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## Foundation Studies and Multicultural Education: Implications for Tertiary Institutions

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## FOUNDATION STUDIES AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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### Introduction

A review of the literature shows that most educators agree with two principles underlying most points of view with regard to multicultural education. These are:

- The right of children to identify with a particular culture within the broader context of Australian society.
- The need to educate all children not only towards a degree of tolerance and understanding of other cultures, but also to appreciate that it can be profitable to accommodate some of the points of view of other cultures.

Few educators would disagree with these principles. But the principles themselves provide little guidance with regard to appropriate content and strategies for teachers. The question of how to translate guiding principles, aims or values into practice is complex. In some areas, such as 'mathematics' and 'literacy', clearly articulated aims all but define content and time allocation for the teacher. Other areas, such as aims associated with 'democracy' may be better served indirectly, by procedures and attitudes expressed across the curriculum, rather than in specific syllabus content. Multicultural education is a complex area, and its aims do not readily suggest means of achieving them.

Too often, the matter of how best to address multicultural education is not given adequate consideration. Many theorists advocate strategies and activities that require teachers to plan lessons to address the values of multiculturalism directly. The result tends to be a set of recipe-like methods that do not focus on the notion of culture. Teachers can not be effective in meeting multicultural goals unless they attempt to do it on the basis of an understanding of the social nature of human beings. If teachers focus on the aims of multicultural education directly, without dealing with the complex notion of culture, they become idealogues rather than educators.

The emphasis on strategies that we find in the literature is also strong in the teacher training institutions. Since the traditional foundations of history, sociology and philosophy of education have fallen from favour, students do not have the opportunity to study those aspects of human beings

associated with culture. If teachers do not have an understanding of the degree to which culture affects consciousness and the way in which different cultures involve different interpretations of the human condition, they must see other cultures in terms of the conceptual categories of their own culture, and the behaviour they attribute to culture will be limited to superficial manifestations, such as dress and religious observance.

The case presented here is that institutions of teacher education should provide courses in which student-teachers have the opportunity to consider some of the insights from those foundation discipline areas that are associated with human nature and the learning of culture. This understanding would enable them to help children see different cultures as different interpretations, and so promote better understanding of people from different cultures. It would also help teachers to better understand how the cultural dimension plays a part in the way in which all of their pupils learn.

### **Present Interpretations of Multicultural Education**

Australian educators generally have accepted the reality of different cultural groups in Australia and seen the need for all children to be aware of the cultures around them. They often recognize too, that culture is complex, and that aims of multicultural education should be pursued across the curriculum. The Education Department of Western Australia, for example, published the following in a policy statement: The proposals put forward in this paper call for an approach that is fundamentally different from the major thrust of programmes in teacher education today. The focus of courses in teacher education is on explicit knowledge and explicit methods of teaching. Student-teachers are given the understanding that their job as teachers will be to teach explicit knowledge, and they are given set strategies to achieve this task. It would require a radical shift for many teacher educators to give other views of teaching the credit they deserve.

An interesting thought is that the notion of multicultural education, as we most often see it, is itself an example of a culturally shared point of view. The Frankfurt School of Critical Theorists, amongst others, has described some culturally shared modes of thought which include a conception of rationality as purposive and instrumental. Knowledge, in this scheme of things, is seen as a commodity, which can be described as such (Giroux, 1983). Courses in teacher education often illustrate this view: students are taught models, algorithms and strategies that, within their own logical framework, are guaranteed to produce desired end results. Students can be tested to determine whether or not they 'know' these methods. Multicultural education, accordingly, has strategies consistent with its rationale, and students are given to understand that mastery of this 'knowledge' leads to successful practice.

Culture is complex and it is extremely difficult to come to grips with its implications. Those who attempt to deal with it by means of methods or strategies can present, at best, a shallow view of culture. At worst they see other cultures in terms of their own conceptual categories, with the result that other cultures must be seen as less viable, poor relations.

### **What Teachers Should Understand About Culture**

Perhaps the most important understanding for teachers is that everyday notions of reality are problematic, and that the world is open to interpretation. The nature of the taken-for-granted world of reality derives largely from culture; even reactions to such fundamental situations as birth and death are strongly influenced by culture. Culture is a major influence on consciousness.

Multicultural education is not a separate subject in schools and colleges, rather, it should form an integral part of all aspects of the curriculum. Nor is it a programme only for immigrants; it has relevance for all Australians, irrespective of age and heritage.

(Education Department of Western Australia, 1981, p. 319).

We wholeheartedly endorse this paragraph. It implies a recognition of the complexity of culture and rightly points out that it belongs right across the curriculum instead of in one part of it. But the Department's policy writers then translated this sound theory into less sound practice. A later passage from the same policy statement reads:

... activities would include, where appropriate, the introduction of references to other countries and their customs and languages ... activities to highlight cultural similarities and differences could also be introduced into art, physical education and home economics programmes ...

(Education Department of Western Australia, 1981, p.320).

This statement of policy is consistent with the approach taken in a large amount of literature, including the policy statement cited above, is sound, but it is not legitimate to attempt to translate such complex theory into the kinds of teaching strategies that are alluded to in the above policy statement. The activities teachers may choose in accordance with the above statement do not communicate fundamentally important concepts about culture. For example, a lesson or two on Chinese cooking in a social studies programme would meet the requirements set out in this statement. But to introduce a topic such as this and to 'teach' it as content in a lesson in its own right is to bring no more than an isolated and superficial aspect of culture to the attention of children. Multicultural education is often given this kind of treatment in teacher training programmes; it is dealt with in terms of methods and strategies rather than as an adjunct to a basic study of the social nature of human beings.

Without an understanding of the social nature of human beings, teachers can not adequately help children to develop healthy affective and effective responses to other cultures. Issues associated with multicultural education arise in many contexts in a classroom, and the teacher needs knowledge and understanding to deal with sensitive issues and to exploit appropriate situations to the fullest.

The proposals put forward in this paper call for an approach that is fundamentally different from the major thrust of programmes in teacher education today. The focus of courses in teacher education is on explicit knowledge and explicit methods of teaching. Student-teachers are given the understanding that their job as teachers will be to teach explicit knowledge, and they are given set strategies to achieve this task. It would require a radical shift for many teacher educators to give other views of teaching the credit they deserve.

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The particular interpretations we make of the world are, to some degree, dependent on the interpretations of our society. People create culture, and perpetuate it as a shared awareness. Many theorists in a number of discipline

areas have helped to explain this notion. The sociologists, Berger & Luckmann (1967, p. 51), for example, claimed that 'Man's self-production is always, and of necessity, a social enterprise. Men *together* produce a human environment, with the totality of its socio-cultural and psychological formations.' (Emphasis in original). Many others have also contributed to our understanding of the social world. The phenomenologists and some sociologists have made particularly important contributions.

If teachers are to understand something of the nature of culture, it is essential that they should study the way in which it is transmitted and learned. Two points are important here. One is that culture is learned implicitly. This makes it extremely difficult to identify and describe those aspects of behaviour that can be attributed to culture. Because cultural attributes are implicit, anthropological and ethnographic descriptions are usually long and detailed. Geertz (1973) used the term 'thick description' to describe ethnographic discourse because of the reluctance of ethnographers to distil definitive cultural characteristics from complex behaviours. Ethnographic method is not conducive to classifying people or behaviours according to some pre-conceived scheme; instead it virtually precludes hypotheses and other constraints on the nature of information sought.

The second point teachers should understand about the learning and transmission of culture is that much of it is learned from the words and actions of significant other individuals. But this is not to say that children – and adults – learn culture simply by being in the company of many who share that culture. Not all people would learn the same things given the same situation; the learner takes an active role in learning. As Edward Sapir wrote: Culture is not a '... neatly packaged-up assemblage of forms of behaviour handed over piece-meal . . . to the passively inquiring child.' Culture is not something 'given' but something to be '... gradually and gropingly discovered' (Sapir, cited in Wolcott, 1982, p. 90).

The outcome of enculturation is that we become immersed in culture, to the extent that we find it difficult to see different interpretations of the world. The interpretations we have are often seen as natural, and taken-for-granted. Given that different interpretations are possible, then one's cultural orientation has a fundamentally important influence on consciousness. The effect of cultural learning is to place lenses before the eyes; it puts some things in focus at the expense of other things. It gives us a way to make sense of the world; we see as natural things that may otherwise be problematic and perplexing. Take an example. Many would not find the word 'learning' in the least ambiguous. But what would the word mean in a very different culture? Margaret Mead once classified societies on the basis of whether or not people make a self-conscious effort to pass on the culture to the young (Wolcott, 1982, p. 89). Those in which this effort is not made, she called 'learning cultures'. We suggest that the word 'learning' would not easily translate into the language of a 'learning culture'.

It is difficult to conceive of teachers learning about other cultures without, in the process, developing some awareness of our own culture. That is, what are our values? What are the widely shared assumptions underlying the major theories that guide teaching practice? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these assumptions? Only if teachers understand their own biases can they hope to address multicultural issues. A teacher who does not understand his/her own cultural position could not understand the position of others. The teacher's way of knowing, in this case, would be seen as *the* way of knowing, and the teacher could not be aware that there may be other culturally-shared ways of knowing. Multicultural education, in the hands of such a teacher, could only be superficial and trivial, if it had any value at all.

Cultural learning has profound effects on the individual. Teachers should understand something of this process of which they, wittingly or unwittingly, play a significant part.

### **Why Teachers and Children Would Benefit if This Content Were Included in Teacher Education Courses**

If trainee teachers were given a far broader view of the nature of culture, the resulting understanding would be of benefit in several ways.

#### **1. Achieving The Aims of Multicultural Education**

As described above, teachers need an adequate understanding of the nature of culture in order to avoid seeing other cultures through the conceptual lenses of our own, and so inadvertently placing value judgements on other cultures.

#### **2. Understanding Children**

A broad understanding of the nature of learning helps teachers to better understand the children in their charge. Take the example of the Aboriginal boy in Roebourne of 13 years of age, with reading and mathematics abilities at about the level of Year 3. His 'progress' in these areas was extremely slow, but is that to say he was not learning? The same boy was socially mature in the company of others of his age, and an expert hunter and preparer of food in the bush. Clearly, the boy's failure in the classroom was intimately connected with his embeddedness in another culture. Most strategies of cognitive psychology do not address the kinds of issues that should concern the teachers of a child in these circumstances. But this example highlights problems that apply, to some degree, to any student in any class. Perhaps other examples are not as pointed, but the issues are real. The way in which children have grown up to see the world has profound effects on what and how they learn.

#### **3. Culture and Teaching Strategies**

If teachers have a broader understanding of human beings in the social and cultural context, they are better able to see the strengths and limitations of different kinds of learning theories and teaching strategies. The assumptions that underlie theory, for example, about what knowledge is worth while, what kind of individualism we should foster and so on, are culturally specific points of view; they are not always the best alternatives. Some understanding of underlying assumptions helps teachers to choose appropriate strategies.

### **Conclusion**

The aims of multicultural education can not adequately be addressed unless teachers have some understanding of the nature of culture. Without this understanding, other cultures are seen through the conceptual lenses of our own culture, and tend to be judged accordingly. If teachers are to deal adequately with multicultural education, they must go beyond interpreting other cultures in terms of the concepts of our own.

A further application of understanding the cultural nature of human beings is the insight it gives teachers into some of the more implicit characteristics of their students. Given this awareness, teachers are better able to respond to them as individuals.

Trainee teachers should be given a programme that includes a study of culture. Multicultural education in teacher preparation institutions would not then be confined to a separate subject with its own methods. Students should study relevant content in one or more foundation courses, and then carry this awareness, to subjects in which it could be made a logical part.

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