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Equity Pedagogy: An Essential Component of Multicultural Education

THE WIDESPREAD MISCONCEPTIONS about multicultural education have slowed its implementation and contributed to the contentious debate about its nature and purposes (D'Souza, 1991; Schlesinger, 1991). One of the most prevalent of these misconceptions is that the integration of content about diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial groups into the mainstream curriculum is both its essence and its totality. Thus the debate about multicultural education has focused primarily on content integration (e.g., the nature of the canon) and has largely ignored other important dimensions of multicultural education (Sleeter, 1995).

To be effectively implemented in schools, colleges, and universities, multicultural education must be broadly conceptualized and its various dimensions must be more carefully delineated. In previous publications, J.A. Banks (1993b, 1993c, 1994b) has conceptualized multicultural education as consisting of five dimensions: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure.[1]

In this article, we further explicate the concept of equity pedagogy, describe how it intersects with the other four dimensions, and clarify what it means for curriculum reform and classroom teaching and learning. We also describe the characteristics that are needed by teachers to actualize this dimension of multicultural education in the classroom.

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Equity Pedagogy: Meaning and Assumptions

We define equity pedagogy as teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within, and help create and perpetuate, a just, humane, and democratic society. This definition suggests that it is not sufficient to help students learn to read, write, and compute within the dominant canon without learning also to question its assumptions, paradigms, and hegemonic characteristics. Helping students become reflective and active citizens of a democratic society is at the essence of our conception of equity pedagogy.

Pedagogies that merely prepare students to fit into society and to experience social class mobility within existing structures—which are characterized by pernicious class divisions and racial, ethnic, and gender stratification—are not helpful in building a democratic and just society. An education for equity enables students not only to acquire basic skills but to use those skills to become effective agents for social change. We believe education within a pluralistic democratic society should help students to gain the content, attitudes, and skills needed to know reflectively, to care deeply, and to act thoughtfully (Banks, 1994a).

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The implementation of strategies such as cooperative learning and culturally relevant instruction within the context of existing assumptions and structures will not result in equity pedagogy. Instead current assumptions about teaching, students, learning, and the nature of U.S. society must be interrogated and reconstructed. Equity pedagogy also requires the dismantling of existing school structures that foster inequality. It cannot occur within a social and political context embedded with racism, sexism, and inequality.

Equity pedagogy actively involves students in a process of knowledge construction and production. It challenges the idea of instruction as transmission of facts and the image of the teacher as a citadel of knowledge and students as passive recipients of knowledge. Equity pedagogy alters the traditional power relationship between teachers and students. Most importantly, it assumes an integral relationship between knowledge and reflective action. Equity pedagogy creates an environment in which students can acquire, interrogate, and produce knowledge and envision new possibilities for the use of that knowledge for societal change (Banks, 1994b).

Our perspectives on equity pedagogy are guided by these assumptions: (a) There is an identifiable body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that constitute critical attributes of equity pedagogy; (b) critical attributes of equity pedagogy can be identified, taught, and learned; (c) competencies in equity pedagogy can be developed through formal instruction, reflection on life experiences, and opportunities to work with students and colleagues from diverse populations; (d) all teachers need to be able to competently implement equity pedagogy and related teaching strategies because all students benefit from them; (e) in-depth knowledge of an academic discipline, pedagogy, and their students' cultures are prerequisites for teachers to successfully implement equity pedagogy; (f) competency in equity pedagogy requires a process of reflection and growth; and (g) equity pedagogy cannot be implemented in isolation from the other four dimensions of multicultural education described above. It is interrelated in a complex way with the other dimensions (Banks, 1993c).

Characteristics of Equity Pedagogy

Equity pedagogy is a dynamic instructional process that not only focuses on the identification and use of effective instructional techniques and methods but also on the context in which they are used. Cooperative learning, for example, can be an effective instructional technique (Cohen, 1994; Slavin, 1983). However, when it is used without an awareness of contextual issues such as status differences among students, it can reinforce stereotypes and inequality in the classroom (Cohen & Roper, 1972).

Equity pedagogy challenges teachers to use teaching strategies that facilitate the learning process. Instead of focusing on the memorization of knowledge constructed by authorities, students in classrooms where equity pedagogy is used learn to generate knowledge and create new understandings (Banks, 1993a; Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Students make connections between the autobiographical experiences of knowers and the knowledge they create. In classrooms where knowledge construction takes place, teachers enable students to identify and interrogate the positionality of knowers and to construct their own interpretations of reality (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Code, 1991; Tetreault, 1993).

During the knowledge construction process, students relate ideas and perspectives and make judgments and evaluations. Instead of looking for *the* single answer to a problem, students are encouraged to generate multiple solutions and perspectives. They also explore how problems arise and how they are related to other problems, issues, and concepts.

Like the other dimensions of multicultural education, equity pedagogy provides a basis for addressing critical aspects of schooling and for transforming curricula and schools. The discussion that follows relates equity pedagogy to two dimensions of multicultural education: content integration and an empowering school culture and social structure.

School Culture and Social Structure

A serious examination of the culture and social structure of the school raises significant questions about institutional characteristics such as tracking and the power relationships between students and teachers, and between teachers and administrators. The school culture and social structure are powerful determinants of how students learn to perceive themselves. These factors influence the social interactions that take place between students and teachers and among students, both inside and outside the classroom.

Tracking and power relationships within a school are important components of its deep structure (Tye, 1987). The deep structure includes the bell schedule, the physical uniformity of classrooms, test scores, and various factors that allow teachers to maintain control in the classroom (Tye, 1987). Equity pedagogy challenges the deep structure of schools because its requirements for scheduling, arrangement of physical space, and control are frequently at odds with traditional instructional methods that reinforce the structure of schools.

If students are to be involved in the production of knowledge, they need class schedules that allow time for these activities. The 50-minute time slot usually does not allow students the time they need for reflection, content integration, and synthesis. Furthermore, students who are involved in producing knowledge may need to work in places other than the classroom. Teachers may not be able to exercise as much control over students who are working in other areas of the school building, such as the library, or at sites off campus.

These elements of the deep structure of schools are important components of the hidden curriculum. When teachers use equity pedagogy that challenges the deep structure of schools, important aspects of the hidden curriculum are often revealed. Becoming aware of the relationship between the school culture, the social structure, and the deep structure of schools can heighten the teacher's awareness of the power of the hidden curriculum, or what Jackson (1992) calls the "untaught lessons."

The Hidden Curriculum

School teaching and learning take place primarily in groups and through social interactions. Interactions between teachers and students and among students are important parts of the relationship between equity pedagogy and the hidden curriculum. Implementing equity pedagogy requires teachers to understand how students perceive social interactions with their teachers, what they learn from them, and the extent to which students perceive their teachers as caring persons. Equity pedagogy can help reveal the nature of the hidden curriculum by encouraging teachers to raise questions such as: Is this class meaningful for my students? Would my students like a different teacher? Why or why not? What gaps exist between what I am teaching and what my students are learning? If there are gaps, why? If not, why not?

Significant adult-student interactions often occur within the context of the hidden curriculum. The number of people available to work with students in the classroom is an important part of the hidden curriculum. Some classes—often differentiated by designations such as gifted and accelerated—have many parent and community volunteers available to provide classroom help and to implement enrichment programs. The adults in these classes are able to provide students with individualized instruction. This communicates the implicit message that the students are special and important. Teachers who work in schools in which some classes have multiple adult helpers and other classes have only one adult should realize that such factors can severely limit the effectiveness of culturally sensitive pedagogy and cooperative learning.

When used in isolation, instructional strategies such as cooperative learning and constructivist techniques cannot sufficiently deal with the problems embedded in the hidden curriculum. To transform pedagogy, the adults in schools must address the social-class, racial, and ethnic inequalities embedded in the differential levels of support given to different classes and schools. The construction of equity in schools as well as the implementation of culturally-sensitive teaching methods are necessary to actualize equity pedagogy in classrooms and schools.

The physical arrangement of space in a classroom is also a cogent factor in the hidden curriculum. It communicates implicit messages to students. When chairs in a classroom are lined up in straight rows facing the teacher, the implicit message is that all students are expected to participate in the same activities simultaneously and to learn in identical ways as directed by the teacher (Tye, 1987).

Learning centers, on the other hand, suggest that students can legitimately engage in different activities, that the students are the focus in the classroom, and that learning can be interesting and rewarding. Teachers who try to implement equity pedagogy without attending to factors such as the physical arrangement of space in the classroom and the control inherent in certain types of physical conditions will rarely experience success.

Students also learn from their peers, as they are actively engaged in interactions with other students

throughout the school day. Peer relationships are an important part of the social context of the classroom, and teachers need to understand these interactions. They can become potent elements in the hidden curriculum. Implementing group work without making provisions for dealing with the status differences among students based on race, gender, and social class may result in marginalizing low-status-group students rather than providing opportunities for them to learn from their peers (Cohen, 1994; Cohen & Roper, 1972).

Students learn about themselves as they acquire academic knowledge. The academic self-concept of students is highly related to their general self-concept, their ability to perform academic work, and their ability to function competently among peers (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979). Equity pedagogy requires teachers to deal with the dynamics of peer interactions in classroom life. Students are not one-dimensional; therefore, equity pedagogy has to reflect the complexity of student interactions and relationships.

Content Integration and Assessment

Equity pedagogy is tightly intertwined with content integration. How an instructor teaches is informed and shaped by what is taught. Both equity pedagogy and curriculum influence the form and function of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Equity pedagogy is most powerful when it is integrated with transformative curricula. Most mainstream curricula do not actualize the full power of equity pedagogy. They limit equity pedagogy to incremental strategies that are characterized by ideological constraints.

Required content, however, can be taught using a transformative pedagogy, as was done by a high school physics teacher in a Seattle suburban school. He transformed a unit on torques by asking the students to identify a bridge that had collapsed, investigate why it collapsed, and determine how the collapse of the bridge affected people in the community. Working in groups, the students designed bridges that could withstand designated wind speeds and weights. This unit provided opportunities for students to connect their study of torques to a real event, draw on the strengths of their peers by working in groups, and actively engage in constructing knowledge by translating the information they collected on bridges into new designs.

Transformative curricula provide a rich context for equity pedagogy because both transformative curricula and equity pedagogy promote knowledge construction and curriculum reform. Transformative curricula and equity pedagogy also assume that the cultures of students are valid, that effective teaching must reflect the lives and interests of students (Ladson-Billings, 1990), and that students must be provided opportunities to construct meaningful knowledge. In this sense, equity pedagogy is directly related to curriculum reform.

Information is increasing at an astronomical rate. What was once packaged in a one-volume text now requires two or more. Teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to cover all the information they are expected to include in the curriculum. Equity pedagogy provides a rationale and a process that can help teachers focus on the essence of the curriculum rather than on isolated and rapidly changing facts.

Students in the 21st century, unlike those in earlier times, will have to address complex issues that cannot be answered with discrete facts. To be effective, students must know where to get the information they need, how to formulate questions that will provide access to the appropriate information, how to evaluate the information from a cognitive as well as a value perspective, how to integrate it with other information, and how to make reflective decisions based on the best information they can construct. Equity pedagogy helps students to acquire these skills.

Equity pedagogy is student focused. It incorporates issues, concepts, principles, and problems that are real and meaningful to students. Teachers who embrace equity pedagogy assume that all students can learn. They work to develop student potential and to create a classroom environment that is encouraging and filled with opportunities for success.

Equity pedagogy has important implications for assessment. Educators who embrace it must interrogate traditional tests and letter grades. Assessment strategies based on the assumption that all students can learn provide opportunities for students to improve their performances. The teacher who embraces equity pedagogy frequently gives students detailed feedback on poorly prepared assignments and asks students to "revisit" their work. Written comments instead of letter grades provide opportunities for teachers to identify areas of competence as well as to suggest strategies for improvement and remediation.

Portfolio assessment also gives students an opportunity to demonstrate their growth over time, and for teachers to give students ongoing support and encouragement (Valencia, Hiebert, & Afflerbach, 1994). Students can use portfolios to document the complexity and individuality of their work and to reflect on their progress and areas that need improvement. Portfolios contribute to sound assessment decisions and to student development. They describe and provide materials that collectively suggest the scope and quality of a student's performance. Portfolios also provide the structure needed for teachers and students to better understand and make connections between teaching and learning.

Teacher Characteristics

Teachers who successfully implement equity pedagogy draw upon a sophisticated knowledge base. They can enlist a broad range of pedagogical skills and have a keen understanding of their cultural experiences, values, and attitudes toward people who are culturally, racially, and ethnically different from themselves. The skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to successfully implement equity pedagogy are the result of study, practical experience, and reflective self-analysis.

Reflective self-analysis requires teachers to identify, examine, and reflect on their attitudes toward different ethnic, racial, gender, and social-class groups. Many teachers are unaware of the extent to which they embrace racist and sexist attitudes and behaviors that are institutionalized within society as well as how they benefit from these societal practices (King, 1992). Reflecting on their own life journeys—by writing their life stories—can be a powerful tool for helping teachers gain a better understanding of the ways in which institutionalized conceptions of race, class, and gender have influenced their personal lives.

Autobiographical accounts and episodes provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect on times in their lives when they were the "other" who experienced discrimination or a sense of isolation because of their race, class, gender, culture, or personal characteristics. Reflective self-analysis cannot be a one-time event. Multicultural awareness can result only from in-depth work on self. It requires the unraveling of myths that perpetuate social class, gender, and racial privilege (King, 1992; McIntosh, 1990) and a commitment to maintaining multicultural awareness and action.

Equity pedagogy cannot be implemented in a vacuum. It requires more than good will and good intentions. It requires multicultural, pedagogical, and subject area knowledge (Banks, 1991, 1994a, 1994b; Banks & Banks, 1995). Our discussion focuses on multicultural knowledge. However, teachers will not be able to use it effectively without a strong background in their subject area and a sophisticated understanding of pedagogy.

Multicultural knowledge includes key concepts in multicultural education such as culture, immigration, racism, sexism, cultural assimilation, structural assimilation, ethnic groups, stereotypes, prejudice, and institutional racism (Banks, 1991, 1994a). Teachers will use their understandings of these concepts to weave them into classroom discourse, help students describe their feelings and experiences, and draw linkages among different topics.

Teachers must also be able to recognize, compare, and contrast examples of various theories related to diversity, such as cultural difference, cultural deficit, genetics, and cultural ecology (Banks, 1994b). Each of these theories has been used to explain poor academic achievement among low-income students and students of color (Baratz & Baratz, 1970). Cultural deficit theory, for example, has been used to guide the development of many early childhood intervention programs such as Head Start and Distar. An important goal of these programs is to improve the academic achievement of low-status groups.

It is not uncommon for teachers to select aspects from several theories to guide their work with students. An eclectic theoretical approach may sometimes be effective, but it can also be counterproductive. For example, after reading the book, *Making Connections,* by Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer (1990) a teacher may become aware that girls often equate fairness with listening. That teacher may then make a special effort to call on women and men on an equal basis. Multicultural theory, however, reveals that equity may not always mean treating different groups the same (Gay, 1993). It may sometimes be necessary to treat groups differently in order to create equal-status situations for marginalized students. Providing an equal voice for women may sometimes require an unequal focus on women's views and issues in classroom discourse. Equity pedagogy requires

teachers to be able to recognize and respond to multiple student characteristics, including race, social class, and gender.

The effective implementation of equity pedagogy requires teachers to understand the histories, modal characteristics, and intragroup differences of the major racial and ethnic groups (Banks, 1991). This content and conceptual knowledge can provide a foundation to help teachers design and select appropriate instructional materials for their students (Ladson-Billings, 1990, 1994, 1995), make informed decisions about when to use culturally sensitive pedagogy, and decide when to focus on the individual characteristics of students (Nieto, 1994).

For example, research summarized by Shade (1982) indicates that Latino and African-American students often prefer a learning environment that is more personalized and contextual than that preferred by many middle-class, White students. While the learning style literature suggests that certain learning environments are more appropriate for various groups of students, it also suggests that students from all ethnic and racial groups can be found in each of the categories identified by learning style theorists (Shade & New, 1993). When reading and using learning style theories, teachers should question and analyze them carefully. The learning style paradigm is a complex one that defies simplistic classroom applications (Irvine & York, 1995). The paradigm has been criticized by researchers such as Kleinfeld and Nelson (1991), who believe it may result in the construction of new stereotypes about low-achieving students.

Teachers should look beyond the physical characteristics of students and consider the complexity of their individual and group experiences. A Latino student's biographical journey, social class, and geographical location may indicate that a teacher should not focus on modal characteristics of Latinos in determining appropriate pedagogy for the student. Instead, the teacher may need to focus on the individual characteristics of the student. Teachers must make informed decisions about when and how to use knowledge about the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of students when making pedagogical decisions.

Teaching as a Multicultural Encounter

Teaching is a multicultural encounter. Both teachers and students belong to diverse groups differentiated by variables such as age, social class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Teachers who are skilled in equity pedagogy are able to use diversity to enrich instruction instead of fearing or ignoring it. They are able to use diversity successfully because they understand its meaning in both their own and their students' lives. They are able to analyze, clarify, and state their personal values related to cultural diversity and to act in ways consistent with their beliefs.

Self-understanding, and knowledge of the histories, modal characteristics, and intragroup differences of ethnic groups are important competencies required for teachers to implement equity pedagogy. They provide a foundation for teachers to identify, create, and implement teaching strategies that enhance the academic achievement of students from both gender groups and from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Equity pedagogy is not embodied in specific strategies. It is a process that locates the student at the center of schooling. When effectively implemented, equity pedagogy enriches the lives of both teachers and students and enables them to envision and to help create a more humane and caring society.

Notes

1. *Content integration* consists of using examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to teach key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in a subject area or discipline. In the *knowledge construction process,* students are helped to understand, investigate, and determine how implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways that knowledge is constructed within it. The *prejudice reduction* dimension focuses on helping students to develop more positive racial, gender, and ethnic attitudes (Banks, 1993c). *Equity pedagogy* consists of "techniques and methods that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups" (p. 6). An *empowering school culture and social structure* describes the process of "restructuring the culture and organization of the school so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience equality and cultural empowerment" (p. 7). For a comprehensive discussion of the dimensions and their interrelationships, see Banks (1993c).

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