Discourses of Difference: Cognitive Imperialism, Culturalism and Diversity

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Questions

- What kind of education can deal fairly with the diversity of students?
- How can all students benefit from diversity of knowledges and experiences among diverse peoples?
- What kinds of interventions, practices, policies are needed in education?
Postmodern realizations

- Social conditions are contextualized to people, place and attitude.
- Universals are being questioned, including privileged knowledge and culture.
- Diversity of voices are being raised.
- One size education does not fit all.
Two-Prong Project

- Deconstruction: exposing political, moral and theoretical inadequacies of colonialism and culturalism in education.

- Reconstruction: transforming education and unleashing the potential of students in a knowledge society
Conventional Education

- Built on individualism, subjective values, and reason.
- Committed to public education to all children
- Development of human capacity above memory
- Liberating commitment to rescue child from circumstances
- Creates idealism (e.g. equality) detached from circumstances and communities.
Conventional Education

- Socially and culturally constructed through the state.
- Hegemonically distributed within systems that are raced, classed, and gendered,
- Normalizes and privileges Eurocentric, patriarchal, classed ideologies and discourses,
- Conventional methodology and disciplines repeat and affirm Eurocentric perspective.
- Names and controls difference, norms, worthiness, and significance through dominance.

(Elizabeth Minnick, 1990, *Transforming Knowledge*)
Decolonization

- We must decolonize existing education laws, policy, and structures based on racial or cultural superiority.

- This decolonized education is not just for Indigenous students, not just about Indigenous students, but for all students.
Education can either maintain domination or it can liberate. It can sustain colonization in neocolonial ways or it can decolonize. Every school is either a site of reproduction or a site of change.
Decolonizing education requires that we

- Become aware of Anglocentric, colonial bias and its values and its effects on everyone (conscientisation);
- Develop educational systems based on Indigenous humanities, thought, knowledge, worldviews;
- Generate reflective and meaningful transformations of theory and practice to heal present and past.
Culturalism

A theory that holds ‘culture’ as its central foundation. Forwarded by anthropology, culture incorporates the ideologies and discursive regimes of universalism, cultural racism, and cultural incompatibility in order to construct and perpetuate a ‘two race’ binary. It requires that anthropological notions of culture and two-race binary be privileged as the primary analytical tool for deliberations of pedagogy in all instances.
Culturalism is the educational project of Eurocentrism.
Binary Culture Programming

- Cultural programs developed out of anthropological incommensurability theory to argue for separate or special programs based on difference and incapacity.

- Cultural sensitivity and diversity of ‘other’

- Bi-cognitive learning styles research

- Indigenous knowledge is treated as a product of tribal politics/identity—a by-product of culture, while Western knowledge is treated as a depoliticized context.
Evolving Reforms in Education based on Culturalism

Compensatory Education
ESL/Bilingual Education
Education for the ‘At risk’ or ‘other’
Cross-cultural Education
Multiculturalism
Diversity
Remedies to Culturalism

- Accept heterogeneity and diversity as the norm.
- Reconceptualize mainstream as changing and fluid place.
- Rethink what distinctiveness means.
- New narratives require new ethics of research that embrace respectful dialogue and collaboration.
Our challenge is to determine “when a consideration of cultural difference and special needs and interests is significant, and when it is not; when it will lead to greater justice or greater inequality.”

(McConaghy, 2000, 15)
We have all been marinated in Eurocentrism.
Cognitive Imperialism in Education

- English dominant instruction erodes diversity of cultures, languages, and knowledges.
- Assumes superiority of knowledge and people in hegemonic norms of education.
- ‘Other’ depicted as cultural manifestation of maladjustment, not normative centre.
- Lack of diversity in the academy is projected as a deficiency of the ‘other’ or deficiency of cultural understanding.
Manifestations of Cognitive Imperialism

- Defines ‘success’ as assimilation to dominant values and norms, languages.
- Results in contradictory identities and ambivalent self-concept.
- No conventional formal place where Aboriginal knowledge has been allowed to thrive.
- Aboriginal educators are projected as ‘experts’ in all matters ‘Aboriginal’.
“Old knots and tangles that are in all our minds and practices must be located and untied if there are to be threads available with which to weave the new into anything like a whole cloth, a coherent but by no means homogeneous pattern.”

(Elizabeth Minnich, 1990)
RCAP Report argues

- Ethnocentric and demeaning attitudes linger in policies that purport to work on behalf of Aboriginal people…

- Although no longer formally acknowledged, this does not lessen their contemporary influence and their capacity to generate modern variants (Vol. 1:249, 252-53).
Failures of Reforms in Education of Indians

- Only 37% of First Nations students complete high school.
- Only 9% of these students enter university.
- Only 3% of those who enter complete their post-secondary education.
- Only 3 of 70 Aboriginal languages are expected to survive this century.

(RCAP 1996)
Modern Colonial Variants in Contemporary Education

- Native Studies is offered as a Native-white relations story that is the only legitimate narrative for Indigenous peoples in the academy.
- Discourse in texts represent dominance in what is erased, thought significant, and made explicit, constantly contested and debated.
- Racism projects Aboriginals in discourses of incapacity and inferior, constantly in need of development.
- Aboriginal people, language and knowledge has no contemporary significance and value.
To assume Aboriginal education is a problem of method and not dominance is to perpetuate the othering and subordination of Aboriginal people.

Silence is the shield and symptom of dominance.

Education cannot be the doctor if it is the still the disease.
Postcolonial as Reconstruction

A complex and contested scholarship connected to a form of criticism which is, more or less, a set of reading practices that foreground contemporary issues for the active legacy of colonialism, looking to the past for analyzing the inequities in the present.
‘Postcolonial’ as a term

- Constructs a strategy responding to historical experience of colonization and imperialism.
- Viewed as liberation from colonial imposition, as removing brutal oppression and domination.
- Envisions practices for transformation, an act of hope, a light in the darkness.
- Rethinking conceptual, institutional, cultural, legal and other boundaries that are taken for granted and assumed universal, but act as structural barriers to Aboriginal people, women, visible minorities, and others.
Postcolonial Sensibilities

- Engage and draw from the voices once silenced
- Dialogues inform education policies and practices
- Create innovative institutions from theories of education that recognize difference and poverty as subsets of dominance.
- Creates new discourses and attitudes of diversity as norm to be enabled and empowered.
Dialogue negotiates healing through real human responses to dehumanizing history.

Discourse analysis or how things are spoken about illustrates worthiness of social goods taken up and illustrates dominance at work.
No person is privileged with the knowledge of how to achieve a decolonized education.

Every teacher has been a victim and beneficiary of the same educational system. We are in the same circle.

We are all learners. We must become critical learners and healers within a wounded space.

Decolonizing education must be for everyone in the system for diversity to survive.
Postcolonial Education

- Focuses on change of discourses, ideologies, ways of responding and reacting to them, relearning and unlearning conditions of oppression.
- Deals with anti-bias policies and practices, to stop repetition of oppressive discursive practices, harmful histories, and partial knowledge.
- Constructs new knowledge based on voices of the marginalized and silenced, recognizing the diverse heterogeneity of group, and the experiences and knowledges they bring.
Postcolonial Humanities

- Make legitimate that which has been delegitimated
- Reclaim histories, voices, arts, oral and literary traditions in the academy.
- Reject the ‘Indian’ of the Eurocentric imagination.
- Critique use of definitions and value of self definition and self representation
Sui Generis Education

- Healing and restoration
- Dialogue and participation
- Multi-languages engaged
- Self representation
- Self determination based on treaties
- Reinvestment in holistic and sustainability of ways of thinking, communicating and acting together.
“Many torches stand to give one light.”

Peter Hanohono 1996
References


