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Comparative Education

January 28th, 2014

Education as a Mechanism of Assimilation

The word “assimilation” has two major definitions according to Rogers Brubaker (2001): one general and one specific. The first, “general” definition emphasizes “increasing similarity or likeness” whilst the “specific” definition references “complete absorption” (p. 534). The term “assimilation” tends to have a very negative connotation in today’s society, evoking thoughts of programs like Nazi eugenics and the indoctrination of Native Americans in the 19th and early 20th centuries. For thousands of years, dominant societies have attempted to eradicate a particular rival group’s customs and social norms, leading to the colloquial taboo on the word and the process. The other broad and less politicized “general” definition sounds closer to what John Berry (1997) calls “acculturation.” Whether or not education should or could be used as an agent of assimilation depends on the definition used. If one uses the former definition, meaning “increasing similarity or likeness” or “acculturation,” then education can and should be used for cultural assimilation.

Any type of cultural assimilation involving education would need widespread “institutional changes,” focused towards a “multicultural education” of all students (Banks 2001, p. 3). F. Graeme Chalmers (2002) focused on multiculturalism in art education and came to the conclusion that teachers prefer “celebratory multiculturalism,” less forceful, militant, and controversial than “critical” multiculturalism, because of its simplicity (p. 295). In order to implement celebratory multiculturalism, James Banks (2001) advocates for widespread changes in curriculum, teaching materials and methods, “attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of teachers and administrators,” and in the “goals, norms, and culture of the school” (p. 3). He also defines four additional elements (besides curriculum development)

required for proper implementation of multiculturalism, including “the knowledge construction process,” “prejudice reduction,” “an equity pedagogy,” and “an empowering school culture and social structure” (p. 4). Banks also emphasizes that all students can benefit from a multicultural education across the board, “not just [the] low-income students and students of color” (p. 4). When students learn about other cultures, they learn about ways of thinking different than their own, developing their ability to empathize with others (p. 10). Teachers are the vital link between all of these processes and success. If a school can boast “high quality teachers” who know their students, “are experts in their content specialization, pedagogy, and child development” (p. 13-4), can “avoid stereotyping,” and “value inclusiveness” (Chalmers 2002, p. 296) while implementing the five factors of multicultural education, then academic achievement of all students will increase (Banks 2001, p. 14). In order to promote a less dominant culture’s smooth assimilation into a dominant society, there must be strong multicultural education for both groups to ease tensions and promote equality.

For hundreds of years, the United States attempted to “completely absorb” the Native American culture, using education as the main means of doing so. John Bloom (2000) explains that the federal government started a boarding school program “during the late nineteenth century as part of a crusade by a coalition of reformers who aimed to assimilate Native Americans into dominant Anglo-Protestant society through education” (p. xii). According to Jane Simonsen (2006), politicians and other “domestic scientists” believed they could destroy the “tribal ways” of the Native Americans by forcing them to “attend school” and “participate in local economies and national government” through the Dawes Act of 1887 (p. 2). This attempt to eradicate Native American culture is an example of the more specific and more colloquial definition of “assimilation.” Those children who, with their parents’ permission, “decided to go to boarding school” to learn “the white man’s ways” could claim to be neither of their fathers nor “entirely of ‘the white man’” (p. 190). According to Robert

Trennert (1982), by 1900 many educators “generally accepted the increasingly prevalent theory that Indians were childlike in nature and incapable of assimilating into white society on an equal basis” (p. 288). The Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Francis Leupp even “suggested that the system failed to produce self-reliant Indians and, instead of giving Indian children a useful education, protected them in an artificial environment” (Trennert 1982, p. 288). Despite this vocal objection, the program continued until the mid-1970s, with no favorable results. Clearly then, the “complete absorption” of Native Americans into the dominant society failed. This is just one example of a dominant group’s attempts (over more than 100 years) to eradicate another culture through education. Rogers Brubaker (2001) explains that strict assimilationist policies generally backfire, “provoking a reactive mobilization against such assimilatory pressures” (p. 534). Therefore, employing education as a mechanism for *complete* cultural assimilation of the more colloquial definition seems to be impossible and improbable.

The real question, whether or not education should be used to increase the similarity of cultures, can be answered with a conditional yes. This type of assimilation need not be “morally objectionable” and in fact “some forms of assimilation are indeed widely thought to be desirable,” especially “linguistic” and “socioeconomic” acculturation (Brubaker 2001, p. 534, 541). Brubaker maintains “success in schooling, occupational mobility, and full participation in public life” necessitates “linguistic assimilation” (p. 541). In the United States for example, “the intergenerational acquisition of English” is desirable, but only without “the intergenerational loss of competence in the language of origin” (p. 541). Therefore, curricula should be taught in the country or province’s official language, with classes given to those students who are not proficient, so as to afford the same opportunities to all students later in life regardless of language spoken at home. To some extent, the types of assimilation which respect existing cultures should be required in society, especially from immigrants who have

moved to their new country on their own free will with a high degree of “voluntariness” and “permanence” (Berry 1997, p. 8). These people chose to embrace a new culture and, to an extent, leave their old one behind. With a particularly large influx of immigrants, “multiculturalism” can only go so far before one of the cultures becomes completely overwhelmed (p.8). For the sake of fairness, the culture with low mobility who occupied the geographic area first should not be that culture. At the same time, however, schools should attempt to teach a well-rounded multicultural curriculum in every subject in order to promote a pluralist culture, preventing this cultural overrun and connecting with each of their students (Nash 1990). According to Nash, schools have the ability to shape consciousness to some extent, so conceivably one could use this to improve the socioeconomic standing and solidarity of a community. Changing the culture of a school by uniting the different individual students while keeping their individual qualities intact can improve a school’s performance and the community around it drastically. Students will feel a sense of belonging and collective identity which, if paired with a multicultural education, could lead to a new culture of innovation and academic achievement. When assimilation, coupled with multicultural education, is used to increase the similarities of multiple cultures, individuals, schools, and communities, all have the potential to improve by moving past any serious cultural disruptions.

While celebratory multicultural education should be used as a mechanism for assimilation, several issues need to be avoided. Firstly, proper multicultural education as defined by James Banks (2001) with five distinct dimensions can be costly in time and resources, due in large part to the vast amounts of extra teacher training necessary to implement it properly. Many teachers would also need to fundamentally change the way in which they present materials and in fact their entire pedagogy. By no means does this make it impossible to implement, just highly impractical for many schools with tight budgets.

Teachers also must ensure they do not achieve “celebratory multicultural education” by simply knocking one culture down to bring others up: the goal should be to elevate all cultures. Schools would need to make sure they do not use the curriculum to apologize for history and stir up additional cultural resentment or conflicts as well (Chalmers 2002). “Hypoculturalism,” avoided with skillful and knowledgeable teachers, can also create tension because “only natives of a culture are authorized to speak on its behalf” (p. 298). To implement assimilation through celebratory multiculturalist education (including Banks’ five dimensions) would require a wealth of highly-trained and top-notch teachers to circumnavigate the problems to which it could lead.

Although assimilation of a culture into a dominant society can be difficult, with the aid of celebratory multicultural education, it becomes less so. The more specific definition of “assimilation” may mean “complete absorption,” but education cannot accomplish this in modern society. Therefore if we take the more general “acculturation” definition, we can see that assimilation is indeed possible and in fact made easier through multicultural education. Most if not all societal problems that could stem from assimilation can be fixed through proper multicultural education. This can take quite a lot of resources to implement properly, so while assimilation may be possible, practicality may not be its strong suit. However, if a dominant culture is going to “assimilate” or “acculturate” another group, reducing ethnic, racial, or cultural tensions, education can and should be used.

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