

ANTIRACIST EDUCATION: EDUCATION THAT ACKNOWLEDGES AND FIGHTS RACISM IN AND OUTSIDE SCHOOL.

EDUCACIÓN CONTRA EL RACISMO: EDUCACIÓN QUE RECONOCE LA EXISTENCIA DEL RACISMO Y LO COMBATE DENTRO Y FUERA DEL AULA

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ABSTRACT

Antiracist education aims to promote among teachers and students a critical examination of the historical, political and economic roots of racism in order to provide understanding of current practices, social barriers and new approaches to collective existence of diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups in today's society.

Key Words: antiracist education, racism, diversity

RESUMEN

La educación contra el racismo pretende promover entre profesorado y alumnado un examen crítico de las raíces históricas, políticas y económicas del racismo. El objetivo consiste en facilitar la comprensión de prácticas habituales, barreras sociales y nuevos enfoques de la existencia colectiva de diversos grupos culturales, étnicos y lingüísticos en nuestra sociedad actual.

Palabras Claves: educación antirracista, racismo, diversidad

1. INTRODUCTION

Recognizing that educational institutions such as schools and universities play a critical role in reproducing or analyzing, critiquing and transforming our understandings

of how we have come to view and construct our world (Giroux, 1987), makes it easy to understand that schools are a place where racism and stereotypes against ethnic, racial, cultural and linguistic minority groups are promoted. The reproduction of discrimination at school prevents it from providing an education based on justice and equity. If discrimination and racism have been promoted at school, then the promotion of consciousness against those two should be promoted at school (Kailin, 2005).

Most of the models that have guided the educational processes since the development of education in the United States, have been thought from the standpoint of uniformity; with the guiding principal that states that there must be a single common culture and to develop it, there must be a process of assimilation into this culture. School has forced students to adopt cultural patterns often alien to their own (Banks, 2002). Those belonging to ethnic origin, have been forced to fit into the dominant society, leaving aside, their customs, their ways of learning, their dress and their language, being all these vital aspects of their culture, causing a disorientation with negative consequences, such as stress, cultural uprooting and low self-esteem, among other social problems (Omimi, 2000).

There have also been educational models designed to address issues of cultural, linguistic and cultural diversity and, acknowledge social problems related to race. These models have provided their analysis in deeper or more superficial ways; some have been designed as intent to solve friction among different racial and ethnic groups and some to try work towards equality in education but they do not base their analysis in the structure of power, assuming the need for change in people's attitude and not the social, economic and political system (Kailin, 2005). Among these models, we can identify multicultural education and antiracist education.

Antiracist education is often compared with multicultural education. The distinction between multiculturalism and antiracism to be blurred as some writers appear to conflate both terms as if they mean the same thing. In other cases scholars may refer to multiculturalism even when working with some of the basic tenets of anti-racism. The question is not whether multiculturalism shares certain ideas in common with anti-racism, but rather, to explain where to draw the boundary and operationalize the distinction between these two terms.

Banks (2002) describes multicultural education as

an idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school (Banks, 2002:2).

This definition points at the need to bring justice to the school system, because it understands *“that some students because of their characteristics, have a better chance to learn in schools as they are currently structures than do students who belong to other groups or who have different cultural characteristics”* (Banks, 2002:4), but is there a good enough analysis of the structures of power and the reasons why that reality exists. Banks (2002) recognizes that the consideration to implement multicultural education must include the analysis of power relationships, inside the school and in the complete education environment, which means to change much more than curriculum, (Banks, 2002) but this is not pointing out at changes outside the educational spheres. Authors Kehoe & Mansfield (1994) challenge multicultural discourses, sustaining that these discourses hide within the multicultural paradigm historical legacies and racial imageries of a past that perpetuates systems of power and domination within educational institutions (Kehoe & Mansfield, 1994).

Multicultural education has been used as a fix for discrimination, evoking multiculturalism as a way of building a society that is respectful of cultural differences. According to Delgado & Stefancic (1998) multicultural education is used as a fetish that allows giving an order to the classification of individuals and groups that are presumed to become problematic due to their culture, overlooking their difficulties to adapt to a society that has originated the problem in their legal, social and economic system (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998). Generally, what is being gathered is a simple vision of respect and tolerance in which society is viewed as diverse but not unequal. This gap can cause that under the cloak of the adaptation to diversity, what fundamentally is being proclaimed is an adaptation to the inequality.

The antiracist discourse highlights persistent inequities among communities, focusing on relations of domination and subordination (Kailin, 2005). To a multiculturalist the issue is one of a lack of recognition of the positive contributions of minorities, which stems from misunderstanding and miscommunication. An antiracist sees the issue starkly as entrenched inequities and power imbalance. Multiculturalism views the problem as manifested in intolerance and lack of goodwill. Anti-racism troubles the manifestation of the problem as bias, discrimination, hatred, exclusion and violence (Price, 1992). Multiculturalism perceives prejudice as a violation of democratic rights. Antiracism perceives prejudice as an integral part of the social order. Consequently, multiculturalism presents the mechanism of redress through education-sharing and exchange of ideas while antiracism views the mechanism of redress through fundamental structural/societal change.

When, the issues of race, race relations, racism and inequality seem to be absent from a school project or education model, diversity remains reduced in many occasions to its folk aspects because it's addressed as mere "cultural tourism". Nevertheless,

Pollock (2006) warns that to have a static preconceived idea about when to talk and when not to talk about race might be harmful, because they might not suit real children in real world situations, instead, they should make a decision according to the situation that is faced in a daily basis. For this teachers need to work to on identifying what she calls “everyday Racism”; *“everyday antiracism in education thus requires that educators make strategic, self-conscious everyday moves to counter these ingrained (racist) tendencies”* (Pollock, 2006:2).

For Pollock (2006), everyday antiracism in education involves first, rejecting false notions of human difference, understanding that race categories are not a genetic reality, for which it is possible to affirm that human beings are equally intelligent and have the same potential. Second, acknowledging lived experiences related to the racial lines that have been set up and have gotten to adopt meaning through the centuries, because they have created different realities that bring different experiences within society and the educational system. Third, understanding and building upon diversity, in order to bring strength and joy within racialized groups that have suffered from negative classifications. Fourth, preparing oneself and others to challenge inequality among racialized groups, observing the opportunities and privilege that some groups have and the arbitrary disadvantages those other groups have. Pollock suggests that these 4 steps might seem contradictory, because *“sometimes being colorblind is quite harmful to young people; sometimes a “celebration” of diversity can be reductive and harmful; sometimes “recognizing” one aspect of an identity (a student’s or one’s own) detracts from a sense of common humanity”* (Pollock, 2006:3) but that they are not if they are applied according to an specific context and the particular situation of a person. For example, she states that being “black,” has both negative connotations, such as the limited opportunities and the historical oppression that suffered, and positive

connotations, such as the bonding that the black community has done over their oppression, for which it is important to wonder when it is helpful, and when it is harmful to talk about racial patterns in schools (Pollock, 2005).

2. TEACHERS IN ANTIRACIST EDUCATION

In this process of antiracist education teachers should reflect on their practices and how those practices reflect what happens in the larger society around issues of race. Weinberg (1992) borrows from Dubois when he refers to the limitations of educational reform, marked by the fact that teachers have not been educated about race and racism, in the contrary, that they have been taught to follow the mainstream's racist discourse, which makes them reproduce racist beliefs in their classrooms and schools. Educational reform has not been possible do to the misconceptions and ignorance about ethnic and racial groups that teachers acquire from the wider society. These misconceptions are promoted by the mainstream and they are not challenged, in the contrary, reinforced, because they maintain a social, economic and political system that benefits them (Weinberg, 1992).

To challenge mainstream's racist discourses can be harder for White teachers, because their identities and social construction has been very different, than the one of people of color (Howard, 2006). It is hard to foresee White teachers being able to relate to their students of color, considering the limited interaction that White people have had with people of color (Wise 2001, 2002). Howard (2006) borrows from Nieto (1999) and Sletter (1994) by saying that too often White teachers are part of multicultural settings, which are realities that are not consistent with their own realities, socialization patterns, views of the world, life experiences and the development of racial identity, in other words, they are expected to be what they have not learned to be (Howard, 2006).

These difficulties that White teachers can have to teach in an antiracist context can be explained by many causes. Wise (2001) attempts to explain it by pointing out that White people have lived in denial of racism, being ignorant for the most part about the reality that minorities live, partly because of the isolation minorities have lived, but also because they have been taught to believe in what other White people have to say, rather than what people of color say, even if it is about their own lives:

if one does not know many blacks, or personally witness discrimination, it is all the more likely that one will find the notion of widespread mistreatment hard to digest. Especially when one has been socialized to give more credence to what members of one's own group say, than what the racial "other" tells us is true (Wise, 2001: 2).

To understand the difficulties that White teachers have to teach ethnic and racial minority children explained previously, seems harder when the numbers of children of color at public schools does not correlate with the numbers of teachers of color, as the wide majority of teachers in the United States are White. Howard (2006) questions the relationship that exists between these underrepresentation of students of color and their failure at school:

in present public education we are faced with three simultaneous statistical realities (1) our teacher force is mostly White, (2) our student population is highly diverse and growing in children of color, and (3) children of color are precisely the students most at risk of being caught on the negative end of the achieving gap (Howard, 2006: 4).

If the numbers imparities are part of the cause of the achievement gap that exists among racial and ethnic minorities and White Students, there are several things that can be done; one is the increment in the numbers of teachers of color and the preparation of White teachers for multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural settings. This preparation must consist in a transformation that understands the need to create inner change in the self, as much as in society. As a White educator, Howard (2006) establishes:

if we as White educators are not deeply moved and transformed, there is little hope that anything else will significantly shift....we cannot help our students overcome the negative repercussions of past and present racial dominance if we have not unrevealed the remnants of dominance that still lingers in our minds, hearts and habits. (Howard, 2006: 6).

Bedard (2000) discusses the need for a decolonizing process for White teachers in order to implement an anti-racist praxis into the existing educational system. Without this process the author feels that White teachers cannot teach in an antiracist framework because racism and institutional racism are so embedded in what it means to be White that there is a need to decolonize White people and create a White identity based on equity and social responsibility (Bedard, 2000).

Wise (2002), without disagreeing with the need for White teachers to challenge their place in society, explains the benefits of being White teaching about racism and antiracism (Wise, 2002). He manifests that for Whites it is hard to hear about issues of race and racism when a person of color is talking, because most of the time, White people feel uncomfortable, guilty or as if they were being blamed, besides, that is much easy to hear such stories, coming from a person one can relate to; *“We are much more comfortable listening to one of our own describe the reality of others”* (Wise, 2002: 26). Understanding Wise’s perspective, it could be said that everyone in society can take part in the change of that society. Wise says that most of the recommended books about issues of race that are part of students lists at school do not encourage White to think about what it means to be White in a White dominant society or to think that race has anything to do with them, more so when talking about racial oppression:

this unfortunate tendency to think of race as merely a black or brown issue is at the root of much of the white condition today: one that renders us largely impotent when discussing issues of race, identity, and our place in a white supremacist system. Indeed, it is our inability to conceive of race as fundamentally about us that makes it impossible for most Whites to even comprehend that the system is, in fact, white supremacist. We

think of white supremacy as something preached by the Klan, skinheads, or neo-Nazis, rather than as the default position of American institutions since day one. And when it comes to our own complicity with the maintenance of this system (Wise, 2002: 27).

Howard (2006) borrows for his book's title "We Can't Teach What We Don't Know" Malcolm X's words, words to which Malcolm so brightly adds "*...and we can't guide where we won't go*", teaching antiracist education demands a commitment to create internal and social change. The need for analysis and the negotiation of identities is probably extensive to teachers of other racial and ethnic groups too; educators, of any race need tools for analyzing the consequences of their daily practices and behaviors because they are uncertain of which actions are racist or antiracist (Pollock, 2006).

Giroux (1997) suggests that educators should pursue a *frontier pedagogy*, which explains that educators should cross the borders of the different cultures that coexist in their classrooms and schools. In this sense the educators have to become something more than intellectual tourists and visit other people's culture as outsiders, contemplating it as something exotic or entertaining. They should be introduced in other spheres in order to assume the specificity of different contexts, geographies, languages. The frontier pedagogy suggests the need to move inside multiple discourses using a traveling language. The educators, thus, become border crossers, allowing the nucleus of its analysis to travel, move, and rotate on itself (Giroux, 1997).

Conclusions

When working in antiracist it is important to focus on a concept of race that acknowledges the power of constructing racial differences but it requires that we disassociate negative meanings from race: in this sense, rather than minimize the concept of race, it should be problematized and disassociated from its negative meanings. Conflict stems from the institutional and social practices that create and

sustain injustice and inequality among groups and individuals defined in racial terms, highlighting race in a discussion of critical antiracism studies is a political act (Kailin, 2005). At the same time, the concept of race and the implications that it carries should be evaluated in every moment (Pollack, 2006).

The purpose of antiracist education is to develop within the students, teachers, staff and community members the abilities, knowledge, and skills needed to contribute to the construction of a fair society. This purpose would be achieved if antiracist education includes the examination of inequalities throughout history, such as: slavery, colonialism, immigration policies and laws, unfair relations of the hierarchical structures of power, negative attitudes and assumptions about race, racial stereotypes, institutional racism and discrimination (Kailin, 2005). If Antiracist education does not question the system of domination, and is implemented in a simplistic way that reduces its principles to the incorporation of diverse material and perspectives to be more inclusive of traditionally underrepresented groups, it might get stuck in the exposition of cultural and racial diversity as folklore and it will not address the asymmetrical race relations promoted by the structures of power (Gorski, 2008). Antiracist education should directly address issues of power and privilege, in society, as well as in school.

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