not limited to the American experience. We are witnessing how these topics extend all over the world: on our television sets, in the news, on the Internet, and in social media. It has become a pressing need to secure a conversation that may address education in such a way that it contributes to the well-being of the individuals presently being educated. How can this possibly be achieved?

Thinking about the word “culture” may invite us to, in turn, trace it to and associate it with yet another word: cultivation. When we consider the word “cultivation” an image of a garden may come to mind: images of soil, seeds, sunlight, water, as well as the care and effort undertaken by the person in charge of doing the cultivating. Should education choose to respond to multiculturalism, we would prepare individuals who will regard themselves as well as the world around them in a new way. Educators can help students initiate this process of directing the gaze on to new horizons. According to this image, educators may prepare the

grounds for this type of education, but the growth and development of it ultimately falls on the student's reception and practice. A multicultural education now begins to acquire a concrete and profound humanistic bend to it, one of responsibility to the self and to others.

In *Art as Experience* John Dewey (1934) discusses how we are inadvertently living life in an "anaesthetic" way. An *anaesthetic* way of life suggests acting automatically, reacting instead of responding, doing things the way they have always been done, going through life not questioning anything. Dewey seems to suggest that as long as we have a body, we are able to receive impressions and stimuli from the outside world. Through the sheer fact of existing we are able to have experiences of things, but not to have an experience of things. In order to transcend this "numbing" sense of existence (anaesthetic), we must have an aesthetic way of life, but aesthetics need to be cultivated. Dewey suggests that we need to be cultivated in such a way that we learn to live differently. Therefore, paying attention, becoming present, living aesthetically demands a different form of being that demands more time and more care for education to penetrate the fabric of life. Many philosophers across time, from Plato to the present day, have made the argument that we need time to experience ourselves and experience our education. Incorporating and reintegrating leisure into conversations and activities can be instrumental to overall success for an appropriate multicultural orientation.

Leisure contains in itself the implication of slowing down. Understanding leisure, or at least, understanding the value of the capacity to *slow down* is in the best interest of anyone who directly participates in the life-long process of education and self-education. Education may choose to focus on the concept of *otium* (leisure), traditionally understood as time away from overt action that we dedicate to think about and take in the world. The Greek root for leisure, *skolé*, gives way to our word "school." Josef Pieper tells us that "school, literally, means leisure" (2009). In a world that is ceaselessly led by action and activity, facilitated by increasing demands in technology (broadly understood), we must, at

some point, cede to Hannah Arendt's invitation to stop and think about what it is that we are doing (1998). As of late—as many popular (non-academic) readings and academic writings may attest—we have seen much interest in understanding the effects of being pressed for time in American society: why is it that people are becoming so overwhelmed, hurried, running from one place to another, multitasking, depressed, reacting to stimuli instead of responding to them? Whence the need to go faster?

While leisure has not been a fashionable concept in education, except in small academic circles, it seems to me that it is beginning to acquire some relevance; as of late people are writing about it once again. Leisure responds to the importance of weighing options, to thoughtfully considering circumstances, and to engaging others in dialogue. Taking time, not trying to rush over material or to try to cover the most topics in the least amount of time, is a fundamental practice for teachers. If teachers understand the value of taking time in their own teacher education practices, they will, in turn, provide the same time to their students. Providing time may facilitate introducing practices into daily exercises and discussions that are meant to enhance the educational experience in multicultural education. I want to propose that education takes time, that cultivating ourselves and helping to cultivate in others the importance of understanding each other, of the necessity of responding to our current situations, and of being aware and awake, requires attention and time. Teachers cannot achieve this through implementation of timed exercises or through discrete units aimed at talking about cultures, which removes ourselves from the edifying experience of engaging one another. An ethical and meaningful response to the crisis in the world requires education with an emphasis on multiculturalism. This, in turn, requires reflective practitioners who will be able to show students how it is done.

Teacher education programs have the responsibility to open up the conversation on multiculturalism and to turn it into a subject for reflection: what is the importance of a multicultural orientation to education? What are the goals of multiculturalism in today's world? In what ways can multiculturalism address many of the challenges we face today

as a society? If teachers are themselves prompted to reflect upon these questions, then multiculturalism in education has a chance to root itself in the conversation and grow and emanate from the lives of educators and of those being educated. To this end, teachers must be initiated into practices of reflection and self-cultivation, which will, in turn, allow them to model and guide others. Teacher education programs would be wise to elicit teachers to think in both ends of education: the individual and the collective. When we understand ourselves we are better positioned to understand others and in a better position to embrace a multicultural approach to education. Incorporating leisure into our everyday practice, especially into our education practice, may do a world of change. Mindful teachers who will, in turn, allow students to think and take their time because they do so themselves, will create a practice in itself: constant cultivation and aesthetic experiences.

Conclusion

While many Teacher education programs offer courses on multicultural perspectives in education to pre-service and in-service teachers, it is worth noticing that this declaration is often ambiguous, since there is not an unequivocal definition for multiculturalism or what multiculturalism in education stands for. Every program gets to define it in a way that best reflects the nature of the conversation they seek to have as well as the goals they seek to achieve. By definition, a teacher education program must seek to further the education of teachers, to broaden their views and concepts regarding education in such a way that they are better prepared to offer themselves as genuine guides and as role models for the less experienced learners. Teachers with an outlook to the world that emphasizes aesthetic experiences, understanding, responsibility, and empathy towards others share a view of multiculturalism that has an important transformative goal that takes time to mature and to develop in students. Incorporating consistent practices in our educational

journey commits us to engaging understanding and of thoughtfully responding to ourselves and to one another, all in the service of the public good.

In 1983 Diane Ravitch wrote a short article titled “On Thinking about the Future” that proves to be an attractive piece to read today, as she envisions the school in the year 2000. As an historian of education, she walks us through past policies that had failed to fulfill the goals for which they were initially enacted. As a conclusion, she states that if there is anything to be learned from the past it is that so-called revolutions in education (sudden implementations and cures) have never worked. Instead, she suggests, we need to proceed carefully with small but assertive steps that may take longer and not to overthrow a failed plan, but rather to transform it from deep within. What an approach to leisure and conversations on multiculturalism needs is, first and foremost, an open and receptive way of being. Leisure is an activity that demands consistency and practice. It is for this reason that the appropriate context for leisure resides in education and, for all it is worth, multicultural education.

At the moment, it is clear that more meaningful conversations are waiting to be had that would lead to significant actions, since it is not a matter of solving a problem, but a matter of understanding and slowly changing a living system comprised of human beings. It is in this sense that an education in multiculturalism acquires an active and ethical perspective to teaching, and one for which we are all responsible.

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