

Multicultural and Antiracist Education: Developing a Clear Conceptual Framework

In order to have a clear sense of the legitimate goals and strategies of multicultural and antiracist education, it is important to have a clear sense of what we mean by the terms 'multiculturalism,' 'antiracism,' etc. In turn, a clear understanding of these terms requires that we begin with an understanding of what race and culture are. No easy task! Below, I will provide some of the best conceptualizations of these terms that I have yet come across, and leave it to you to compare them with your own best understandings of each of these terms. Most of these conceptualizations come from the work of Lawrence Blum in "Antiracism, Multiculturalism, and Interracial Community: Three Educational Values for a Multicultural Society."¹

What is race?

Read each of the following definitions, note differences between them, and compare them with your own conception of race. Then write out the most adequate definition of race that you can come up with, explaining why it is better than others.. (What would 'adequate' mean? For starters, how about: --accurate and comprehensive with respect to our best current understandings from biology, history, social science, and common usage. There will sometimes be tensions between common usage and the most scientifically informed understandings related to a concept. In such cases, you will need to suggest how such tensions are to be resolved..)

From the Canadian Oxford Dictionary (1999):

1. Each of the major divisions of humankind having distinct physical characteristics.
2. A tribe, nation, etc. regarded as of a distinct ethnic stock.
3. A group of persons, animals or plants connected by common descent.

From the Random House College Dictionary (1972):

1. A group of persons related by common descent, blood, or heredity.
2. *Ethnol.* a subdivision of the human species, characterized by a more or less distinctive combination of physical traits that are transmitted in descent.

From the Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia (1996) [*italics added*]:

A race is a population group or subspecies within the living human species, *Homo sapiens*, set apart from other subspecies on the basis of arbitrarily selected, commonly visible, or phenotypic criteria. The criteria most often selected are skin color, hair quantity and form, and the shape and form of the body, head, and facial features. A problem is presented, however, by the high variability of such characteristics within any particular population group. Not all genes that transmit all phenotypic characteristics ascribed to a subspecies are transmitted in a cluster. As a result only some members of a particular "race" will have all the criteria for that race, although every member will probably have one or more of the characteristics.

¹ Lawrence Blum in "Antiracism, Multiculturalism, and Interracial Community: Three Educational Values for a Multicultural Society." Distinguished Lecture Series 1991-1992. Boston: University of Massachusetts at Boston.

The species *Homo sapiens* is not difficult for specialists to identify, nor is there difficulty in determining its constituent populations, those groups of human beings who inhabit the various areas of the earth. *No such clear-cut agreement is possible in determining the nature of subspecies, or races, and many, probably most, scientists today reject the concept of race.* Other scientists use the race concept as an expedient shorthand expression for variants in anatomical traits exhibited by the populations of broad geographic homelands--zoographic regions with characteristic resident animals that shared the terrain with developing human populations.

Even in this geographic sense, however, the term race must be understood to have value only as a general term without precise definition, because it does not take into account hybridization and movement of populations with the consequent "gene flow" from one area to another, nor does it allow for continuing evolution. Human beings do, however, partially reflect their geographic origin in the physical traits that have been mentioned, and in some physiological characteristics such as tolerance of cold, heat, and altitude. [End of entry from Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia 1996]

What is racism?

Compare the best definition of racism that you were able to develop in your group discussion with the definition from Lawrence Blum below, then write out the most adequate definition that you can come up with, explaining why it is better than others.

RACISM:

Racism is the denial of the fundamental moral equality of all human beings. It involves the expression of attitudes of superior worth or merit justifying or underpinning the domination or unjust advantage of some groups over others (Blum 1992, p.2).

Racism refers both to an institutional or social structure of racial domination or injustice—as when we speak of a racist institution—and also to individual actions, beliefs, and attitudes, whether consciously held or not, which express, support or justify the superiority of one racial group to another. Thus, on both the individual and institutional levels, racism involves denying or violating the equal dignity and worth of all human beings on the basis of race, and on both levels, racism is bound up with dominance and hierarchy (Blum 1992, p.4).

It is worth noting that this conception of racism was criticized by several students in a course in UBC's Native Indian Teacher Education Program (Chilliwack, 2000) for failing to mention hatred as a common feature of racism. An important question to think about is whether hatred is present in some form even in "polite" forms of racism. And what other emotional sources are involved in the development of racist attitudes? How could the conception be revised in light of these concerns? It is also worth noting that Blum distinguishes between racism and these three problematic attitudes or practices which may involve racism in particular cases but which are not necessarily racist:

- *racial ignorance or insensitivity*
- *making racial distinctions*
- *racial exclusiveness* (e.g., Chinese-Canadian children playing together at recess)
- *racial discomfort* (i.e., discomfort being with people of racial/ethnic background different from my own).

Here are some questions about *racial discomfort*: Do you think that someone can experience these feelings of discomfort without being in some way involved in racist thinking? --i.e., without holding any assumptions of superiority, but only of difference? Is it easier to imagine racial discomfort being nonracist in some cases rather than in others? What examples come to mind? What factors *other than* assumptions of superiority or inferiority might cause racial discomfort? In other words, is discomfort that seems to have racial contours necessarily about race or racialization? (Consider, for example, an African Canadian student feeling uncomfortable in a group of white students, an Anglo-Canadian student feeling uncomfortable in a group of Croatian-Canadian students, and a recently-immigrated Chinese-Canadian student who speaks very little English feeling uncomfortable in a group of Anglo-Canadian students.)

What is antiracism?

Compare the best definition of antiracism as an educational goal that you were able to develop in your group discussion with the definition from Lawrence Blum below. Then write out the most adequate definition that you can come up with, explaining why it is better than others.

ANTIRACISM:

Antiracism ... involves striving to be without racist attitudes oneself as well as being prepared to work against both racist attitudes in others and racist injustice in society more generally (Blum 1992, p.2)

Blum notes that there are three components of antiracism:

- 1) "Belief in the equal moral worth of all persons regardless of race, not just as an intellectual matter, but rooted more deeply in one's attitudes and emotions";
- 2) Understanding the *psychological* dynamics of racism ("scapegoating, stereotyping, rigidity and fear of difference, rationalization of privilege and power, projecting of unwanted wishes onto others," etc.) and understanding the particular *historical* forms of racism ("slavery, colonialism, segregation, Nazism, the mistreatment of native Americans," etc.);
- 3) Opposition to racism in the actions of others and in social practices and structures (Blum 1992, pp.4-6, indenting added).

What is culture?

Compare the best definition of culture that you were able to develop in your group discussion with the definition below. Then write out the most adequate definition that you can come up with, explaining why it is better than others.

CULTURE:

The forms of expression and language, ways of living, patterns of social and human-nature interaction, understandings, knowledge, forms of production, forms of artistic expression, and traditions of birthing, childraising, educating, home-making, mating, friendship, care, celebrating, grieving, and dying, which have developed in a certain community of people and which are passed on in some form from one generation to the next. It is important to recognize that 'culture' includes not only elite intellectual and artistic traditions, but also traditions of getting and preparing food, traditions of making and wearing clothes, and traditions of caring for children, for the sick, and for the elderly. These crucial elements of culture are too often not adequately recognized (in western societies) for their intellectual and artistic dimensions, though they do seem to be quite commonly recognized for their role in generating meaning and shaping identity.

What is *multiculturalism*?

Compare the best conception of multiculturalism as an educational goal that you were able to develop in your group discussion with the definition from Lawrence Blum below. Then write out the most adequate conception that you can come up with, explaining why it is better than others.

MULTICULTURALISM:

Multiculturalism [as an educational goal] involves an understanding, appreciation and valuing of one's own culture, and an informed respect and curiosity about the ethnic culture of others. It involves a valuing of other cultures, not in the sense of approving of all aspects of those cultures, but of attempting to see how a given culture can express value to its own members [or help its members create and express meaning and goodness in their lives and communities] (Blum 1992, p.2; parentheses added).

This definition may sound a little rosy. In reality, it may seem that a kind of mutual tolerance may in many cases of cultural conflict be the most that we can hope for. But it might be argued that in such cases, what has been achieved is not a true multiculturalism, but only the halfway point of tolerance or worse, the mere cessation of hostilities. Considering this point, how do you think multiculturalism is best defined?

Blum argues that there are three subvalues of the value of multiculturalism as he defines it:

- i) affirming one's own cultural identity; learning about and valuing one's own cultural heritage;
- ii) respecting and desiring to understand and learn about (and from) cultures other than one's own;
- iii) valuing and taking delight in cultural diversity itself; that is, regrading the existence of distinct cultural groups within one's own society as a positive good to be treasured and nurtured" (Blum 1992, p.8).

For a very different view on the question of valuing cultural diversity itself, see Jerrold Coombs' article, "Multicultural Education and Social Justice" (*International Yearbook of Adult Education* 14 (1986):1-14). This question leads into holist vs. individualist debates about valuing such as, Is it the culture itself that is valuable, or is it only the fact that a particular culture matters to its people that makes any culture be something of value?

Put more directly, is it reasonable to value a culture in the sense of devoting funding to its preservation, if no living members of that culture are concerned about its preservation?

Does a culture have meaning and significance beyond what it means to its bearers? If so, who is to decide its meaning and significance, and on what criteria? But these questions go beyond the scope of this outline.

One of the most useful aspects of Blum's conceptual framework in terms of aiding curriculum development in multicultural education is his articulation of the *three dimensions of culture* for ethnic groups that have had to deal with emigration or immigration and resultant cultural transition. I will use Canadian examples to illustrate these three dimensions:

1) Ancestor culture of the ethnic group

(for example, ancient Japanese culture as the ancestor culture for Japanese-Canadians).

However, it is important to recognize that there is not one homogeneous ancient Japanese culture, but rather, many, with regional, linguistic, religious, class and gender differences.

2) Historical experience of the ethnic group once outside its originary homeland or once invaded by powerful immigrants

(for example, the experiences of Japanese Canadians from the late 19th century to the late 20th century, including the period of developing many successful family fishing, grocery, and other businesses, the horrible years of dispossession and internment in detention camps during the Second World War, and the late 20th century efforts to have these problems addressed).

3) Current ethnic culture of the ethnic group, which Blum characterizes as "family ethnic rituals, foods, customs regarding family roles and interactions," etc. It is important to note that dealing with racism can be a very significant part of current ethnic culture for marginalized groups.

So, for example, current ethnic culture for Japanese-Canadians will include much more than just the kinds of rituals, food practices and family customs that Japanese-Canadians currently participate in. It will also include the resources, discourses and practices that Japanese-Canadians have developed to deal with the various forms of discrimination they still encounter, and the resources and institutions they have developed to enable the continuation of their cultural identity.

Blum notes that these latter two dimensions of culture are profoundly inter-cultural with respect to the ancestor culture of the group and the dominant culture(s) with which the group has had to interact. (Of course, an ancestor culture may also itself have been influenced by earlier intercultural negotiations.)

Awareness of these three dimensions of culture can help teachers to frame their students' explorations of culture in ways that avoiding the problems of freezing, etc., described on the following page with special reference to indigenous peoples.

Two different philosophical foundations for Multiculturalism

The rise of interest in multiculturalism in Canada over the past three decades has coincided with an increase in the popularity of *cultural moral relativism*, the view that (1) there are *universally binding* moral laws or universal values of any sort, and that (2) if there are *any* laws, these have force only relative to a particular cultural group within a particular historical regional context, and they cannot be validly critiqued from outside of that cultural, historical regional context. As a result of these beliefs, cultural relativists often argue that all cultures must be taken equally seriously, and given equal protection and support – because no one is in any position to decide which cultures are more deserving of respect and support than others.

But cultural relativism is not the only possible foundation for multiculturalism. As Blum notes, “While the philosophical relativism on which this version of multiculturalism rests needs to be taken seriously – it has a long and distinguished philosophic history – there is an alternative, quite different and nonrelativistic, philosophical foundation for multiculturalism” (Blum, p.12). That alternative is *cultural pluralism*, the view that although different cultures manifest many different values and must respond to different ecological and historical contexts, it is possible for the values and context of a given culture to be appreciated by people from a different culture, and to that extent, also to be judged by those people. Cultural pluralism is an important perspective to consider, because it is not clear how one can, for example, condemn the racist and genocidal values of Nazi Germany without a commitment to cultural pluralism or to some less modest alternative to cultural relativism.

Blum notes that a pluralist, nonrelativistic approach to multicultural education would involve “exposing students to, and helping them to appreciate the range of, values embodied in different cultures.” But he warns that a pluralist approach

should not minimize the work often necessary to see beyond the parochial assumptions and perspectives of one’s own culture Indeed, one of the undoubted contributions of the multicultural movement has been to reveal those obstacles as well as the dominant culture’s resistance to acknowledging them (Blum, p.12).

Blum describes multicultural perspectives as differing from antiracism perspectives in part by discussing the tragic case of Vincent Chen, the Chinese-American who was beaten and killed by a white autoworker resentful against the Japanese for the effects of global auto production competition on unemployment for American autoworkers. Blum notes that Vincent Chen’s murderer not only mistook a Chinese-American for a Japanese American; he seemed to have “no clear sense that there was any difference between these two Asian-American groups.” Blum notes that “racist attitudes are generally not sensitive to [such] cultural and ethnic distinctions,” and this is the reason why distinct cultural and ethnic groups often need to and do unite in opposition to racism [Blum, p.13].

Blum also discusses the example of Irish Americans as once discriminated against by Anglo-Protestant Americans, but now themselves largely seen as part of the dominant white majority, to explain how racialization can change over time, and to note that from a multicultural point of view, a dominant racial group (white Americans) can be seen to be composed of many

different ethnic and cultural groups (e.g., Anglo-Protestant Americans, Irish Catholic Americans, Polish Catholic Americans, Jewish Americans, etc.) He concludes:

Antiracism and multiculturalism constitute two distinct and complementary lenses, yielding different categorizations of a common social reality. Both lenses highlight a truth about that reality. Antiracism: the truth that groups are arranged in a hierarchy of dominance and subordination, security and vulnerability, advantage and disadvantage; multiculturalism: the truth that groups have distinct cultures (Blum, p.14).

But it is also important to recognize the extent to which resistance to racism can become a part of one's historical cultural experience and current culture. It might be more accurate, then, to describe multiculturalism and antiracism as two different focal points on the same bifocal lens. However, this lens quickly becomes multifocal as soon as we begin to grapple with the complex intertwining of class, gender, and disability with race and culture in the characterization of social experience.

Related values --

Blum discusses two other values that are important themes in any program of multicultural and antiracist education:

A SENSE OF INTERRACIAL COMMUNITY:

This involves a sense, not necessarily explicit or articulated, that one possesses human bonds with persons of other races and ethnicities. The bonds may, and ideally should, be so broad as to encompass all of humanity; but they may also be limited to the bonds formed in friendships, schools, workplaces and the like (Blum 1992, p.2).

TREATING PERSONS AS INDIVIDUALS:

This involves recognizing the individuality of each person—specifically, that while an individual person is a member of an ethnic or racial group, and while that aspect may be an important part of who she is, she is more than that ethnic or racial identity. It is the lived appreciation of this individuality, not simply paying lip service to it, that constitutes the value I will call treating persons as individuals (Blum 1992, p.2).

We will see some related concerns about cultural identity and generalization focusing on indigenous peoples on the following page.

Problems of Generalization and Re-presentation in First Nations Education

Recognition of First Peoples and learning about their histories and their contemporary social, cultural, economic and political realities are important parts of environmental education. In these endeavours, all of us, whether native or non-native, need to recognize and deal with problems of cultural generalization and reification. It is not surprising that these problems are widespread. Dominant societies have formed around centuries of racism, ethnocentrism and bodily and cultural genocide directed against indigenous peoples. It will take time and effort and reeducation to infuse dominant cultures and languages—and ways of speaking, perceiving, thinking, picturing and remembering—with the distinctions and understandings needed to avoid these problems.

- ◆ FREEZING – Holding onto a traditional picture of an indigenous people, or honouring their historical roots, but failing to recognize or honour their present social, cultural, economic and political realities. I.e., failing to honour the strategies and paths of adaptation that particular indigenous groups or individuals have taken and are taking now in dealing with dominating cultures. In other words, mistaking *ancestor culture* or *historical experience* for *contemporary culture*.
- ◆ MYTHOLOGIZING – Uncritically accepting myths about indigenous cultures and expecting indigenous people to live up to them.
- ◆ COMMODIFYING CULTURE – Treating culture as if it consisted of little more than cuisine, clothing styles, art and music, all as commodities for the consumption and entertainment of those who would like to purchase them ---*rather than* understanding culture as the practices, traditions, languages, knowledge, relationships and community life that lie behind the artifacts.
- ◆ CULTURAL APPROPRIATION– Attempting to incorporate practices, rituals, concepts or beliefs from another culture into one's own without adequate understanding of the context that informs them, the limitations of "transplanting", and the constraints and protocols that need to be observed.
- ◆ UNIVERSALIZING or "PAN-INDIANISM" – Failing to recognize diversity across different indigenous societies & cultures. Ex.'s: "Native American beliefs", "According to native legends..." There are times when collective terms are appropriate and accurate, but other times when they amount to a lack of recognition of the particular First Nation involved (e.g., Cree, Mohawk, Shuswap, etc.) or of the particular bands or people involved (e.g., northern Alberta Cree c/w Cree bands in other regions).

HOMOGENIZING – Failing to recognize diversity within particular indigenous societies (e.g., with respect to socio-economic background, with respect to schooling experiences, with respect to views about educational issues, environmental issues, gender issues, etc.).

ESSENTIALISM:

The view that there is a core set of characteristics which everyone "genuinely" belonging to a certain group possesses. (One can have essentialist views about gender, about race, about socio-economic class, about culture, etc.)

BIOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM:

The view that these core characteristics are inborn in a person, and ultimately of genetic origin.

Assuming these core characteristics to be innate, biological essentialists also often argue that it would go against instinct and be socially counter-productive to attempt to change these characteristics, to attempt to alter their distribution in people, or to encourage people to go into occupations that are unsuited to their supposed biologically given predispositions and abilities.

Many people who think of race as solely a biological property think of it in these terms:

Biological property:

Possession of a certain set of physical characteristics,
-- either commonly visible features
(often: skin colour, shape of head or facial features,
colour and form of hair, eye colour, shape of body),
-- or genetic constitution (genotype).

Many people who think of race solely as a socially constructed property think of it in these terms:

Socially Constructed Property:

1. Dominant groups classify human beings according to 'race' because their particular racial classification system serves their interests. They develop criteria to legitimize their classification system, but it is held in place largely by their social, economic, political and military power to impose it within their own society and in other societies as well.
2. There is no pre-existing objective reality compelling this classification.
3. The very fact of this classification system being in use has tended to legitimate and entrench it.

Essentializing race:

Ignoring the extent to which racial identity is influenced or created by social and historical factors both in a person's life and in the broader society, and *failing to recognize* the influence of socially dominant interest groups in the construction of 'race' (i.e., racialization), *insisting against this complexity* that racial identity is determined solely by biological factors and/or that racial identity is tied to certain behaviours and capacities.