

Multicultural for who? A review of a comprehensive multicultural textbook

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BOOK REVIEW

Bennett, C. I. (2019). *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice* (9th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Pearson. 582 pp., ISBN: 0-13-467902-4. \$29.99 (Digital) or \$86.45 (Print).

Bennett's (2019) book *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice* is an essential read for anyone involved in the field of Education because it encompasses several concepts of multicultural education. Nonetheless, some important factors are left out of the conversation, which I will present in this review. The title does it justice. It includes discussions on the main aspects of multicultural education: from its origins, conceptual models, and core values, to topics on race/ethnicity, gender, class, special education, religious pluralism, the roots of cultural diversity and immigration in the U.S., as well as culturally responsive teaching and how to reach all learners through curriculum transformation.

The book is divided into Parts I, II, III, and IV. Some of the main topics will be presented next. Part I, *The case for multicultural education*, is dedicated to explaining what multicultural education is, including its background, its four basic principles, core values, and dimensions. Like most multicultural education scholars do in their publications (Aydin, 2013; Banks, 2014; Gollnick & Chinn, 2017; Sahin & Kilinc, 2016), Bennett made sure to present a chapter to address the criticism about multicultural education discussing the pitfalls and traps that multicultural educators must be mindful of when approaching this subject.

Besides, Bennett made important clarifications concerning the sources and types of racism, namely, individual, institutional, and cultural. Hence, she pointed out that culturally competent teaching is imperative to counter institutional racism in the U.S. For that matter, she made important comments about White superiority and oppression couched on the belief in the inferiority of any element that does not have an Anglo-European origin, proposing that it is vital to discuss and become aware of Whiteness and White privilege to fight racism and, thus, teach for social justice. That would consist of affirming students racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, as well as their diversity, and including the family and community in efforts regarding multicultural classes, to address racism in the curriculum. In addition, Bennett mentioned President Donald Trump's anti-multiculturalism attitudes and how they can be pervasive to increase and legitimize prejudice against religious pluralism that results in hate crimes, particularly those related to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

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Part II, Roots of cultural diversity in the United States: the conflicting themes of assimilation and pluralism, focuses on immigration in the U.S., comprising topics like a brief history of naturalization and immigration laws into the country to clarify on how those used to process and how they are now. A relevant issue presented refers to the impact that immigrants have on the U.S. economy to counter common misconceptions and misinformation that lead to anti-immigrant policies and anti-immigrant hysteria. A valuable historical overview about each type of common immigrants in the U.S. helps the reader be more acquainted with the early immigration of Anglo-Europeans, involuntary immigration of American Indian and African Americans, as other sorts of immigration. For example, the reader might find it interesting to read a chapter about Latino immigrants' perspectives in which Bennett clarified that there are diverse origins of Latinos in the country, therefore, valuing the diversity among Latinos, avoiding any homogenization of this ethnic group. Another example is a chapter about Asian American perspectives in which not only did Bennett identify the Asian countries where most immigrants to the U.S. come from, but also, she addressed the pervasive stereotypes of Asians being 'good minorities' and its consequences to students and education. Finally, in her chapter on Arab Americans' perspectives, Bennett addressed mistakes and misconceptions people may have about this ethnic group, its demographics, and origins, as well as its cultural and historical heritage. In each one of those chapters, she offered tips and suggestions as to how teachers should deal with misconceptions and prejudices against each of these groups in the classroom. In part III, entitled Reaching all learners: perspectives on culture, gender, class, and exceptionalities, Bennett explored the subthemes of multicultural education and their implications on teaching and learning. She addressed the interrelated ideas of culturally responsive/relevant teaching and students' learning styles. She also discussed the reasons why culturally relevant teaching is still not common practice in U.S. schools, and with her blueprint for culturally competent practice, Bennett declared the fundamental principle that teachers can (and should) make a difference.

Finally, in part IV, Teaching in a multicultural society, Bennett delved into the transformative power of teaching multicultural education in schools. She included ideas of the importance of teaching in linguistically diverse classrooms which includes both discussing English Language Learners in America and the importance of bilingual education, as well as a recognition of the importance of African American Language in culturally diverse classrooms. Bennett made a point that the family, mainly the parents, should be the school's partners in language learning to reaffirm their cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Carroll, 2017; Swick, 2009; Wessels, 2014). Lastly, she discussed curriculum transformation focusing on the challenge of establishing multiple perspectives in the classroom as opposed to the prevalent Eurocentrism curriculum.

Review

One of the strongest aspects of Bennett's book that immediately calls the attention of the readers is that it offers insightful examples that illustrate the necessity of implementing multicultural education in American schools. In addition, overall, Bennett's book resembles others of multicultural education (i.e., Banks, 2014; Gollnick & Chinn, 2017) mainly due to its informative and descriptive nature. Accordingly, it is noteworthy that throughout the book several seminal authors on multicultural education are cited such as Au, Banks, Gay, Howard,

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and Sleeter, as well as endnotes are included to each chapter with a list full of suggestions on further readings on the subjects.

If one considers that the primary objective of this book is to be a textbook on multicultural education, then Bennett's book accomplished its goal. Bennett touched on a wide range of the most relevant trend topics in the field of multicultural education. Nevertheless, though the readers will agree that the book is comprehensive in its approach to multicultural education themes and subthemes, they may also perceive that it lacks in-depth discussions on each subject presented in it.

Bennett's book encompasses every subject or subthemes of this field of study. However, some important information related to the subjects is absent. For example, despite including a section on White privilege and institutional racism, the core of the matter about the reasons those exist, as well as the power relations that work as barriers to implementing a multicultural curriculum to American schools and in higher education institutions seem to be left out of the table. In fact, there is no suggestion of how to implement multicultural education to higher education in teacher preparation programs which would be an important consideration given the fact that teacher preparation programs must be infused with multicultural, sociocultural, and political discussions so that future educators understand the context of their practice (Essary & Szecsi, 2018).

Despite being a textbook, given the importance and magnitude of certain topics that include significant issues in the U.S. educational system, namely racism, prejudice, segregation, and others that affect students' learning and progression in school life with effects on their future, some in-depth reflections should have been included. Furthermore, in spite of being a comprehensive book, multicultural education texts should take every opportunity to educate its readers about the importance of minorities discourses in the process of knowledge construction. An aspect that should be highlighted in the field of Education, mostly in Multicultural Education that tends to be disregarded is a rather subtle one, though powerful. In this area, power relations are at stake, mostly invisible, like those present in the discourse, not only oral but written as well. Educators should not take them for granted without proceeding to a more profound investigation, naturalizing them. Words are powerful; they are tools to legitimate distinct points of view, consolidate certain "truths," mainly from hegemonic groups. Frequently, what is available in the market is the product of the majorities, who belong to segments of society that are privileged in many ways, literate and well-off. Inadvertently, educators, scholars, writers, and students may not realize that, because they are immersed in a cultural broth, they reproduce endlessly a certain mindset in which the dominants will remain in a dominant position, keeping the others apart. Bauman (2004) called them human wastes, those that 'failed' to meet the 'requirements' to become part of the established society, and who are excluded from it.

For instance, regardless of the undoubted relevance of addressing immigration issues in her book, by referring to immigrant groups as 'Asian Americans,' 'African Americans,' or 'Arab Americans' Bennett inadvertently homogenized these groups as if every Asian (or African or Arab) considers him/herself as having a hyphenated ethnicity (Asher, 2007). Therefore, it is assumed that the groups represented in those chapters are those of documented immigrants

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(dual citizenship), or who have an Asian, African or Arab descent that considers themselves as hyphenated Americans (Asher, 2007). Consequently, others were disregarded, namely undocumented immigrants, who are often neglected and live at the margin of the society, even with the importance of this issue in the U.S.

Although Bennett's book defined, informed, and described different subtopics pertaining to the multicultural education field, it did not approach the discussion on the barriers to implementing a multicultural education or curriculum as a systemic issue. Elias (2001) posited about the figurational models or theories in which power relations, mainly those of domination-subjection relations, evidences the existence of processes of exclusion and stigmatization that are put into action by the set of established towards the outsiders. The former occupies positions of prestige and power and are often known as the 'good society;' while the latter, the outsiders, are excluded from society. This sort of discussion and analysis of structures of society would help the readers understand the phenomenon of prejudice, discrimination, and violence (Elias, 2001; Fletcher, 1997) in the modern society and would bring a broader spectrum to the discussion in the multicultural education field.

Multicultural education textbooks such as Bennett's are addressed to the so-called establishment, while the outsiders' (Becker, 1963, 1977) perspectives and voices are not included in the text. In other words, the text is written to the established, White majority in the U.S. and one may wonder whether readers from minority groups feel that the book also 'speaks' to them. Multicultural education should not be restricted to steps to be trailed, as if it could be accomplished or understood by following tips and instructions of a manual or textbook. Conversely, congruent with constructivist approaches, it must foster authentic, holistic, and continuous learning opportunities and practices (Halpern, 2017) to work on deconstructing people's biases, misconceptions, prejudices and discrimination against "the others." Bennett's attempts to include a plethora of information does not guarantee a deep understanding of this complex subject. Nevertheless, it is a good start for readers from diverse profiles and educational backgrounds regardless of their experience in or relation to the field of education. Finally, if discussions about the structural problems and power relations that function as barriers that prevent multicultural education to be fully implemented in the American educational system, its concepts of social justice and promoting an egalitarian society will always sound as unattainable ideals – and will continue to serve as fuel for its critics.

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