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Critical Multiculturalism for Immigrants of Color

Gilbert C. Park, Ball State University, IN

Gilbert C. Park, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Studies

Abstract

While public schools have been preparing immigrants and their children to become productive members of the society, the demographic shift from earlier European immigrants to today's immigrants of color demand a different way to address the goal of successful Americanization. Recognizing the impact of race in this process, this article argues for critical multicultural education that challenges the meaning of "American" to foster successful integration of today's immigrant students of color into the American mainstream.

Introduction

Traditionally, public schools have played an important role in assimilating young European immigrants into the American mainstream. With the shift in the demographics of immigrants towards persons of color since 1965, however, an increasing number of scholars (Olsen, 1997; Portes & Rubmbaut, 2001; Grant, 1994) argue that straight-line assimilation where immigrants become fully incorporated into American mainstream is only one of many options for today immigrants of color. Some of these critics (Park, 2011; Tuan, 1998) point to race as a factor in the Americanization process where schools actively construct white Americans to mean "real" Americans thereby leaving hyphenated American identities for many immigrants of color as less than authentic Americans. Seeking to add to this body of knowledge and to interrupt this process, this article argues for shift in schools' approach regarding today's immigrants of color towards critical multiculturalism through review of relevant findings. Specifically, it starts with an argument that race plays a role in guiding the immigrants of color towards dissonant acculturation away from mainstream America. Secondly, it criticizes widely used cultural celebrations to promote ethnic pride as a way to foster selective acculturation. Lastly, the author suggests critical multiculturalism that politicalizes teaching and learning to foster selective acculturation into the American mainstream by challenging the meaning of "real" Americans.

Segmented Assimilation & Race

Today's demographic shift adds a racial dimension to the Americanization process unlike the one experienced by the earlier European immigrants. According to Census 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) as an example, only 14% of foreign-born residents living in the United States were of European or Canadian origins while Asian and Latin American immigrants alone constituted 81.3% (p. 2). This demographic shift challenges the traditional understanding that Americanization is a straightforward process where immigrants become fully incorporated into American mainstream over time (Park, 2011; Lee 2005, Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). For instance, Portes & Rumbaut (2001) explain that today's immigrants are "undergoing a process of segmented assimilation where outcomes vary across immigrant minorities and where rapid integration and acceptance into the American mainstream represent just one possible alternative" (p. 45). Other alternatives include rapid assimilation into non-mainstream and oppositional cultures of inner cities and slow assimilation on the terms of the immigrants. Considering the impact of race, they (2001) argue that "race is a paramount criterion of social acceptance that can overwhelm the influences of class background, religion, or language" in leading to either smooth or difficult incorporation into American mainstream (p. 47).

The first possibility is the successful incorporation into American mainstream that Portes & Rumbaut (2001) call "consonant acculturation" where immigrant children acquire the ways of life in the U.S. while gradually abandoning that of the parents. The Americanization of earlier European immigrants whose full integration into American mainstream required complex maneuvers in a changing racial politics over time serves as an example. For instance, Roediger (2005) posits that the status of the European immigrants were "ethnic" whites who weren't authentic white Americans but had the chance to become one, hence better than Americans of colors. These European immigrants quickly learned the privileges and resources available to white Americans and successfully achieved social distance from other immigrants and Americans of color as a way to fully access the American mainstream and become Americans. These racial maneuverings of the adults took place in their workplaces as well as schools and led to a similar rate of Americanization for both the parents and their children. The end result is full integration into American society as equal members to the native born over time.

Just as the racial congruence helped the earlier European immigrants to achieve consonant acculturation, the racial difference can be a barrier against today's immigrants of color. Portes & Rumbaut (2001) explains that "dissonant acculturation" is when immigrant children become familiar with the language and the ways of life in the immediate local context of the U.S. while losing the culture of the parents at a faster rate than their parents. Dissonant acculturation often leads the students to develop what Ogbu (1993) calls "oppositional identities" where the immigrants define who they are against what they perceived to be of white middle class. Such was the case for some Vietnamese immigrants in Zhou & Bankston (1998) and Hmong immigrants in Lee's (2005) who equated Americanization to the incorporation into the underprivileged local urban youth culture away from the American middle class mainstream. The different rate of acculturation between the parents and the children led to role reversal where more acculturated children were taking the responsibility of adults for the parents who were

less knowledgeable about American society. Coupled with the forces at school that aim for faster incorporation of the immigrant students in the culture of the mainstream America, the parents' inability to control the rate of their children's cultural assimilation can lead to rapid incorporation that heightens cultural conflict between school and home as well as the students and their families.

In addition to being integrated into the local urban youth culture, such conflict also makes it difficult to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with school staff many as well as co-ethnic peers. For example, Gibson (1988) found that Punjabi immigrants who are not fluent in their parents' language did not fully access the resources and support from family or the co-ethnic community when faced with racial discrimination and were forced to deal with it alone. Others like the Vietnamese immigrant youth in Zhou & Bankston (1998) found support from co-ethnic peers who were equally struggling against the academic and racial marginalization at the school away from their families. Similarly, Lee (2005) found that some academically struggling Hmong American students even internalized the society's negative views against Asian Americans and distanced from more traditional and recent Hmong immigrants who are more successful academically. Without meaningful support, many of these immigrants of color experience academic and social difficulties at school and are underprepared for the adult world in the American mainstream.

Selective Acculturation & Cultural Celebrations

While many schools turn to celebration of diverse cultures of the students to strengthen the co-ethnic community and promote a sense of validation, the author argues that it is not enough to counter the role of race in fostering dissonant acculturation. But first, there is literature supporting the importance of strong co-ethnic network both in and out of school for the immigrants of color. For instance, studies (Lew 2006; Valenzuela, 1999; Gibson 1988) point to a strong co-ethnic network as a resource to foster selective acculturation that promotes biculturalism for immigrants of color. Such findings encouraged multicultural educators. When the rate of acculturation is mediated by a co-ethnic community, according to Portes & Rubaut (2011), the cultural shift from the parents' to the U.S. is slowed down and partial retention of the parents' language and norms are common. Studies (Lee, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Olsen, 1997) show that selective acculturation is most desirable since many children who showed these traits were fluent bilinguals, which was associated with higher self-esteem, higher educational and occupational expectations, and higher academic achievement. For instance, studies (Lee, 2005; Zhou & Bankston 1998) found that selective acculturation occurs when a positive image of the students' language and culture both in and out of classrooms were presented to promote a sense of cultural pride and validation as legitimate members of the school. This kind of school policy and practice led to at least partial retention of the cultural norms of the students' ethnic community. Consequently, these students remained under the influence of the co-ethnic community and the family, which in turn, served as resources to succeed in schools. The studies also report that students who have undergone selective acculturation experience academic success.

Encouraged with these findings, many well meaning educators and educational researchers turned to school wide diversity events to promote a sense of ethnic pride and intergroup harmony (Lee, 1998; Park, 2011). Multicultural educators and scholars, on the other hand, have long been critical of such an approach by saying that these approaches are not multicultural education. More recently, as an example, Park (2011) argues that a cultural diversity event called Ethnic Fest worked to narrowly define “real” Americans to mean “cultureless” whites while situating the Korean immigrants as “cultured others.” Initially, Ethnic Fest helped to construct culturelessness to be normal as the students of color displayed and educated cultureless white students about their differences. This coincided with the Korean students’ understanding of “real” Americans to mean English fluent whites, which then shaped their perception of their own social locations within the school and the society as inferior to “normal” whites. In the process, he (2011) argues that cultural validation can actually lead the Americanization process of immigrants away from mainstream America and work against selective acculturation

Instead, many multiculturalists aim for concepts like equity and social justice beyond incorporating cultural others and validating cultural diversity. Among them is Grant (1994) who argues that multicultural education is a “philosophical concept and an educational process” that promotes equal educational opportunity for all students including those who are both historically and presently underserved in our schools (p. 4). Other leading scholars like Sleeter (1995), Neito (1996), and Ladson-Billings (1995) agree with Grant and they point to individual, curricular, and institutional barriers facing students of marginalized groups beyond the confines of schools. For instance, Neito (1996) states that there are “practices and policies that advantage some students at the expense of others” (p. 315). Similarly, Sleeter (1995) calls for understanding the power relationships both in schools and a larger society to highlight the unequal distribution of power and privilege. In her argument for culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995) echoes the concern by suggesting that not only incorporates the students’ cultures but also produces academic excellence while preparing students for social actions. With these in mind, Gorski (2006) posits that multicultural education is a “political movement that attempts to secure social justice” for all students, that recognizes both individual and institutional biases against non-mainstream students exists and that these must be overcome to eliminate educational inequalities through comprehensive school reform (p.165). Regarding immigrants of color, these multiculturalists are not satisfied with promoting ethnic pride and co-ethnic cohesion but seek to empower the immigrants of color to critique and challenge the forces that lead them away from American mainstream.

Critical Multiculturalism for Selective Acculturation

The author locates critical multiculturalism within this framework of multicultural education for shifting schools’ approach to Americanizing today’s immigrants of color. Critical multiculturalism views teaching as a tool for establishing and maintaining social justice both in and out of schools by confronting and disrupting the issue of inequity. Castro (2010) posits that critical multiculturalism requires “conscious reflections” where educators examine their own worldview to recognize the influence of their own life experiences in shaping these views. This serves to challenge the universality of the

“right” way to live and fosters an appreciation for diversity around their own lives as well as their students’. Critical reflections, Castro (2010) further explains, must be coupled with what Freire (1999) calls, “critical consciousness” where teaching is viewed as a political act so that the educators can locate their own teaching in relation to power.

The assertion is that education is political in nature as it can serve as a tool of the oppressors to facilitate their dominance, but, it can also empower the oppressed to resist the oppression as educators and students work together to transform the society towards social justice. This perspective resists viewing students as “receiving objects” of learning but instead promotes active learning where teachers and students teach and learn together through democratic social relations. It also critiques and challenges what Freire (1999) calls the “culture of silence” that instills negative and suppressed self-images of the oppressed that work to allow social injustices in schools and society. One way to do this, Kincheloe (2008) argues, is for educators to examine their own positionalities to the power relations as a way to become active members of the community for social change. The goal is for educators to examine how schooling plays a role in maintaining the power relations that marginalize their students both in and out of their classroom and explore ways to disrupt oppression with the students.

Regarding immigrant school experiences, critical multiculturalism locates the problems facing immigrant students in the U.S. beyond the confines of the school into the power relations between the “normal” or “real” Americans and cultural others. In other words, their academic and social marginalization in schools that leads to dissonant acculturation of immigrants of color ultimately serves to maintain the privilege of native-born white Americans against the newly arrived. To do so, critical multiculturalism requires both all members of schools, including educators and their students, to directly challenge the meaning of *American* as a cultural and social construct with political implications. This is achieved by providing opportunities for schools to examine who are authentic *Americans*, and how the term works to privilege and disadvantage some over the others while exploring ways to re-construct the term *Americans* as a group to include immigrant students in their classrooms. The goal is then to challenge the power relations that label people of color as less-than-authentic-Americans and resist social injustice related to this practice both in school and the larger society. In the process, critical multiculturalism can interrupt the forces of dissonant acculturation and foster successful incorporation of today’s immigrants of color as legitimate member of American mainstream.

Conclusion

The article argues that schools’ approach to today’s immigrants of color must consider critical multiculturalism as a tool to critique and challenge the meaning of authentic American using the literature on immigrant school experiences. The examination of immigrant experiences of the past European immigrants and today’s immigrants of color suggests that race plays a significant role where the latter group is led away from mainstream America. While many well-meaning educators seek to promote intergroup harmony and ethnic pride, many multiculturalists argued that such efforts have misidentified the problem that exists in the policies, practices, and the attitudes towards immigrants of color. Among them are critical multiculturalists who argue that the root of

the problem lies with how the term “American” is narrowly defined to mean white Americans, and both educators and students must critique and challenge this to foster selective acculturation of today’s immigrants of color towards the American mainstream.

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