SOCIAL JUSTICE WITHIN AND AGAINST MULTICULTURALISM

by Lawrence Blum*

We like to think that multicultural education and social justice education fit together like hand and glove, or even that, basically, they are the same thing. Certainly the New Jersey Project construes diversity education in a broad way that embraces social justice education.

But I don't think it is so simple. There are strands within what most people think of as multicultural education, or diversity education, that do not really help us bring social justice issues to the forefront of our teaching. They may even work against it.

I will discuss four of these. After doing so, I will suggest a model of inclusion education that ensures that we aspire to the full range of goals that we need to, including social justice but not limiting ourselves to that.

1. "Celebrate diversity":

Yes, let us celebrate our diversity and leave no one out of the celebration. But the problem is that this "feel good" multiculturalism focuses only on the upside. The music, film, indigenous arts, the close families, the gay and lesbian clubs that provided sociality when alternatives were not available, women's music, black jazz and blues, and so on — all this is positive and important. But social justice has to take on the negative, the "bummers" — racism, homophobia, sexism, class oppression. Nothing to celebrate there — just unpleasant realities to face up to.

(I do think the "celebrate diversity" strand is more a problem about the way multiculturalism is conceived at the K-12 level than in colleges and universities.)

2. "Inclusion":

Again, of course, we want all voices, all experiences, all cultures to be included, especially those of groups previously excluded. All students, especially from majority or dominant groups, need to hear, to listen, and to learn to appreciate and empathize with these previously excluded voices. And those groups need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

But there is a problem here, and I see it in some of my students (especially, but not only, white) who have taken these sorts of courses. They think that by studying some African American literature, Latino studies, women's perspectives, they have emerged into the light; they have "done the diversity thing." Indeed, they are way ahead of their fellow students who haven't.

But, again, they missed something — they missed justice! They've read women's literature, but they've missed the continuing structures and culturally-embedded expectations that keep women largely confined to less valued occupations, to lower pay, and render them vulnerable to violence and objectification. They've missed the historical legacy and often continuing structures of racial dominance and marginalization. Nancy Fraser, Manning Marable, Iris Young, and others constantly remind us of the danger of losing sight of these structures of injustice in an approach that places in the foreground only inclusion and recognition.

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3. "Respect for differences":

We often hear, almost as a slogan of the multiculturalist movement, that multiculturalism and diversity mean "respect for difference." The old Eurocentric and oppressive perspectives that we are trying to reject do not respect difference; they proffer only one right way of doing things - - their way. Difference is threatening, and people who are different are seen as inferior or defective. Diversity education is meant to be an antidote to this oppressive Eurocentric monolith through the idea of respect for differences.

Well, this is a very complex territory and you don't really want me as a philosopher to get going on it. But if I may put it somewhat oversimplistically, when we are seeking justice, generally what we want is the same thing for each group. We want people to be recognized as equals and to be treated as equals. After all, what is the major justice-related problem with K-12 education? It is that children of color do not have equal educational opportunities, and that class background too strongly determines educational outcomes. What does justice demand in this situation? It requires that all groups have equal educational opportunity, that all enjoy equal access to job possibilities, that women and racial minorities not be seen as unsuitable for certain jobs because of their particular identities.

These are not issues about respecting differences. They are about seeking equality. Perhaps the idea of "respect for difference" can be worked with, twisted around, so that it looks like it does the trick in these situations. But, really, an appeal to older values of equality and equal treatment are a more natural framework for expressing why certain social arrangements are unjust. The idea of social justice is closely tied to that of equality. We should not give up equality in the name of difference and diversity. We need to keep hold of both.

4. "Culture":

The highlighting of the term "culture" in the idea of "multiculturalism" can itself get in the way of social justice concerns, especially when culture is bound up, as it so often is, with students' identities. This issue surfaces often in my own teaching. Let me give an example from a recent course of mine.

We are discussing white ethnic groups, such as Italian and Polish Americans. Tanya, a light-skinned Latina woman, expresses some irritation: "What is all this about being 'white'? I mean, what is 'white'? That isn't a real thing. What counts is your culture; that's what you really are. I'm Latina, I'm Colombian -- that's what counts. It doesn't matter what color you are." Perhaps Tanya is not the most tactful student I have ever had; but, in fact, students like Tanya are very useful to furthering the educational process in a class, though we may get nervous that they have offended someone in the class, as they often do. Tanya presented a teachable moment and I invited response, even though her remark was off the track of what we had been talking about. In the midst of a heated exchange, Nakia, a dark-skinned male African American student, injected this note of reality into the conversation. "Out there in the world, the 'shade tree' operates," he said. "When I go for an interview, the employer sees my dark skin and that is a strike against me. And the darker you are, the more it works against you. That's it. That's 'whiteness' in the real world."

This interaction raised complex issues. Tanya was not wrong in what she was saying. Skin color shade plays a very different role in the identity of Latino/as than it does in the identity of virtually all other ethnic or pan-ethnic groups. And Latinas are rightly sensitive to the tendency of U.S. Americans to impose their highly racialized framework on every ethnic group and on Latinas in particular. There are light-skinned Latinas and dark-skinned Latinas, and they may care much more about their shared Latina, or Dominican, or Puerto Rican, identity than they do about their race.

Nevertheless, her enmeshment with culture prevented Tanya from seeing the ways that race was a source of injustice in the world — injustice in employment, in this

particular case, although many other examples could be cited of what Nakia called the "shade tree."

It may seem that the New Jersey Project has a ready answer to the concern that focusing on culture can get in the way of taking injustice seriously, especially (as in this example) racial injustice. For the New Jersey Project casts a wider net than multiculturalism as focused solely on culturally or ethnically defined groups. The Project looks not only at culture but at class, race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, and so on. Well, this wider net is certainly an improvement over multiculturalism as narrowly defined. But I still see two problems.

A perhaps minor one is that the word "multiculturalism" is still the term of choice for many both outside and inside the diversity movement, and this word privileges "culture." Indeed this fact provides one advantage of the terminology of "diversity" (and "inclusion") over "multiculturalism," since it is broader in its reach. Yet the terms "diversity" and "inclusion" too have their problems, precisely because of their vague expansiveness. For instance, they have provided space for Christian conservative groups to constitute themselves as a diverse voice, an identity group that has a right to be included. More generally, conservatives in general have challenged the diversity movement's neglect of diversity of opinion as one of the favored diversity categories, alongside race, gender, and the rest. I do not deny that this claim to inclusion can be answered; but it has a surface plausibility, and in any case this development must be contended with on the political terrain of colleges and universities.

A more significant point is that the relationships among the various diversity categories are very complex. There can be real tensions between analyses that start with one of these categories and ones that start with another. Susan Okin has argued plausibly in a recent article that many traditional cultures are essentially patriarchal in character, and that granting cultural recognition as a general stance within diversity education can come at the expense of women. If Okin is even partly correct, there can be genuine tensions between the feminist strand of diversity education and the "cultural affirmation" strand.

Similarly, "race" as a category of justice concern has been used to demote the concerns of women; black women have felt pressure, and have sometimes fully voluntarily given primacy to their racial over their gender identity. Race has also had a tendency to mask the operation of class -- both as a concern in its own right and as a factor in the life situations of African Americans. Here I think Nathan Glazer, hardly a close friend of the diversity movement, but often an insightful observer of it, is correct when he notes in his book *We are All Multiculturalists Now* that race, gender, and sexual orientation have been given much greater attention than class as a focus of justice-oriented concern within the diversity movement (Glazer 15-16). But race has also sometimes had a deleterious effect even on the understanding of the plight of people of color, and especially blacks and Latinos, in masking the operation of class-related factors, such as movements of jobs and the historical accumulation of wealth, and other economic developments, in causing the inequities from which people of color suffer. Of course, race factors and class factors are completely intermeshed in these cases; but they are still distinct factors, and the way that race is often thought about, and privileged, can well have a tendency to drive the class dimension from sight. The useful and yet problematic concept of "institutional racism" is one culprit in this area.[1]

Of course none of this is a criticism of the New Jersey Project's attempt to make "diversity," "inclusion," and "multiculturalism" encompass the broad range of categories of groups suffering from injustice that it does. Surely this is the right way to go. I simply caution that in casting that wide net, we must be aware of the many pitfalls in addressing all these issues together -- and especially to avoid being overly optimistic that they can all be easily combined in a singular curricular approach. Even apart from some of the inherent tensions I have just mentioned, in particular teaching contexts it is extremely easy for some justice concerns to get lost amidst others.

Think for a moment back to my exchange between Tanya and Nakia concerning culture and race. Nakia talked about how the shade tree disadvantages him when he

goes for an interview. But would this be equally true of a dark-skinned black woman? Perhaps sometimes, but, in general, I suspect not. To some segments of the white population, blackness in males carries an implication of threat or at least discomfort that it does not to the same extent in females. That, among other reasons, is why, (according to William Julius Wilson in his book *When Work Disappears),* in many contexts black women are able to get jobs that black males, especially young black males like Nakia, are not. (Wilson 122-126) And yet the shade tree does not disadvantage black males over black females in all contexts. In contexts where physical attractiveness is an issue, it generally works in precisely the reverse direction. The darker-shaded female is more disadvantaged than the darker-shaded male. This, of course, is a product of sexism, in the context of the general Eurocentric white bias of standards of attractiveness.

In the context of the class conversation I reported, it would not have been impossible for me to have drawn attention to this complex of culture, race, and gender issues. But it would not have been easy to do either; making too many points at once in the context of a class discussion can mean that students do not take in any of them.

In criticizing an exclusive focus on difference in diversity education as potentially masking a concern with social justice, I want to make clear that I am by no means aligning myself with those who would counterpose a focus on identity groups based on gender, race, and sexual orientation, and the like, in the name of a universalistic social justice. In his *Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (1995), Todd Gitlin makes that very argument. While not pretending to do justice to his challenging and complex argument, I want to aver that gender, sexual orientation, and race are themselves crucial domains for struggles for justice, and also that attempts to privilege more "universal" ideals has often historically had the effect of demoting or silencing justice concerns along these dimensions. While I have argued that class concerns, and justice issues based on them, have indeed tended to get sidelined in the diversity movement, this is, in part, a reaction to the very opposite dynamic involved in Marxist-based struggles that privileged class over gender, race, and sexual orientation as categories of domination and injustice. All these dimensions of justice are intertwined, yet are also partially separate, and require attention to their own distinctive and specific forms of injustice. I applaud Gitlin's search for common ideals and broader and broader alliances and lines of connection across different struggles and groups. But this search should not mask the multiple axes of injustice and the structures of domination that support them.

If we are aware of these difficulties, what might be a helpful framework for thinking about diversity or inclusive education that is most welcoming to social justice concerns? I propose we envision four overarching values that we aspire to convey in our teaching about race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, disability and class.[2]

Four Values for Diversity Education

Social justice: Certain rights should be granted to all persons equally independent of their sexual orientation, race, etc. One might call this a sameness-oriented value. The provision of schools safe from homophobia is a good example. The idea of the safe schools movement is that gay students should have a safe and hospitable learning environment, such as heterosexual students generally take for granted. Laws against discrimination in housing on the basis of race or sexual orientation are another example of a social justice-based policy. Accessibility for students with disabilities is yet another. Attempting to ensure that working class children have as good schools as middle class children exemplifies this value as well. All these are social justice concerns, and they involve an aspiration to equal rights, equal opportunities, equal access.

The idea of social justice provides a critical standpoint from which our students can survey our society, from which challenges to the structures of domination and inequity can be lodged: Are opportunities and access provided for all groups equally? If not, who is benefiting and who is losing from the inequities? What can we do about this?

Recognition of differences: Earlier I said that the value of respecting differences can get in the way of social justice concerns, as indeed it can. Nevertheless, recognizing differences is an important value in its own right. This value plays out differently for different groups. Perhaps the example people first think of are cultural differences, cultural distinctness. My student Tanya wanted to be recognized for her Colombian, and more generally Latina, identity. She did not want her distinctness lost in the broader category of white people. African Americans want their culture to be acknowledged and valued both in its own right and in its contribution to the larger American culture. At the same time, often African Caribbeans and Africans who live in the U.S. resent being taken for African American, in part because they feel their own distinctive cultures—Jamaican, Igbo, Ethiopian, or Trinidadian—are overlooked when they are simply grouped together with U.S. blacks.[3]

But some version of the value of recognizing and valuing differences applies to all groups. Gays and lesbians, for example, do not only want the same opportunities as straight people, as a matter of justice. They also want distinct aspects of their cultural life and experience recognized and valued. Perhaps one can not generalize about all gays and lesbians, but most, at least, do not want only to be seen as "the same" as straight people except for sexual orientation, but also for their distinct sexual orientation to be recognized as pervading one's life and sensibility. The desire for distinct organizations and places of socializing all reflect a desire for a sustaining and/or recognition of distinctness.

Recognition of distinctness is without question a value distinct from social justice, and as I was arguing earlier, the two values can get in the way of one another. Still, we should try our best to put both into our overarching program of multicultural education, no matter which particular issue we are dealing with in a given course or unit.

Recognition of sameness: The value of recognition of sameness has something in common with social justice, and has something else in common with recognition of distinctness, but it is distinct from both of them. One might say that recognition of sameness is the social or psychological counterpart of social justice as a more material issue. The struggle for Civil Rights, for example, was and is largely a struggle for equal access and equal opportunity, as matters of social justice. But it was and is also an issue of recognition — as an equal citizen, as an equal member of the political society shared with other groups. It was and is a struggle to be treated with equal dignity, based on Immanuel Kant's idea that every human individual should be treated with equal dignity, and should not be seen as inferior (Kant 53-54).

Morris Kaplan in his book *Sexual Justice* (1997) argues very powerfully that one important strand in the gay and lesbian rights movement is a demand to be treated as equal members of the civic society. The Supreme Court's decision in the Romer v. Evans case in 1996 striking down the state of Colorado's law forbidding municipalities from granting equal rights to gays, was in part a ruling about recognizing gay people as full members in good standing of the polity. Of course the ruling had a material, social justice aspect too - - concrete protections against discrimination. The two dimensions are related, and perhaps can not always be separated, as the material dimension can be taken as an expression of the recognition one. But they are two different things. Public officials who grudgingly enforce protections for gays but would prefer not to have to would be acting justly but without conferring their own recognition.

At the same time, it is important to see that when people want recognition, sometimes what they want is recognition of their distinctness, and sometimes what they want is recognition of them as equals. It depends on the context. Charles Taylor explores this complexity in his famous essay "The Politics of Recognition" (1994). To put the point perhaps a bit crudely, one type of recognition is of the form that you are as good as anybody else, the other that you are different from everybody else. As gays/lesbians, as blacks, as Latinas/os, people want recognition as equals to others, but also recognition of their own distinctness.

Boundary-crossing community: The three values so far mentioned - - social justice, recognition of difference, and recognition of sameness - - are, I think, widely accepted among diversity educators, even if they are not always clearly differentiated from one another. But in my own teaching I include a fourth value that may perhaps be less widely acknowledged than these three. That is the building of a sense of community across the various types of difference that we are concerned with here - - of race, culture, class, gender, and the like. For me diversity education is incomplete if it teaches social justice, recognition of difference, and recognition of equality, but does not help students to bridge the gaps of communication, sociability, and ultimately friendship that often divide people in these different groups, even when the groups genuinely respect each other - - respect at a distance. I think we must actively encourage that sense of community in our own classrooms by trying to make our students learn to really listen to each other, to talk to one another. We put them in small groups with people different from themselves, have them work on group projects, and generally try to help them feel comfortable with one another.

Placing community in there as one of our basic goals in diversity education can complicate things, leading to similar tensions and maskings mentioned earlier at the level of content focus. For example, some critics claim that antiracist education is a divisive force, that it subverts community in the classroom because it pits different groups against each other. This certainly can happen. Any serious confrontation with white privilege (or male privilege, or heterosexual privilege) can have the effect, at least temporarily, of making the privileged group uncomfortable, feel under attack, and the like. Perhaps such discomfort is even an essential stage in the education of these students.

But there are different ways of doing antiracist education. While all involve giving voice to the students of color in one's class, some approaches can bring the white students along, while others can alienate them permanently. White students need to be validated in their own good faith efforts to grasp the concerns and experiences of students of color, even if the students are sometimes insensitive or ham-handed in the way they do this. Their own attempts to improve race relations, or to contribute to racial justice, must also be acknowledged, even if sometimes they misfire or are limited in their vision. They should be encouraged to pinpoint their own ignorance and to ask questions, even if students of color get tired of being asked the same ignorant questions again and again.

An interchange in the course described earlier symbolized for me the possibilities of communication and community in classes dealing with diversity issues. A white student used the expression "street black" to make a point about racial classification in Latin America in contrast to the United States. A black student (originally from Haiti), sharply - - but without hostility - - questioned her use of that expression. The white student immediately apologized: "I'm sorry; I see that that could be an offensive expression." Classrooms have to be made comfortable enough for students to complain of offensive or insulting speech from other students. At the same time it must also be comfortable enough for the "offending" student to learn from the interaction, not to be so defensive that he or she just shuts down. These teachable moments must be used as occasions for the class to recognize its collective stake in diversity and social justice education. All this is part of the value of boundary-crossing community.

Conclusion

We are misled if we think that the all-embracing concept of diversity, inclusive or multicultural education favored by the New Jersey Project provides a clear road map of educational goals. In particular, social justice concerns - - in the areas of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and disability status - - can get lost in approaches guided by several familiar mantras of the diversity education movement. I have mentioned four of these - - celebration of diversity, inclusion, respect for difference, and the focus on culture. All are important goals in their own right, but they do not afford the conceptual tools for a strong focus on social justice issues.

I have argued that social justice must be an explicit and strong component of diversity and inclusion education. In addition, I have suggested three other general goals, which span the distinct diversity categories of the New Jersey Project (race, gender, and so on). These are recognition of difference, recognition of sameness, and boundary-crossing community.

I have resisted the attempt to counterpose an "identity politics" to a search for universal ideals of justice. In an article criticizing Todd Gitlin's effort in this direction, Robin D. G. Kelley quotes Anna Julia Cooper, the 19th – 20th century black feminist, who beautifully articulates the links between particular identities of race and gender, and broader ideals of a universal justice and radical humanism:

> We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition. ... The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that. ... not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won - - not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong (88 - 89).

NOTES

[1] For a critique of the way that the concept of "institutional racism" can (though it does not have to) fold class factors into racial ones in an unhelpful way, see L. Blum, "What is 'Racism' in Antiracist Education." *Teachers College Record* 100.4 (Summer 1999): 860-880.

[2] I draw these four values from my own article, "Multicultural Education as Values Education," a working paper of the Harvard Children's Initiative (available from the author) and from Nancy Fraser's, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age."

[3] A different, and less honorable but nevertheless understandable, reason that black Africans in America have sometimes distanced themselves from African Americans is their perception that African Americans are the lowest on the American ethnoracial pecking order.

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