

Should Multicultural Education Be Neutral?

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Abstract: One of the most essential current discussions in multicultural education is the transformative nature of multicultural education. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the diversity, global migration, and justice problem. Currently, many countries (including China) are debating what types of multicultural education that students need to receive from schools. In China, the debate focuses on whether multicultural education should be neutral when dealing with different cultures. However, the meaning of the term *neutral multicultural education* in the China context is different from the Western context. Based on the understanding that the content of multicultural education should exist in the private sphere, neutral multicultural education in China admits the importance of the superficial diversity, while put it under the supervision of unification. In this case, neutral position is assumed that could attain harmony. Harmony, for those support neutral position, is the best type of justice, and with no need for enhancing social justice which is defined as too radical for China. In order to discuss neutral multicultural education in China and elaborate on my argument, this paper analyzes the model of neutral multicultural education in China which consist of four aspects, and indicates its limitations. After that, my solutions will follow to reveal the transformative nature of multicultural education.

Keywords: Neutral multicultural education; China; diversity; just; model

Introduction

One of the most essential current discussions in multicultural education is the transformative nature of multicultural education. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the diversity, global migration, and justice problem (Galston, 1991; Banks, 2008; Jackson, 2008, 2010). Currently, many countries (including China) are debating what types of multicultural education that students need to receive from schools. In China, the debate focuses on whether multicultural education should be neutral when dealing with different cultures. However, the meaning of the term *neutral multicultural education* in the China context is different from the Western context. Basically, for western theorists, there are three types of neutrality: neutrality of aim (Rawls, 1996; Kymlicka, 1989; Caney, 1991; Raz, 1986; Mason, 1990), neutrality of procedure (Rawls, 1996, Habermas, 1996), and neutrality of outcomes (Waldron, 1993,; Larmore, 1987; Galston, 1991). In a multicultural society, neutrality of aim has three possible meanings:

- a. that the state is to ensure for all citizens equal opportunity to advance any conception of the good they freely affirm;
- b. that the state is not to do anything intended to favor or promote any particular comprehensive doctrine rather than another, or to give greater assistance to those who pursue it;
- c. that the state is not to do anything that makes it more likely that individuals accept any particular conception rather than another unless steps are taken to cancel, or to compensate for, the effects of policies that do this. (Rawls, 1996, pp. 192-193)

Neutrality of aim and neutrality of procedure are worth pursuing for those who support neutral multicultural education in western countries. These two terms work together to construct an education system that allow the recognition of diversity within it with a maximum 'neutral' stance of educators and teachers.

Comparing with the notions mentioned above, the term *neutral multicultural education* in China emphasize different aspects. Based on the understanding that the content of multicultural education should exist in the private sphere, neutral multicultural education in China admits the importance of the superficial diversity, while put it under the supervision of unification. In this case, neutral position is assumed that could attain harmony. Harmony, for those support neutral position in China, is the best type of justice, and with no need for enhancing social justice which is defined as too radical for China. Due to the prevalence of neutral multicultural education in China, it almost shades the reality that China is a multicultural society. In most people's view (both westerners and Chinese people), China is still not a multicultural country as it mainly consists of Chinese ethnic groups rather than immigrants from different countries. Therefore, the importance of multicultural education and its transformative nature are being obstructed. In order to discuss neutral multicultural education in China and elaborate on my argument, this paper analyzes the model of neutral multicultural education in China which consist of four aspects, and indicates its limitations. After that, my solutions will follow to reveal the transformative nature of multicultural education.

The Model of Neutral Multicultural Education in the China Context

In contemporary China, a multicultural society, which is facing the centrifugal force that inherent in every diverse society, implementing effective multicultural education is a necessary step toward a more inclusive and just society. Unfortunately, existing model of neutral multicultural education in China is lacking some critical dimensions, such as transformation, dialogue, and the minority perspective. In order to avoid misunderstandings about multicultural education and clarify the transformative nature of multicultural education, I will first investigate four aspects of the model of neutral multicultural education in China today, indicating their respective and common drawbacks. After analyzing each aspect, related recommendations will be following.

Aspect 1: The content of multicultural education exists in the private sphere

The split of the public and private sphere is receiving increasing attention in China because the traditional view, which mixes the public and private sphere together, has caused a predicament that Chinese citizens ignore the public sphere and thus are indifferent to public dialogue and social morality. Unfortunately, this model places multicultural education in the private sphere for the reason that the content of multicultural education, such as culture, values, and religion, should be seen as a personal choice instead of a social problem. Based on this prejudiced assumption, although dialogue is arousing more concern in schools in China than ever before (Feng, 2017; Li and He, 2009), those multicultural items which are defined as "private things" (e.g. religion, ethnic) remain absent in dialogues. Therefore, I argue that this model puts multicultural education in a wrong place, which will conceal the

transformative nature of multicultural education. Before elaborating on my argument, we need first to clarify the relationship between the public sphere and private sphere.

Different from the public area which means “places that are generally open and accessible to all people in society” (Franken, 2016, p. 6), the term public sphere refers to “the place in society where matters of mutual interest and political action are discussed” (Franken, 2016, p. 6). The public sphere has a special intimate relationship with public reason, dialogue, public discourse and democratic deliberation (Habermas, 1996, 2000). On the contrary, the private sphere refers to the very personal place, both in the spiritual dimension and the material dimension, where others (e.g. the state, the teachers) do not have the right to enter (Brighouse&Swift, 2014; Locke, 1968). After defining the two terms, the following question is do schools and classes belong to public sphere? Typically, schools and classes have been seen as a socialization machine that works for the government. As prospective citizens, students are treated as having “undeveloped reasoning faculty” (Burt, 2003; Brighouse&Swift, 2014), so the state, schools and teachers have the duty to teach them and infuse values to them, and help them to live a better life (Wang, 2017). However, as Kennedy and Fairbrother (2004, p. 294) rightly pointed out, “Asian citizenship education is characterized more by conceptions of moral virtues and personal values than by civic and public values”. China’s education system infringes enormously on the public sphere, and for this reason, this model proposes that although schools and classes belong to the public sphere, the content of multicultural education exists in the private sphere.

In fact, the archetype of the aspect one of the model can be traced to ancient China, an “acquaintance society” (Fei, 1992), where had a deep-rooted custom of the antagonism between acquaintance and stranger. For those people on the acquaintance side, they could be seen as “us” and received attention and rights, but those people defined as stranger had to be “them” and thus be ignored and discriminated against. So it is an inner-to-outer concentric circle, closer to the center signifies closer to the power of majority. This tradition “may reinforce an ‘us and them’ attitude rather than promote solidarity” (Osler, 2011, p. 11). So Liang Qi Chao (1902), a famous thinker and political activist in the late Qing dynasty, warned that Chinese focus too much on personal morals and the division of “us/them”. I defend that multicultural education should be understood as an activity which deals with public affairs for three main reasons: 1) proponents of multicultural education must know that without the institutional justice, the procedural justice, and a sufficiently high percentages of citizens who value civic virtue and are willing to take action when justice and the liberal state seem threatened, the personal freedom in the private sphere presented in this model can never be guaranteed; 2) multicultural education is a collective good, sustained via the collective practices of active engaged citizens who fight for shared fate. And the awareness of the importance of public sphere is a precondition for the creation of active engaged citizens; 3) possessing the vision of “us/us” (as opposed to “us/them”) and being willing to maintain the shared basic mechanism of dialogue and its basic values (i.e., reciprocity, tolerance), which can only be cultivated by valuing the public sphere, will provides us a holistic view to analyze the dynamic and interrelated society and thus rescue the transformative nature of multicultural education.

Only when multicultural education defines itself as a collective good and focuses on

public life can it get rid of overemphasizing personal interests and thus be able to cultivate students to be the active engaged citizens. Therefore,

[i]f we think of the public as a common world, as a space where robust matters of concern call people together from different social locations, emphasizing at once their interdependence and their differing vantage points, then the public is not something given, something introduced by teachers to students. Rather, curriculum is a search for these matters of common concern behind the veils of mute facts and chattering opinion. And pedagogy becomes the attempt to call together a public hearing on these matters of common concern, an attempt to build a capacity for judgment. (Higgins&Abowitz, 2011, p. 379)

Multicultural education is unable to be value-free. On the contrary, it should make full use of the classes, which is an example of the public sphere, to replicate the conflicts in our real world and help students have a comprehensive understanding of the world which they are prepared to improve (Higgins&Abowitz, 2011; Hess, 2011; Parekh, 1997). In this way, we can shift “from individual and isolated efforts toward collaborative and institution-wide efforts, which contextualize school and classroom practices with broader social, political and historical contexts of (in) justice.” (Schoorman&Bogotch, 2010, p. 84)

Aspect 2: Superficial diversity under political unification

Politics is a sensitive field in China, both for leadership and civilian. For most of Civilian, they tend to define themselves as obedient subjects rather than engaged citizens because all the term “citizen” means for them is a series of economic benefits and privileges (e.g. health care and children's schooling). As a legacy of the Cultural Revolution in the sixties, most of parents in China don't want their children to be involved in politics and don't encourage their children to fight for justice since that can be dangerous and uncertain. For leadership, they totally understand that on the one hand, empowering students with fully knowledge, skills, and values of civic engagement will imperil the stability of the regime; on the other hand, higher level of education which will inevitably involve above items of civic engagement is the precondition of economic development and international competitiveness. Therefore, it can be equilibrium to balance both sides of the coin.

In contemporary China, national stability and national unity are the baseline of multicultural education that must not be broken. As Samuel Hinton (2011) noted,

the CCP's (Chinese Communist Party) control of all institutions in China propagated dominant Han ideologies and reproduced dominant Han culture as ways to maintain national unity. Therefore, multiculturalism in China has its own distinct characteristic, tolerance of minority cultures and languages on the condition that they do not damage national stability and national unity.

In fact, for proponents of this model, diversity (including diverse ethnic) itself is not worth celebrating, it is just a historical fact that we need to deal with to unify the country and make it prosper. For example, Fei (1992) and Guo (2015) use the term “unity in diversity” to describe the ideal Chinese nation and the ideal relationship between different ethnics groups. Based on defining China as a nation-state, a typically opinion regarding the diversity and

unity in China was expressed by Zhou (2016, p.25), “the diversity of ethnic groups in nation-states is very meaningful for respecting and protecting diverse cultures and the weaker individuals, but won't necessarily be a good thing for consolidating and developing the nation-state.” To make sure diversity can be controlled with unification and thus become the fuel of development, the 18th CCP National Congress which hold in November 2012 called for a massive effort to foster the Chinese socialist core values—prosperity, harmony, democracy, and civility at the level of national; freedom, equity, justice, and rule of law in the social level; and patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship at the individual level. Leaders of the CCP claimed that these core values define the goals, purposes, and norms of the state, society, and individual citizens, and reflect the true meaning of Chinese socialism and what Chinese aim to cherish and promote in contemporary China. Chairman Xi hoped to “make them all-pervasive, just like the air” to achieve social cohesion. Chinese theorists believe that

[f]undamentally, all Chinese people share similar values and the same sense of morality, whatever their ethnic group or religious beliefs, and this is what has kept the 56 ethnic groups united. Therefore, whatever form education on national unity takes, it should emphasize and promote these shared values. (Global times, 2009)

Socialist core values have been put into textbooks, classes and schools and permeated in various kinds of cultural and art works. These socialist core values, which based on traditional Chinese culture, as some people have realized (Li, 2014), reflect the dominant viewpoint. Although these core values try to be as abstract as possible to be neutral, the official explanation of these values still stands in the mainstream party and the mainstream theory in Chinese history, especially Confucianism. Additionally,

[d]ispite provisions in the Constitution and laws enacted to protect minorities rights, the dominant group, the Han, determines what knowledge, culture, and language should be included and excluded from school curriculum and school knowledge in China. Through this determination, hegemonic control is maintained and minority groups' knowledge, language, and culture are subjugated. (Wang and Phillion, 2009: 8)

Therefore, this model treats multicultural education as a tool to keep superficial diversity in schools and society, to gain the support from minority people, and to justify majority policy and ruling. Based upon the above analysis, political control leads to the absence of transformative dimension in the second aspect of the model.

Aspect 3: Neutral position could attain harmony

This model insists that multicultural education should be neutral (here refers to negative overlook) to fundamental difference among people to attain harmony instead of radical social changes. It is a fascinating argument for scholars who insist the idea of neutrality can be traced back to certain prominent thinkers such as Rawls (1971, 1996) and Raz (1986). Indeed, neutrality has a rational aspect and plays a crucial role in China's education system. However, I argue that multicultural education was born to change reality toward autonomy and justice, thus neutrality is not suitable for multicultural education.

Let's start by elucidating the idiosyncrasy of multicultural education. Multicultural

education can be understood that 1) as a cultural view that no culture can be claimed superior to others; 2) as a historical view that takes complicated historical facts into account and does not analyze reality too simplistically; 3) as a pedagogy that schools and classes are the places for dialogue and should encourage students to take action to improve the status quo; 4) as a public policy which aims to establish norms and laws to attain political and social equality by public debates and sufficient dialogue; 5) an ideology or a worldview that hopes to build a just and colorful society. These features make multicultural education move beyond compliance and apathy, change existing citizenship, and instill necessary basic values to students.

Proponents of the neutral position, however, believe the finest way for multicultural education to attain harmony is through a neutral position. They proposed two main reasons to support their position. The first one is people's autonomy and independence. The state must recognize and acknowledge the autonomy of individuals (Dworkin, 2007; Humboldt, 1969; Raz, 1986; Gutmann, 1995), no one has the right to choose life-styles for others. Likewise, it is unfair that the state supports or devastates any particular culture or group. Second, a neutral state is necessary to reduce conflicts, which result from "Reasonable pluralism" (Rawls, 1996; Kahn, 2008). I argue that when proponents of this position transfer the idea of neutrality from the institutional level to the education field, they misunderstand neutrality as a commitment to making education independent of all values rather than being neutral among conflicting comprehensive doctrines. Having value orientation in the multicultural education does not automatically lead to prejudice or an unjust society; on the contrary, it is a necessary step toward a just society and desirable country, given that the value orientation appeals to our shared fate, open to criticism, and its application is based on just procedure. To be clear the relationship between neutrality and value orientation in multicultural education, I propose to comprehend multicultural education as a composite of negative multicultural education and positive multicultural education. The neutral position is a requirement of negative multicultural education to avoid minorities and their cultures being discriminated against and treated unequally. Negative multicultural education would be a supplement but not the major force to create a just society as the neutral position is very easy to be caught in the extreme case that

[the] rational and mechanistic way of measuring racial prejudice also complicates ways of narrating extreme forms of racism because at the abstraction level, all types of racism, discrimination or prejudice are measured against one standard: the neutral rational standard that simplistically groups all manners of discrimination. Thus, the only thing that is suspect is any deviation from the neutral rational standard. (Gatimu, 2009, p. 53)

So we also need positive multicultural education to empower students to take action to fight for justice. Positive multicultural education not only recognizes that societal culture "provide[s] it members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities" (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 76), and a just society should have special rights (in contrast to the neutral responses to difference) to recognize, representation and protect the cultures of minority groups (Kukathas, 1998; Kymlicka, 1998), it should also realize that a just society requires the education of all citizens to cooperation, dialogue, resist, protest; to transcend the vicious notion (namely, the notion of separate but equal binary relations: man/woman,

black/white, privileged/unprivileged and even oppressors/oppressed (Minnich, 1990)). Only in this way is it possible to ensure that multicultural education towards a just society where all people are equal and treated equally as the end, rather than just a less discriminatory society and an unequal treatment society where people are still isolated and treated as the tool. Therefore, we need multicultural education to play its transformative role in empowering citizens with necessary knowledge, skills, emotions, and values (Jackson, 2014; Spiteri, 2017).

Aspect 4: maintaining harmonious superficial diversity though multicultural education, with no need for enhancing social justice

Most Chinese scholars use the term “diversity” to reflect the diverse backgrounds of students in schools, namely, students who come from different regions, have different religions, eat different foods, speak different languages, have different clothe styles, etc. Cultural diversity has always been seen as a positive situation, both for schools and teachers. Schools often hold some particular festivals and events to provide a realm for minority students to display their distinct cultures (though limited to foods, music, pictures, and clothes). For supporters of this model, the items mentioned above are evidence enough that multicultural education has succeeded in China. Although they deem multicultural education as a theory which is embracing diversity, they ignore an inseparable component of the multicultural education, namely, the political dimension of struggles for social justice. Without valid citizenship education, most of educators and education decision makers in china believe that keep harmonious superficial diversity is enough and with no need for moving to justice. There are two reasons for them to support this argument. First, keeping unity at the deep level while allowing diversity at the superficial level could be helpful to minority students as it allows them to be part of the majority, gives them nearly equal opportunity to go to Han-dominant universities (nearly all great universities in China are Han-dominant), and empowers them with knowledge, skills, and values which are the same as Han students to participate and attain their own goals (Zheng, 2009; Ji, 2012). Some researchers, such as Fan (2010), already realized that the superficial equality is hiding the deeper inequality between majority students and minority students (e.g. languages and cultures), which may in turn cause “cultural interruption” and “cultural discontinuity”. Second, social justice is not considered as a high priority in contemporary China where still is a developing country. Empowering all citizens with the same basic education, skills and related values (e.g. hardworking) is crucial to keep or even expedite economic development of China and improve the living standard of its people. Put differently, keeping diversity at superficial level is the best way to balance the inclusion of ethnic diversity and economic development, social justice can took into account after China move into the developed country (Zhou&Zhu, 2009).

The main limitation of the argument, however, is minority students and marginal students would still be discriminated against and treated unequally even if schools keep superficial diversity. In other words, just stay at harmonious superficial diversity is obviously not enough because “it acknowledges diversity without addressing the cultural asymmetries within existing political institutions” (Soutphommasane, 2005, p. 408). Multicultural education should have higher goals, which can be cited from Freire (2012) and Banks’ (2013) view: multicultural education must always be transformative. As Banks (2013, p. 3) said, “[a]

key goal of multicultural education is to help individuals gain greater self-understanding by viewing themselves from the perspectives of other cultures. Multicultural education, assume that with acquaintance and understanding, respect may follow.” Superficial diversity is not the ending of multicultural education, but the beginning. According to the new transformative model which I contend in this paper, effective multicultural education should go beyond diversity to social justice; to help students acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes which are necessary to form a just society. Owing to Chinese scholars and educators who put much effort into celebrating superficial diversity while ignoring the empowering of students to take action to improve equity and social justice, if we use Banks’ (2013, p. 54) approaches to evaluate this aspect and its application, we can observe that it is only remains at level 1 (the contributions approach that focus on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements) and level 2 (the additive approach that content, concepts, themes, and perspectives are added to the curriculum without changing its structure at most), but is not concerned with any level 3 (the transformation approach that the structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to review concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups) or level 4 (the social action approach that students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them).

To conclude, this aspect engenders an awful circumstance that diversity is merely a ghost without substantial content. Postiglione (1998, p. 2) pointed this out that “despite the diversity that exists among ethnic communities in China, state schooling has remained largely monocultural.” Take political field for example, as long as multicultural education touches on the substantiality of cultural diversity (e.g. political ideas, political party system or other public affairs) which is crucial to the social stability, diversity disappears. Therefore, social justice is a necessary condition for obtaining substantial diversity, whereas discriminations and unequal treatments behind the superficial diversity are the barriers to attain this goal. In a just society that is created and maintained by all its citizens, multicultural education is valuable as a means, ultimately moves from diversity to social justice. Correspondingly, the new curriculum reform of multicultural education should shift from the contribution approach and the additive approach to the transformation approach and the social action approach.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have reviewed the model of neural multicultural education in contemporary China and indicated why it is not suitable for multicultural education. Clearly, as an ingredient of a worldwide movement, multicultural education in China should be more concerned about its role of transformation and social action, to clarify that it is not just for marginalized groups, which is a widespread misunderstanding about multicultural education. Thus, multicultural education will show its transformative nature: “a reform movement designed to restructure educational institutions so that all students—including white, male, and middle- class students—will acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively in a culturally and ethnically diverse nation and world” (Banks, 2013; 54). As a global theory and social movement, rethinking its development in the China context might broaden our understanding to multicultural education and help us find a better way which is based on respect for each country’s uniqueness to expand international cooperation

on multicultural education.

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