Malta Review of Educational Research

A Raison d'Etre for Multicultural Education in Malta

Andrew Azzopardi
andrew.azzopardi@um.edu.mt

Andrew Azzopardi is a Lecturer in the Department of Youth and Community Studies, Faculty of Education. His lecturing focuses on sociology, critical pedagogy, disability politics, inclusive and multicultural education, emancipatory research, youth and community studies. He is coordinator of the Masters in Inclusive Education and Communities. He has published in *Disability and Society* and *The International Journal of Inclusive Education*, in an electronic journal of the University of Leeds, and co-authored two texts, *Developmental Programme for PSD Teachers (2000)* and *Creating Inclusive Schools* (2002), a chapter in the forthcoming *Disability and the Politics of Education: An International Reader,* and a book on *Career Guidance for Persons with Disability*.

Abstract

This paper aims at reflecting on the transformation of educational environments and practices into ones that are just and democratic in increasingly diverse communities. We need to critically analyze the discourses around ethnically diverse children within schools in Malta. Such analysis can raise awareness about their educational experiences and how these are influenced by the ideas, attitudes and actions of the members of mainstream schools. This can in turn lead to a greater commitment towards the democratization of educational practices and the development of educational environments that are responsive to cultural differences. The presence of minority cultures in our schools can thus become a stimulus for developing open-minded citizens that, instead of feeling threatened by the increasing diversity of people in our country, will feel that they have an opportunity for growing into more humane, engaged and active global citizens.

Introduction

> *The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.* (William James)

According to the UNHCR (2002) over 21 million people are in some way or another compelled to move away from their native land, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons varying from race, religion and nationality to membership of a particular social group or political opinion. While this may be caused in the first place by the continuation in some parts of the world of the human paradigm of exclusivity, elitism and favour especially when communities are governed by physical and ethnic homogeneity (Morris, 1969), it is a challenge for democratic communities at the receiving end:

> Terms such as multiculturalism, pluralism, or diversity have become popular, and remind us that we might do well to avoid previous generations' absolutist outlooks and rigid categories. (Chetkom-Yankoo, 1999, p. 3)

Multiculturalism as a notion has evolved immensely over these last years:

> Multicultural education was born at a time when it was believed that it was in everyone's interests that ethnic minority children be subsumed within the presumed dominant white, middle class, Christian culture as quickly and as effortlessly as possible. This approach conveniently shifted the responsibility for change from the state to the individual in general and the black individual in particular. (Jones, 1998, p. 2)

Beyond its application to culturally and linguistically diverse people, multiculturalism is aimed at enhancing the self-esteem and the enabling of positive interaction and responsiveness for all: It lies at the root of improving academic outcomes, promoting equity, effecting change in the school community and beyond (Grant, 1999). Multiculturalism challenges the 'straight up' view of cultural development and recognizes that all cultures have values that can be transported whatever the geographical context.

Of all institutions, schools remain the most methodically and directly answerable for imparting norms and values. Two of the most outstanding characteristics of educators are their capacity to adjust to society's evolving needs and the faculty to read the signs of the times, detect and direct the necessary transformations (Mahalingham & McCarthy, 2000). Educators have the unique opportunity to influence the societal trends and where necessary engage students through debate, most especially through the varied processes of the informal curriculum (Mayo, 2007). Education can either contribute towards creating social ghettoisation (Munns & Rajan, 1995), or promote the inclusion of marginalized communities by prompting dialogue (Freire, 1970).

Educators are compelled to interpret social makeovers. They can undertake a process of creating self-growth by engaging in an open and constructive debate with students on what constitutes 'difference', what comprises 'diversity', and how we go about re-defining and applying multiple identities. The value base that should govern

our thinking is respect, cooperation, forbearance, broad-mindedness, respect for difference and uniqueness (Reardon, 1997a).

Multicultural Education – An Unyielding Commitment

When students build up a multicultural perspective, they improve their self-concept and self-understanding, develop a sensitivity to and understanding of others, and extend their ability to perceive multiple identities, and interpretations of events, values, and behavior (Ulin, 2001). For many students coming from minority cultural backgrounds, educational excellence remains a deceptive and impossible target to achieve because of a very complex discourse laden with power issues:

> Over the years we have come to see multiculturalism – as a set of propositions about identity, knowledge, power, and change in education – as a kind of normal science, a form of disciplinarity of difference in which the matter of alterity has been effectively displaced as a supplement. On the terms of its present trajectory, multiculturalism can be properly diagnosed as a discourse of power that attempts to manage the extraordinary tensions and contradictions existing in modern life… (McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2000, p. 70)

Multicultural education interrogates, challenges, and reinterprets concepts and paradigms in the development of pedagogy and curriculum in educational settings. Multicultural education is about creating the right ambiance for increased educational equity. What we now call multicultural education originated in the 1960s in the wake of the civil rights movement as a corrective measure to the long-standing de facto policy of assimilating minority groups into the 'melting pot' of dominant American culture (Grant, 1999):

> Multicultural education is a field of study and an emerging discipline whose major aim is to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class, and cultural groups. One of its important goals is to help all students to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to interact, negotiate, and communicate with peoples from diverse groups in order to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good. (Banks and Banks,1995, p. xi)

Our schools are a fantastic opportunity to federate and congregate human capital, stimulate and motivate debate on the importance and attractiveness of diversity. We need to celebrate the value added that society will gain if we capitalise on the worth of diversity (Salend, 2001). Social disadvantage creates a belief in a minority's innate inferiority, prejudice and bigotry. In a classic example of power-influence asymmetry, the minority group can do little to improve its image in the eyes of the establishment. Its members are often characterised as

- Different, non-normative, strange
- Morally inferior, primitive, not human
- Fit only for doing society's dirty jobs
- Undeserving of consideration or rights
- Unclean, evil, corrupting, dangerous. (Chetkow-Yanoov, 1999, p.17)

What constitutes an inclusive multi-ethnic school as a core institution in the formation of an individual's personality and as a fundamental structure in the social world? The curriculum and the school's overall atmosphere and ethos is the main party in this engagement (Sheets, 2005). We need to explore whether in our school community recognizes and respects the cultural, ethnic and personal identities and life-experiences of its students and whether it helps them develop their identity amidst countless conflicting external pressures. The leading notions that we need to juggle as we debate multi-ethnic schooling and the processes of integration are non-participation, discrimination, violence, prejudice and hostility, the generation of collective forms and boundary maintenance (Reardon, 1997b).

The 'Inclusive' Discourse

We need to critically explore the educational experiences of migrant children with ethnically different backgrounds through an open debate with the different stakeholders of the school community thus attempting to identify and address the issues related to the presence of these children in schools. The outcomes of such studies will inform developments in multi-ethnic educational practices and policies. We need to rebound from reading school experiences to engaging with other social contexts, namely 'open centres' for immigrants in Malta and the Maltese community – such a controversial, undecided and undetermined way of hosting people who are coming from a distinct experience (Neubeck & Glasberg, 2005).

Local educational institutions during the last decade have struggled with the inclusion of different cultural 'others' even though guided by the National Minimum Curriculum's principles of equality of holistic educational opportunities (Giordmaina, 2000). Not enough research has been conducted in the local context to explore how these principles are being translated with respect to the educational rights of ethnically different children. The importance of research that looks into how schools are responding to the needs of a multicultural and anti-racist education cannot be underestimated. The increased migration of people to our country and the hostile and sometimes violent reactions towards them call for an urgent exploration of the various educational processes (Grant, 1999).

We are realizing that skin colour, different religious backgrounds, and language barriers are finding the schools unprepared. In our local contexts, as elsewhere (Munns & Rajan,1995), we have heard parents and educators give us clear messages that they think these students are misplaced. As Educators we need to inspire dialogue on issues of relevance to cultural minorities and the way that school communities can respond to this up-and-coming veracity. Schools need to address the victimisation that is taking place in our society. It is essential to develop a humane social environment, to redistribute resources and to establish a human rights discourse as the platform and manifesto of all our argumentation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that:

> Everyone has the right to education….. Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all…. (Article 26)

Educators have a unique opportunity and responsibility to influence the societal trends and engage students in dialogue towards a shift from a reactive to an adaptive mentality, from a culture of (forced) tolerance, to a culture of change, a discourse that is contained by ethical parameters and representation, and a provision to instil the values of inter-dependency and cross-fertilisation of culture.

The value base that will govern the educational terrain has to be respect, diversity, inclusion, tolerance, cooperation, forbearance, acquaintance, broad-mindedness, peace, uniqueness, complementarity and mutuality as a basis for co-operative endeavours (Reardon, 1997a). This calls for the creation of an educational environment that promotes progress in learning, effective teaching, opportunities for students to discuss and manage their own learning, support for learning, and procedures for assessing, recording and accrediting achievement (Buckingham, 1998). Schools should be havens of self-development whereby all members of the community are encouraged to have a voice. Our schools need to explore whether the central practices in communication, spoken, written, and nonverbal forms are taken on board. The centrality of language and linguistic expression remains crucial for bridging the gap between ethnic diverse students and the school community.

Looking Beyond

Inclusive learning entails that students actively engage in their own learning, rather than become passive recipients of information and knowledge. This places a new responsibility on the teaching community for closer observation, skills assessment, and active intervention resulting in a fundamental analysis of how individuals learn and how teachers should respond (Buckingham, 1998). We need to engage with some very important questions at this point: What are the policies and the strategies that go against the grain of including all students unconditionally? In what ways are we going to revamp the qualities that have characterised our society, that is, solidarity and cohesion?

Our role in education is to find ways for supporting diverse groups to share community within a pluralistic society. We need to engage in methods whereby citizens can become politicians and interact in organized campaigns that can empower them to take action to correct many of the injustices that cause violence in our community. The notion of 'conscietization' (Freire, 1970) – of creating the right environment for students to politicize their issues and to propose their agenda is a principle that stands tall.

I am proposing 'coexistence' as the most basic and fundamental of solutions. It offers the best long run protection from the hostility and struggle that threatens contemporary societies. Multiethnic schools ensure that all individuals can hang on to their identity (or identities), can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging (Bauman, 2001; Chetkow-Yanoov, 1999). Acceptance gives a feeling of security and self-confidence, making the students more open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. Multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding, and discourages ghettoization, hatred, discrimination and violence.

Valuing diversity is important, as it may engender an awareness of and a sensitivity to differences; but it does not necessarily translate into structural changes unless embedded in dialogue even within schools (Freire,1970). Multi-ethnic schools are made up of a commitment to policy development, setting up of programs, organising personnel and improving practices. At the heart of what makes a school multicultural lies in the managing of diversity which includes transforming mindsets, especially if this culture is impeding change. Unity in diversity needs to be the basic premise of all that happens in an education structured around dialogue.

Multicultural schools are distinguished by the following characteristics adapted from Banks (1999):

- The teachers and school administrators are to have high expectations for all students and positive attitudes toward them.
- The formalized curriculum reflects the experiences, cultures, and perspectives of a range of cultural and ethnic groups and needs to match it to the learning, cultural, and motivational styles of the students. The school community is to show respect for the students' languages and dialects.
- The instructional materials used in the school are to surface events, situations, and concepts from the perspectives of a range of cultural, ethnic, and racial groups. The assessment and testing procedures used in the school are to be culturally sensitive. All aspects of the curriculum are to reflect cultural and ethnic miscellany.
- The school guidance teachers, PSD and history teachers and counsellors should have high expectations for students from different ethnic groups and support these students in realizing positive career routes.

The teacher should be adept at implementing the multicultural curriculum with interactive and cooperative strategies (Banks, 1999). As part of the multicultural curriculum, students should be given many opportunities to express their feelings and emotions and to participate in dialogue and cooperative groups with their peers. Didactic, teacher-led instruction has serious weaknesses when teaching any content; however, it is notably unfitting when teaching multicultural content - an area in which diversity is valued and different perspectives are a vital part of the content.

Banks (1999) argues that a major goal of multicultural education is to create the appropriate educational opportunities for students from different racial, ethnic, and social-class groups. A multicultural education fosters inter-group knowledge and understanding and equips students to function effectively in a global society. Multicultural education values cultural pluralism and rejects the view that schools should seek to melt away cultural differences or merely tolerate cultural diversity (Reardon 1997a). More so, multicultural education accepts cultural diversity as a valuable resource that should be preserved and extended to promote and foster inter-group understanding, to help students develop more positive attitudes toward cultural diversity and to localise the impact of racism and other barriers to acceptance of differences (Neubeck & Glasberg, 2005).

But some are threatened by this inclusion (sometimes also referred to as integration) process (Grant, 1999). They see multiculturalism as having to give up power in order to make room on the stage of life for new characters in the play. Yes,

power will have to be shared (Bauman, 2001). But in sharing 'it' we can achieve higher levels of humane and flourishing communities. This is also the best way to manage the increasing reality of diverse communities.

The Teacher's Role

When teaching a culturally varied student population, educators need to determine the microcultures that exist in the community. The teacher's role in implementing a multicultural curriculum is of great importance (Banks, 1999). The teacher has influence over the curriculum with his/her values, perspectives, and teaching styles. This is why it is not feasible to produce a multicultural curriculum, give it to teachers, and state that a multicultural curriculum exists in the school. Valuable multicultural materials are made ineffective when used by a teacher who lacks a knowledge base in multicultural education or who does not have positive attitudes toward a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Schools should have a policy statement on multicultural education that conveys the school community's dedication to establishing and preserving schools in which students from all groups have an equal opportunity to learn (Banks, 1999). They need to ask (see Banks, 1994; Grant, 1999; Munns & Rajan, 1995; Neubeck & Glasberg, 2005):

- Do 'I' have the ability to hear the voice of the child?
- Are the structures within my school flexible enough to allow the child's wishes and views to be taken into account? If not, how might 'I' change or manage this?
- Do the students 'I' work with have the power to create opportunities to make their voices heard?
- Do 'I' appreciate the complexity of the learning context?
- What role does the construction of this social problem have upon the ability of adults to hear students?
- Do words truly reflect thoughts and feelings? How can 'I' be sure that what the child is saying accurately reflects their views?
- Are there forms of education that are specifically or uniquely suited for the education of children of different cultures?
- Are there general or universal forms of schooling and teaching that will equally and adequately address students of diverse cultures?

Wrongful Perceptions (And Some Thoughtful Points)

Children from different cultures often have to make major adjustments to meet the expectations of the school. Teachers should take whatever measures are necessary to see that the other students do not interpret these adjustments as evidence of cultural stereotypes. Teachers can help eliminate stereotypes by presenting material and activities that enable students to engage with the similarities of all individuals. A multicultural program should not focus on other cultures to the exclusion of the cultures represented in the class (Buckingham, 1998). In order to change people's oppressive ways, we must learn about oppression. We must examine our responses to diversity, devoting as much effort to changing them as we devote to learning about culture. Nurturing diversity means making multicultural education a politicised process.

We need to despell the myths: that 'other' cultures should be projected as having dissimilar life styles that reflect the dichotomy from the prevailing culture; that multicultural education should only happen when and where there are students in classrooms who are members of minorities; that bilingualism is a liability rather than a quality, and that multicultural education needs to be perceived within a separate set of goals.

On the other hand we need to promote intercultural dialogue. We need to augment courses in social studies, history, citizenship education and PSD by including multiple perspectives on culture, history, language and traditions of different minority groups. Empathic assessment of alternative interpretations of events in history can help students break away from ethnic encapsulation. It is important that we analyze traditions and events through history lessons to encourage the students to become knowledgeable and appreciate similarities and differences among various ethnic groups. The adequate appraisal of the characteristics and needs that all human beings share can foster a sense of community and social inclusion among individuals of diverse ethnic identities (Bauman, 2001).

Dialogue is essential to explain to students of various ethnic identities that they are valued members of the school community – they are more likely to learn when they feel esteemed members of the community. We also need to highlight learning through group activities in the classroom and apply opportunities for students to have positive interpersonal relations with individuals of various ethnic groups (Buckingham, 1998).

We also need to contextualise beyond the textbook and use community resources on ethnic diversity. As long as there are members of the community who feel unwelcome in the school, it is very difficult for ethnically diverse students to initiate involvement. The first step in multiculturalizing the school is the development of positive and supportive relations between the school and the community. Multicultural education is about people learning to live together, it's the commitment and love of learning of teachers and students, it is about the support of parents too (Truman et. al., 2000). By asking for cooperation from students, parents, and the local community, teachers can develop educational resources. Students of various backgrounds need to know and appreciate attitudes, institutions, and traditions they share. Other social identities, related to common prospects rather than common inheritances must be negotiated. These new images and assumptions will not deny differences (e.g., language, colour, sexuality, class or capital). Through study, students will adopt transformative, new identities. Curricula, therefore, will be designed not as the guardians of national or ethnic identities but, rather as the sponsors of new identities (Jones, 1998; Mahilngham & McCarthy, 2000; Taylor et. al, 1994).

Conclusion

We need to celebrate the value added that society will gain if we capitalise on the value of diversity (Ulin, 2001). Education is not about trying to fit everyone into the same mould, or creating the 'model', exemplary or 'good' citizen. It is about enabling citizens to make their own decisions and to take responsibility for their own lives and their communities (Freire, 1970; Bauman 2001).

The value of schooling is in the capacity to prepare students for a life that is engrossed in continuous decision making situations (Ministry of Education, 1999). School in principle is also there to help students fabricate strategic models and to cultivate a social commitment towards inclusion (Ministry of Education, 1999):

> To start with, community is a 'warm' place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frosty day. (Bauman, 2001, p.1)

References

Banks, J., A. (1994). *An introduction to multicultural education.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Banks, J.A. (1999). *An Introduction to Multicultural Education (2nd ed.).* Boston: Allyn and Bacon

Banks, J.A., & Banks, C.A.M. (Eds) (1995). *Handbook of research on multicultural education*. New York: Macmillan.

Barker, C. (2003). *Cultural studies - Theory and practice (2nd ed.).* London: Sage.

Bauman, Z. (2001). *Seeking safety in an insecure world.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Buckingham, D. (Ed.) (1998). *Teaching popular culture – Beyond radical pedagogy.* London: UCL Press Limited.

Chetkow-Yanoov, B. (1999). *Celebrating diversity – Coexisting in a multicultural society.* New York: The Hayworth Press.

Freire, P. (1972). *The pedagogy of the oppressed.* London: Penguin.

Giordmaina J. (Ed.) (2000). *Proceedings – National curriculum on its way.* A conference held on the 9-11th June 2000.   Malta: MOED.

Grant, C.A. (Ed.) (1999). *Multicultural research - A reflective engagement with race, class, gender and sexual orientation.* London: Falmer Press.

Jones, R. (1998)*.* Multicultural education is dead. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, The Queen's University of Belfast, August 27th - 30th 1998.

Maccarthy, C., & Dimitriadis, G. (2000). *Globalising pedagogies – Power, resentment and the renarration of difference* in Mahalingham, R. & McCarthy, C. Multicultural curriculum – new directions for social theory, practice, and policy. Routledge, New York

Mahalingham, R., & McCarthy, C. (Eds.) (2000). *Multicultural curriculum – New directions for social theory, practice and policy*. New York: Routledge.

Mayo, P. (2007). Critical approaches to education in the work of Lorenzo Milani and Paolo Freire. *Journal Studies in Philosophy and Education, 26(6),* 525-544.

Morris, D. (1969). *The human zoo.* Berkshire: Vintage.

Munns, J., & Rajan, G. (1995). *A cultural studies reader - History, theory, practice.* Longman, London.

Neubeck, K. J. & Glasberg, D. S. (2005). *Sociology- Diversity, conflict and change.* Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Popkewitz, T. (1999). Reconstituting an ethnography: Social exclusion, post-modern social theory, and the study of teacher education*.* In C.A. Grant (Ed.), *Multicultural research - A reflective engagement with race, class, gender and sexual orientation*. London: Falmer Press.

Reardon, B. A.(1997a). *Tolerance – The threshold of peace – Primary school resource unit*. Vendome: Imprimerie des Presses Universitaires de France.

Reardon, B. A. (1997b). *Tolerance – The threshold of peace – Secondary school resource unit*. Vendome: Imprimerie des Presses Universitaires de France.

Reardon, B. A. (1997c). *Tolerance – The threshold of peace – Teacher training resource unit*. Vendome: Imprimerie des Presses Universitaires de France.

Salend, S. J.   (2001). *Creating inclusive classrooms – Effective and reflective practices (4th ed)*. New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Sheets, R. H. (2005). *Diversity pedagogy – Examining the role of culture in the teaching-learning process*. Boston: Pearson.

Taylor, C., Apiah, K.A., Habermas, J., Rockefeller, S.C., & Wolf, S. (1994). *Multiculturalism – Examining the politics of recognition*.   New Jersey: Princeton University Press – Princeton.

Truman, C., Mertens, D.M. & Humphries, B. (2000) *Research and inequality*. London: UCL Press.

Ulin, R. C. (2001). *Understanding cultures – Perspectives in anthropology and social theory* (2nd ed.). USA: Blackwell publishers Inc.

United Nations (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Retrieved May 31, 2008, from http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html.