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CHAPTER 6

THE CASE FOR A CULTURE SENSITIVE EDUCATION, AND THE ROLE OF PEDAGOGY IN RESOLVING TENSIONS BETWEEN TRADITION, MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

The basic assumption that underlies this chapter is that culture is an ever changing, reciprocal process involving sets of durable social interactions, which can be reproduced, but which are also capable of being recreated, adopted and adapted in both time and space. In other words, culture is not a static, purist concept, but a highly dynamic one. The origins of this dynamism often comes from sustained cultural contact between peoples of different ethnicity, religion, gender, traditions, and the day-to-day use of one or more languages within and across populations.

The study of culture is sometimes set within opposite ends or poles of a spectrum, such as traditional versus modern, individualism versus collectivism. Polarities have both their merits and demerits when used in discussions about other areas as well as culture, e.g. psychology, economics and educational studies. On one hand, their use can lend specificity and focus to investigating a particular area, and this applies equally to the study of cultural processes and particular cultural contexts. On the other hand, the use of polarities can often give the impression that culture and cultural processes are limiting and complacent, as they are only conceived to exist within certain arbitrary limits, (i.e. polarities), and so may have no active relationships with other aspects of the same or other cultural contexts. Some critics would even go as far as to say that polarities are flimsy artificial constructs, and of limited application and value to critical analysis and meaningful debate. This is not the view of the present author, but it is important to bear in mind that the uncritical use and overemphasis of polarities in a discussion about culture, could result in the perception of culture and the study of cultural processes as something static, whether they be at the opposite ends of a spectrum or somewhere in the middle of a continuum.

The title of this section of the present volume presents us with an implied polarity. In many cases, the provision of education in immigrant societies involves tensions between modern and traditional concerns, in which modern is the polar opposite of traditional. So polarities are with us whether we want them or not and in

fact do serve a useful purpose when used in the appropriate context. In this chapter, the use of polarities must be seen in the context of a wider discussion about cultural diversity, and its place in the changing nature of educational reform, especially in multicultural societies with newly immigrant groups. In this regard therefore, because of the breadth of the process of education for immigrant and multicultural societies, the considered use of certain polarities would be helpful in order to focus our discussions more succinctly.

The chapter will be structured as follows: the first part will examine the current debate on reforming “education for diversity” as a prelude to examining the nature of a culture sensitive education, the second part will discuss the nature of a culture sensitive education in the context of immigrant and multicultural education. The third part will examine the key role of pedagogy in culture sensitive education from a cross cultural perspective, the fourth and concluding part of the chapter will examine the implications of a culture sensitive education for policies of acculturation, curriculum reform and the development of pedagogy. The chapter will be framed within the wider context of equipping immigrant groups with an education that is both sensitive to their own cultural contexts but prepares them for life in the global village. The notion of diversity in the context of education is therefore a useful start to a discussion about providing an education that is sensitive to cultural needs. So let us first examine the relationship between education, diversity and cultural influences.

EDUCATION FOR DIVERSITY AND DIVERSITY OF EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

Corson (1998) has argued that if differences that exist between a minority of educationally diverse students and the main body of students in a given population are educationally relevant, then some different type of educational provision is warranted. This line of argument is certainly becoming more common, when it comes to discussing the education and schooling of multi-ethnic populations and newly immigrant groups. This is mainly because of the enormous population shifts over the decades since World War two, and the re-examination by many societies of their social welfare and education policies, to meet the challenges of major demographic movements. A universal thread flowing through the effect of population shifts is that cultural diversity has emerged as a key factor in the general debate concerning education for diversity.

Cultural diversity is no longer a marginal issue linked with a few immigrant groups, and small numbers of ethnic minorities within a larger society. It has become an important issue in the provision of education, so much so, that societies have had to face the fact that educational provision may itself have to be diversified, in order to meet the very real challenge of multicultural education that embodies much of cultural diversity. However, there are certain forces that emerged in the postmodern world of the final decade of the last century which are proving to be detrimental to policies of Education for Diversity. Postmodern trends are not intellectual movements or a particular philosophical tradition but a state of society at a particular time. According to Corson (1998) postmodernity has two distinct but conflicting