

TRANSCA

Multiculturalism

Why read this Text

You should read the text if you are interested in the origins of the concept of multiculturalism and in its meanings throughout history. In addition, the text deals with strategies for trying to establish equal rights in a multicultural society or education system.

Multiculturalism refers to a set of socio-political ideas and measures for the handling of diversity and difference within a society and is also linked to the question of integration. Originally developed in Canada in the 1980s by philosophers such as Taylor, Tully and Kymlicka, who argued that members of minorities should not be forced to align with the majority society, but rather obtain enough space and rights to live in a self-determined way, while recognizing and appreciating mutual differences. This can be done through anti-discriminatory and difference-sensitive measures in various state institutions, such as schools. However, the particular approaches can contradict each other: for example, some not only refer to cultural, ethnic and religious aspects, but also to other categories of difference such as class, gender or sexuality. The omission of these, as well as other issues such as a rigid concept of culture, were often criticized and evaluated. Multiculturalism has offered and continues to provide a more or less viable alternative to the widespread notion of the "melting pot", especially in the US in the first half of the 20th century, where different groups were thought of as "merging" with each other into a homogeneous nation.

Historical Context

Before the term first appeared in Canada around 1960, other "classical immigration countries" such as the US and Australia have long been thinking about how to deal with increasing (cultural) diversity and migration in the times of globalization. In the US, since the first half of the twentieth century, the metaphor of the melting pot has been used to describe the mode of dealing with migrants and minorities. The main aim was to align them with the majority society, so that their cultural differences would disappear over time and a group of people as homogeneous as possible could be formed (Bienfait 2006: 11).

In the 1980s, the Canadian theorist Charles Taylor was the first to enforce the concept of multiculturalism as official policy in Canada and as opposed to the melting pot. In Taylor's idea of a "multicultural mosaic" (or "salad bowl"), each "culture" is embodied in a mosaic stone that belongs to a larger whole, but at the same time remains preserved in its particularity. The individual "cultural characteristics" should be mutually recognized, valued (not only symbolically) and heard by the central government (see *ibid.*: 65f). In this "policy of recognition," the quest for authenticity opposes the enforcement to submit and assimilate to a leading culture (see *ibid.*: 70).



TRANSCA

Another major Canadian theorist, James Tully, goes even further than Taylor and believes that only through public/institutional recognition a sense of belonging can arise. Another often-quoted Canadian philosopher, Will Kymlicka, emphasizes the inherent nature of multiculturalism and pleads for more consideration for group-specific needs. With this concept of "liberal multiculturalism" he proposes to extend the individual rights of every citizen through certain group rights (for indigenous people, migrants and minorities) (see *ibid*: 87ff).

a) Discussion

As already indicated, the concept of multiculturalism does not mean the same to everyone, but has been and is being understood and used differently by different people, institutions, and local and national contexts. The often-rigid definition of "culture" was in fact an important and often thematized problem of multiculturalism. Culture is understood as something self-contained, homogeneous, and outward-looking that is bound to a territory and controls its bearer without exception. Ideally, Multiculturalism does not always aim for equal opportunities along "cultural" or ethnic differences, but also considers other groups or categories of differences such as gender, class, gender, religion, sexuality, special needs, etc. including differences within a group (see Intersectionality).

This is where liberal feminist criticism sets in, e.g. represented by Susan Moller Okin, stressing that women in particular (but also children or lesbian and gay representatives) are suffering due to traditions of non-Western "foreign" cultures, and should be protected by special rights from practices such as headscarves or arranged marriages as well Polygamy. This view arose with quite some criticism. What is problematic here is that in the case of the "foreign culture", morally condemnable practices (for example, violence against women) are primarily attributed to culture itself, to tradition, or to a religion, whereas in one's own society they are related to the pathological or simply abnormal nature of an individual (cf. Heins 2013: 110).

Also in the context of school, there is no fixed approach to dealing with diversity, but rather various theoretical and practical approaches that can be in parts contradictory (Leistyna 2002: 9). An educational model that has existed since the beginning of mass school enrolment is that of assimilation. The main concern here is the adaptation / approximation of students with different cultural / linguistic background to the requirements of a school and the majority society (see melting pot theory), for the purpose of developing a controllable workforce. One of the main concerns of a critical multicultural education model is the understanding of differences of all kinds as potential resources that must not only be accepted but also promoted, such as multilingualism (see Kalantzis & Cope 1999: 281).



TRANSCA

b) Practical Example

In a public school in Changlet (USA) a new multicultural experiment was launched in 1993. After many attempts to tackle long-standing issues such as cultural segregation, class hierarchies and discrimination, as well as drug abuse, violence and a high drop-out rate, a commission of 17 volunteers emerged: teachers, directors and specialists, called the "Central Steering Committee" (CSC) and later also formed additional sub-commissions. Their goal was to improve the conditions in schools for students and their parents and communities through multicultural strategies. Decisions were made to re-design the curriculum, to sensitize and diversify the school staff, to involve parents and communities more intensively in decision-making processes, and to be more public via regular reports. For example, bilingual teaching has been extended to include more subjects, more specific about the history of certain countries and "cultures", celebrating festivities from other regions of the world, mainly activities that draw attention to the issue of multiculturalism and diversity. (ibid.: 172f) Often a concept of culture was used, which represented groups as enclosed and thus probably led only to more essentializations.

In an analysis of the first three years of research the author of the study (Leistyna 2002) came to the following conclusion: Despite high ambitions and efforts of those involved, the project could not achieve much in the fight against social injustices and hostilities. Nevertheless, Leistyna's investigation reveals the problems that can be encountered in such a project and thus offers the opportunity to take them better into account and counteract in the future. Simultaneously, this demonstrates the need for a contemporary and progressive multiculturalism that leaves room for differences within groups and recognizes the multi-layered nature of identities and categories through an intersectional perspective. To conclude, we can only refer here to further developments, such as transcultural approaches (Welsch 2017) or the concept of hybrid identities (Bhaba 2012).

Thinking further

- What is your personal understanding of multiculturalism? What are its benefits and dangers/limits?
- Are there, and when yes which, multicultural practices and/or policies in your school? Can the concept of multiculturalism in schools be helpful?
- How can a constructive multiculturalism concept in education look like?
- What does culture mean to you?
- Do you think that your understanding of culture is accepted elsewhere in a different cultural context? If so, why?



TRANSCA

- Does one need specific competences or specific cultural practices in order to fit into a society?
- What concept of society do you accept? Is it always about “blending in”?

Sources

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