

# ***Multicultural Education: A Mosaic, Not a Melting Pot***

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In recent years, many educators have supported multicultural education as a way to deal with global interconnectedness and Asia's multiethnic population. What is disconcerting is that educators have yet to agree on what *multiculturalism* really is or how it might affect curriculum and teaching. It is against such backdrop that this paper attempts to discuss multicultural education in the Philippine context.

There are two diametrically opposed perspectives of multiculturalism that are vying for predominance: (1) the goal of cultural pluralism is that ethnic groups will remain intact and that their "idiosyncratic" ways of knowing and acting will be respected and continued; (2) assimilationism, on the other hand, accepts the importance of understanding multiple beliefs, but has as its primary goal the amalgamation of all groups into the Philippine mainstream.

## **Underlying Philosophies**

It is of great importance to understand the dual philosophies underlying multiculturalism, without which cultural education will lead to a good deal of confusion. Teachers have thus developed or use curricular materials developed in Manila that are at odds with school community philosophies as in the case of Muslim Mindanao.

### *Assimilationism*

Philippine education, patterned after the American system, has traditionally been assimilationist in character. Educators with this view believe that it leads to better relationships among ethnic groups and enables the dominant culture to select and adopt significant non-Christian cultural accomplishments.

Assimilationist educators might support trilingual education, but not primarily so that students might maintain and appreciate their own language and culture. Instead, assimilationists value trilingual education as the quickest way for non-Tagalog-speaking Filipinos to become literate in Tagalog-based Filipino and in English.

In the 1990's, programs to incorporate all groups into a single culture are likely to try to meet the needs of individual students and accommodate their "idiosyncratic" backgrounds. Educators in Muslim Mindanao, for instance, structure activities in such a way and with the expectation that all Muslim students eventually melt together in the pot.

Assimilationists know, however, that their position is under attack. They fear the strength and solidarity of cultural pluralism, and sometimes they deplore what they see as its end result. Mindanao State University (MSU), for example, ironically has the once popular concept of being a "melting pot" but the trend in its research and instruction is towards an attachment to one's own ethnic identity.

### *Cultural Pluralism*

To cultural pluralists, having one set of cultural principles amounts to imperialism toward minority groups. Multiculturalism, this group believes, should only develop appreciation for the perspectives of others, but should sustain a value-tolerant acceptance of diverse cultural understanding, belief systems, customs, and sociological traditions.

Horace Kallan formulated the notion of cultural pluralism in 1915 (Gordon 1964). Kallan reasoned that "democracy for the individual must, by extension, also mean democracy for groups."

Peter Adler (1974) added three basic pluralist principles:

- Every culture has its own internal coherence, integrity and logic;
- No culture is inherently better or worse than another; and
- All persons are to some extent culturally bound.

Pluralist educational experiences promote the value of retaining cultures, not simply tolerating or melting them down. Pluralist teachers and their students try to construct meaning together and thereby create an empowering environment (Tiedt and Tiedt 1990).

### **Points of Contention**

Anthropologists and sociologists acknowledge that pluralism has helped make Filipinos aware of their past denigration by foreign imperialist cultures, but educators fear that cultural pluralism's acceptance of many religious, social and political perspectives will lead to a fragmented society. The point that this paper endeavors to raise, however, is that cultural pluralism is not altogether separatist. Many adherents of cultural pluralism value national unity and equal interaction among ethnic groups.

The context between traditions in multiculturalism is also an absolutist versus relativist disagreement. Filipinos have historically subscribed to principles of constitutional democracy, which are grounded on the Christian heritage. Defenders of this tradition dislike relativistic approaches that encourage individuals in ethnic groups to "be who they are," even if being who they are means supporting a divergent interpretation of democratic ideals and practices.

Historical judgments are yet another zone of contention. While assimilationists say that they welcome new historical views, they do not always accept as fact a curriculum with a "multiple perspective."

### **A Double Bind for Teachers**

Confusion has arisen as schools have asked social science teachers to infuse pluralist multiculturalism into their courses at the same time that they tell them to produce graduates who are culturally literate in the traditional sense. Additional confusion stems from the reality that teachers must make choices among many topics and curriculum materials, which take either assimilationist or pluralistic perspectives.

An observation by a Christian educator, Antonio Isidro, who was the first president of MSU, is pertinent in this context:

In the Philippines, the educational policy and the highly centralized administration did not function effectively among the Muslims. The educational policy was to give a uniform curriculum and instructional materials to pupils throughout the country. So that the adopted textbooks - approved by the Board of Textbooks and the Bureau of Public Schools - were the same from Aparri to Jolo, for Juan and Abubakar. There was no consideration for differences in social conditions or cultural heritage. The system of administration was so highly centralized that adaptations of some materials in the forms of bulletins and circulars were made by the Central Office and applied in all parts of the country. . . (Isidro 1976).

If education is to have a more vital role in undergirding development, justice, peace and order, and freedom in the Southern Philippines, ways have to be found to undo its foreignness, free it from its role as a tool of the conqueror and be joined in its efforts at cultural change by other cultural forces. This will require far more fundamental innovations than the addition of Arabic to the curriculum and the declaring of Fridays as a rest day for schools in Muslim areas. It will require the best of insight and planning by educators who are predominantly Muslim.

### **Supportive Role of the Minority Cultures**

Such a goal will also require the supportive energies and dedication of Muslims and others like them in all aspects of life; those who can free themselves from various self-serving, self-seeking impediments in order to formulate a forthright, meaningful educational development program for their people. Such a program must include a strong and capable educational system that will eventually benefit not only the Muslim South, but the entire body politic -- the Republic of the Philippines.

Educational reforms will not do it alone. Education can only be effective when there are positive forces at work in all segments of society in the political, social, judicial, religious and economic realms. If the leaders of society in the South do not join in a concerted effort to find and implement that which is rich in their own culture and relate it to the changing world around them, education among these cultural minorities will continue to stagnate. If

this happens, the fault will be on those on Mindanao and Sulu and not on those in far-off Manila. Only when all join together to bring about relevant change in the immediate society by recognizing the cultural pluralism will the efforts to bring a better life that is the goal of education on Mindanao and Sulu have possibility of finally being realized.

### **Concluding Statement**

Teachers, other educators at the national and regional levels, parent groups and students need to enter into continued dialogue about the assumption and interpretations that underly various multicultural curriculum approaches. Even if we do not reach general consensus about which path of multiculturalism to take, educators and students must understand that different paths exist and that different classroom activities may fall on one or the other pathway.

Placing ideas within a conceptual approach such as this paper has endeavored to do encourages students to think critically and make conclusions among a variety of viewpoints. As we engage in such discussions and analysis, we may ultimately come to a clear understanding of what multiculturalism means for the curriculum in Philippine schools, especially for those in areas like Muslim Mindanao.

### **References**

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