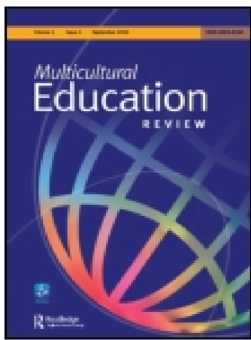

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Re-imagining multicultural education: new visions, new possibilities*

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ABSTRACT
In this article, Sonia Nieto reflects on the heretofore known history of multicultural education since its beginnings in the early 1970s, with a focus in the United States. She then reviews what has been missing from this rendering and suggests what it might mean, in the current sociopolitical context, to imagine new possibilities for the field, including new voices, new visions, and new contexts. Using her research and that of others, she then explores what it would mean to re-imagine multicultural education in a global context for students, teachers, families, schools, and nations.

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The field now called multicultural education has been around in the United States for just under half a century. Its immediate predecessors were the intergroup relations movement (Banks, C.A.M. 2005; Taba & Van Til, 1946), ethnic studies (Banks, 1973), and multiethnic education (Banks, Cortés, Gay, Garcia, & Ochoa, 1976). Multicultural education as a separate field began in earnest in the early 1970s as a result of increased attention by African American and other scholars to the education of African American and other students of color who had long been poorly served by public schools (Baratz & Baratz, 1970; Gay, 1971; Sizemore, 1972).

The immediate antecedents of multicultural education do not, however, tell the entire story. Its emergence was foreshadowed by a long history of social movements for equity and social justice including abolition, universal suffrage, and protests against Nativism and the xenophobic treatment of Indigenous people, immigrants, and others. "Liberty and justice for all," although a noble ideal, has always proven elusive. Gunnar Myrdal (1944), in a ground-breaking study of the lives of African Americans in the 1940s, articulated this reality as the quintessential "American dilemma," that is, the juxtaposition of the ideals of equality and fairness with the ugly realities of slavery, White supremacy, and the subjugation of women, African Americans, Indigenous Americans, working class people, and immigrants.

Nowadays there is some recognition of the role played by African American intellectual giants involved in the struggle for equality in civic life, including in education. These included Du Bois (1935) and Woodson (1933). But many who played a part, African American and

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others, are still largely invisible and unacknowledged in the academic literature. A recent groundbreaking book addressing this serious flaw chronicles the many conflicts, tensions, and contributions of people of color to the field of curriculum and, thus, to education in general (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016). Another recent book describes the contribution of Latin@s in the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in public education (Colón-Muñíz & Lavadenz, 2016). Much more scholarly research is needed in this area to tell a more complete and accurate history of education in the United States.

Multicultural education and the quest for educational equity

Education has been a significant part of the "American dilemma" described by Myrdal (1944) because equal education has been just as elusive as equal justice, equal voting rights, and equal opportunity in general. Thus, multicultural education was an attempt to change the educational outcomes of African American and other children long denied an equal education. In order to do so, it had to challenge the deficit discourses that rendered communities of color – especially African American, Latino/a, American Indian, and some Asian American groups – as lacking in culture, devaluing education, and as completely responsible for the educational failure of its children. These disparaging discourses described children as "culturally deprived" and their families as living in a "culture of poverty" (see, for example, Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965; Lewis, 1965; Riessman, 1962). What was missing in this discourse was a recognition of the institutional policies and practices – including vastly unequal resources, a Eurocentric curriculum, teachers who were poorly prepared to teach students of diverse backgrounds and, of course, racism and other biases – that made educational inequality a natural outcome for large segments of the population.

By the mid-1960s, the sociopolitical landscape of life in the United States began to change as a result of numerous forces, including the Civil Rights movement with its demands for equal opportunity in all aspects of civil life, as well as more radical demands for racial and economic justice, and widespread public opposition to the Vietnam War. Consequently, by the early 1970s, activists and scholars were challenging conventional explanations for the causes of educational inequality. A particularly insightful critique came from sociologist William Ryan, author of *Blaming the Victim* (1971), who famously wrote,

> We are dealing, it would seem, not so much with culturally deprived children as with culturally depriving schools. And the task to be accomplished is not to revise, amend, and repair deficient children, but to alter and transform the atmosphere and operations of the schools to which we commit these children. (p. 61)

Multicultural education grew out of this context. Principally inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, it catapulted the quest for educational justice to the forefront of civic life in the early 1970s.

It is no surprise, then, that backlash and controversy have followed multicultural education from its very beginnings (Sleeter, 1995a). This is because, at its core, multicultural education is a direct challenge to public education's Eurocentric focus and curriculum, as well as to the starkly uneven outcomes of education that have been particularly onerous for children whose race, ethnicity, native language, and social class differ from the majority group. Now, new and critical voices were contesting the previously agreed-upon notion of what it meant to be an educated person. Communities of color and others were no longer content with a curriculum limited to Shakespeare, Faulkner, and Hemingway; the new curricula now would

include Morrison, Neruda, and Bulosan, among many others. Marginalized people and their allies were insisting that history could no longer simply be about the exploits, conquests, and achievements of Europeans and White Americans; it now had to include as well the study of Brown and Black and working-class people, and of imperialism, colonization, and exploitation. Multicultural education also challenged *how* education was done, and *who* benefited, and *why*. It was, in a word, a direct affront to the notion of White supremacy.

In spite of the continuing controversy that has characterized it, multicultural education took hold in the 1980s and 1990s and the field has established itself as a serious scholarly endeavor with a sound theoretical foundation and solid research base (see, for example, Banks, 2009; Banks & Banks, 1995, 2004). I have written about this history previously (Nieto, 2009). Similar movements were also starting in other Western nations, particularly in Great Britain, Canada, and Australia (for a review of multicultural education in these and other nations, see Banks, 2009).

A changing sociopolitical context

US schools and society have both undergone immense changes in the years since multicultural education first appeared on the scene. For example, the nature of the US population has changed considerably from one that was overwhelmingly European American to one that is increasingly multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural. But unlike previous waves of immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new immigrants are coming not from Europe but mostly from Mexico, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and several Asian and South Asian nations. This new diversity has implications for US classrooms whether they are in large urban centers, suburbs, or rural areas. Moreover, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2043, people of color will outnumber Whites, and that by 2060, one in three residents will be Hispanic (U.S. Census, 2012).

Public schools have also changed a great deal, with children of color now outnumbering White children in most urban areas and even in urbanized suburbs and some suburbs. In fact, currently the majority of one- and two-year olds in the nation are children of color, and by 2019, it is estimated that they will be the majority of all children in US schools (Children's Defense Fund's, 2014). At the same time, and in spite of the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court ruling outlawing so-called "separate but equal" schools for White and Black children, a 2014 report from the Civil Rights Project found that public schools in some parts of the nation have experienced an unprecedented backslide toward de facto "separate and unequal" education, this in spite of the fact that a 2014 study found that integrated schools have been found to have "substantial benefits for educational and later life outcomes for students from all backgrounds" (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee, & Kuscera, 2014, p. 2). The news was not all negative, however. The report also found that in the US South, the region that was the most segregated prior to the Brown decision, the backslide has not been as dramatic. That is, schools in the South are now the least segregated of all regions in the country. At the same time, the most segregated regions are in the North and West, and Hispanics are the most segregated of all students by both ethnicity and social class.

Globalization, with its cataclysmic changes including vastly increasing immigration and economic exploitation, has also had an impact on education around the world (Spring, 2014; Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). Wars, invasions, and other civil disturbances have also contributed to mass migration and to an unprecedented number of refugees entering other

nations. These movements are having a dramatic effect on classrooms and schools around the world, including in the United States.

Since the mid-1980s, massive privatization, marketization, and standardization have also characterized public schools, and they too have changed the nature of education in the United States as well as in other nations (Apple, 2009). A mindset that views education as simply another commodity foreshadows unsettling problems for public schools, and some of these are already evident. Vouchers and charter schools, the primary examples of privatization, are now a fact of life throughout the country. As a consequence, they are changing education from a public enterprise to a moneymaking scheme, with little consideration for the "public good." Writing about how this problem has manifested itself in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, what she calls an "iconic American city," Barbara Miner has written, "In the current debates on vouchers, there is strikingly little discussion between democratic values, the common good, and public education" (Miner, 2013, p. 174).

Standardization has taken root in the United States through federal initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Law (2001), followed in 2009 by Race to the Top (RTTT), both of which required massive testing of students in a number of content areas. Supposedly meant to raise standards and help close the "achievement gap" between White and some Asian American students (the highest achieving groups) and Black, Hispanic, Native American, and other Asian American and Pacific Islander students such as Cambodians and Laotians (the lowest achieving groups), it has led instead to higher dropout rates among the latter, with little or no improvement in achievement (Berliner & Glass, 2014). While these initiatives were a boon for testing and publishing companies, they did little to improve the education of the most marginalized students in US schools. One of the consequences of such initiatives is that multicultural education has often been placed on the back burner as states demanded that teachers and schools instead focus on teaching test-taking skills and the low-level knowledge that is frequently found on such tests. With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, there is some hope that more attention will now be paid to actual teaching and learning rather than the singular focus on testing, but it is too early to tell what the outcome of the new law will be.

The ideals of democracy have been challenged as a result of some of these changes. John Dewey, the father of progressive education in the United States, would probably find it hard to recognize schools today. Despite important positive changes in such areas as access to education for a much broader segment of the population than ever, as well as improvements in technology, and the professionalization of teachers and other educators, public schools have lost some of the connection they always had to public life and democracy. For Dewey, one of the greatest hopes for public education in a democratic society was to help create equal opportunity for all youngsters, not just a privileged few. A century ago, he wrote, "It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them" (Dewey, 1916, pp. 119–120). Decades later, in response to Dewey's hopeful vision of public schools as a democratizing institution, economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis wrote an article with the ironic title, "If Dewey Calls, Tell Him Things Didn't Work Out" (1974). Despite Dewey's fervent wish that equality of opportunity might be the outcome of public schooling, it has not occurred.

Some of the changes in public education in the past century, however, have been quite positive and the field of multicultural education has changed as a result. For instance, population changes have brought new energy to public schools. The United States continues

to be a nation of immigrants. Yet, many US educators do not necessarily view new immigrants in a positive light because they have not been adequately prepared to teach these newcomers, having neither the academic preparation nor the resources with which to teach them. One result is that many educators are unaware of the tremendous assets these students bring to their education, including bilingualism and multilingualism, as well as numerous life skills and strengths such as resilience, courage, and grit.

Other changes in the sociopolitical context of our society have also had an impact on multicultural education. Since its beginnings, multicultural education has consistently expanded its reach to include other differences besides race and ethnicity. These parallel movements to multicultural education in the past quarter century or so have helped broaden the field to be more inclusive of oppressive conditions, attitudes, and behaviors not originally included under the umbrella of multicultural education. These include gender, social class, language, religion, and ability. Most have been quite readily accepted by proponents of multicultural education. Unfortunately, gender studies, which incorporates women, gay, lesbian, transgender, transsexual, and other groups, has not been as widely accepted within the field of multicultural education. Formerly invisible in the curriculum, gender studies took hold most strongly in higher education (Schmitz, Butler, Guy-Sheftall, & Rosefelt, 2004). Queer studies, a vibrant field in its own right, has also become a prominent feature in higher education (Spargo, 1999). The same is not the case in K-12 education where it has faced opposition and contestation.

Thus, acceptance of a broader definition of multicultural education has not been universal. The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) has taken a principled stand on this issue by including the following anti-discrimination statement on its website:

> The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) is committed to an anti-discrimination policy in all of its programs and services. NAME is consciously and proactively inclusive of all areas of diversity including, but not limited to race, ethnicity, color, national origin, sovereign tribal Nations status, ancestry, gender identity and expression, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, social class, socioeconomic status, marital status, language, disability, or immigration status. (NAME, n.d.)

In spite of this noble statement, individuals both within and outside the organization still have doubts about including some differences under the umbrella of multicultural education, especially sexuality. Some fear that what they consider "diluting" multicultural education to include other differences will diminish its original focus on race and ethnicity. More recently, others have protested the inclusion of gender and queer studies in the curriculum on religious grounds. It is important to remember, however, that during the Civil Rights Movement, racists voiced similar religious objections concerning equality for African Americans. Clearly, much still needs to be done to counter negative attitudes, behaviors, policies, and practices targeting LGBTQ communities, which often lead to alienation, exclusion, and high rates of suicide among these populations.

Imagining new possibilities for a new era

Where will multicultural education be in another half century? Will it have gone the way of other movements in education that have flourished and then disappeared? Will there still be a need for multicultural education in 50 years? Will it become more inclusive or less so?

How will continuing globalization, immigration, privatization, and other issues not yet on the scene affect it?

Reconceptualizing multicultural education

In the remainder of this article, I want to imagine what a new, reconceptualized multicultural education might look like. This is a topic I addressed with my colleagues Patty Bode, Eugenie Kang, and John Raible a number of years ago (Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008). In that chapter, we discussed what it might mean to retheorize multicultural education to take into account critical issues generally missing in the discourse. One salient issue we addressed was that of *power.* In most of the original conceptions of multicultural education, power was not explicitly addressed, though there was an implicit recognition on the part of many theorists concerning how power relations are part and parcel of the problem of inequality. By the 1990s, the issue of power was becoming more visible in key writings in the field. For example, James Banks characterized multicultural education as a "transformative project" (1996), while both Christine Sleeter (1995a) and Stephen May (1999) wrote about "critical multicultural education," Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux discussed "revolutionary multiculturalism" (1997) and as early as the first edition of my book, *Affirming Diversity* (1992), I insisted that education could not be separated from the sociopolitical context in which schools exist.

Some theorists and many practitioners however, in their enthusiasm to implement multicultural education, have focused on superficial aspects of diversity rather than on the institutional policies and practices that maintain entrenched power relations in place. Consequently, a critical stance has sometimes been missing in the curriculum, that is, in *what* is taught in multicultural education. Michael Apple has articulated what a concern for power might mean not just in multicultural education but also in curriculum in general. He writes,

> … a truly critical study of education needs to deal with more than the technical issues of how we teach efficiently and effectively – too often the dominant or only questions educators ask. It must think critically about education's relationship to economic, political, and cultural power. (Apple, 2004, p. vii)

Some of the questions Apple asked readers to consider were: "Whose knowledge is it? Who selected it? Why is it organized and taught in this way? To this particular group?" (Apple, 2004, p. 6). And, of course, Paulo Freire's quintessential questions: Who benefits? Who loses? (see Freire, 1970) continue to be relevant for multicultural education today.

A related significant issue for reimagining multicultural education concerns pedagogy, that is, *how* the curriculum is taught and the learning environment is structured. Since the 1990s, there has been an increased focus on critical pedagogy and critical literacy, both of which encourage educators to teach in a way that communicates the importance of reflecting critically on knowledge and how to use it (see some early iterations of this approach in Nieto (1992) and Peterson (1991)). For example, Bob Peterson went beyond Freire's proposition that students need to learn to "read the word" in order to "read the world" by suggesting that students needed to learn "to "read the world and change it" (1991). These ideas have had a profound impact on multicultural education, if not so much in practice, at least in theory.

Reimagining multicultural education also means rethinking the goals and visions it exemplifies even though these may contradict current notions of education. Some educators have suggested, for instance, that *love* and *caring,* terms not usually associated with education – particularly in these times of standardization, accountability, and marketization – are also essential in education The contributions of Nel Noddings (1992) and Angela Valenzuela (1999) have been particularly significant. Rosalie Rolón-Dow has carried this notion further by adding that care alone is not enough; *critical care* is what is needed, especially when considering the historical and lived realities of students of color, Latin@s in the case she describes (2005).

The issue of *happiness* should also be part and parcel of what multicultural education is about. Daisaku Ikeda has written extensively about this in describing Soka education, a Buddhist view of teaching, learning, and education (2001). In reviewing a book of his essays, I wrote,

> Imagine a world in which the goal of education is the realization of happiness; in which learning is celebrated as the very purpose of human life; in which humanitarian competition is valued over self-promotion; in which the vision of education is both democratic and participatory; in which words such as *compassionate, humanistic, holistic, wise,* and *courageous* are used liberally to describe the outcomes of education; in which literature and the arts are favored over functionalism and materialism; in which the ultimate goal of education is "to help [the student] to become the best he is capable of becoming, to become actually what he deeply is potentially" (p. 46) (Nieto, 2012, p. 152)

Ikeda suggests, for example, that students' identities, perspectives, and experiences need to be included in the school's curriculum and pedagogy. He describes an education that is deeply humanistic, democratic, participatory, and artistic. It is about learning for life, not for a job. It echoes the very best of Freire, Dewey, and other humanists who view education as life itself. This is what Soka education is about, and it seems to me that our field of multicultural education can learn a great deal from it.

New visions, new outcomes

I want to conclude by reflecting on a question that a reporter asked me recently. "What would a student who had experienced the kind of education you envision – an education that is multicultural, socially just, critical, and culturally responsive, from kindergarten through high school – look like upon graduation?" she asked. That is, of course, the fundamental question all educators must think about in their daily practice because outcomes should be our greatest concern. I am not talking here about outcomes on exams, or the jobs they get when they complete their studies, or other such functionalist issues. Being "college or career ready," to use the current jargon, can be important but also a slippery concept. Careers available today were unheard of even a couple of decades ago and aside from excellent literacy and numeracy skills, being "college or career ready" changes all the time. Instead, what I'm talking about, and what this reporter was asking, concerns the kinds of attitudes, perspectives, and values that young people should develop as a result of their education.

It was such a weighty question that I had to think about it for a moment before responding. My answer to her was this: I would hope that such a young person would be a curious and enthusiastic learner, open to new and different perspectives, knowledgeable of the arts, literature, history, and the social and behavioral sciences, adept at communicating important

ideas, able to hold intelligent conversations about a variety of topics, accepting and respectful of differences, and be at least bilingual, if not multilingual. I would hope she would be happy, that she would have felt she belonged as a significant member of her school community, and that her teachers cared about, and for, her. And, finally, I would hope that he would feel empowered to help leave the world better than he found it. This is, after all, what education should be about.

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