

## **Intercultural education and the global-local context: Critiquing the culturalist narrative**

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Theory and practice in intercultural education remain problematic as they continue to reflect the tensions between universalistic and particularistic agendas. Particularism is manifested in a culturalist narrative which is mired in a failure to subject relativistic postmodernism to adequate critique. At the same time, universalism is frequently displayed in an attachment to utopian globalism which denies social complexities, divisions and inequalities. This has resulted in conceptualisations of intercultural education which are either wedded to an uncritical multiculturalism or to a futuristic universe of cultural unity. If intercultural education is to involve the mutual legitimisation of collective existence it must focus on the concerns of young people as experienced in their immediate relationships. As such, it moves away from reified notions of cultural identity towards the realism of multiple identities, localised tensions, conflicts and affiliations. In addition, this alternative approach places critical engagement and the pursuit of justice at the centre of intercultural education. In this way, connections between the local and the global can be explored on the basis of an agenda based on the assumption of material and other inequalities which may be diverge from conventional cultural, ethnic and national contexts. Thus, intercultural education directs its attention to such issues as: resource allocation, the environment, collective decision-making, and social welfare. Above all, a central aspect of this approach is the application of reasoned enquiry in the process of communication and intercultural dynamics in the educational context.

### **Introduction**

In this paper I attempt to highlight some problematic issues regarding theory and practice in intercultural education. In so doing, it suggests a re-conceptualisation in a manner which demands critical engagement with previously held paradigmatic assumptions. The paper directs attention to the recurring themes of universalism and particularism against the background of globalisation and ethno-national politics. In particular, I will focus first of all on the difficulties associated with a culturalist approach to intercultural education and secondly on what might be seen as a more fruitful approach which connects with the immediate, local experiences of children and young people and the pursuit of justice.

In its focus on justice the paper does not intend to become locked into a lengthy debate on human rights or the merits / demerits of such thinkers as Rawls and Nozick. Indeed, it seeks as much as possible to steer clear of engagement with grand abstractions and instead intends to privilege the recent work of those who ground their ideas in the experience of individuals and groups as they move through their lives in cities, villages, organisations, and networks of social interaction. Insofar as justice figures in the central argument we can be immediately drawn to the experiences of children and young people in their interactions with each other, their parents and other authority

figures, and the institutions with which they engage. When justice is interpreted as fairness, a concept all too familiar children, it can readily be understood in the context of interpersonal conflict and the allocation of resources. As such, it will be encountered at diverse levels of intensity and in a variety of social contexts, including schools, classrooms and recreational areas.

At this point, allow me to refer briefly to the recent work of Amartya Sen (2010). Sen's background in philosophy and economics, together with his citation of classical Indian thinkers, has enabled him to engage critically with a range of conventional perspectives. To a significant extent, Sen, in his exploration of the idea of justice, is able to avoid the pitfalls of cultural parochialism. For Sen, notions of justice are required to be tested on the basis of reason and reasonableness against the backcloth of global reality. Accordingly, it will be a central concern to demonstrate that reason and reasonableness can be separated from culturalist narratives in the re-conceptualisation of intercultural education as a pragmatic endeavour.

The goal, therefore, is to re-position intercultural education such that it engages with the lived experiences of children and young people within the global context of the 21st century. At this point it may be necessary to engage initially with what some may see as a commonly held contemporary paradox. In the midst of the globalising uniformity of the international economic order there is apparently a continuation and renaissance of diversity in the politics of identity. The story is that the politics of civil liberties and civic participation, together with resource accumulation and allocation, are increasingly eclipsed by the politics of national and ethnic distinction, although recent events in the Middle East and North Africa might suggest otherwise.

The process of critical engagement with resource accumulation and allocation issues at the fulcrum of local-global contexts will necessitate an encounter with issues of conflict. Multiculturalist intercultural education has, in the past, had a tendency to downplay conflict as a fundamental, normal aspect of the experience of young people. Rather, conflict has been viewed as dysfunctional and pathological, and frequently in the context of inter-ethnic relations a signifier of racist antipathy. Much of this thinking is rooted in a somewhat superficial reading of intercultural relations with the adoption of relativistic positions in educational practice and an ideology of *culturalism*.

## **Us and the others**

Culturalism suggests a perspective that promotes the reification of the process of distinct collective identity formation at the expense of other macro and indeed micro social considerations. It privileges particularistic, apparently cohesive modes of human existence, characterised by more or less uncontested moral and social codes. Culturalism readily identifies 'us' and the 'others'; it simplifies through the promotion of individuals as little more than representatives of their ethnicity, religion, or linguistic group. (This was exemplified, somewhat amusingly, when I visited a small village primary school in England some years ago during what was called 'multicultural week'. I happened to be present in a classroom on the occasion of a talk on the culture of India by someone who it was assumed would know a great deal from first-hand

knowledge of 'the culture'. The only problem was that the speaker, though of 'Indian' descent, was from Africa, had not been to India and made elementary factual errors in her exposition.) When positioned within a context of a Western neo-colonialist narrative culturalism frequently descends into a kind of unquestioning liberal orientalism: the romanticisation of reified non-Western 'cultures' and the negative labelling of 'Western' cultural practices.

Does this mean to say that the classic politically progressive grand narratives have greater credence? The promotion of the eventual elimination of cultural diversity as the preferred solution to social injustice and through a universalistic stance suggests, in contrast to culturalism, an essentially globalist position. Here, we may identify globalism as a perspective that promotes the reification of the process of transnational social and economic integration at the expense of a consideration of the relative autonomy of cultural characteristics. The suppression of ethno-national sentiments in the Soviet Union and other communist countries illustrated the consequences of the imposition of globalist ideology.

The 21st century, however, has enjoined us to re-think many of these assumptions. First of all, a good deal of uncertainty has been generated in the wake of recent events and ongoing situations, including: the renaissance of politicised religion; 9/11; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the continuing tensions and conflicts in Israel, Palestine and Lebanon; the current challenges to traditional and autocratic power in a number of nation-states; and the ongoing debates over faith, education and public life. As a consequence, cultural relativism is increasingly challenged by a pressing need to invoke principles connected with issues of social, indeed global, justice.

So, while progressive educationists and social activists continue to confront prejudice and racism both in theory and practice there is an increasing tension between the conventional, relativistic tolerance enshrined in antiracism and the apparent intolerance and nihilism portrayed in absolutist ideologies. The Western liberal conscience is seemingly tested in a confrontation with illiberalism. The condemnation of internationalised terror and the use of armed weaponry by state regimes against their own populations may, in the views of some, come dangerously close to a renewed negative stereotyping of cultures that appear as non-Western. On the other hand, in the educational context, it may challenge the primacy of diversity and pluralism in pedagogical processes and institutional structures, an almost paradigmatic position which begins to seem somewhat unstable when juxtaposed with an equally firm position on the universal character of human rights.

The type of discourse characterised by a culturalist position invokes a pre-modern perspective on culture, bringing to mind Durkheim's notion of mechanical solidarity, a feature characteristic of less complex societies, untainted by intercultural contact and reflected in homogeneity and similarity (Giddens 1972, p128). Here, in suggesting that individuals are entirely subordinate to the distinct cultural practices of social groupings possessed of mechanical solidarity, the ascription of such distinctive homogeneity may tend to reinforce mutual exoticness and/or suspicion. This may be seen to become even more pronounced when culture and religion appear to coincide, noting in 2007, for

example, the sixtieth anniversary of the partition of India where the previous imperialist, heterogeneous entity was supposed to give way to two distinct relatively homogeneous nation-states. Yet to achieve this, significant geographical movements of populations were necessary, even though the resulting (mainly religious) 'homogeneity' was one-sided and arguably ignored other similar claims from inside pre-independence India to nation-statehood.

The reification process is stark: in the process of the construction of homogenous 'cultures' there is also the construction of specific forms of homogeneous *otherness*. Pakistani 'culture' became identified in contrast to the newly formed otherness of Indian 'culture', while in more recent times the construction of mutual otherness is observed in the emergent nation-states in the former Yugoslavia. Similarly, in the British Isles, the implications of the partition of Ireland have been such that Northern Ireland was seen by the majority of its population as having a Protestant Christian culture, thereby assigning a Roman Catholic identity of otherness to the South (the Republic).

So, it may be supposed that perspectives have changed. It is commonly held by those associated with intercultural education – especially those who have been active in organisations such as the International Association for Intercultural Education (IAIE) – that it has moved beyond the paradigmatic assumptions of multiculturalism. Jagdish Gundara has on more than one occasion stated that 'multicultural' should be reserved as a descriptor for societies characterised by linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity and not necessarily as a policy indicator for educators and politicians (Gundara, 2000; 2008). The fact that 'multiculturalism' remains current and increasingly ascribed negative connotations by the popular media should not obscure its lingering influence in intercultural education. The observation that attacks on multiculturalism are often a mask for a nationalist right-wing agenda should not prevent those concerned with intercultural education from undertaking a critical examination of the taken-for-granted perspectives which underpin practice in diverse countries.

At this point in the argument, it is helpful to consider the view that 'multiculturalist' intercultural education is predicated on a non-realizable utopia. Of course, utopias are never far from the thinking of those who seek to remedy the perceived ills of education. The egalitarian classless society was in part the aim of those who sought to end academic selection at the second level of schooling, while the self-regulating community was seen as the endgame for 'progressive' educators. Thus, with multiculturalism, where all will live and work in peace, love and harmony, no matter what their background and personal histories might be. Not only are such utopias non-realizable there must also be a degree of scepticism following Basil Bernstein's view that 'education cannot compensate for society' (Bernstein, 1971).

A second, connected, consideration is that of misplaced liberal ideology in education. In its contemporary guise liberalism not infrequently confuses educational aims and objectives with educational methodology, a confusion classically highlighted by Antonio Gramsci. In aiming to create a climate and culture of co-operation, antiracism and mutual respect schools may find that educational programmes which focus on the

positive nature of diversity and the negative character of prejudice and discrimination may have the opposite effect. Indeed, a further consideration is the outcome of well-intentioned liberalism insofar as there may be a failure to connect with children's experiences, not all of which suggest a readiness to receive and process the message of multiculturalism. In addition, an emphasis on 'culture' may ignore the tensions and conflicts which are grounded in material factors, many of which are often more significant for young people and their families. Poverty, lack of educational opportunity and the prospects of unemployment frequently figure more prominently in children's lives than the divisions engendered by 'culture'.

Finally, the multiculturalist agenda, in its emphasis on diversity, can easily ignore transnational experiences of ongoing globalised encounters. Curiously, globalisation – however it may be defined – may often be sidestepped in pedagogical practice predicated on multiculturalism. The processes of global economic integration continue to have significant consequences for people's lives throughout the world, not least their livelihoods and the rules governing their cultural practices.

### **A critique of assumptions**

What I am therefore proposing is an approach to intercultural education located within a cross-national framework based upon a critique of assumptions underpinning conventional wisdom in multiculturalist approaches to intercultural education. These assumptions coalesce around a requirement to recognise the legitimacy and integrity of cultures. The focus upon diversity and difference between nations / ethnic groups has been progressively relevant to late twentieth and early twenty-first century educational policy. As increased migration introduced new groups, often visibly identifiable, to existing populations, together with the consequences of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States, the emphasis on the need to recognise difference, in the context of ethnic egalitarianism, became enshrined in multiculturalism. Whatever the distinction there may be between multicultural education and current thinking in intercultural education it is clear that the former has continued to inform, in an unreflective manner, a good deal of pedagogical practice.

On the other hand, a focus upon similarities in human behaviour and social practice provides support for a universalistic view of social relations that finds expression in such notions as human rights and international law. Twentieth century anthropologists, unlike their nineteenth century predecessors, increasingly searched for uniformities – a search which gained urgency in the wake of the Holocaust, predicated as it was upon supposed hierarchical and immutable human differences. The work of Levi-Strauss (1968) together with Chomsky's (2006) perspectives on language exemplified this quest for a deep underlying uniform structure of human existence and social intercourse. Such an approach could not only add weight to the forces of modernisation it could also lend credence to the process of the internationalisation of morality – and even legality. Against this backcloth, the United Nations represented the hopes of those who sought a global solution not only to the threats of war but also to poverty, under-education and violations of individual liberties. The post-war political settlement in Europe and Japan, while clearly creating a framework for economic revival and

increased multinational commercial / industrial enterprise, nonetheless also provided the space for the development of social harmonisation. The European Union, Council of Europe, OECD and ASEAN in varying degrees sought to drive national and international policy in the direction of peace and co-operation. Likewise, in the wake of postcolonial independence organisations such as the African Union represented a modernist quest for political harmony among emergent nation-states and a bid to downplay traditional collective loyalties, especially when they threatened to destabilise the region.

However, following these statements it may be helpful to add some further comments. First of all, it can be argued that the dominant narrative informing intercultural education policy and practice in the West over the last twenty years or so has been the outcome, to a considerable degree, of a colonial and neo-colonial heritage. To this end, the US, France and the UK are cited as exemplars of nation-states who, as a consequence of imperialist and neo-imperialist histories, have somewhat different versions of this narrative. The American version continues to emphasise: a process of nation-building, ongoing guilt over the treatment of non-white minorities, and a desperation to be viewed as the international standard-bearer for equality, democracy and opportunity. The contradiction between a nation borne out of a struggle for freedom from colonial rule and the perpetuation of internal colonialism in respect of Native Americans, African-Americans and other groups became all too apparent in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The French version, despite the presence of significant minority populations originating from the Maghreb and elsewhere, still maintains the promise of an eventual common identity derived from the principles underlying the 1789 Revolution. Entry into the arena of intercultural education for French policymakers has been a difficult task since the post-war period has witnessed a mortal wound to fundamental assumptions concerning the nature of France (e.g. the Indo-Chinese War, the struggle for Algerian independence, etc.). Only the relatively recent conflicts associated with the *banlieues* has possibly prompted an acceptance of, and some reflection on, the diverse character of French society and its ramifications for intercultural education.

The UK version, typically, has evolved in an ad hoc manner alongside the disintegration of empire and the phenomenon of post-war immigration. The demand for labour in the developing and expanding welfare state, public transport and the building trades pulled in migrants from Ireland, from the Caribbean and the Indian Sub-continent while panics ensued over the supposed impact upon social relations and, more importantly, social order. The move from assimilationism to multiculturalism could be seen generally as a combination of reactive responses and high-minded liberalism, paralleling earlier policies towards the problems of social unrest said to be threatening the metropolitan regions of the UK at the end of the 19th century. At that time, the focus was on 'unruly' working-class youth though the later 1905 Aliens Act sought to restrict immigration from eastern Europe (mainly Jewish) which was perceived as having an increasingly negative impact on British society.

It might be further argued that this has been accompanied by a process of *infantilisation* of the less-industrialised, non-Western world. This indicates a tendency

to ascribe child status to adults – a tendency commonly occurring with the treatment of women in nineteenth century Western Europe. In the same way, non-Western nations are judged – and by extension non-Western ‘ethnic’ groups – to be less mature and therefore have less responsibility for their actions than the West. Hence, a propensity to justify violent actions which, if carried out by others in similar circumstances would be deemed unacceptable.

Secondly there is an inescapable link between this narrative and the relativistic postmodern agenda that filled the vacuum bequeathed by what some may see as the degeneration of the academic left. The postcolonial agenda while having an honourable connection with the anti-imperialist thinking associated with nineteenth and twentieth century socialism and liberalism became increasingly fragmented into single issue movements. In the era of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and statist social democracy in the West critical theorists in diverse disciplines – sociology, psychology, international relations, literary and cultural studies – frequently offered keen insights into patterns of social relations, media representations of reality and the human condition at large. These insights often ran counter to some of the tired but persistent variants of orthodox Marxism, challenging both the received wisdom of the left as well as offering an alternative to the assumptions of capitalism. The writings emanating from the Frankfurt School, the sociology of C. Wright Mills (1956), the cultural critiques of Raymond Williams (1961) and Herbert Marcuse (1964), the existential psychology of R. D. Laing (1960), among others, constituted an, at times, interesting cornucopia of ideas to invigorate the late 20th century academic scene.

### **Neither culturalism nor globalism?**

However, with the fall of the Communist empire and the apparent decline of the secular grand narratives, postmodernism permeated academic left thinking to the point where some would say that it began to lose any sense of direction (Epstein 1997). In an effort not to appear to be upholding a Western-centric view of the world, naïve relativism came to the fore with the assumption that it was illegitimate to challenge social practices that prevailed among non-Western peoples and minority ethnic and cultural groups. The major justification for this was the impact of Western colonialism and continued existence of neo-colonialism. Some might venture that it found particular political expression in, for example, anti-Zionism, with a minority of the academic left in support of violent extremism and suicide bombings. With the frequent elision of anti-Zionism and anti-Jewish sentiments it suggests that some indeed might have succumbed to Bebel’s characterisation of anti-Semitism as the ‘socialism of fools’. In any case, it demonstrates the consequences of adopting a culturalist perspective.

However, the view taken in this paper is that neither culturalism nor globalism reflect the complexity and fluidity of macro and micro interpersonal relations. Nineteenth century – Western – anthropology attempted to fix both biological and cultural boundaries (and indeed physical, mental and emotional characteristics to be found in individuals representative of these bounded categories). Contemporary social science has generally been seen to have progressed beyond that. A more mature reading of

history would suggest that cultural identity is the consequence of a dynamic, defined as much in relation to the collective ‘other’ as in relation to the collective ‘self’.

So, what are the implications for intercultural education? An immediate response is that if there is to be any chance of success in enabling children and young people to make the transition to adulthood in a way that facilitates mutuality and reciprocity there needs to be a more modest and realistic agenda. There may need to be a move away from an approach which emphasises a superficial mutual understanding of ‘cultures’ and towards an approach that considers how we manage our mutual *misunderstandings*, suspicions and hatreds. Such an approach underscores the local contexts of inter-group relations and the immediate experiences of children and young people which are typically characterised by a mix of tensions, conflicts, friendships and transactions. In cities with diverse populations in Europe, North America and elsewhere local milieux may reflect socio-economic rather than ethnic divisions per se. What may more pertinent is the micro-sociological context of *neighbours*, i.e. those who inhabit contiguous spaces, originally as a consequence of transactional processes, though this may be largely historical. Conventionally, neighbours have not been drawn together as a result of mutual attraction; on the contrary, the relationship between neighbours is often developed and maintained through the informal but effective management of tensions. It is of course possible that in time such relationships acquire a *Gemeinschaft* type character with affective, familial overtones (Tonnie, 1955) – or, more rarely, degenerate into open conflict.

### **Reconsidering the concept of culture**

I trust that my rejection of culturalism is not taken to denote the elimination of culture from intercultural education for that would indeed be bizarre. However, it might mean that we need to re-consider the concept, possibly along the lines of Chabal and Daloz (2006) who suggest we seek to understand culture as a “system of meanings” which makes sense to people within a given context. Intercultural education might therefore signify a process which promotes learning in order to obtain access to shared structures of meaning through gaining a knowledge and understanding of symbolic systems (ref. Ecco and others). In particular, it suggests:

- a critical approach to the determinism, on the one hand, of cultural identity and, on the other, of globalisation i.e. culturalism and globalism;
- and, as a corollary, an emphasis on dissimilar universes of meaning framed by the dynamic, historically situated character of social life.

Intercultural education therefore cannot be separated either from a richer appreciation of history or from the ongoing experiences of young people.

Consequently, it will need to engage with the deconstruction of the provinciality of culturalism and the hegemony of globalism. The political events of recent years in Northern Ireland might suggest that beneath the surface of the old rhetoric historic ‘enemies’ are able to construct new realities. Likewise, in 21st century intercultural education we should be able to construct a pathway whereby there is a recognition both



of the dynamic integrity and of the historical interconnectedness of collective identities.

This aspect of collective identity is signalled in work undertaken in respect of the experiences of young refugees who had come to the UK from Kosovo against the backdrop of war and degradation (Bash & Zezlina-Phillips, 2006). In this paper the use of a somewhat eclectic collection of theoretical ideas was employed in an attempt to clarify some issues surrounding what is a particularly complex dynamic. This eclectic collection ranged from the macro sociological to the psychodynamic, from the geographical to the metaphors of quantum mechanics. No apology was made for this eclecticism; indeed, it was regarded it as a particular strength since it permitted an exploration of the research issues in a manner unconstrained by the usual orthodoxies. Likewise, the intention is for this eclectic spirit to continue to inform thinking in respect of intercultural education in an attempt to connect children's actions and experiences with the broader socio-cultural context.

Accordingly, while it is accepted that cultural identity and otherness are not only at the very core of conventional thinking in respect of intercultural education, it must also be noted that they are also the source of much difficulty. The complications of gender and socio-economic status, let alone individuality, are sufficient to give pause for a re-consideration of such thinking. Thus, the case is made for taking a view that intercultural education should be re-modelled on non-*culturalist* lines. However, it should be emphasised at this stage that this is not to be taken as undervaluing the undoubtedly laudable motives of those who have sought to position current practice in intercultural education as a means of navigating through the quagmire of suspicion, tension and conflict. On the other hand, the central issue of relativism and absolutism has yet to be resolved since history and mythology are still more likely to succeed. Neither the Kantian maxim nor 'the golden rule' (do/do not do unto others what they would do/do not do unto you) carry much weight when there is a significant degree of intercultural conflict over physical or social space.

Secondly, however, there is an urgent need to focus on an educational objective that cuts through the debates and arguments surrounding relativism, dominance and submission. Such an objective suggests the privileging of reason, dialogue and civic engagement as both the means and the ends in contributing to the maturation of young people as citizens in a global context. It takes what many would regard as one of the foundations of education – the *process* itself – as the key to constructing a more effective model of intercultural education. However, that process is also required to be critical in character to ensure that participants do not seek refuge in formulaic culturalist solutions to problems, tensions and conflicts. Culture, rather than being perceived as the sole definer of existence, identity and behaviour, might then be seen as a resource for the transformation of being in the context of dialogic engagement.

Finally, to return to a theme signalled at the beginning of this paper, it is important that we consider intercultural education based on critique, reason, dialogue and civic engagement as education in pursuit of social – global – justice. We are not here concerned with exhorting children and young people to subscribe to a global human

rights agenda. Laudable though this might be in principle it has little relevance to social interaction at the local level where tensions in the school playground, competition for jobs and housing, and access to health care and other public resources are more significant. The pursuit of justice is played out in the process of critical engagement with such issues and, if intercultural education is viewed as an international endeavour, that pursuit takes on a global aspect.

The possibility is that such an approach can draw upon the rational potential of all young people. While this approach is not hostage to a naively romantic vision of humanity it also runs counter to the pessimism of Hobbes, the cynicism of Machiavelli and the kind of apocalyptic vision enshrined in the English novel, *The Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954). Indeed, it is possible that in this way a model of intercultural education may emerge which moves the focus towards processes of mutual gain, reciprocity and exchange, while at the same time enabling an acceptance of compromise that does not necessarily challenge loyalties to specific cultural groups. If, in the course of that, global and intercultural misunderstandings eventually melt into the background, then so much the better.

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