

Critical Multiculturalism: Theory and Praxis

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Abstract

Critical multiculturalism emerged in the 1990s as a considered critical theoretical response to the limitations of previous forms of multicultural education. However, as with critical theory more generally, it has since often been criticised for an inability to translate its theoretical concerns into actual pedagogy and practice. In response, an international project was established to address this lacuna directly - exploring the specific pedagogical implications of critical multiculturalism in schools and teacher education in various national contexts, including Aotearoa/New Zealand (May & Sleeter, 2010). This symposium includes the New Zealand contributors to that project. The papers explore the theory and praxis implications involved in developing a critical multicultural approach to education, along with specific examples of practice. In the process, the contributors also explore explicit connections with other critical approaches, most notably, critical race theory, antiracist education, and critical pedagogy.

Key Words: critical multiculturalism; multicultural education, antiracist education, critical race theory; critical pedagogy

Rationale

Critical multiculturalism emerged in the 1990s as a considered critical theoretical response to the limitations of previous forms of liberal or benevolent multicultural education (see, for example, Kanpol & McLaren, 1995; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; McLaren, 1997; May, 1999; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004). Critical multiculturalism's principal concern was to redress the over-emphasis on the impact of curricular change, and the under-emphasis on the impact of structural racism on students' lives, in liberal multicultural education theory, policy and practice. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) comment, a key problem in these liberal multicultural approaches is their failure "to see the power-grounded relationships among identity construction, cultural representations and struggles over resources." Rather, such approaches engage "in [a] celebration of difference when the most important issues to those who fall outside the white, male and middle class norm often involve powerlessness, violence and poverty" (p. 17).

It is this key issue that critical multiculturalism has tried to address in its own extensive critiques of liberal multiculturalism, in conjunction with related critiques in critical race theory and antiracist education. As Berlak and Moyenda (2001) argue: "central to critical multiculturalism is naming and actively challenging racism and other forms of injustice, not simply recognizing and celebrating differences and reducing prejudice" (p. 92). From this, critical multiculturalism has adopted a specifically critical conception of social and cultural power relations – drawing on the work of Gramsci and Freire, among others – and an avowed and overt antiracist stance.

Critical multiculturalism has also engaged actively with postmodernist conceptions and analyses of culture and identity. This has allowed critical multiculturalism to avoid another key weakness of liberal multiculturalism – its tendency to essentialise (and museum-ise) culture. On this view, culture, often equated or elided with ethnicity, is seen as a characteristic of individuals, and as a set of stable practices that can be described and taught. As the antiracist educator, Richard Hatcher, observes of this, while “culture is the central concept around which [this] multiculturalism is constructed, the concept is given only a taken-for-granted common sense meaning, impoverished both theoretically and in terms of concrete lived experience” (1987: p. 188).

In contrast, critical multiculturalism has adopted an overtly positive, dynamic conception of culture, consonant with more contingent understandings of identity. In so doing, it recognises ethnicity as an important source of identity, but one that invariably articulates, in often complex, and sometimes contradictory, ways with other forms of identity, such as class, gender and sexuality. As Stuart Hall observes, this allows for a view of culture that continues to recognize “that all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position” (1992; p. 258).

And critical multiculturalism has been – at least in its stated aims – also centrally concerned with making links between educational theory, policy and practice, thus potentially providing both a critical and practical account of culturally pluralist forms of teacher education and schooling. This aligns with the related intentions of critical pedagogy, and its emphases on voice, dialogue, power, and social class, particularly as these are taken up in schools.

However, a key criticism that has been levelled at critical multiculturalism in subsequent years has been the apparent inability of its exponents to translate the theoretical concerns of critical multiculturalism into actual pedagogy and practice – a criticism of critical theory more generally (although see Mahalingham and McCarthy, 2000). Liberal multicultural education might have many weaknesses, but at least it could be readily applied in schools and teacher education programs. Examples of critical multicultural practice are far less common.

This symposium addresses this latter lacuna directly. As part of a wider international project exploring directly the pedagogical implications of critical multiculturalism (May and Sleeter, 2010), it brings together the New Zealand contributors to that project. The symposium papers explore the theory and praxis implications involved in developing a critical multicultural approach to education, along with specific examples of practice. In the process, the contributors also explore explicit connections and disjunctures with other critical approaches, most notably, critical race theory, antiracist education, and critical pedagogy.

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Chair: Stephen May, University of Waikato

Paper Contributions

Introduction and Overview: Critical multiculturalism: from principles to practice

Stephen May, University of Waikato

This introduction and overview briefly outlines the key theoretical principles of critical multiculturalism, and their implications, in general terms, for pedagogy and practice, before introducing the individual paper contributions.

Paper 1: Critical multiculturalism and subject English

Terry Locke, University of Waikato

Critical multiculturalism has been challenged on a number of fronts in recent years. Both proponents and detractors have focused on an apparent inability of critical multiculturalism as discourse or ideology to transform itself into something of use to classroom teachers, that is, to declare itself in terms of a range of practices deemed to be consistent with its ideals. The second challenge comes from the widespread uptake at policy level of outcomes- or standards-based testing and qualifications regimes, which have narrowed the multicultural debate to a concern with achievement gaps and ways of closing them.

This paper begins with a brief description of critical multiculturalism as a basis for developing such an approach for subject English. To this end, the paper first identifies issues and potentials viz-à-viz four paradigms of subject English/English Language Arts: cultural heritage, personal growth, textual and sub-textual skills and critical practice. While acknowledging that subject English is not the same thing across different Anglophonic settings, I will use this map of its different tendencies or paradigms as an heuristic to explore how each of these might help or hinder the instantiation of a

critical multicultural discourse in classroom programmes. With reference to recent New Zealand and international research, I will suggest some actual classroom strategies that, in my view, are consistent with a critical multicultural approach. In doing so, I will be addressing the first of the challenges alluded to above and acknowledging the constraints of the second.

Paper 2: Knowing Our Place: Critical Multicultural Science Education

Georgina Stewart, NZCER

Multiculturalism has proved more complex and difficult in science education than in other curriculum areas, due to the abyss separating science and culture, and adherence of school science to a disciplinary view of the curriculum and science knowledge, with purposeful exclusion of human dimensions. These issues have contributed to the development of apparently incompatible perspectives on multicultural science education, resulting in disconnection between theory and practice, and hiding equity for non-Western students behind a trenchant debate about indigenous knowledge. The differences between the positions in the research are essentially political, related to understandings of the links between science, science education, and power relations between various groups in society.

Different cultures give rise to different world-views, but this does not in itself explain the longstanding inequity in science education for non-Western students around the world. More emphasis in science teacher education is needed on the history and philosophy of science, science's role in the colonisation and oppression of indigenous people and non-Western cultures, and the influence of social ideologies on science concepts. Multicultural science education could also become more united with other major traditions of science curriculum reform to support changes for greater equity. In light of these issues, this paper explores what a reconstituted critical multicultural science education might comprise.

Paper 3: A critical multicultural approach to physical education: Challenging discourses of physicality and building resistant practices in school

Katie Fitzpatrick, University of Waikato

Discussions of physical education as a specific site for the articulation of a critical multicultural practice are rare. While physical education has strong traditions of critical theory and pedagogy, the majority of this work focuses on bodies, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, class and inclusion. With a few notable exceptions, scholars in the field largely ignore 'race', racism, ethnicity and racialization, despite these having a significant place in sport sociology.

In this paper, I first explore the tensions in advancing a critical multicultural pedagogy of physical education. Such tensions include the alignment between physical education and narrow discourses of the body and health, which simultaneously value slimness and whiteness and devalue the physical. In the second part of this paper, I draw on a critical ethnographic study of diverse youth undertaking physical education in a South Auckland high school. One teacher in this study employs a critical multicultural pedagogy of physical education through playfulness, building relationships and challenging racialised and gendered norms. How his approach is both informed by broader policy contexts and is received by students is also discussed in light of the wider aims of critical multiculturalism.

Paper 4: Discursive positioning and educational reform

Russell Bishop, University of Waikato

Addressing the persistent and disproportionate high under-achievement experienced by indigenous students in schools has long been of wide international interest because the low level engagement in education by these often marginalized and subordinated families and communities is a common problem experienced in many developed societies. Much of the ‘under-achievement’ research has focussed on improving schools, despite many of these initiatives being unsuccessful. Associated professional development initiatives often fail to take into account the role of deficit thinking and pathologising practices in maintaining educational disparities, and the importance of the culture of the student within the educational relationship for the promotion of learning, both key principles in critical multiculturalism.

Drawing on Te Kotahitanga, this paper explores how the deficit positioning of Māori students, as well as other indigenous and minoritised students, can be contested. The analysis draws on culturalist (the need for micro-level teaching reform), structuralist (the need to address macro-level power imbalances) and relational discourses to address micro-level power imbalances at all levels of education. It suggests that the key to educational reform for Māori and other minoritised students is the discursive (re)positioning of teachers within a relational discourse. In the paper, I argue that this multidimensional conceptual framework is consistent with the wider principles and practices of critical multiculturalism.

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