A Brief History of Multicultural Education

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As conceptualizations of multicultural education evolve and diversify, it is important to revisit its historical foundation -- the roots from which it sprang. What did the earliest forms of multicultural education look like and what social conditions gave rise to them? What educational traditions and philosophies provided the framework for the development of multicultural education? How has multicultural education changed since its earliest conceptualization? The answers to these questions provide an important contextual grounding for understanding the various models of multicultural education evolving today.

The historical roots of multicultural education lie in the civil rights movements of various historically oppressed groups. Many trace the history of multicultural education back to the social action of African Americans and other people of color who challenged discriminatory practices in public institutions during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s (Banks, 1989; Davidman & Davidman, 1997). Among those institutions specifically targeted were educational institutions, which were among the most oppressive and hostile to the ideals of racial equality. Activists, community leaders, and parents called for curricular reform and insisted on a reexamination of hiring practices. Both, they demanded, should be more consistent with the racial diversity in the country.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the women's rights movement joined this push for education reform. Women's rights groups challenged inequities in employment and educational opportunities as well as income, identifying education as a primary contributing factor in institutionalized and systemic sexism. Feminist scholars and other women activists, like groups of color before them, insisted on curricula more inclusive of their histories and experiences. They challenged the discrepancy low number of female administrators relative to the percentage of female teachers (Banks, 1989).

Sensing progress -- if only slight -- by groups of color and women in their struggles for human rights and social and educational change into the early 1970s, other traditionally oppressed groups found growing support and energy for their movements. Through the 1970s, gay and lesbian groups, the elderly, and people with disabilities organized visible and powerful pushes for sociopolitical and human rights.

As K-12 schools, universities, and other educational institutions and organizations scrambled to address the concerns of these and other historically marginalized groups, a host of programs, practices, and policies emerged, mostly focused on slight changes or additions to traditional curriculum. Together, the separate actions of these various groups who were dissatisfied with the

inequities of the education system, along with the resulting reaction of educational institutions during the late 1960s and 1970s, defined the earliest conceptualization of multicultural education.

The 1980s saw the emergence of a body of scholarship on multicultural education by progressive education activists and researchers who refused to allow schools to address their concerns by simply adding token programs and special units on famous women or famous people of color. James Banks, one of the pioneers of multicultural education, was among the first multicultural education scholars to examine schools as social systems from a multicultural context (1981). He grounded his conceptualization of multicultural education in the idea of "educational equality." According to Banks, in order to maintain a "multicultural school environment," all aspects of the school had to be examined and transformed, including policies, teachers' attitudes, instructional materials, assessment methods, counseling, and teaching styles (1981; 1989).

By the middle and late 1980s, other K-12 teachers-turned-scholars including Carl Grant, Christine Sleeter, Geneva Gay, and Sonia Nieto provided more scholarship in multicultural education, developing new, deeper frameworks that were grounded in the ideal of equal educational opportunity and a connection between school transformation and social change. In order to move beyond slight curricular changes, which many argued only further differentiated between the curricular "norm" and the marginalized "other," they built on Banks's work, examining other structural foundations of schools and how these contributed to educational inequities. Tracking, culturally oppressive teaching approaches, standardized tests, school funding discrepancies, classroom climate, discriminatory hiring practices, and other symptoms of an ailing and oppressive education system were exposed, discussed, and criticized.

Meanwhile, the cultural landscape of the United States continued to become less visibly white Christian and more visibly rich with cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, underscoring the necessity for everyone to develop a set of skills and knowledge that the present system was failing to provide all students. These included creative and critical thinking skills, intercultural competence, and social and global awareness. The education system was not only plagued by unequal treatment of traditionally oppressed groups, but was also ill-equipped to prepare even the most highly privileged students to competently participate in an increasingly diverse society.

So as the 1980s flowed into the final decade of the twentieth century, multicultural education scholars refocused the struggle on developing new approaches and models of education and learning built on a foundation of social justice, critical thinking, and equal opportunity. Educators, researchers, and cultural theorists began to further deconstruct traditional models in both the K-12 and higher education arenas from a multicultural framework. Joel Spring, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and others contributed to a new body of critical sociocultural criticism of educational institutions within the context of larger societal and global dimensions of power, privilege, and economics, and the intersections of these. What started as small curricular shifts and additions has become a framework for reexamining both schools and society from a progressive and transformative framework. For example, Ovando and McLaren (2000, p. xix) point out that

as long as we continue to operate within the existing capitalist social relations of the larger society, there is good reason to believe that racism and social injustice will continue to pose a serious threat to democracy and that the dream of social equality will remain largely unrealized.

So, while work continues toward school transformation, the emerging conceptualizations of multicultural education stress that this work must be understood relative to the social and political structures that currently control education in the United States, and that the two are intrinsically linked. Multicultural education, in its determination to address the ills and shortcomings of the current education system, can be a starting point to eliminating inequities in society.

Today, literally dozens of models and frameworks for multicultural education exist. While theory and scholarship has moved from small curricular revisions to approaches that call for full transformations of self, schools, and society, many implementations of multicultural education still begin with curricular additions of diverse sources. But with a fuller understanding of the roots of the movement, we are better equipped to follow the transformative path laid by many educators, activists, and scholars. And it is important to remember that multicultural education is a relatively new concept that will continue to change to meet the needs of a constantly changing society.

References

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Fuente: Critical Multicultural Pavilion

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