

Revisiting the Multicultural Predicaments

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Abstract

In 2007, I released a research note in which metaphors such as ‘monolith’ and ‘umbrella’ were used to depict the discursive predicaments of multiculturalism in education. As a sequel to it, I am going to reconsider the praxis-related predicaments of multicultural education this time. Generally speaking, the revamping programs for promoting school performance and ethnic/cultural identity of minority students, if based primarily on a micro-level analysis of cultural diversity or focused exclusively on the minority’s point of view, will not do much help. It is quite often argued that the minorities will become vulnerable if they pay too much attention to the task of chasing or fixing up an ‘ever-changing’ identity, because the members of the majority group, in the meantime, are busy equipping themselves for winning the competition educationally, economically, and politically. The macro-level analysis of cultural diversity, such as theories of ‘cultural ecology’ and ‘capitalist racial order’ should be taken into account.

Keywords: multiculturalism, cultural diversity, ethnic identity, minority students

INTRODUCTION: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

In late 1980s, as I tried to initiate a new area in which theories and methods of sociology of education would be employed to examine the inequality issues of aboriginal education in Taiwan, a senior anthropologist of the Academia Sinica (中央研究院) kindly reminded me: “While doing aboriginal studies, you should keep sensitive to the cultural factors that are different from yours or those of the majority group”. Taking his advice, I got access to the data retrieval system and keyed in “education” and “culture” as keywords to make a search for relevant literatures. A list of book titles came out from the system and most of them seemed to have a common concern for “multicultural education”. Frankly speaking, it was for the first time I heard something about multicultural education. I found it, however, not only interesting, but also helpful in doing aboriginal education research. So I began to learn and launch a so-called multicultural perspective for the investigation and amelioration of Taiwan’s aboriginal education. As a result, I did earn myself a reputation for it.

Ten years later, at a conference reception in mid-1999, I chatted with a friend freely and broadly around the conference topics, i.e. aboriginal education and multicultural education in Taiwan. He is a cultural anthropologist working at National Taiwan University. During our talk, I smelled that he did not feel comfortable with the concept of multiculturalism. I also noticed that he tried to control his temper and antipathy against multiculturalism, yet failed. Finally, he raised a series of unfriendly questions, such as: “Have you ever thought about that multiculturalism, or multicultural education, might be a fraud, or a farce? Don’t you know that it could be the biggest joke in the 20th century?”

I was shocked, but I did not get mad at him. It was probably because I believed that my friend, as an expert in exploring culture or “cultures”, must have some solid reasons for supporting his argumentation. Facing his challenges, and thanks to him, I suddenly got a bright light around my head and unexpectedly discovered that almost all the books and journal articles I had read about multicultural education were written by its proponents, especially those American educators such as James Banks, Carl Grant, Geneva Gay, and Christine Sleeter. In response to this rude, though late, awakening, I turned around and delved into a wider range of publications concerning multiculturalism in political philosophy, cultural anthropology, sociology of culture, and so forth. In late 2002, I felt refreshed with a new and critical insight into multiculturalism, and multicultural education as well. From then on, I have been in a process of refining my ideas through giving talks and replying, and discussing and conferring with colleagues and graduate students in Taiwan and Mainland China. In what follows I would like to share 2 critiques of multiculturalism in education, which were made by me in 2007 and 2014 respectively.

THE FIRST CRITIQUE

My first critique (Chang, 2007) cares about the discursive formation of multiculturalism in education. As a matter of fact, multiculturalism, owing to the sway of political correctness, has been a longstanding controversial issue ever since it burgeoned in the second half of the 20th century. In Taiwan, it has fallen victim to the myth of what I called a monolith discourse and that of an umbrella discourse at the same time.

By “monolith”, originally it means a huge rock or a large organization that looks solid, impressive and powerful, and is difficult to change or to be moved. In my critique, I use this word as a metaphor to denote mono-culturalism. Conventionally, we usually take the privileged group to blame for their ethnocentric mono-culturalism. However, some members of the minority groups have

unexpectedly developed an ethnic essentialism in our multicultural era. They depreciate the majority group, defy the legitimacy of the mainstream institutions, and discourage individual freedom and choice of their own people. What they have in mind is an ethnocentric petition for collective rights. Obviously, this is a peculiar form of mono-culturalism that embraces not only an ethnocentric conservatism, but also a left-essentialist ideology in a way Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) have well delineated.

In contrast to the monolith discourse which implies the exclusion of other ethnic groups, the umbrella discourse is proposed to depict a multi-faceted inclusion of subjugated and subordinated groups, for the word “umbrella” may rhetorically and semantically signify a huge, protective covering. Yet, so far as it goes, too much inclusion has caused problems of category mistake. Multicultural scholars such as Sleeter and Grant (1999) in America and Tan, Liu and You (2008) in Taiwan, to name but a few, tend to take multicultural education as a common solution to a wide range of inequality issues, including those characterized by ethnicity, gender, social class, and even people with special needs. In so doing, both the concept and the practice of multicultural education would be caught in an awkward situation.

It is firmly held that the core belief of multiculturalism is to encourage people to respect, celebrate, and enjoy cultural diversities. Though this statement might have the potential to prove itself valid for promoting anti-racism, it could hardly do any good to the task of dispelling sexism or any other kind of discrimination. Provided we made lots of efforts to respect, celebrate, and enjoy the cultural values of an ethnic group, whatever it is a patriarchal system or a matriarchal society, I wonder whether we did help make a just society for both genders there. Moreover, as for the case of social class, shall we advise the working-class students that they (should) respect, celebrate, and enjoy their working-class identity and stay where they are coming from (with their working-class parents) for good? The answer is definitely clear, “No”. The crux of the problem is that culture is not a cure-all for everything. There is always something that counts beyond cultural (or ethnic) identity, i. e. such as economic redistribution or political recognition.

THE SECOND CRITIQUE

My second critique (2014) deals with the predicaments of multicultural policies in the sphere of aboriginal education. In 1992, Taiwan’s Ministry of Education proposed a “Five-Year Plan for Developing and Ameliorating Aboriginal Education: Outlines of the First Phase”. It was for the very first time that Taiwan Government began to introduce the term “multiculturalism” into its official document. In 1996, as

“The General Consulting Report of Educational Reforms” was worked out by the Executive Yuan (行政院, the Cabinet of Taiwan), the implementation of multicultural education has become a state policy for the advancement of aboriginal education (and gender education as well) since then.

Unfortunately, as my second critique points out, the multicultural policies that are presumed to be set up for the betterment of aboriginal education have remained merely nominal over the past 20 years. In other words, these so-called multicultural policies existed almost only in name, in the air, and no more than a political slogan.

As regards the prospering of ethnic relations, the government did not do anything big enough to promote mutual understanding and interaction among the ethnic groups in Taiwan. On the contrary, it has made up policies that are to maintain and strengthen the ethnic identities in a monocultural way. For instance, an aboriginal TV channel has been set up for the purposes of entertainment, communication and education. However, only a few, if any, members of the privileged group and other minority groups have spontaneously and voluntarily switched to this channel and stayed there for long. The Ministry of Education has also designed a “local language course” for aboriginal children to learn and practice their mother tongue in school. Despite the queries concerning the legitimacy and usefulness of this additive course, we seldom hear that there are kids of the Southern Min, the Hakka, and even the Mainlander who choose to sit in the Aboriginal language class all willingly by themselves.

With respect to the upgrading of aboriginals’ educational attainment, and achievement as well, the education authorities of Taiwan, from central to local governments, have almost done nothing in any multicultural sense. They have been making evidence-based policies in terms of research findings derived from either the field of educational psychology or that of educational technology. None of them has anything to do with social and cultural differences. As a result, what they have realized and facilitated till now, is something no more than individual difference.

As indicated in Table 1, it seems that the aboriginal people have made great progress of educational attainment during the past 60 years or so. For those Taiwanese citizens born in 1940-1950, the aboriginals have completed an average number of 5.92 years of education, lagged far behind the Hakkas (8.51 years) and the Mainlanders (13.36 years). By the age-cohort 1970-1979, the number goes up to 11.09 years for the aboriginals. Probably in the next 1 or 2 coming cohorts, they may catch up with their counterparts, especially the Mainlanders. However, it must be noted that this significant progress is largely a product resulted from a 3-wave

expansion of education system in Taiwan after World War Two: (1) the first wave: primary education for all since early 1950s; (2) the second wave: lower secondary education for all since 1968; and (3) the third wave: a planned universalization of upper secondary and tertiary education since mid-1990s. Being endorsed an equal opportunity to get access to school does not guarantee one's accomplishment at school. Please take a look at the dropout rates of aboriginal students at primary and high schools, as shown by Table 2, and imagine what happened when they were in school.

Table 1: Average number of years of education completed (by age cohort and ethnicity)

| | Aborigines | Southern Min | Hakka | Mainlander | total |
|-----------|------------|--------------|-------|------------|-------|
| Born in: | | | | | |
| 1930-1939 | n.a | 4.72 | 6.23 | 9.84 | 5.04 |
| 1940-1949 | 5.92 | 6.78 | 8.51 | 13.36 | 7.26 |
| 1950-1959 | 7.25 | 9.40 | 10.14 | 13.55 | 9.83 |
| 1960-1969 | 9.00 | 11.28 | 11.93 | 12.82 | 11.46 |
| 1970-1979 | 11.09 | 12.82 | 13.41 | 13.57 | 12.90 |

Source: Revised by the author from Table 4 of Wu (2007: 121).

Table 2: The suspension and dropout rates (%) of aboriginal students as compared with that of the student population: 2000-2009 school years

| Year | Student | Primary School | | Junior High School | | Senior High School | | College/University | |
|------|------------|----------------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|
| | | Temporary Suspension | Dropout | Temporary Suspension | Dropout | Temporary Suspension | Dropout | Temporary Suspension | Dropout |
| 2000 | Total | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.10 | 0.60 | 0.95 | 0.92 | 2.46 | 2.17 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.03 | 0.28 | 0.12 | 3.00 | 1.51 | 2.00 | 3.25 | 2.53 |
| 2001 | Total | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.27 | 0.78 | 0.82 | 0.56 | 1.94 | 1.82 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.01 | 0.29 | 0.32 | 3.94 | 1.88 | 1.54 | 2.95 | 2.42 |
| 2002 | Total | 0.03 | 0.06 | 0.06 | 0.67 | 0.84 | 1.22 | 2.37 | 1.89 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.05 | 0.26 | 0.08 | 3.09 | 3.48 | 2.69 | 7.45 | 5.54 |
| 2003 | Total | 0.02 | 0.08 | 0.10 | 0.74 | --- | --- | 4.75 | 3.95 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.03 | 0.44 | 0.23 | 4.35 | --- | --- | 4.57 | 3.42 |
| 2004 | Total | 0.02 | 0.08 | 0.07 | 0.71 | 1.56 | 1.55 | 5.53 | 4.94 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.00 | 0.47 | 0.11 | 3.59 | 4.92 | 3.96 | 4.83 | 4.30 |
| 2005 | Total | 0.02 | 0.08 | 0.05 | 0.64 | 1.65 | 1.40 | 6.07 | 5.65 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.02 | 0.49 | 0.05 | 2.88 | 4.48 | 1.87 | 5.13 | 4.49 |
| 2006 | Total | 0.03 | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.53 | 1.58 | 1.26 | 6.88 | 5.86 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.01 | 0.37 | 0.08 | 2.26 | 3.39 | 2.00 | 5.02 | 4.33 |
| 2007 | Total | 0.03 | 0.06 | 0.03 | 0.50 | 1.54 | 1.17 | 7.42 | 6.23 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.02 | 0.34 | 0.00 | 2.22 | 4.84 | 1.36 | 5.85 | 4.79 |
| 2008 | Total | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.02 | 0.45 | 1.54 | 1.35 | 6.87 | 5.61 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.00 | 0.28 | 0.03 | 2.13 | 3.72 | 1.92 | 9.15 | 7.78 |
| 2009 | Total | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.01 | 0.46 | 0.61 | 0.56 | 5.69 | 2.28 |
| | Aboriginal | 0.00 | 0.34 | 0.00 | 1.98 | 1.60 | 0.78 | 7.37 | 3.99 |

Source: Revised by the author from Table 6-7 of Tan, Liu and You (2012: 181).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: IS THERE A WAY OUT?

1. Shall we select a more accurate term such as “multi-ethnic education” to substitute for “multicultural education”?

2. Shall we follow the instructions of “culturally relevant pedagogy” or “culturally responsive teaching” in spite of the cautions aroused by scholars such as Irvine and York (1995: 491-493)? Their points include (1) whether culture is the primary variable that influences learning styles of culturally diverse students (there might be other significant variables); (2) whether characteristics of a cultural group can apply uniformly to individual members of the group (not all members of the same cultural group behave in identical ways); and (3) whether students of culturally diverse group should always be taught by using their preferred learning style (culturally diverse students have demonstrated their resilience and adaptability and can master various learning styles).
3. Shall we not confine our discussion to the micro-level perspective of cultural diversity but invest more energies and endeavors in approaching the macro point of view such as theories of “cultural ecology” (Ogbu, 1995 & 1998) and “capitalist racial order” (Foley, 1978, 1990 & 1991)?

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