(Almost) Everything I Need To Know about Multiculturalism I Learned on Jury Duty

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Introduction

Our given name is effectively taken away from us at jury duty. We become numbers which are assigned at random to match the numbers on our juror badges. The running joke is that no one really wants to be here, as Number 24 periodically repeats "are we having fun yet?" Despite what some roll their eyes at as a "waste of time," this analytical educator considers it to be great opportunity for people watching. A magical thing occurs in this land of nameless numbers when a random group is forced to be together for a certain period of time—natural coexistence.

We're all immovable until the judge excuses us. We share the day dining together in the cafeteria and sitting together on uncomfortable benches inside the federal courthouse. In that time, we share stories, backgrounds, jokes, and the like. People socialize across generational and skin color boundaries while class distinctions seemingly begin to blur. For today, we are simply individual numbers who have all come together as a group to serve our civic duty.

As I reflect upon my recent experience on jury duty together with a melting pot of socially-conscious citizens, I feel an urge to explore the implications for education and my own teaching practice. Three major themes surface as I contemplate my own flexible understanding of multiculturalism in present-day society:

1. Defining multiculturalism.

2. The cult of personality.

3. Teaching multiculturalism.

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Defining Multiculturalism

One thing doesn't make a man.
      —Dan from *Half Nelson*, 2006

Subjective by nature, riddled with controversy, and for many the cause of a tense reaction at its mere utterance, "multiculturalism" is a hot topic. Be it skin color, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, political perspectives, even life experiences and past mistakes—no one single attribute constitutes the entirety of a person's identity. These are merely puzzle pieces that construct our identity, whether they result in the so-called "norm" or not. Much of the available literature alludes to the subjective nature of defining multiculturalism, suggesting that a general definition is often inaccurate and misrepresented.

In their research Banister and Maher (1998) do an excellent job of drawing authentic perspectives on multiculturalism from their study participants. Although the participants' perspectives are a bit alarming at times, they result in a realistic and generalizable assessment of the lack of understanding about multiculturalism and thereby shed light on the obstacles that prevent the attainment of authentic multiculturalism in a global society.

Perhaps a member check would have benefitted the Banister and Maher data analysis by giving the participants more of a definitive voice instead of being somewhat separated from their words. Nevertheless their study provides a powerful look into the messages of multiculturalism that students potentially receive in the classroom.

To extend this research approach and get a local teacher perspective on multiculturalism, I emailed three interview questions to eight colleagues. The questions were as follows:

1. How do you define "multiculturalism"?

2. How does "multiculturalism" affect your professional work?

3. Who should teach "multiculturalism"? How and why?

Much like what Banister and Maher experienced, the responses surprised me. Most agreed that multiculturalism began as a formal study of cultures using a wide range of simple surface-level stereotypes. This brings to mind the transition from Sleeter and Grant's (2007) first three lower-level multicultural education approaches that tend to ignore the root of the problem and deal with multiculturalism in an unrealistic and artificial manner, failing to provide meaningful learning experiences for students.

Most of my respondents agreed that multiculturalism has transitioned into the study of the qualities and attributes we share through tolerance, acceptance, and open-mindedness; however, one colleague replied that it was just a matter of being aware that students are different and have different needs, thus implying that multiculturalism is akin to intellectual ability and universal design for learning.

The reported effects of multiculturalism upon my respondents' professional careers surprised me as well, since not a single person offered any negative reactions. Most claimed that their minority background or their life experiences had resulted in them taking care to be more patient with "aggressive" personalities in an attempt to be empathetic of others.

However, one colleague took it a step further by noting the need to be aware of cultural "taboos" in order to mentally skirt an issue unless it was particularly important for the task at hand. This could be an issue worthy of further investigation, particularly when racism is involved. However, the focus of this article is on a discussion of the practical implications of a flexible frame of mind in the classroom, which becomes more relevant around the third and final question about who should teach multiculturalism

Cult of Personality: "Boxed in" by Learned Behaviors

All right, so I'm part of the machine. But if I'm part of it, then so are you. You are, too. We all are.

—Dan from *Half Nelson*, 2006

Fueled by decades of ideologies passed down generation to generation, the media propagates a great many of our learned behaviors, leaving us essentially "boxed in." Some productions, such as the film *Half Nelson* (2006) or the thematic study by Fleetwood (2005), attempt to break away from the racially-charged stereotypes that most media proliferate as the standards of past generations, thus seeking to escape the imposing and outdated beliefs that are insufficient for the 21st century global world in which we live. Essentially, we are all guilty of being a part of this machine whether by turning the oppressive gears ourselves by "buying in," or idly sitting by for fear that we are only a powerless individual.

Do we allow ourselves to be trapped in a reality that is riddled with injustices, using the excuse that "I'm just one person." The real question is, who am I? Like Dan from *Half Nelson*, I question the machine and what it means for me. Who am I to judge someone by the color of his or her skin? Who am I to assume that I know how their past experiences have shaped their identity and beliefs? Who am I to tell someone how they should think or feel? And ultimately, who am I to assume that someone else understands all of the complexities that make me who I am?

Every day we are "boxed in" (Pollock, 2005) because we are at war with the proverbial others and with our own identity. We are taught to believe a certain thing regarding the color of skin, spiritual and religious beliefs, cultural practices, etc. Beliefs are imparted upon us daily—from our families, our community, our schools, our television sets, and our Internet.

Even political factions impose ideologies about beliefs, seen in the recently published Texas Republican platform that rejects the teaching of critical thinking skills in our schools because it challenges the existing beliefs of parents (Strauss, 2012). It should be noted that, in response to the backlash, the Texas GOP chairman stated that teachers should present the facts to be considered and empower the students to draw their own conclusion, which ironically emphasizes what "critical thinking" actually is (Wiggins, 2012).

As Maira (2005) points out, once we are able to effectively think for ourselves, we must make the choice to think critically about what we have been taught, to challenge the status quo of our surrounding society in order to develop our own conclusions. Do we agree? If so, why? As part of our identity, should we not know why we believe something to be true, or is it just accepted as a continuation of our family's belief set? Do I accept it as part of my identity simply because it is part of my parents' identity?

Do I, personally, continue cultural traditions of my German-Irish ancestry simply because of bloodlines? Would this not imply an acceptance of stereotypical White power mentalities (McIntosh, 1988)? Or do I think for myself and search for meaning on my own by daring to construct my own identity? My own identity, though marked by color and other genetic traits along with the stereotypes that may accompany them, is for me to develop, for me to understand, for me to choose, for me to own who I am.

Through recent research Pollock (2005) discovered at a California high school that even skin color and supposed ethnic markers can be misleading because multiple cultures and races can mix together to a point that a simple check-box on a government document no longer fits. We, as a global society, have become so much more (i.e., a blend of Irish, German, Native American Indian, Welsh, Italian, etc.). Where do I, the seemingly Caucasian White girl, fit into the "box"?

Getting in a Flexible Mind Frame to Teach Multiculturalism in the Classroom

As Banister and Maher (1998) point out, the way we treat multiculturalism in our classrooms effects the way students will view such concepts. We are modeling behaviors and beliefs. Do we treat the subject through simple stereotypes of tolerance, through superficial activities that supposedly deal with culture? Or do we address it in an authentic way, with no right or wrong answers? Do we open students' minds to the possibilities of social and cultural coexistence? As responsible educators, we should strive for multicultural education that feeds the open-minded soul with an understanding of difference and empowers students to be equipped for social action, effectively empowering the one to be part of the many.

Stuhr (1994) quotes Grant and Sleeter by noting that education which is multicultural and social reconstructionist exists when "students and groups are taught to coalesce and work together across the lines of race, gender, class, and disability in order to strengthen and energize their fight against oppression" (p. 176). This is pivotal because being taught to coexist in a unified reality is a valuable life skill, as our world is filled with many points of view to be considered.

Stuhr goes on to note that this highly authentic approach is an interdisciplinary opportunity in which content "is taught as it is experienced in life, as part of a social and cultural context." This approach allows educators to foster an authentic learning experience in which the context and situations are purposely related to and relevant to the students.

Smith (1994) adds to this standpoint by stating, "sooner or later, practices of schools must reflect the will of the changing population" (p. 14). All too often, the curriculum and educational ideals of the schools remain unchanged even as the background and needs of the students change significantly. The running educational joke is that our schools are still reflective of the 1950s teacher-centered classrooms of generations past.

It appears that our treatment of multiculturalism is just as out-of-date, since too often it is actually assimilation under the guise of celebrating individual cultures on designated days. As our country is the quintessential melting pot of culture it is time that our educational practices reflect true multiculturalism.

Conclusion

Spurred by our increasing global interconnectedness, peoples from a variety of cultures are working, learning, and socializing together daily. It is imperative for our survival that we learn how to successfully coexist—not through assimilation, but through gaining an awareness of and acceptance of differences.

As one colleague noted in response to my questions, "kids don't seem to have a problem communicating with people of other cultures; it seems to be the adults that need the help." As children, we are innately curious and open to almost everything. Perhaps it is the seemingly frozen cultural ideals of our elders that influence our beliefs more than we do through learning from our own experiences and explorations. In essence, perhaps we are tainted by the media and our elders who impose their beliefs upon us which tend to exile us if we do not agree and/or live accordingly.

I'll close with a further reflection of my experience with jury duty, as I feel it brings the realities of multiculturalism full circle. During a lull in the questioning portion of the jury selection process, one of my fellow jurors turned to me and said:

> . . . everyone in this room has stereotypes. I don't see how they think we can all be impartial. We can't just check our stereotypes at the door. It's what we know and feel to be true. I guess we can just try to be open-minded and do our best.

To me, that's what multiculturalism is. It's a mindset in which we are not only aware of differences but are also open-minded to them and willing to do our best to coexist. We're not all going to agree. We are not all going to be the same. But we're here together. Whether in the jury room, the halls of a school, or the community, we're going to get through the day together.

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