

Is Multicultural Theory Relevant to Education?

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Talking about multicultural educational theory is a hazardous enterprise, requiring us to pick our way through a conceptual and political minefield. There are many different theoretical strands of it that I can only refer to here: liberal or mainstream, radical, poststructural, feminist, and perhaps even conservative multiculturalism. Although each offers a distinct perspective on cultural issues, all are concerned in some respect with the definition and protection of minority language, political and economic rights, and education.

In "On Pragmatism and the Consequences of Multiculturalism," Haithe Anderson argues that multicultural theory (presumably in any of the above guises) has little or no practical use in education. Theory, she argues, can only be interpreted through local traditions and belief systems and thus multicultural educational theory only influences schooling insofar as teachers translate it themselves into social practice. In addition, Anderson notes that from a pragmatist perspective there can be no universalizing theories, since all theories are, in essence, attempts to privilege one (local) view over another in an endless game of political one-upmanship. Finally, Anderson notes that while liberal educational theorists aim to protect both cultural values and a shared civic (political) culture and place a high value on the principle of tolerance, they are not always tolerant of other paradigms that do not privilege that principle to the same degree.

I will begin at the end. With respect to the limitations of liberalism, it is quite true that liberal democratic theorists such as Amy Gutmann and others may find it difficult to "tolerate" theories that do not posit tolerance as a foundational principle of a liberal, democratic, multicultural society. Liberals have difficulty with communitarian theory, for example, since it privileges the presumed interests of the whole at the possible expense of the constituent parts. And radical and poststructural multicultural theorists are critical of liberals for identifying mere tolerance as a foundational principle, arguing that analyses of power and self-interest should be at the center of multicultural educational theory.¹

But such disagreements should not inhibit theory-making. We must simply acknowledge that they are built into it. Any foundationalist (no matter how reluctant) commits to certain principles and defends them against competing principles. The fact that liberals may be "intolerant" of the core principles of other paradigms does not, in and of itself, undermine liberals' ability to establish a coherent, principled argument for tolerance within the liberal framework. Moreover, Gutmann and other liberal democratic theorists are increasingly emphasizing the importance of civic dialogue and deliberation at the center of their theories partly, I believe, to escape the limitations of a purely foundationalist argument. Through democratic deliberations tolerance would not be merely a static, foundational principle on which to erect a theory, but a concept that would become sustained in public life.

Now to the larger theoretical issues. Anderson is entirely correct in her claim that moral and political concepts are always viewed through local lenses. Ideological, political and even psychological variables inevitably color how we view the world. Where she and I differ, however, is the conclusion to be reached from that. Is it the case that there can be no foundations and that we can never go beyond “admiring” other perspectives through a kind of philosophical and ideological voyeurism? I do not believe so.

Anderson contrasts the universalist, philosopher-king (or queen) with the dialogic, mediating pragmatist, who does not claim to be imposing any metanarrative. But are there really many philosophers of education who today believe that one can theorize independently of real-world constraints and who believe that their findings embody universal truths? Theoretical claims are inevitably flawed, limited, and limiting. The question that remains, however, is whether or not the project of trying to identify truths about public education (or anything else for that matter) is worthwhile. I believe it is.

Poststructuralists tell us that the Enlightenment project was a radical failure. Certainly, with respect to issues like protection of cultural rights it has not been a resounding success. But until there is a viable alternative, many of us will soldier on, well aware that we are mere intellectual laborers, not philosopher-kings (despite the occasional vacation into delusional grandeur). Of course this debate could continue endlessly, since as a practicing (but not preaching) foundationalist I would have to argue, at the risk of seeming impolite, that the pragmatist position is itself based on the foundationalist assumption that there is no foundation. But it is probably more fruitful to move on to other issues.

I am arguing that, despite its limitations, theory-making in education is a worthwhile endeavor. But Anderson is quite right to question whether or not multicultural theory is relevant to educational policy and practice. She contends that teachers do not spend much time, if any, evaluating the kinds of theoretical tensions that liberals and others agonize over in forums such as these and that it would not do them much good if they did, since these theories will be internalized and practiced (if at all) in a way that may be a far cry from what the theory-maker intended. She concludes, therefore, that theory is largely irrelevant, since teachers integrate multiculturalism and civic virtues, for example, all the time, through daily practice.

Her argument raises both empirical and ethical questions. First, do teachers in fact integrate these principles in practice? I am not at all sure that there is evidence of such integration — for two reasons. First, the tensions between individuals, minority cultures and dominant cultures are built into culturally diverse, liberal, democratic polities. And second, even a casual glance at the socioeconomic, educational and political status of minorities in North America tells us that we have not reconciled these tensions in practice. The ethical question is whether or not teachers should be considering them. If there are tensions between civic political values and cultural values, and if we indeed wish to protect both, should we not be working with teachers to evaluate these principles and determine how to articulate them to their fullest possible extent in schools?

This leads me to the fundamental difference between Anderson and me: the conception of what educational theory can or should provide to educational practice. I agree that teachers should not “thoughtlessly follow (sic) the rule of academic theory”; indeed, I would have thought the purpose of theory for teachers is to help them reflect upon and evaluate important issues in schools. The reflective practitioner understands that her work is situated in a social, political and theoretical context and attempts to use that understanding to examine and improve her practice.

Theory generalizes about educational problems, helping us understand them and design solutions to them. Its aim should not be unthinking obedience: that is indoctrination. But we must be vigilant in evaluating educational theory in terms of its internal coherence and logic as well as its real-world implications. Clearly, some theories have been immensely useful in helping us understand issues of inequality and cultural difference. Jeannie Oakes’s work on tracking, John Ogbu’s studies of the historical internalization of oppression by African Americans, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis’s evaluation of the structural inequalities of capitalist societies and, in multicultural education specifically, work by Sonia Nieto, James Banks, and others have helped us understand the challenges of teaching and learning in a multicultural society.

Multicultural educational theory can be relevant to school policy and practice but — and this is a critical point — it must be accessible. When multicultural theory is articulated in language so obscure that only those who write it can understand it, it is no more than narcissistic philosophizing. We must communicate, and communicate clearly, to address the real problems of inequality, injustice and low achievement that currently plague our public schools.

Theory-making is always a flawed exercise but its value lies in its potential to explain phenomena that we observe in schools and society, helping us build a knowledge base about important educational issues so we can make things better. Without generalized understanding, attempts at improving school policy and practice risk being ad-hoc interventions that may improve local problems but will do little to help us address system-wide patterns of inequality.

In *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, the late physicist Richard Feynman points out that scientific knowledge is “an enabling power to do either good or bad — but it does not carry instructions on how to use it.”² The same goes for educational knowledge: writing its instruction manual is up to us.

1. See, for example, Peter McLaren, “White Terror and Oppositional Agency,” in *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference*, ed. Christine E. Sleeter and Peter L. McLaren (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995).

2. Richard P. Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out* (Cambridge: Perseus, 1999), 142.