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Diversity as a Condition of Cultures: Querying Assumptions of Mainstream and Minorities in Education Policy and Curriculum

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Highlights

- Discussions of diversity in relation to children's education are often characterized by binaries of same/different, mainstream/margins, inclusion/exclusion, self/Other.
- Curriculum remains a contested site in educational debate, with differing views about curriculum as reinforcing social norms, beliefs, and values, as addressing the learning and social needs of learners from a variety of backgrounds and worldviews, or as a hybrid of these.
- Policy and curriculum designed or intended to address diversity tend to rest on assumptions of majority or dominant cultures as homogenous and distinct from the cultures of minority Other/s.
- Inequality is often multidimensional, intersecting with, perpetuating, and reinforcing other inequalities and human rights violations affecting children and families.

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- Understanding culture in terms of heterogeneous practices of everyday life shifts the focus of discussion and debate toward more nuanced understandings of Otherness, difference and diversity as operating within, as well as between, cultures.

In recent decades, the language, logics, and practices of globalizing circumstances have come to furnish the “everyday vocabulary” (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014, p. xii) of contemporary education research. Indeed, it has become customary to write about childhood, curriculum, and culture as co-located in contexts characterized by the effects of globalization, transnational mobility, and technologically facilitated global networks. Of course, globalization is hardly a new phenomenon (Sachs, 2020), but contemporary scholars argue that its configuration in recent decades

... is now placing tremendous pressure on local settings and institutions such as schools and universities, on the very nature of intellectual and pedagogical processes, and on the social subjects and lived communities formed in these domains (Goel et al., 2021, p. 641).

Such concerns regarding globalization and its locally situated effects raise questions about the relevance and effectiveness of curriculum, and tensions regarding equity and inclusion in increasingly diverse multicultural schools and communities. Policy borrowing and curriculum reforms, together with pedagogical approaches from “elsewhere,” offer the tantalizing promise of improving educational quality, ensuring that a given country’s system of education will become or remain competitive within the global knowledge economy. Yet questions abound about what curriculum should look like in any given place, what it should aim to achieve, and how learning that takes place within and beyond educational settings impacts on shaping the citizens, communities, and societies of the future (Tan, 2016).

Such concerns occupy a significant place in political, economic, and educational discourse, and it is important to recognize that schools are also among those social institutions generally considered “local public goods”—that is, they are often provided by local governments, “taking into account the specific needs of each local community” (Sachs, 2020, p. 204). Yet curriculum is about more than addressing local learning needs, and, as illustrated by recent polarizing, politically charged debates in the United States, is a site of ongoing contestation, in which competing groups may invest heavily in the information, books, resources, and topics for learning and discussion that make their way into schools and classrooms (see, for example, Bickford & Lawson, 2020; Bjork-James, 2020; Morgan, 2022). In these debates, whose views and experiences “count” and whose are marginalized or delegitimated can spill over into debates about what “counts” as legitimate or acceptable knowledge for children and schools. These contentions map onto a broader local and national cultural politics that coalesce around notions of belonging and entitlement of

a mainstream or dominant group that is positioned in defense of itself against a vilified and dangerous “Other.”

Even in less contentious circumstances, parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers continue to engage in discussion and debates about the purposes and functions of education. Biesta categorizes these in terms of *qualification*, *socialization*, and *subjectification*. Qualification refers to “the ways in which education contributes to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that qualify us for doing something,” whereas socialization is concerned with how “through education, individuals become part of existing sociocultural, political, and moral orders,” and subjectification with individuation, that is, the process of gaining agency and independence as self in relation to the prevailing social order (Biesta, 2009, p. 355). Curriculum and schooling are thus generally expected simultaneously to address the needs and wholistic development of individual learners, to reinforce local values, beliefs, and cultural practices and to prepare children as future citizens and workers whose skills and worldviews will equip them as participants in local and/or global industries and economies (see Biesta, 2021; Morgan, 2018). However, and importantly, these functions take place in contexts that are themselves always already characterized *by* diversity that has yet to be taken fully into account.

In this paper, I am suggesting that education is constrained by current conceptions that assume homogeneity within mainstream or dominant culture, while difference and diversity among minority groups is taken as “given.” Curriculum, in this way of looking at it, is seen as a tool for assimilation, functioning as a corrective to heterogeneity. Difference and diversity, in these conceptions, are understood as “a problem to be resolved” (Ileiva, 2021, n.p.), or, as Buchanan puts it, “the problem of otherness” (1996, p. 484). Informed by the work of Michel de Certeau (1984, p. 1997), Buchanan interrogates the notion of homogenous, hegemonic cultures, arguing instead that Same and Other are both in the process of becoming, and “therefore never yet infinitely other” (1996, p. 490). Such a position helps move beyond dichotomies and persistent chasms to be identified and addressed. Instead, it points to the possibilities that mutually shared conditions of otherness and becoming might put into play, in what Biesta refers to as world-centered education concerned with an existential question that

... always poses itself in our encounters with the world, where the world does not appear as material for our understanding and sense-making, but actually may be asking something from us, and that it is the encounter with this question that actually calls our subject-ness into existence (2021, n.p.).

As a set of educational questions, subjectivity, diversity, and encounter then become shared and interconnected, located in a shared world rather than terrains marked out by difference and division.

The papers in this Special Issue address a range of topics that in various ways speak into these debates about the purposes and functions of schooling, on one hand, and, on the other hand, the needs of individual learners in heterogenous and rapidly evolving societies. For some, mapping policy reforms concerned with inclusive education expose persistent problems of inequality and privilege and reveal problematic policy assumptions of homogeneity within mainstream societies. Writing from their context in Wales context, Knight and Crick (2021) contend that inclusive education sits on a deficit-diversity continuum, where inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classrooms implies a deficit requiring conformity to the norm, while simultaneously positioning greater diversity through their inclusion as a benefit to all students in the classroom. These positionings on the part of policymakers highlight the extent to which homogeneity is assumed of non-neurodiverse students in regular classrooms. Neurodiversity becomes an instance of heterogeneity—at once a deficit or problem to be solved, *and* a potential benefit to be accrued by presumably homogenous others.

However, given that almost one third of children in Wales live in poverty, socioeconomic diversity alone presents an example of heterogeneity that is likely to affect large numbers of Welsh schools. This is before even considering that, according to United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF), an estimated billion children around the world are considered “multi-dimensionally poor,” meaning that they are “simultaneously deprived in key dimensions such as education, health, housing, water, and sanitation” (UNICEF, 2021, p. 20). In this one example, one category of disadvantage (disability) intersects with and potentially reinforces and perpetuates another (poverty) (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021), while homogeneity of non-neurodiverse students is tacitly assumed in the policy context. These kind of policy blind spots are implicated in a discursive rendering of some forms and categories of disadvantage as invisible, meaning that inequalities pertaining to them potentially remain unacknowledged and unaddressed.

For some scholars, new pedagogies offer ways of cultivating the kind of ethical understanding, critical thinking, and empathy through which children are able to engage meaningfully with others in diverse educational contexts (Feng, 2022). Indeed, curriculum can be approached through a number of lenses, including cultural perspectives that advocate for curriculum that “reflects social values and expectations through its design and implementation” (Yang & Li, 2022). This is seen as more inclusive due to the fusion of global and local, and the value and efficacy of hybridized models of curriculum and pedagogical approaches in light of local cultures. As other scholars have observed with regard to studies of education curriculum and policy reform in China, for example, “what we have seen and can expect to see in the future, are adaption of ‘borrowed’ policies and co-existence of these policies with indigenous practices and values” (Tan & Reyes, 2016).

Some authors note, however, that there is limited international research concerned with what is termed “sub-cultural diversity” (Alhosani, 2022), underscoring the need for rethinking assumptions

about the homogeneity of “local,” and to consider how taking heterogeneity of the local as a given might impact on educational and other forms of equity. Similarly, there is a need to consider the role of education in addressing diverse needs in changing contexts. In many societies, globalization and urbanization have changed the nature of community interaction. This, in turn, means that time spent outside the contexts of home and school may primarily involve interactions between parents and children who live in the same household, rather than engagements with other children and adults in the community (Luo, 2022). With greater insularity and fewer opportunities for meaningful engagement to create familiarity with others, there is less likelihood of awareness of diversity within and between community members.

Concluding thoughts

The education of children is a years-long encounter with self and Other, and with the heterogenous ways of being, knowing, and doing that occur within any society. Researchers in the fields of multicultural and intercultural education (Gube et al., 2022; Halse, 2021; Kennedy, 2022) observe that diversity takes many forms and requires ongoing commitments to the critical work of addressing systemic and structural inequalities, and to education as a key site of social transformation and change. However, diversity is not a characteristic of those groups deemed Other as compared to a presumed distinctive, homogenous “local” culture, and descriptions of it as such tacitly negate diversity as a condition of everyday life in every place and society. This is not to suggest that there is nothing distinctive in the local, but rather to insist on its heterogeneity. While systems and structures of power may rely on hegemonies organized around gender, sexuality, race, class, and so on, everyday lifeworlds and cultures are more fluid and dynamic, continually being formed and reformed in the practices of everyday life (Certeau, 1984).

Importantly, then, curricular and pedagogical questions concerned with cultural diversity need to move beyond its constitution as an issue to be addressed within and in relation to contexts of dominant local cultures imagined as monolithic and homogenous. Instead, there is a need to consider instead how heterologies, or “the study of the interconnected histories of self and other” (Ileiva, 2021, n.p.) can lead to different ways of understanding, imagining and navigating our encounters with one another in the heterogenous spaces and societies we inhabit. Recent ethnographic work in the field of anthropology calls our attention to “the plethora of existential struggles, improvisations, ideas, and landscapes that shape what life means and how it is experienced and imagined in splintering and pluralizing presents” (Biehl & Locke, 2017, p. 5). Preparing today’s children for diverse futures in diverse contexts relies, I would argue, not on looking to cultural, linguistic, religious, or historical narratives that would constitute what is local, what is different, and how to bridge the perceived gaps between them. Rather, it requires recognition of the multiplicity, diversity, and

complexity of shared pasts, presents, and futures, and a means of attending to these together in a world inhabited by us all.

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