

June 2017

## Book Review: Education and the Politics of Difference

Majid Malekan

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci>

---

### Recommended Citation

Malekan, Majid (2017) "Book Review: Education and the Politics of Difference," *Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.  
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol33/iss2/5>

This Book review/Compte rendu is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [tadam@uwo.ca](mailto:tadam@uwo.ca).

Canadian and International Education

Vol. 33, No. 2, December, 2004.

© Comparative and International Education Society of Canada

Abdi, A. & Ghosh, R. (2004) *Education and the Politics of Difference: Canadian Perspectives*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press. Pages: 204. Price: 24.95 CDN (paper).

Reviewed by Majid Malekan, Queen's University.

At a time when many see Canadian multiculturalism practices problematic, a book that "selectively discusses the significance and implications of this paradigm shift [from an assimilationist approach to multicultural approach] in teaching and learning" (p. 6) is timely and of great value. The authors' mission statement is an attempt "to narrow the gap between the dramatic theoretical developments in the social sciences and the concept of multiculturalism, and difference-friendly multicultural education." (p. 6-7)

After an introductory chapter, the book starts with a chapter on different perspectives on knowledge, culture, and difference. The next chapter discusses major issues of multiculturalism such as equity, racism, construction of identity, classism, and politics of identity and difference. The third chapter is a historical and critical review of multicultural policy in Canada. Chapter four discusses the globalization of difference in the context of the post-September 11 world and the concluding chapter is on the future of multiculturalism.

The main thread interwoven in all the issues and discussions in this book is the issue of power and control. In discussing every single issue, the authors never forget "*the true test of multicultural and intercultural education will be evident only through the changes in the inequalities of wealth and power, which currently reflect an ethnic hierarchy both in Quebec and the larger Canadian society.*" (p. 138, italics added)

What I liked most about the book is the third chapter which is a fairly comprehensive and contextual and critical analysis of the history of multiculturalism in Canada. By contextual I mean it justly views multiculturalism in the context of immigration policies and tracks the ups and downs of the latter while focusing on the former. It traces the changes in the concept of multiculturalism in policies as well as practices. In doing so, the authors give due space to the special issues

of Quebec as well as aboriginals. When they are talking about policies, they are aware of the gap between policy and practice and do not dream about policies. That is why when they talk about a specific program they ask "if it is ever implemented." (p. 124)

What I had most trouble with in this book was identifying the intended audience because of what it does or does not take for granted. The authors swing between discussing more advanced topics such as third space and describing what happened on September 11 of 2001 (p. 147), between elaboration on politics of identity and briefly and narrowly defining concepts such as gender and class. They talk about consensus theorists, conflict theorists, correspondence theorists and cultural pluralists without defining these terms and giving examples from each group and explaining how these views can have different meanings at school level. Talking about "radical theorists" (p.16), "independent researchers" (p. 17), "resistance theorists" (p. 18), "critical radical educators" (p. 19) "critical pedagogy" (p. 19) "multiple traditions of knowledge" (p. 39), "cultural content of children" (p. 42), "current democracies" (p. 48), and later "so-called democratic societies" (p. 56), "postmodern societies" (p. 57), "cultural content of minority culture children" (p. 75), and "critical citizenship" (p. 149) without any definition and distinction as if everybody knows what they are, does little to help the development of the concepts. Writing about "genuine multiculturalism" (p. 7) (as if such a notion ever exists), "multiculturalism, in its present form" (p. 34), and different approaches in multiculturalism that are supposed to be defined and discussed 50 pages later in chapter 3 of the book does not help the reader. Again, in chapter 1 and 2 they talk about assimilation as opposed to integration (p. 71) and these notions are only defined and elaborated in chapter 3. When one reads, "societies aiming at social equality and economic justice have made public education available to those groups that, due to discrimination, were at one time deprived of this facility" (p. 48-49), one wonders what societies they have in mind and what is their role model of an equal and economically just society.

Touching concepts and leaving them without elaborating on them does not help readers. For example, defining cultural capital "as the ensemble of all linguistic and expressive skills" (p. 17) or post modern theory as "anti-modernity (modernity as an enlightenment-driven project)" (p. 18) is just an oversimplification. When they say, "democracy implies that despite differences, human beings have equal dignity, and therefore equal rights" or "as such, democracy signifies recognition" (p. 26), it is not clear what notion of democracy they have

in their mind. Why should one believe that "women, for example, may manifest differences in thought processes that correspond to their differences in status and lack of power in society" (p. 33)? How is the reader supposed to understand "critical pedagogy perspective" (p. 68), "the dynamics of identity" (p. 72), effective and productive citizenship" (p. 88), "postmodern democracies" (p. 88) without at least some reference to the literature? They provide their "rebuttal to critics of equity policy" (p. 50) without ever letting the reader know who are these critics.

Lack of a clearly defined theoretical framework is my second concern with this book. A statement like: "education must enable the increase of one's internal resources, the right to determine one's life choices, and the right to influence social change" (p. 89) has certain assumptions about education and society and how society should be changed. However, these assumptions are never spelled out in the book. These could be part of their theoretical framework which, while never clearly defined, is vaguely and implicitly spread through the book via adjectives such as "critical", "radical", "genuine", "true", and so on. In fact what they have recognized as "ideological shifts in multicultural theory in Canada" (pp. 107-113) is more or less the general conceptualization of multicultural education in most countries. Their five-stage version of Canadian multicultural education has been suggested as different views on multiculturalism by Kinchloe and Steinberg (1997), among many others. One might expect that authors clearly state their standing position about multicultural education and different versions of it right at the beginning. However, these versions are discussed in the chapter three of the book and only in the context of Canadian schools. Here and there, they talk about postmodernism approvingly without ever describing their understanding of this fluid and ambiguous concept. They argue, "modernity tends to marginalize, destroy and obliterate a large variety of world views, both in experiences and through ideas." (p. 88-89) However, we are not told what characteristics of modernity contribute in this process and how.

As for the methods of argumentation in the book, the authors bring lots of unsupported claims which they do not elaborate. While one may or may not agree with some of these statements and mention them informally, they need evidence (from authors or the literature) in order to serve as premises of arguments. Here are a few examples: "[Canada has] one of the most progressive programs of immigration" (p. 9), "the Canadian case (which is arguably one of the most admirable multicultural possibilities in the world)" (p. 11), "the function of

knowledge is to lead one towards freedom, and that can only happen when it increases awareness of the hidden aspects of power." (p. 22) "there is a global consensus on basic rights for all." (p. 26), "a significant aspect of multicultural education is to teach dominant groups to challenge oppression." (p. 39) and "the onus is on dominant groups to be inclusive because minority groups do not define the parameter of separation." (p. 72) (I wonder why should dominant groups do so anyway as they benefit from it?), "the provincial departments of education [in Canada] have historically maintained a policy of assimilation." (p. 45), "the lack of acknowledgement that racism still exists" (p. 56), "studies indicate that child-rearing and cultural factors such as motivational values account for differences in the academic achievement of the successful minority students." (p. 60), "it is estimated that one in five Canadian children lives in poverty." (p. 63), "statistics show a clear link between education and poverty." (p. 63), "schools fail the children of the poor, and extend the cycle of underachievement." (p. 64), "for boys, morality is tied to fairness and competing rights [...]. For girls, morality involves responsibility, and is contextual and narrative." (p. 65). Many more examples can be provided for this issue. On the other extreme, they use quotes from the literature to support notions that may be regarded as common sense ideas or at least ideas that are not backed up by research.

There are still other inconsistencies in the authors' conceptualizations. They use schooling and education interchangeably (e.g. p. 15, 37, 68) which is problematic and ignores other forms of education which take place in other institutions as well as informal education which occurs in non-institutional settings. Sometimes they use education and learning interchangeably: "education is not merely collecting disjointed knowledge; rather, it is acquiring conceptual schemes. Learning is to connect and to make meaning." (p. 75) In the same vein, not always all concepts and terms are used consistently and with due care.

In the section devoted to "the theories of knowledge" (pp. 22-23), they just jump from "the positivist period" [sic] to Freire and Lusted then mention feminist pedagogy (rather than feminist epistemology) to conclude about "social, historical, and political aspects" of the construction of knowledge. The book mostly focuses on theoretical and policy issues, but sometimes it just jumps to pedagogy and classroom level discussions (e.g. p. 74 & 78) and it is not consistent in raising problems at different levels.

While from the very beginning of the book the authors clearly state that in this book difference will exclusively refer to groups based on racial, ethnic, gender, and social class characteristics, although they "are cognisant that there are other socially or otherwise based differences" (p.7), one cannot understand why these "other" differences such as sexual orientation and ableness have been excluded. In discussing sexism (pp. 65-66), different ways of bringing equality of opportunity is analyzed but equity has not been mentioned at all. All through the book they talk about the link between knowledge and power but we are never told what their theoretical framework for this link is. For example, one might have appreciated a mention of Foucault. By the same virtue, missing from their references are some major works on multiculturalism and politics of difference. To name a few, I could mention Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), Appadurai (1990), and Hall and Paul (1996).

They quote Phinney (1990) that "the impact of gender in the representation of ethnic identity is rarely examined" (p. 72). However, this statement may have lost its validity after 15 years in 2004. Just to name a few, one can see Wade (1994), Spencer et al. (1995), and Carter et al. (1997). The book does not have an index and one of the references (Kuhn in page 5) does not match with references given at the end of the book.

All this said, this book has a distinguishing feature that makes it totally different from many books on equity: it does not *reduce* the issues around equity to the technicalities of teaching and implementing the existing policies. To my understanding, equity is all about politics and this book is an unapologetic effort to hit the nail right on the head.

## References

- Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy, *Public Culture*, 2(2), 1-24
- Carter, R. T., DeSole, L., Sicalides, E., Glass, K., & Tyler, F. (1997). Black racial identity and psychosocial competence: A preliminary study. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 23(1), 58-73. Sage.
- Hall, S. & Paul D. G. (1996) (Eds.). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage.
- Kincheloe, J. & Steinberg, S. (1997). *Changing multiculturalism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Spencer, M., Cunningham, M., & Swanson, D. (1995). Identity as coping: Adolescent African-American males' adaptive responses

to high risk. In H. Harris, H. Blue, & E. Griffith (Eds.), *Racial and ethnic identity: Psychological development and creative expression* (pp. 31–52). New York: Taylor & Francis/Routledge.

Wade, J. C. (1994). *Racial identity attitudes, perceptions of racism, and gender role conflict in African American men*. Paper presented at the annual Teachers College Winter Round Table on Cross-Cultural Counseling and Psychotherapy: Race and Gender, New York.

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Majid, Malekan, Queen's University. Email: 4mm7@qlink.queensu.ca.

---