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How Comprehensive Is Multicultural Education?:

A Case for LGBT Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Within the discipline of Multicultural Education, discussions, often heated, are currently underway regarding the place (or non-place) of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and heterosexism/homophobia/biphobia/transphobia issues. While some organizations and textbook writers and editors expand the concept of multiculturalism to encompass LGBT issues under their mantle, others view multiculturalism as founded primarily around concerns of race, ethnicity, and racism to the exclusion of other social identities and forms of oppression. The author enumerates and refutes the major arguments often used to restrict inclusion of LGBT issues within the rubric of multiculturalism.

INTRODUCTION

Multicultural education is a philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity as acknowledged in various documents, such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence, constitutions of South Africa and the United States, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations. It affirms our need to prepare students for their responsibilities in an interdependent world. It recognizes the role schools can play in developing the attitudes and values necessary for a democratic society. It values cultural differences and affirms the pluralism that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. *It challenges all forms of discrimination in schools and society through the promotion of democratic principles of social justice....* (National Association for Multicultural Education, emphasis added).

Within the discipline of Multicultural Education, discussions, often heated, are currently underway regarding the place (or non-place) of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and heterosexism/homophobia/biphobia/transphobia issues bringing to the surface what some express as “the growing pains” evident within the movement. While some organizations and textbook writers and editors expand the concept of multiculturalism to encompass LGBT issues under their mantle, others view multiculturalism as founded primarily around concerns of race, ethnicity, and racism to the exclusion of other social identities and forms of oppression.

In their extensive textual analysis of popular multicultural education textbooks designed for pre-service teachers within university schools of education, Blumenfeld, Jaekel, and Castañeda (forthcoming) found that while some multicultural education books are either somewhat or fully inclusive of LGBT issues (e.g. Koppleman & Goodhart, 2008; Nieto & Bode,

2008; Sleeter & Grant, 2007; Spradlin & Parsons, 2008), others showed blatantly scant or only partial inclusion (Banks & Banks, 2007; Bennett, 2007; Pang, 2005; Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2006).

Many rationalizations have been put forward for not including these issues (as well as issues around people with disabilities/Ableism) within multicultural circles. In this essay, I enumerate and refute the major arguments often used to restrict inclusion of LGBT issues within the rubric of Multicultural Education.

The themes around which some individuals and organizations rationalize their exclusion of LGBT issues within the context of multiculturalism center around the following:

1. LGBT People Do Not Have a Culture

Some assert that sexual and gender identities do not comprise “cultures,” and, therefore, do not fall under the category of Multicultural Education. “Those who hold this view,” according to Sleeter & Grant, (2007), “[Begin] with the premise of diversity rather than justice [, which] can lead to addressing only diversity, and ignoring justice issues” (p. 184).

Koppelman (2008) adds that “[some] say multicultural education includes recognition of women, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and other minority groups; opponents to this idea argue that such groups do not constitute distinct cultures and therefore should not be included” (p. 311).

A form of cultural imperialism for LGBT people (as is true for many ethnic and racial groups) is that they often grow up within a society depriving them of an historical context for their lives. The larger society perpetuates the myth that they have no culture and no history, and that they do not constitute a bona fide community or *culture*. From Europe in the Middle Ages to the United States and many other countries today, there has been an active attempt to falsify

historical accounts of same-sex relationships and transgressive gender expression, thereby making accurate reconstruction extremely difficult.

Fiedler (1967) defines the term “group,” as “a set of individuals who share of common fate.” For Gordon (1964), it is a “shared feeling of peoplehood”; and for Worchel & Austin (1979):

a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social categories, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it (p. 19).

Similarly, the term “culture” has been defined in a number of ways. For example, according to Nieto (1996):

Culture can be understood as the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and world view created and shared by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and/or religion, and how these are transformed by those who share them (p. 138).

Among the above definitions of “group” and “culture,” a strong case certainly can be made that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have and constitute “culture(s),” and bona fide communities (e.g., a sense of “peoplehood,” cultural expressions such as music, art, film, literature, and symbols, linguistic terminologies, cultural artifacts, local and national leaders, a shared sense of history, local and national institutions—legal, professional, political, media, business, literary, recreational, social, and others—and national holidays, for example,

October as “National LGBT History Month,” June as “National LGBT Pride Month,” April 1 as “National Day of Silence,” and October 11 as “National Coming Out Day,” etc.)

A stronger case, however, can be made that “culture” is and should not be *the* primary criterion for inclusion under the rubric of multiculturalism as evidenced by the many definitions of the term “multicultural education,” including the one quoted at the beginning of this essay. A “Social Justice” model (e.g., Adams, Bell, and Griffin, 1997; Miller, 1976; Young, 1990), is and needs to be infused into and to inform multiculturalism. This model investigates the ways in which social structures promote and maintain issues of domination and subordination because true “multiculturalism” cannot be achieved without examining and addressing larger contextual societal (or systemic) structures related to relative power differentials and inequities. These systemic inequities are pervasive throughout the society. They are encoded into the individual’s consciousness and woven into the very fabric of our social institutions, resulting in a stratified social order privileging dominant (agent) groups while restricting and disempowering subordinate (target) groups based on ascribed social identities. And this is not merely the case in societies ruled by coercive or tyrannical leaders, but also, according to Iris Marion Young (1990), occurs even within the day-to-day practices of contemporary democratic societies like the United States.

Though the concept of “social justice” has been defined a number of ways, I have synthesized my definition: “The concept that local, national, and global communities function where everyone has equal access to and equitable distribution of the rights, benefits, privileges, and resources, and where everyone can live freely unencumbered by social constructions of hierarchical positions of domination and subordination based on social identities.”

2. Homosexuality and Race Are Very Different Because

Homosexuality Is a Choice, While Race is Immutable

Proponents of this argument assert that since “race” is an immutable biological trait that people are born with, therefore, certain protections must be provided to prevent the dominant group from persecuting minority “races.” They also assert that since homosexuality is not something that people are born with but rather “choose” later in life, homosexuals—and by extension bisexuals and possibly transgender people—neither deserve nor require “special rights” for their chosen so-called “life style.”

I see an underlying assumption to this argument: there are only limited rights to go around, and since there is such a scarcity of rights available, we must divide them among people on the basis of biology. This “scarcity” theory results in marginalized groups competing for what they see as the crumbs of a small and limited pie, rather than joining together to work for a larger and more equitable pie.

In truth, all social identities are socially constructed. For example, looking over the historical emergence of the *concept* of “race,” critical race theorists remind us that this notion arose concurrently with the advent of European exploration as a justification and rationale for conquest and domination of the globe beginning in the 15th century of the Common Era (CE) and reaching its apex in the early 20th century CE (see, e.g., Zuckerman, 1990). Geneticists tell us that there is often more variability *within* a given so-called “race” than between “races,” and that there are no essential *genetic* markers linked specifically to “race.” They assert, therefore, that “race” is discursively or socially constructed. “Race” is, furthermore, an historical, “scientific,” cultural, and biological myth, an idea, and that any *socially-conceived* physical “racial” markers

are fictive and are not concordant with what is beyond or below the surface of the body (see e.g., Cameron & Wycoff, 1998).

Researchers have conducted numerous scientific studies, some still currently underway, to “discover” the true genesis of same-sex attractions as well as transgressive gender expressions. Researchers have spent literally millions of dollars in their attempts to unlock the answer to the perennial question: “What *causes* homosexuality?” though we virtually never ask the question: “What causes heterosexuality?” (I actually would rather researchers investigate the question: “What causes homophobia?,” for then we might discover a cure for this form of oppression.)

Without getting caught in the “nature v. nurture” debate, for the jury is still out (no pun intended) on this question, let us presume for the sake of argument that sexuality and gender identity and expression are choices. If this is the case, LGBT people should be accorded their rights and protections from discrimination as are those who *choose* their religious (or non-religious) affiliation and expression. Religion is, in fact, a choice as emphasized in a Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life (2009) study, which found that 44% of U.S.-Americans change religious affiliation at least once during their lives. The First Amendment guarantees constitutional protections on the basis of religious affiliation and expression.

On the other side of the coin, if sexuality and gender identity and expression are genetically predetermined, LGBT people should be accorded rights and protections from discrimination as are racial minorities legally protected.

In the final analysis, however, these are issues of human rights and human dignity, not questions of science. Coretta Scott King (2000) emphasizes this point:

...I believe very strongly that all forms of bigotry and discrimination are equally wrong and should be opposed by right-thinking Americans everywhere. Freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation is surely a fundamental human right in any great democracy, as much as freedom from racial, religious, gender, or ethnic discrimination.

3. Multicultural Education Is and Must Be Based on a Primarily Singular Focus

While the multicultural education movement, in its formative years, focused primarily on issues of racial and ethnic exclusion in the school curriculum, over the years, the field has expanded to encompass other identity categories and forms of oppression in addition to racial and ethnic identities and racism. Though many theorists and practitioners (critical multiculturalists) are making the connections, some theorists and practitioners, however, continue to assert that a hierarchy of oppression is in operation, and that, for example, race and racism trump all other identities and forms of oppression. Others see gender or socioeconomic class as the primary lens of analysis.

According to Sleeter & Grant (2007), “Many ethnic studies educators view race as the basic form of oppression [w]hile radical feminists insist it is gender and class analysts argue that it is the economic structure.” (p. 177). They continue:

Studying multiple forms of diversity is seen as superfluous, a waste of time, and is said to weaken the study of the form of diversity that is of greatest concern.

Moreover, many educators tend to view race, gender, and other social markers of difference as unitary, often failing to address the nonsynchronous or complex and contradictory nature of experience within groups as well as the way in which

multiple characteristics intersect in shaping social life (reference to McCarthy, 1990 in Sleeter & Grant, 2007, p. 177).

Kincheloe & Steinberg (1997) critique what they see as this “left-essentialist” multicultural position, which they view as focusing primarily upon a set of fixed properties that defines a category of people:

The narrowness of essentialist multiculturalism is further exemplified by the tendency of its proponents to focus their attention on one form of oppression as elemental, as taking precedence over all other modes of subjugation. Instead of struggling to articulate and act on the basis of a democratic politics, the various identity groups that constitute the ranks of essentialist multiculturalism have confronted one another over who can claim greater victimization and oppression privilege. Thus, essentialist multiculturalism has concerned itself more with self-assertion than with the effort to build strategic democratic alliances for social justice (p. 22.).

When this occurs, the field of multicultural is weakened as various social groups vie for dominance.

4. LGBT People Are Jumping on the Backs of the Civil Rights Movement, and They Need to Form Their Own Movement Instead

Yes, it is indeed unfortunate that some members of the LGBT community have positioned the issues of LGBT rights and liberation in identical terms as past movement struggles, specifically the Civil Rights struggles of People of Color in the United States. While only concentrating on the similarities of the various forms of oppression, they have neglected to understand and acknowledge the very real differences, especially the ways in which specifically

White LGBT people maintain benefits and privileges based on their Whiteness. White lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people do not experience individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal forms of heterosexism in the same manner as People of Color experience the numerous forms of racism. In fact, the oppression of a White lesbian from that of a White gay man can and often is very different as well, and the oppression of transgender people varies in form from that of a bisexual, gay, or lesbian person.

With the very real differences acknowledged, I also believe that the various forms of oppression (e.g., racism, ethnocentrism, religious oppression, sexism, heterosexism, ageism and adultism, classism, ableism, and others) run parallel and at various points intersect. It is at those points of intersection where alliances and coalitions may form to combat the many spokes on the wheel of oppression; for if we somehow are able to dismantle one of the spokes while neglecting to concentrate on those remaining, the wheel of oppression will continue to trample over the lives of many.

The concept of oppression in its many forms involves an overarching system of differentials of social power and privilege by dominant groups over subordinated groups based on ascribed social identities or social group status. And this is not merely the case in societies ruled by coercive or tyrannical leaders, but also occurs even within the day-to-day practices of contemporary democratic societies like the United States (Young, 1990). Young places these forms of oppression and privilege under five overarching points of intersection, which she categorizes as “faces” of oppression: cultural imperialism, powerlessness, marginalization, exploitation, and violence.

In addition, all the major movements for progressive social change have gained from the theorists, activists, and movement leaders that have preceded them. The first wave of the

Feminist movement in the 19th century of the Common Era gained its inspiration from the leadership and strategies of the Abolitionist movement. The workers and union movements built on the strengths of the Abolitionist and Feminist movements. The Civil Rights movements continued to build on those who went before. In fact, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gained inspiration for his philosophy of non-violent resistance not only from his religious faith, but also from Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa and India, and Leo Tolstoy in Russia. The second wave of the Feminist movement recharged from previous movements reflecting back to the first wave and also to the movements during the intervening years. The counter cultural youth movements, the environmental movements, movements for peace, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movements, the movement for intersex equality and rights, the disability rights movement, the movement for patients rights, the movement for youth liberation, indeed, the movements for all oppressed people somehow connect and draw from one another.

Speaking to a packed audience at the Creating Change Conference, sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Atlanta, Georgia, November 2000, Coretta Scott King talked of these connections:

My husband, Martin Luther King Jr., once said, “We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny...an inescapable network of mutuality,...I can never be what I ought to be until you are allowed to be what you ought to be.” Therefore, I appeal to everyone who believes in Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream to make room at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people.

In addition to political movements, academic discourses also align. Critical multiculturalism, critical race theory, critical feminist theory, post-colonialism, queer theory, and others synergize, reflect upon, and enhance one another.

5. My Religious Leaders Preach That Homosexuality, Bisexuality, and Transgenderism Are Sins

Everyone has the right to hold any, or no, religious beliefs as they consider appropriate to suit their lives. This is a basic constitutional privilege, and more importantly, a basic human right to which all are entitled. Accordingly, one is not compelled psychologically to embrace a people in order to work for their rights and to dismantle the oppression that surrounds them.

Today, many progressive people continue to cite religious texts that may call into question their support for LGBT people. It must be acknowledged, however, that various faiths, with their many denominations, interpret same-sex sexuality, same-sex relationships, and transgressive expressions of gender very differently, for there is no monolithic religious view on these topics.

History records a number of religious texts that individuals and organizations have referenced throughout the ages to justify and rationalize the marginalization, harassment, denial of rights, persecution, and oppression of entire groups of people based on their social identities. At various historical periods, people have applied these texts, sometimes taken in tandem, and at other times used selectively, to establish and maintain hierarchical positions of power, domination, and privilege over individuals and groups targeted by these texts. For example, individuals, organizations, and entire nations have quoted specific texts to justify the construction and maintenance of the institution of slavery, the persecution and murder of Jews, male domination and denial of rights of women, adult domination and persecution of young people, and marginalization and denial of rights of LGBT people.

So a number of questions remain: 1. How can one include LGBT/Heterosexism issues as an integral thread in the tapestry of multiculturalism, even when one struggles with some

religious interpretations of same-sex sexuality, same-sex relationships, and transgressive expressions of gender?, and 2. Is it possible for one to separate one's specific religious interpretations from overriding religious mandates to treat others with respect, and to work to end oppression toward everyone?

6. Inclusion of LGBT Issues Would Jeopardize

Incorporation of Multiculturalism in the Schools

Some maintain that since heterosexism is so widespread and visible throughout U.S. society, possible inclusion of LGBT issues and discussions around heterosexism within an overall context of multiculturalism could potentially jeopardize incorporation of multicultural education issues in educational institutions. Grant and Sleeter (2007) acknowledge that "Although a growing number of books for children and adolescents address sexual orientation, textbook publishers have avoided referring to people who are not heterosexual because of backlash when schools have attempted to do so" (pp. 60-61).

Failing to incorporate LGBT issues in multicultural education in this context is based on a paradoxical foundation and upon circular reasoning: We cannot discuss LGBT and heterosexism issues within overall topics of multiculturalism and social justice prejudice reduction because there is too much prejudice against LGBT people. What is wrong with this logic?

7. Discussion of LGBT Issues Are Inappropriate for Young People

Discussions of LGBT/heterosexism topics have not been included in discussions of overall multicultural topics by some under the assertion that these issues are unsuitable for young children, and should be left to parents to discuss with their children. This reasoning is grounded on the assumption that LGBT concerns are based primarily around topics of sexuality and sex

acts, rather than on broader issues of relationships, culture, history, identity, and social oppression.

In addition, Sleeter and Grant (2007) point out that a major problem in the area of multicultural education remains a bias against lesbian and gay parents. “Ryan and Martin (2000) point out that many educators are ignorant of and prejudiced against gay and lesbian parents. They argue that schools need to implement anti-bias training for teachers and policies that specifically invite both partners in sexual minority families into the school” (p. 170).

These issues can and need to be integrated age-appropriately into discussions across the grade levels and across academic disciplines for a number of reasons, the primary ones being that the earlier we introduce these topics in our schools and within the larger social discourse, the more effective will be our efforts at prejudice reduction and the more equipped will young people be to function and thrive in an ever-changing global community.

8. Heterosexual Privilege and/or Bias Clouds the Issues

Some theorists and practitioners involved in multicultural education and social justice refuse to engage with queer theory (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 57, in Sleeter & Grant, 2007, p. 193) because it may expose the ways in which heterosexuals perpetuate oppression of sexual minorities, resulting in a narcissistic injury to heterosexual multicultural theorists and practitioners and to the larger field of multicultural education. Heterosexism runs deep within our society, and no one, even progressive peoples concerned with issues of multiculturalism and social justice are immune.

In truth, heterosexism/homophobia/biphobia/transphobia (prejudice and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT] people) is pervasive throughout the society and each of us, irrespective of sexual or gender identity and expression, is at risk of its

harmful effects.

First, heterosexist conditioning compromises the integrity of people by pressuring them to treat others badly, which are actions contrary to their basic humanity. It inhibits one's ability to form close, intimate relationships with members of one's own sex, generally restricts communication with a significant portion of the population and, more specifically, limits family relationships.

Heterosexism locks all people into rigid gender-based roles, which inhibits creativity and self-expression. It often is used to stigmatize, silence, and, on occasion, target people who are perceived or defined by others as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, but who are, in actuality, heterosexual.

In addition, heterosexism is one cause of premature sexual involvement, which increases the chances of teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Young people, of all sexual identities, are often pressured to become heterosexually active to prove to themselves and others that they are normal.

Societal heterosexism prevents some LGBT people from developing an authentic self-identity, and adds to the pressure to marry someone of the other sex, which in turn places undue stress and oftentimes trauma on themselves as well as their heterosexual spouses and their children.

Heterosexism combined with sexphobia (fear and revulsion of sex) results in the elimination of discussion of the lives and sexuality of LGBT people as part of school-based sex education, keeping vital information from all students. Such a lack of information can kill people in the age of AIDS. And homophobia (along with racism, sexism, classism, sexphobia) inhibits a unified and effective governmental and societal response to the AIDS pandemic.

With all of the truly important issues facing the world, heterosexism diverts energy and attention from more constructive endeavors. It also prevents heterosexuals from accepting the benefits and gifts offered by LGBT people, including theoretical insights, social and spiritual visions and options, contributions in the arts and culture, to religion, to education, to family life, indeed, to all facets of society. Ultimately, it inhibits appreciation of other types of diversity, making it unsafe for everyone because each person has unique traits not considered mainstream or dominant. Therefore, we are all diminished when any one of us is demeaned (Blumenfeld, 1992).

The meaning is quite clear. When any group of people is scapegoated, it is ultimately everyone's concern. For today, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are targeted. Tomorrow, they may come for you. Everyone, therefore, has a self-interest in actively working to dismantle all the many forms of bigotry, including heterosexism/homophobia/biphobia/transphobia.

I believe that we are all born into an environment polluted by heterosexism (one among many forms of oppression), which falls upon us like acid rain. For some people, spirits are tarnished to the core, other are marred on the surface, and no one is completely protected. Therefore, we all have a responsibility, indeed an opportunity, to join together as allies to construct protective shelters from the corrosive effects of bigotry while working to clean up the homophobic environment in which we live. Once sufficient steps are taken to reduce this pollution, we will all breathe a lot easier.

One way we can do this is to work for the full inclusion of LGBT issues under the umbrella of Multiculturalism.

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