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Multicultural Education in the U.S. and Japan: Needs, Challenges, and Recommendations

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Key words multicultural education; discrimination; Japan

Abstract

This report discusses the need for an educational system that acknowledges and represents all races, ethnicities and genders in its teachers, its students, and in the core curriculum; looks at barriers to such inclusive representation such as cultural pluralism; nationalism in education, and teachers who lack training in teaching a multi-cultural population. Possible solutions are offered, however, none are effective without the willingness of educational boards to create positive change.

Introduction

In the U.S. and Japan, educational materials in government sponsored institutions often are not particularly designed to meet the cultural needs of students; and, educational administrations often are not particularly concerned about those cultural needs. The knowledge base, for example, textbooks, that administrators dictate that teachers must use becomes the world view that students see. School administrators who are not versed in multi-cultural education, and their overseeing boards, will allow culturally limited learning materials in their programs, and in many cases, race, ethnicity, gender and age bias in teacher hiring practices.

It is widely regarded that the purpose of government sponsored education is to keep the dominant majority in power (Gutek, 2004). For example, in Japan, it is common knowledge, easily proven by observation, that the vast majority of university tenure-track teachers are Japanese male; in the non-Japanese sector, the vast majority are Caucasian male. Even amongst the Japanese tenured sector, women are far in the minority. A 2002 survey at the University of Tokyo, Japan's equivalent of Harvard, showed that only 4.7% of its teaching staff were female. There is a tacit prejudice against women. Professor Michiko Go of Tokyo University stated that many professors will choose a man over an equally qualified woman, believing that a woman will quit as soon as she marries or has children. (Kite, 2005). When school administrations hire people of their own kind to teach with a bias in favor of themselves, students receive a one-sided, and therefore, substandard education.

Education In Whose Image?

The system under which students learn is often the same system under which teachers teach. The system, then, generates graduates, including teachers, into society who conform to the norms and dictates of this biased system. Those norms and dictates are not necessarily in the best interests of an increasingly culturally diverse population, a population that has traditionally been marginalized. Marginalization is a means by which a dichotomy is set up between the modern and less than modern (Gutek, 2004). This dichotomy permeates the traditional educational system, virtually excluding those who have not traditionally fit in, and, according to Gutek, leads to the use of “racist, classist, and sexist language constructed by the dominant group, especially by its spokespersons” (2004).

Cultural Pluralism

In Japan, it has been my observation that there is a very strong emphasis beginning in the earliest stages of public education for pupils to understand what it means to “be Japanese.” This implies that it is not acceptable to display thinking nor behavior that is considered “non-Japanese.” “We Japanese” is a phrase heard repeatedly from Japanese of all ages, inferring that there is one appropriate way to think and to act for all Japanese. The obvious danger in this is that the voices of those who are not Japanese, and the voices of Japanese who do not subscribe to the government’s doctrine of what it means to be Japanese, as taught through fully or partially publicly funded schools, are marginalized or totally ignored. Japanese public education largely paints all as being Japanese. In fact, a Japanese Ministry of Education Study Group advised school administrators that “there is no difference in enrolling foreign students...” Further, the group advised that teaching should be done using a Japanese curriculum, and that there is no need for language education in the children’s native languages. (Ministry of Education Study Group, cited in Vaipae, cited in Riordan, 2005).

Similarly, in the U.S. until recently, education took on a culturally pluralistic stance, painting everyone white, assuming all student experiences in American life are similar, and that there is a meritocracy in place that ensures that all can succeed with enough effort (Diversity & Multicultural Education, 2003). Cultural pluralism fails to recognize the unique challenges of diverse students. However, in the U.S., there is a movement to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class and cultural groups (Banks & Banks, cited in Diversity & Multicultural Education, 2003). Multicultural education is a philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity as described in the U.S. Declaration of Independence; the U.S. Constitution; and, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations. It recognizes the role schools can play in developing the attitudes and values necessary for a democratic society; and, challenges all forms of discrimination in schools and society through the promotion of democratic principles of social justice. It makes learning more interesting and relevant to students’ lives; allows students to share information about their heritage; helps all students to interact, negotiate, and communicate with peoples from diverse groups in order to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good to empower every student and increase self-esteem. (Diversity & Multicultural Education, 2003).

The emphasis on multicultural education arises from a Liberal educational philosophy, in which students are looked upon as individuals, and where societal changes are adopted into teaching curriculum and methods (Guttek, 2004). Culture is dynamic, situational, and historic (Gutierrez & Rogoff, cited in Jacobs & Kritsonis, 2007). Culture, states Guttek, is shaped by historic content, geographic location, gender, generation, age, religion, group memberships, and level of education (2004). Education should enable individuals and societies to adjust to change and develop innovative ways to secure maximum social and economic benefits. Schools need to be adaptive and need to anticipate social and economic change. The curriculum should not be set in stone but is the educational response to changing needs. (Guttek, 2004).

Problem Statement

In Japan, the majority of teachers are Japanese, and the curriculum is taught from a Japanese perspective, in spite of growing numbers of non-Japanese. There is a high degree of cultural pluralism, painting minority children as not having any special needs, as well as an emphasis on "equality," treating all students the same, regardless of background (Vaipae, cited in Riordan, 2005). This is in light of the fact that Japan has experienced an influx of non-Japanese since the 1970s in order to meet the needs of an aging and declining labor force (Douglass & Roberts, cited in Murphy-Shigematsu, 2003). For example, changes in Japanese immigration law created a mass migration of Brazilian and other Nikkei from South America to Japan (Tsuda, cited in Riordan, 2005). This large new ethnic group is second in number only to the Chinese (Takezawa, cited in Riordan, 2005). The number of Nikkei from Brazil is close to 290,000, and the total number from South America easily exceeds 300,000. This comprises 20% of foreign residents in Japan. (Hirataka, Koishi, & Kato, cited in Riordan, 2005).

This diversification of Japanese society impacts education because society must adapt to large numbers of children whose mother tongue nor culture is Japanese. It remains to be seen how the government perceives its responsibility to educate such children with regard to their national identity, which is not Japanese (Valdes, cited in Murphy-Shigematsu, 2003). Some reports by Japan's Ministry of Education relating to the issue of foreign students in public schools have been criticized as focusing on the problems schools face due to the presence of foreign students, rather than focusing on the types of sociocultural and educational support the foreign students needed (Vaipae, cited in Riordan, 2005).

This attitude that foreign children constitute a burden on the Japanese public school system stems in part from the fact that foreign children are not legally required to attend school in Japan (Vaipae, cited in Riordan, 2005). According to Yokoi, education for foreign children is considered a privilege to the extent that schools can provide it. "Therefore to go as far as giving consideration to foreign children..." in addition to the Japanese "...would be impossible." (Yokoi, cited in Riordan, 2005). This attitude prevails in spite of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specifies that States will make primary education compulsory and available free to all (UNICEF, cited in Riordan, 2005). Without the will to educate and nurture foreign children as unique individuals with unique needs, their role in Japanese society is the subject of debate and concern (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2003).

In the U.S., over 90% of classroom teachers throughout the U.S. are White. In high poverty urban areas, students of color make up 69% of the total enrollment (National Council for Educational Statistics, cited in Johnson, 2002). In spite of this disparity, there has been a decline of Black, Hispanic and Asian enrollments in teacher education programs since 1990. A small percent of the schools of Education faculty are from minority populations. (Rohena, 2007).

Since traditionally ethnic minorities are becoming very visible in U.S. mainstream society, and becoming more visible in Japanese mainstream society, there is a need to represent these groups more dominantly in the core curriculum. The unique history and life experiences of these minority groups should be acknowledged, discussed and respected in the classroom, as well as in society. The unique needs that minority groups face, for example, for language education both in their native language and in the dominant language, need to be addressed.

Need for Well-Prepared Culturally Diverse Teachers

Increasing numbers of culturally diverse students create a corresponding need for well-prepared teachers who can communicate with students within the context of their cultures and/or native language (Talbert-Johnson, cited in Branch & Kritsonis, 2006). Students need to see role models and images of themselves in the classroom. Recruiting, developing, and retaining qualified minority teachers is necessary (Branch & Kritsonis, 2006). Teaching is a polymorphous activity, which takes on many forms (Cahn, 1997). These activities include proving, demonstrating, encouraging, and disciplining. Having minority teachers in the classroom provides an example to students of speaking and walking styles, accents, and nuances of teachers, yielding more instances for students to absorb and understand how to relate to people of diverse cultures. Minority teachers bring positive images of themselves and varied perspectives to their students. (Southern Regional Education Board, cited in Branch & Kritsonis, 2006). Such teachers give students a positive, ethnic vision of society and can tell the story of America from their non-White majority perspectives. Similarly, in Japan, culturally sensitive and aware teachers are needed to allow minority and underrepresented voices, including the voices of females, to give their perspectives in the classroom.

Further, teachers need to understand how media images of minorities are manipulated and must make the classroom conducive to all minorities (Gay, 2002). Variance in culture, life experiences, and language significantly impact learning styles. Thus, there is a need for culturally diverse teachers who can incorporate such diversity in order to include and validate all student experiences and histories in the classroom. The dominant culture of a society is inevitably reflected in its schools (Nieto, 1994). As such, schools must strive to reflect a true image of society's make up. According to Gutek, the purpose of education is to produce good citizens (2004). Culturally diverse teachers can bring a more realistic view of what it means to be a good citizen, not just a "good American" or a "good Japanese" citizen, but a good citizen, period.

Undoing Nationalistic Education

About U.S. education, Gutek writes “The ideal of the American nationality is modeled on the White, English, Protestant interpretation of the American past” (2004, p. 161). Immigrants are to imitate the first pilgrims, but were “not to contribute to an expansive, more culturally diverse definition of being an American” (Gutek, 2004, p.161). Gay writes that students need to be taught through their own cultural filters (2002). Teachers not trained to teach to diverse students do not know enough about the contributions that different ethnic groups have made, and therefore it is difficult for them to teach multi-culturally. There are trends in how formal school curricula deal with ethnic diversity that need correction, for example: avoiding controversies such as racism, historical atrocities, powerlessness, hegemony; focusing on the accomplishments of a few high-profile individuals and ignoring the actions of groups; giving more attention to dominant minorities; decontextualizing women’s issues and their actions from their race and ethnicity; ignoring poverty; and emphasizing factual information while minimizing other kinds of knowledge such as values, attitudes, feelings, experiences and ethics (Gay, 2002).

Regarding nationalism in Japanese schools, assertions have been made previously in this report which point to the lack of acknowledgement of the unique needs of ethnic minorities in the classroom. Further, there is a movement to downplay negative aspects of Japanese history and its past acts of aggression. One such example is that of Professor Nobukatsu Fujioka of Tokyo University, who is the founder of the Society for History Textbook Reform, a group of academics and social critics whose purpose is to teach only positive aspects of Japanese history. Fujioka helped author a controversial history text approved by Japan’s Ministry of Education, which omitted or downplayed Japan’s aggressive acts against other Asian countries, such as the Nanking Massacre. (McNeill, 2005). It is understandable that a country’s children should grow up with pride about their country. However, to cover up past atrocities is to rob youth of the opportunity to learn that such horrors should not happen again. In addition, the experience of the ethnic children of the affected countries, the history of these children, and the pain of their people are being marginalized, if not completely ignored. In general, the Japanese regular public school curriculum does not reflect the linguistic and cultural environment of minority children (Sekiguchi, cited in Riordan, 2005).

Conclusion

One of the biggest lessons learned as someone who has spent many years outside of the U.S. is that there is much ado about those who are different, no matter what the country. There are different categories of being different. There is being different in a way that the dominant majority accepts, and there is being different in a way the dominant majority does not accept. Unacceptable differences that one has no control over can mean the difference between a fulfilling, well-paying job with respect in society, and a job on the sidelines of society that merely pays the bills, if that. The concern is not about egalitarianism and doing what’s right for all; the concern is, from the dominant group’s point of view, holding on to power. U.S. rhetoric such as the principle of merit-based success that is taught in many schools, as well as the concept that all humans are created equal, are fueled by rhetoric in one of America’s most precious documents: the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The principles of this nation’s great

founding documents are noble, yet the reality can be far different. The same can be said for Japan. A nation's schools have a grave responsibility and contribution to make in helping to ensure that all are truly created equal. Discriminatory practices such as marginalization and hiring teachers largely of the dominant majority in order to perpetuate the status quo violate the very principle upon which education is supposed to be based. Education should provide the "gateway of opportunity" for all, not just for those deemed to be members of society's dominant group.

Money is a useful bargaining chip in creating change. The support of business and civic leaders, both philosophically and financially, can assist in bringing about positive change. Areas in which financial infusions would be helpful in catalyzing progress are: effective teacher training to include culturally responsive teaching principles; appropriate compensation and working conditions for the teaching profession in order to properly educate a diverse body of students; ongoing assessment of the core curriculum to ensure inclusion of all groups, not just the dominant group; a decrease in the tendency toward nationalistic and insular teaching principles; incentives for higher education to hire and promote minorities and women; and, incentives for businesses in general to give minorities and women equal footing in hiring and advancement.

Note

Because this report is being published in Japan, this version has been significantly abridged and adapted in order to increase relevancy to the topic of Japanese multicultural education. Thus, much information about multicultural education in the U.S. has been omitted. However, if there is an interest, please contact the author at Hershey.Wier@gmail.com in order to receive the original version of this paper. A more comprehensive literature review including the following topics is available: Lack of Minority Teachers; Institutionalized Discrimination; Need for Culturally Responsive Teachers; Finding the Right Teachers; Culturally Responsive Teacher Education; School Culture and Academic Success of Minorities; and, Crucial Need to Include Minorities.

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