

Multicultural Education in American Public School: A Quest for Social Justice

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Abstract

Considering the increasingly growing number of immigrants from different parts of the world arriving in the United States with their cultural background and, the need to insertion in American mainstream society, it becomes imperative to devise social policies that would not only help the transitional process but also follow upon their adaptation to American educational system and subsequent integration in the social work force. Multicultural Education as some would label it has been so far the viable and efficient means of dealing with the diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds that created the necessity of the English language acquisition as a primordial condition to satisfy the ideology of American Melting-pot. Based on the ideology of “Melting pot, and creating opportunities for ordinary people to aspire for the “American Dream” it would be crucial to reach a unique and one way of communication through one single language. Following the ideal of “Melting pot” and “Assimilation” through diversity and Multicultural programs has yielded some fruit. However, is public education a common good in a multicultural environment where more and more communities claim their identities? What explains the needs for multiculturalism in public schools? What are the issues multicultural education attempts to address? But would the ideal of “Melting pot” fulfill all the sociological needs the United States faces as a nation? How does the notion of Diversity and Multicultural Education weave into the urgency of American Social policies and governmental priorities today? How would Diversity and Multicultural Education help create a more harmonious society where people are viewed as different flowers with each a fragrance that blends in to create a beautiful garden to take a cue from, Alice Walker, author of The Color Purple? Grounding our argument in Multicultural education as a multidimensional tool for social justice, a necessity for assimilation in the American life, and a quest for racial/ethnic identity recognition our paper would attempt to explore the above questions by providing answers which the questions seem to invite.

Introduction

Similar to other countries around the world, the United States has been facing issues related to diversity in public school for several decades now. Diversity is a notion that has become a stepping stone for public and private institutions to gain not only acknowledgement as viable entities, but also and mainly as a necessary policy to acquire substantial federal funding for their sustainability. Based on the American social fabric, one can but realize that diversity occurs in different ways within the public school system. Diversity is an unavoidable reality as educators, policymakers, administrators and political authorities may use it as a yardstick in order to adapt their educational and social programs. From the ideal of Assimilation –through the ideology of melting pot– Civil Rights Movements and Social Justice Activism demands targeted diversity in terms of pluralism and multiculturalism. Some of the aspects at play concerned citizenship and national identity in a liberal and democratic society.

According to Hochschild (2008), public education, at least through high school, has traditionally been and continues to be the main way for assimilation of newcomers to the American political, economic, and social mainstream. At the same time, Hochschild (2008) sustained that public education in the U.S is facing the growing of immigrant populations: an increasing number of isolated groups of poor students of color and an increasing challenge of assimilation into the American mainstream. As a result she concluded that the combination of traditional mission of education and new multicultural circumstances and politics led to some complicated policy issues.

Taking place in a diversity social policy framework, multicultural education aims not only at recognizing different groups of people, but also at the pursuit of citizenship achievement. Different proponents have viewed diversity as a possibility of assimilation, some viewed it as a project of separation, and others considered it through pluralism and multiculturalism worth to democratic and economic development. Pok (2002) argued that: “Arthur Dun, Henry Thurston, and John Dewey were national educational leaders who viewed schools as a community and education as a service to the larger community to which it belonged” (p. 69). Pok differentiated the role of the two entities: school and education. In fact, school is viewed as an arena where different communities gather to share an ideal: education as a common good. Through education, school is a socializing institution that reproduces norms and values of social mainstreams (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Pascoe, 2007). Sociologically, the norms and values taught in public schools are those of dominant groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970).

The others, constituted of middle and lower classes, are the ones that have to “follow” what is appointed by dominant groups. Dominant archetypes become mainstreams that control and regulate social systems. As a result, mainstream is maintained in society through hegemony. In addition to the ideal of melting pot as assimilation project, pluralism and multiculturalism demands are viewed as a need for change, a need for one’s identity recognition in American public school. The question that comes to mind at this juncture is why there is a need for change through the implementation of pluralism and multiculturalism. What perceptions of public school does mainstream population and researchers have?

Public School as a Common good

Levine (1996) wondered about the origin of the American culture: “Who we are, where our culture derives from, and what it is composed of, all help determine our educational needs and goals” (p. 101). Through this viewpoint of the American culture, Levine (1996) showed that historically the American society was not composed of culturally homogeneous groups. The different groups who settled on the American soil came from many parts of the world, but mainly from Europe. Apart from Africans who were brought unwillingly through slavery, other groups came in America because they found it as the Promised Land (Pok, 2002; Faderman, 2003) even when the Immigration Act was enacted in 1924. For example, Pok (2002) stated that

The first Japanese immigration occurred in 1868 in Hawaii, due in large part to the Westernization of Japan under the Meiji Restoration in that same year. ... For some, the idea of leaving their homeland to embark on a new opportunity abroad and return with newly acquired wealth seemed attractive (p. 28).

the same vein, Faderman (2003) revealed that her mother and aunt “... in 1923, had made it to the safe shores of America, long before Hitler marched through Prael, their shtetl¹ in Latvia” (p. 5). Faderman (2003) added: “Then at the end, in 1945, came the tardy news that in the summer of 1941 the Jews of Prael had been made to dig their own graves and were murdered on the spot. No one survived.”(p. 6) The American soil was considered the land of security and protection, the land of many opportunities, the land where one could make his/her dreams come true. The various populations which came to America had many reasons. Commonly, they came because they needed a better life, peace, and because they needed freedom and democracy. The unified society around democratic ideals that came from different immigrants was so amazing that Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831 immortalized his impressions in a letter to Ernest de Chabrol, as reported by Levine (2002). Alexis de Tocqueville exclaimed:

Imagine, my dear friend, if you can, a society formed of all the nations of the world... people having different languages, beliefs, opinions: in a word, a society without roots, without memories, without prejudices, without routines, without common ideas, without a national character, yet a hundred times happier than our own (p. 105).

This statement is an impression that one could have in the nineteenth century about the image of the United States as a “melted” nation of people coming from different horizons. There was indeed a real diversity among the communities that composed the country. However, the project of a unified nation put the American populations around the same goal: the construction of common cultural values that inhabitants would share in terms of national identity. In 1782 a similar impression came from another French immigrant, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. He was contemplative of how the American society was built around the ideal of same culture. The French immigrant was so intrigued that he did not hesitate to define himself as an American:

He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world (Levine, 2002, p. 105).

The “ancient prejudices and manners” were those de Crevecoeur brought from his native country, France, which he had to leave and “receive new ones” from the destination land, the United States. This is a kind of rebirth. Through the same lens Levine (2002) argued that “Here were the seeds of the idea of melting pot, the most popular and long-lived explanation of what transforms a polyglot stream of immigrants into one people” (p. 106). The common cultural and political project the new nation attempted to build was rooted in the values of democracy and the economic ideology of liberalism. The melting pot idea sustained the assimilation ideology for the United States.

Through democracy and economic liberalism, the United States was giving equal opportunity to everyone who “worked hard” for his/her own achievement and according to respect of human rights. According to the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA, 2011) “culture is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors, and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group” (Para. 1). As such, culture is what identifies a group of people, constituted as a community, and what makes their identity.

Education is the basis of social construction. School, as a social institution, helps to construct and perpetuate norms and values. The common cultural destiny is deemed and embedded in public educational system that helps procreate new generations of Americans, respectful of values of citizenship. Yet, the concept of public education project is not viewed or accepted as a common good for certain groups of people. Far from the ideal project of public education as a common good and an equal opportunity for all, there are different positions towards diversity. In fact, some proponents sustain assimilation ideology while others are eager for separation. Between these two tendencies is pluralism or multiculturalism (Feinberg, 1998).

Assimilation, according to Clark (2003) and Waters (2005), is a cultural or political response to the demographic fact of multi-ethnicity which encourages absorption of the minority into the dominant culture. In this sense, it is opposed to affirmative ideology which recognizes and accepts cultural identities and specificities (Yoshino, 2006). Public education has been used as one of the accurate ways to implement cultural mainstream. In fact, through written or hidden curricula, consciously or unconsciously, teachers and school administrators inculcate habits, attitudes, and values of dominant groups (Bourdieu, 1970, Sleeter, 2005).

Feinberg (1998) found that the terms pluralism and multiculturalism can often be substituted for one another. They actually cover a range of concepts. The term pluralism refers to the view that members of different cultures can pursue their own meanings and traditions in their homes, churches, mosques, or temples and in their communities. Yet, public schools may actively strive to unify all children, regardless of their cultural affiliation, under a single national identity. According to this meaning, public school is broadly concerned with cultural identity. In a pluralistic view, public school has in charge to teach children to respect cultural difference. School can for example use the fact of cultural differences to teach about tolerance and democratic ideals.

Separatism on the other hand, as Metta (1998) argues, is ordinarily motivated by emotional resentment of other communities, ethnicity protection, resistance to ideological oppression or denigration of one’s language or religion, reaction to economic and political power and privilege, protection of cultural tradition, necessity for fragmentation as more and more states break up. In public school environment, it is more the need of cultural identity integration and the recognition of one’s values as part of the whole group. For example, it is not surprising to see some schools proclaiming their cultural or religious identity as Hebrew schools (Goodnough, 2007), Arabic schools (Bosman& Medina, 2007), charter schools (Rimer, 2009), Catholic, and Protestant schools. Each of the different minority groups of the American society is claiming the recognition of their identity and particularities. In this context, is public education viewed as a common good? The answer of this question probably lays in the American democratic ideology.

To understand the goals of public education, two aspects –democracy and liberal ideology-- help determine the role played by public education. Based on the principles of democracy, the United States' educational system applies for American values of citizenship and freedom through a pragmatic development of critical thinking (Dewey, 1980). Citizenship and critical thinking are the two foundations of a democratic educational system. Feinberg (1998) had the same viewpoint when he sustained that historically public schools were justified as critical in bringing different peoples together to participate in a common and shared identity, one in which every person was recognizable to every other person as a citizen of the same nation. Today the emphasis appears to have shifted, and what was once taken as an important role of the schools –advancing a single common identity-- is sometimes viewed as advancing the interests of the dominant group over those who are different and powerless (p. 4).

An education for citizenship aims at sharing cultural and democratic values in American communities in order to construct a common identity. That is to say, regardless of their race, gender, religion, and social background, American students, through values earned from public education, may share the same expectations and have to view each other as belonging to the same nation. But, whose culture was to be taught? It appeared that the values that were worth for the whole American society derived from the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture, values of the dominant groups. This mainstream appeared as the only one conventionally accepted and applying for all communities, despite their disparities: the Western European dominant culture or to some extent the Eurocentric culture. The values of the dominant culture are transmitted through hegemony and written standardized-based or hidden curricula that proclaim the dominant culture (Sleeter, 2005).

The early aim assigned to public education was to prepare children for citizenship and to participate in the construction of democracy: liberty and equality for all. As cited by Hochschild (2003), the U.S. President, Benjamin Franklin, in 1749 proclaimed the mission of public education in these strong words:

Nothing can more effectually contribute to the cultivation and improvement of a country, the wisdom, riches, and strength, virtue and piety, the welfare and happiness of people, than a proper education of youth by forming their manners, imbuing their tender minds with principles of rectitude and morality, [and] instructing them in... all useful branches of liberal arts and science (p. 1).

The American society needed a body of knowledge worth for communities and the educational system in reference to the Western European culture. In the year 1950s, the project of the Great Books, as educational Canons, took place under the leadership of Hutchins and Adler of the University of Chicago (Beam, 2008). Four decades after, Adler (1990) confirmed the democratic and civic vision of the American educational system, arguing that:

The three main objectives of schooling are: preparation for earning a living; preparation for intelligent fulfilment of one's civic duty, to be a good citizen of the republic; preparation for fulfilling one's moral obligation to lead a morally good life, enriched by the continuation of learning after all schooling is terminated (p. 2).

Education is both a way that enables young students to acquire moral values preparing them for good life in society, and a way that attempts to give abilities for a professional career. Education is a path for continuing training and learning at any age; education is a spring boat for knowledge building.

As Adler, Feinberg (1998) argued that in democracy “the aims of [public] education in a society ... are [the] commit[ment] to liberal democratic principles and to providing the conditions that members of different cultural groups need in order to flourish... One of the historical purposes of American education is to develop a shared national identity and a common loyalty.” (p. 2) Pok (2002) in her historical analysis about the assimilation of Japanese descendants in the United States described how they attempted to become American citizens. According to her the “Issei and Nissei” children had a devoted faith in the American citizenship to which they proclaimed their loyalty despite the consequences of the World War II that drew them from the public school of Seattle to their permanent incarceration in Minidoka, Idaho, and Tule Lake, California. The quest of citizenship and national identity puts members of the American society to co-exist and share the same obligations to one another within the field and ideals of the same land.

John Dewey, as cited by Pok (2002), argued that “School is not only a preparation for life; it is life itself” (p. 80). School, as a socializing institution, plays an important role in communities’ common identity building. School deserves attention from the community to which it belongs because the better the quality of education the better the society. Pok (2002), in this sense again, argued that school could be viewed “as a community and education as a service to the larger community to which it belonged” (p. 69). As a community, school gives the opportunity to children of different backgrounds to come together in the same ideal of commonality. That ideal of commonality is what Walker (2006) found essential in public education as a tool for also developing a common cultural identity. By extension, he sustained that a culturally proficient school [is] where the culture of the school promotes inclusiveness and institutionalizes processes for learning about differences promoting differences, and appropriately responding to differences. It is a place where educators and students are valued and community members are involved in facilitating cultural understanding (p. 58).

Schools prepare students to become “good citizens” and to be aware of cultural diversity; thus, preparing them for the acceptance of differences as an enrichment. If the development of citizenship is valued in democratic philosophy, capitalistic ideology is more vocational and seeks for the development of skills and abilities needed for economic growth.

In a capitalistic view, some proponents, as Kezar, Chambers, Burkhardt, and Associates (2005), found that public education serves as a common good if only it is in relationship with the society in which it is a part. That relationship is built upon the belief that public education serves society in certain ways: “... as the creator of knowledge, the producer of leaders, and the engine of the economy ... and [as] critical to the society’s well-being” (p. 3). For Kezar et al. the role of public education is more vocational. Public education provides to citizens the skills needed for workplace, the skills and abilities that are worth to transform the society in a useful meaning. That is the social efficiency aspect of education (Sleeter, 2005) according to which vocational and technical training systems are guided by workplace’s culture: adequacy in training and social needs. Sleeter (2005) confirmed this assigned role to vocational and technical education when she asserted that “The main purpose of curriculum [in vocational education is] providing the business community with workers for a revamped economy, and making future workers more employable by equipping them with skills employers seek” (p. 20). Consciously or unconsciously, the training purpose executed by teachers, administrators, policy makers, and even local communities targets the achievement of professional skills’ efficacy supposed to lead students to employment and a better life.

To Feinberg (1998), vocational and technical education’s goal is intended to offer equality of educational opportunity and to assure that students will be rewarded, both in school and afterwards in the workplace, according to their merit. When they follow this principle, schools not only act according to an established principle of fairness, but they also provide a continuing talented workforce for the nation as a whole. In addition to vocationally school driven, the needs of identity affirmation are tremendous. Each component of the American population wants its part to be known and to be accepted as well. The role of educators becomes exhausting in the sense that multicultural curriculum they have to design should reflect the diversity of the American population, different from the principles of standardized-based curriculum. The ideals of public school are no longer framed in schooling; rather they are about education, which should lead to self-determination and critical thinking. One of the principles of education is based on self- discovery and the fact that one belongs to a specific community with its values and norms. Public education’s curricula are moving from old archetypes toward new needs of identity affirmation: curriculum design is shifting from the patterns of a dominant culture to the recognition and integration of minorities’ cultural identities.

Toward a Multicultural Public School

Contrary to the principles and values of democracy, equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, proclaimed by the American Constitution, public education was segregated. Children of the dominant white group had the opportunity to attend best schools. Racial segregation put non-whites and children “of color” in poor and non-qualified schools like the Historically Black Colleges and Universities, HBCUs (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Wells & Crain, 1997). These educational institutions did not provide good outcomes compared to their counterparts of white schools. In the segregated educational system, the idea of culture differences and disadvantages for non-white students’ has been highlighted by Minow, Sweder, and Markus (2008) who argued that:

Most common school practices have been developed for and validated by students from mainstream or European American contexts. In multiple ways ... they reflect and foster mainstream understandings and perspectives. As Pierre Bourdieu explained, 'An educational system that puts into practice an implicit pedagogic action requiring initial familiarity with the dominant culture, and which proceeds by imperceptible familiarization, offers information and training which can only be received and acquired by subjects supported by the systems of predispositions which is the condition for the success of the transmission and inculcation of the culture' (p. 84).

The culture and values transmitted by public education were not those of non-white minorities. Students with middle class European American background, in this condition, had a great advantage because the world of education and schooling was framed according to realities that are the translation of European Americans' values, assumptions, and ways of being. That is why students of those communities had easy opportunities for educational credentials and professional qualifications at workplace. These disadvantages for minority groups could not remain so long. There have been reactions both from dominant and non- dominant groups.

The Civil Rights Movement started in the late 1950s by Black Americans who criticized institutional and racial discrimination as being in contradiction with the American Constitution and democratic values. They found educational and racial segregation as contrary to the values and principles of equality in human rights (Wells & Crain, 1997). The main demands were the desegregation of educational institutions and the necessity for political leaders to take into account the needs of different ethno-cultural minorities. Those claims and civil rights grassroots led to the creation Affirmative action for higher education in order to close the wide gap between Whites and Blacks (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Donahoo, 2008). Despite the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision approved in 1954 against segregation in public education, it is only in 1969 that the African Americans integration in white public schools was recognized (Wells & Crain, 1997). In reaction to the educational desegregation process, as related by Whyte (2002), certain white populations abandoned interracial public schools and relocated in new white suburbs. These movements of white populations aimed at recreating another type of segregation. That was, for example, the case of Park Forest, in the year 1970s in Chicago. In this new suburb, the residents recreated new white schools for their children (Whyte, 2002).

The U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education (1954)* and the civil rights movement opened the door for groups which had been excluded from schools, or from decision making about schools, to speak. Gay, as cited by Sleeter (2005), described the ensuing process of movement building:

The arenas of activity moved from courtrooms and the southern states to the northern ghettos and the campuses of colleges and schools. The ideological and strategic focus of the movement shifted from passivity and perseverance in the face of adversity to aggression, self-determination, cultural consciousness, and political power (p. 53).

When schools were desegregated, parents and community leaders of color began to demand curricula that reflected their community identities, and that teachers expect the same level of academic learning for their children as for white children. While schools staffed by white teachers generally regarded the cultures and language backgrounds of children of color as deficient, some advocates and scholars from communities of color and language-minority communities argued that culture and language are strengths on which learning can and should be built. The civil rights movements ended up with a proliferation of movements for equity and social justice. The women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s challenged patriarchy in different forms; the bilingual education movement and the gay/lesbian movement challenged legalized and institutionalized assumptions about normalcy and mainstreams (Yoshino, 2006). As a result, "Ethnic studies, women's studies, and latter gay/lesbian studies scholarship burgeoned as programs were created and faculty who were hired to teach in them found themselves needing to unearth subjugated knowledge in order to teach it" (Sleeter, 2005, p. 14). Desegregation movements occurred in higher education as a claim for ethnicity and community affirmation. In fact, Sleeter (2005), described one of the curricular implication arguing that:

Starting on college campuses during the 1960s, youth demanded ethnic studies courses that related to their own experiences. The student activists, abetted by the efforts of textbook analysts and by the new thinking about cultural differences, provided the stimulus for the first multiethnic education programs by using strategies of civil rights activists such as sit-ins and boycotts (p. 13).

Non-white cultural and historical realities or values found places in public education curricula. For example Martin Luther King, Jr., a Black hero, is celebrated through the January 18th annual commemorative day, in memory of his non-violent action for civil rights. That is also the case for different federal decisions taken for bilingual studies in public schools for Hispanic and Native American groups.

The affirmative action occurred as an effect to desegregation process. The first federal order in a racial discrimination context is the Executive Order No 10925 issued by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and enacted in July 1964 by U.S. President Lyndon Johnson through the Civil Rights Act. This executive order indicated that federal contractors should take affirmative action to ensure job applicants. Employees should be equally treated, regardless of their race, creed, color or national origin. Due to civil and human rights demands, politicians, policymakers, and educators had to redefine, through reforms, the perspectives and the role of public education (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). Certain boundaries shifted: "School as a community and education as a service to the larger community to which it belonged" were reminders that cultural diversity developed awareness, acceptance, understanding, and adaptation to cultures, races, and religions (Pok, 2002, p. 69). Multiculturalism in American education became a reality.

Multiculturalism as Social Justice

Multiculturalism appeared as a key point in curricula design and as an aspect of social justice. That is why Sleeter (2005) argued that:

Multicultural education has served as an arena for working on school-related equity and social justice issues from vantage points of multiple historically marginalized communities... Embedded in all of these strands are visions of a rich curriculum that will enable young people to examine ways in which a diverse country has struggled to live up to its own ideals of justice, freedom, and equality (p. 11).

Some demographic forecasts showed that the American population is continuously changing. In fact, a significant demographic transformation is on the horizon for the United States of America. Bennett (1995) estimated that "By the year 2000s, over 30 percent of our school age population will be children of color" (p. 18). Eight years later, Frankenberg (2003) provided statistics showing that "Our schools are becoming steadily more nonwhite, as the minority student enrollment approaches 40 percent of all US public schools" (p. 5). Additionally, research has indicated that ethnic minority students are disproportionately poor, dropping out of school, being suspended or expelled, and achieving far below their potential relative to the ethnic majority (Bennett, 1995; Wells & Crain, 1997). Consequently, Frankenberg (2003) and Wilson (2010) argued that teachers must prepare themselves and their students for the ever changing challenge of interaction and communication with diverse races. Reduction of fear, ignorance and personal detachment are eventual benefits to multicultural education.

Multicultural education, to Wilson (2010), relates to education and instruction designed for the cultures of several different races in an educational system. This approach to teaching and learning is based upon consensus building, respect, and fostering cultural pluralism within racial societies. Multicultural education acknowledges and incorporates positive racial idiosyncrasies into classroom atmospheres. Catherine R. Stimpson, as cited by Levine (2002), discussing the importance of multiculturalism argued that "The necessary recognition that we cannot think of culture unless we think of many cultures at the same time" (p. 143). Multiculturalism is nowadays one of the most important issues faced by politicians, scholars, and educators in the United States. Multiculturalism cannot be separated with American history. The U.S. is a particular nation of nations. From the actual notion of "salad bowl" to the former idea of "melting pot" portrayed by Crèvecoeur in 1782 there is a wide gap. If the "melting pot" was a project attempting to create a culturally homogeneous nation, where individuals would be educated according to a mainstream, multiculturalism seems to educate individuals who would hold their personal cultural identities living together and interacting in diversity.

Diversity, in opposition to assimilation, is acting, as Yoshino (2006) argued, against mainstream and covering, the conventional understanding to downplay one's difference. According to him, racial minorities are pressed to "act white" by changing for example their names, languages, or cultural practices. Women are told to play like men at work. Gays and lesbians are asked not to engage in public display of same-sex affection. Individuals with disabilities are urged to conceal their handicap in order to allow them function. Among other cases, Yoshino (2006) asserted that American civil law has generally ignored the threat posed by covering demands. At certain moments, minorities feel uncomfortable with established rules that shape their unwilling way of living in society.

Activism and social movements differently reshaped boundaries. Multicultural educational programs and social laws changed rules (Kezar et al. 2005; Yoshino, 2006). Today, race, national origin, gender, religion, and disability are protected by federal civil rights laws. An increasing number of states and educational institutions include sexual orientation in civil rights laws and curricula as well. People should not be penalized for being different. Consensus on multiculturalism does not completely protect individuals against demands that shape those differences.

Diversity learning is a high priority, including multicultural and intercultural understanding (Conley, 2000). Although differently defined, multiculturalism often refers to sensitivity to difference, including race, gender, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and disability. In Debra Humphrey's report for a national survey in 2000, as cited by Gurin (2002), sixty two percent of reporting educational institutions had a diversity course requirement or were developing one. Among these, fifty eight percent require one course and forty two percent require two or more courses. In the most common model among schools with requirement (68 %), students select a course on diversity from a list of options. Increasingly, multicultural perspectives are also infused throughout curriculum, particularly in the humanities and social science.

Based on the theory of transformative intellectual knowledge, Sleeter (2005) strongly expressed concerns about the efficient manner to define the goals of multicultural education. According to this theory, she argues that

Even when textbooks look multicultural on the surface (e.g., having added people of color to lists of famous people to study, or stories by authors of color to reading texts), most present a sanitized view of the world that suggests everyone is fairly content. The issues that do not show up in major texts (such as why millions of U.S. citizens continue to live in poverty, or what happened to indigenous people who used to have sovereignty in the Americas) present very loud silences to those who are aware of them. Textbooks can serve as useful resources in multicultural curricula, if their use is informed by transformative knowledge (p. 87).

According to the transformative intellectual knowledge theory, multicultural textbooks do not aim at considering students as empty vessels that have to be filled. In fact, this theory refutes the banking pedagogy which consists of feeding students with ready to wear contents of knowledge (Freire, 2000). In this sense, we would agree that an effective multicultural education contends for the development of students' critical thinking about socio-economical and historical realities: what are the actual problems their society is facing, what are the eventual reasons or origins, and how can students contribute to address them? In multicultural education, socio-historical issues are part of the reflection that leads students to use efficiently their mind to understand diversity realities as systemic realities which they have to take into account in order to better address them.

For Banks (2004) multicultural education should consider school as the community where students would cultivate democratic behavior and address shared cultural identities. In this point of view, Banks sustained that "Students must attain democratic values in school, if we ever hope to change the political, social, and economic structures of stratified societies and nation-states because they are the future citizens and leaders" (p. 10). How can education miss that reality? Today's students are leaders of tomorrow. How can they become effective leaders, if they are not aware of the democratic values of the republic and multicultural realities that exist in their environment? This is an imperative preparation of students as citizens who have to consider the increasing community changing that occurs in their society. Multicultural education involves the active recognition by schools for "cultural membership". Students are not taught just as citizens of one nation but also as members of different cultural groups composing that nation. Alternatives to pluralism were assimilation through which the concept of nation was then called the "Melting pot."

The general ideal that historically has been used to improve public education was the concept education as a common good. Classism has negatively influenced the mission of public education in the American democratic society (Conley, 2000; Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1980). In this sense, public education was aimed at serving the interests of dominant groups. Those dominant groups took control of the educational system by inculcating their own ideology that became a national mainstream. Equality in education is a social justice request intended to balance or reduce the gap between different communities. Feinberg (1998) argued that if multicultural education is unchecked there are serious indirect social costs to the exercise of equal rights, especially in societies that adhere to liberal democratic ideals.

One of these is that unearned advantages inherited from wealth allow distort and slow the development and rewarding of talents. Less talented members are advantaged over more talented ones because family background provides advantages that challenge relative deficits in talent. A commitment to equal opportunity seeks to mitigate this advantage by holding that children have the right to receive an education that is consistent with their capacities, regardless of the socioeconomic background of their parents. Individual intellectual growth is personal. That goes from acculturation to deculturation (Faderman, 2003). A commitment to individual growth entails giving children a right to select their own conception of the good and to develop their talents. In whatever way, children's capacities allow constraints if only others do the same. This principle requires from schools to challenge children's capacity in ways that they might not experience at home divergences compared to school's experience. It requires that they expand their understanding and broaden their cultural horizons by engaging their present conception through their interaction with others.

The principles of school as a common good should be held as universal, applying to everyone regardless of social class, race, sex, or religion, and they must be acceptable even if people occupy different social positions. Thus, if children are to be granted equal opportunity, the right of free association, and personal growth, they must also learn that it is important for others to have these rights too. The universality of cultural right is essential for stabilizing these principles in the construction of a liberal and democratic society. If children are not taught that the rights they have for themselves are rights that should be extended to others, then the principles are not long lasting. Schools are responsible for teaching values to children, but not indoctrination in mainstream (Pascoe, 2007, Yoshino, 2006).

Some parents fear that "exposing" or sending their children to school could undermine their commitment to their own traditional values. These parents want to be able to recognize themselves through their children, and they want their children to cherish their own values and way of life and not others'. This conception applies to the conception of education as theorized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *L'Emile*(trans. 1998). According to this theory, man is innately good and society corrupts him. That is why the child must be the less possible exposed to the influence of the society; but how can a child be subtracted from an environment in which s/he is called to live? Can individuals live without networking, without interaction?

Globalization is nowadays looking like a refutation of multiculturalism. Instead of recognition of individuals and groups particularities, globalization attempts to put together what people have in common and not what differentiates them. The world stands as one. Germany is united; Europe is united in one entity. The African continent is striving on the same way. Barriers and boundaries are in constant reshaping. Universities and faculties are taking part in globalization evolvement. Many educational institutions are coming together through networking, sharing together standardized curricula and training programs.

Echoing Wilson (2010), I argue that certain conditions urge if public education aims at building a sustainable multicultural education worth for the mutual comprehension of diversity and the construction of solid foundations for a democratic society. These conditions are as follows:

- provide alternative points of view relative to information already taught in most educational systems,
- provide ethnic minorities with a sense of being inclusive in history, science, etc.
- decrease stereotypes, prejudice, bigotry, and racism in America and in the world.

A public education free of prejudice, a public education color blind in its decision making, a public education that would look communities' differences as an enrichment would probably lead students, both young and adult, to become more integrated in a society more and more diverse.

CONCLUSION

The American public school has known diverse fortunes. Through its history, there have been many changes and they are still ongoing. From the segregated educational system to the affirmative action aimed at closing the gap between the different communities, the United States found important to look forward in searching the application of the principles of democracy: equality for all citizens. The sad reality is well documented in Jonathan kozol's(1991) Bestseller book *Savage Inequalities*, which reflects that there still persist some increasingly growing social inequalities despite the improvement

in wealth, privilege, and position that are hard to explain away simply on the basis of differences in individual effort and initiative, significant as such as differences are. Finally, there is a collective concern that we are failing to develop to its fullest the human potential of the diverse population, cannot ultimately succeed as a democracy if we fail to close the gaps in opportunity that continue to be associated with race” (Bowen & Bok, 1998, p. xxii).

Considered the United States becomes more and more diverse racially and culturally, the questions raised by multiculturalism in the past 50 years become all the more pressing, as one tries to rethink what pluralistic democracy could and should mean for a population of people so widely different from each other.

In this vein, Frankenberg (2003), citing the University of Michigan psychologist Patricia Gurin, who has studied race relations in higher education, argued that “students learn better in a diverse educational environment, and they are better prepared to become active participants in our pluralistic, democratic society once they leave such a setting” (p. 14). By frequently interacting with counterparts from diverse backgrounds, students are challenged to think in deeper and more complex ways. Another benefit is that students educated in such environment are better able to participate in a heterogeneous democratic society because they have already experienced various perspectives. Their different experiences reinforce their sensitivity to others weakness but also others strengths (Bowen & Bok, 1998).

People want to keep their indigenous racial or ethnic cultural traditions instead of trying to fit into mainstream. Culture is a dynamic process. Each generation, according to the needs and requirements of the time has to set up strategies worth to address those issues. School as a socializing institution plays an important role in this context. As part of the construction of citizenship, and as part of acculturation and deculturation, education is an important springboard to democracy. As Sleeter (2005) advises, “Young people should develop some sense of solidarity across differences that enable working toward closing the gap between the Nation’s ideals and its realities” (p. 15). As the world is coping with the economic recession and the concerns with sociopolitical unrest in many parts of the world have undoubtedly awaken ethnic and racial animosities, it becomes more important than ever before to search for viable and sustainable solutions through investment in young people’s education that would open other doors, doors through which they would seek to share with the 99 percent of the population should they be among the top One percent leading the economy. Advocating for a multicultural education in American schools might be a way of implementing social justice as an experimental social policy. We cannot but conclude that Inter-cultural relations exist among human beings and, that acknowledging the benefits which go along with understanding each other as people and nations becomes essential for nurturing positive and stronger human resources. Not only would a generalized multicultural education bridge the gap of misunderstanding, and prevent xenophobic attitudes, it would lead to a more democratic American society, and a better future for human kind as a whole.

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Notes

¹Shtetl - Little city, small town, village - in particular, the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, where the remarkable culture of the Ashkenazim flourished before World War II.

In many a shtetl, most of the inhabitants were Jews; in others, all were Jews. And it was in the shtetlach that certain Jewish traditions and values were preserved and embellished until they achieved a character distinctly their own.

The shtetl was the incubator and fortress of Ashkenazi culture. The residents were poor folk, fundamentalist in faith, earthy, superstitious, stubbornly resisting secularism or change.

<http://www.templeanjose.org/JudaismInfo/history/shtetl.htm> Retrieved Dec. 18, 2011