

Anti-Oppressive Classrooms

– Critical Framework of Multicultural Education

Jiarong Chang^{1,a,*}

¹College of Arts and Science, Boston University, Boston, MA, 02215, United States

a. jrcchang@bu.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: In an era marked by diverse cultures, perspectives, and experiences, the traditional classroom model can sometimes inadvertently perpetuate inequalities and reinforce oppressive structures. The current paper aimed to investigate the effective strategies and pedagogical approach to challenge oppression and create an equal, fair, yet prosocial learning environment. This paper's findings suggest that education that adopted a critical framework of multiculturalism has the potential to be a powerful tool for dismantling oppressive forces and fostering inclusivity, equity, and social justice. This framework not only acknowledges the existence of systemic inequalities, discrimination, and power imbalances but actively seeks to confront and challenge them within educational settings. By embracing anti-oppressive classrooms, educators can create dynamic learning environments that empower students from their daily lives, validate their diverse identities, and provide them with the tools to critically engage with the world around them. This paper delves into the essence of Anti-Oppressive Classrooms as a cornerstone of a more just and equitable education, exploring its fundamental principles and the profound impact it can have on both individual learners and society as a whole.

Keywords: multiculturalism, education, social justice, equity

1. Introduction

Structural racism and oppression toward minorities have long existed in society, but its existence does not mean that should be the norm, and educators should teach the students social justice and the skills they need to transform society. Some people may think of multicultural teaching as helping students learn about different cultures and telling them every culture, race, or ethnicity should be equal and respected; however, this is just the surface level and is called the liberal framework of multicultural education. Critical multicultural education should be incorporated into the teaching curriculum and educators should not only teach students from different perspectives but also emphasize the actions towards transformative justice.

This paper will constructively analyze the existing literature on the critical framework of multiculturalism in educational contexts and provide insights on how educators could adopt anti-oppressive practices in the curriculum. This paper aims to add to the existing literature on education and transformative justice by illuminating how the critical framework not only challenges traditional

norms but also serves as a catalyst for nurturing inclusive, empowering, and socially conscious learning environments.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Conservative, liberal, and critical frameworks of multicultural education are distinct approaches that shape how societies and educational institutions address diversity, inclusion, and equity in their curricula and practices. Each framework approaches these issues from a different perspective and advocates for different strategies and goals. This section will break down these frameworks and analyze differences between these frameworks.

2.1. Conservative Framework

The conservative framework of multicultural education emphasizes the preservation of traditional cultural values and the maintenance of societal cohesion. It often seeks to integrate diverse perspectives and cultural elements into the existing curriculum without challenging the dominant cultural norms, with the primary focus on promoting a sense of unity and shared values, while avoiding potentially divisive or controversial topics [1]. This framework involves celebrating cultural differences, recognizing history from different regions, and incorporating diverse literature into the curriculum. Critics argue that this approach can sometimes lead to tokenism or a superficial inclusion of diversity without addressing underlying power dynamics and structural inequalities.

2.2. Liberal Framework

The liberal framework of multicultural education aims to promote equality and individual rights while recognizing the importance of diversity. It seeks to create an inclusive environment where different cultural perspectives are acknowledged and respected. This approach often involves curriculum reforms that incorporate diverse perspectives and histories, address stereotypes and biases, and encourage open discussions about social issues. It included “celebrating and preserving opportunities for choice” [2]. The goal is to provide students with a well-rounded education that reflects the complexity of the world they live in. Critics of the liberal framework argue that it might not go far enough in challenging systemic inequalities and could inadvertently perpetuate them by focusing solely on individual rights and representation.

2.3. Critical Framework

The critical framework of multicultural education takes a more transformative and socio-political approach. It recognizes that societal power structures, such as racism, sexism, and economic inequalities, play a significant role in shaping education. This framework aims to dismantle these power dynamics by addressing issues of social justice and equity directly within the curriculum and educational practices [3]. It encourages students to critically examine the root causes of inequalities and engage in activism to challenge them. The critical framework often emphasizes the importance of representation, empowerment, and social change. Critics of this approach argue that it can be overly ideological and may not provide a balanced view of history and society.

It is important to note that these frameworks are not rigid categories, and there can be overlap and variations within each framework. Additionally, discussions around multicultural education often involve a combination of these perspectives, as educators and policymakers navigate the complexities of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in education.

3. Critical Analysis of Multicultural Education

3.1. The Importance of Multicultural Education

Most schools adopt the liberal framework of multicultural education, in which teachers treat students with different identities equally with equal respect. This is not essentially wrong, but it ignores students' identities. The findings from Miled highlight the dominant liberal framework of multicultural education, the systemic barriers to move beyond the tokenistic approach of cultures and the organizational constraints to move towards transformative multiculturalism and anti-racism education in teachers' training and professional development [2]. Students are born in different families with different cultural, ethnic, or gender identities, and those identities are meaningful to them. Gonzalez-Mena has pointed out that she was shocked and uncomfortable that her female identity was being ignored by her husband, though she did not want to be treated unequally due to her gender [4]. Similarly, people of color will feel enormously sad if one ignores their ethnic identity because their race and culture have made up a great part of them. Just as Gonzalez-Mena said, aspects of their cultural identity generate oppression, and "ignoring that aspect doesn't make oppression go away" [4]. Therefore, educators should acknowledge that differences naturally exist because different families have different manners of raising children, and finding out the best way to treat them may be one of the priorities in culturally responsive teaching. The most important aspect of Gonzalez-Mena's point is that educators should not assume mainstream culture or the culture they are more familiar with as "normal" [4]. Otherwise, they will adopt the conservative framework of multicultural education, in which they consciously or unconsciously make students assimilate to the mainstream culture, which should not be the most privileged or the most powerful one in the ideal society that is based on the concept of cultural pluralism.

3.2. Goals of Critical Multiculturalism

In order to reach the ideal state of cultural pluralism, whose goal is to achieve "unity through diversity", educators should have a critical framework of multicultural education [4]. Critical multiculturalism teaches students about the inequality that minorities may face in mainstream culture and does not ignore their identity [5]. Furthermore, it promotes students to actively respond to oppression and take steps toward transformative justice [5]. Such a kind of pedagogy is crucial for minority students because mainstream culture and media in U.S. society have long celebrated "American dreams", or what Alismail pointed out as the "land of opportunity" [5]. While opportunities do exist in the U.S. and successes are achievable through endeavor, not everyone can get the same opportunity and not everyone can achieve success through the same amount of work. The existing opportunity gap and achievement gap should be realized by minority students, not to blow their confidence, but to let them have a holistic view about the complex environment. The existing opportunity gap and achievement gap should be realized by minority students, not to blow their confidence, but to let them have a holistic view about the complex environment. Although Fowler and Brown argued that minority students who detected cues of negative or unequal expectations towards them may have negative contributions on their achievements [6]. However, many also pointed out that disparity in resource allocations, achievements, and opportunities were structural, and there would only incur little change if marginalized groups' rights were not defended [7]. Minority students who do not receive the message that disparity and privileges exist naturally in society might constantly doubt themselves or might even become not capable to realizing the fact that they face oppression. Incorporating John Steinbeck's novels, which talk about struggling experiences of immigrants with low socioeconomic status and how they fail to achieve American dreams, or similar ones that talk about diverse perspectives that differ with what the mainstream media has

communicated, could help minority students think critically about the internal, structural oppression in the society and understand their roles in the society. Other than that, teachers should help them with concrete skills, like defending themselves, actively standing for modifications of current policies, articulating the issues with critical thinking, or others that are essential for social change.

3.3. The Current Situation of Oppression

Although it is important to celebrate and embrace diversity, the most important step toward social justice is to understand that oppressions exist in different subtle forms. Sexism, racism, and all other forms of oppression become too subtle and normal for people to be concerned and notice because people generally view today's issues less seriously than those in the past, and people tend to pay more attention to individual cases. In the case of sexism, according to Sensoy and DiAngelo, mainstream media culture that captures women as less powerful creatures than males and sexualizes women has exacerbated the subtle form of sexism in everyday life [8]. The popularity of rap and hip-hop music may make the situation of sexism worse to an extent. As mentioned by Sensoy and DiAngelo, it is very common for us to see "women performing classic porn tropes as defined by men" [8]. Besides, many of the popular song lyrics sexualize women and talk about female sexual organs. As the appearance of lyrics and scenes increases, teenagers could become more numb and think of that as the norm. Such culture gradually shapes students' beliefs, and it poses barriers to building a socially just society. They have a strong effect on teenagers who have not yet developed their value systems and cannot distinguish right from wrong. This is not to say that teachers should ban such lyrics or such music video scenes, for those are a kind of expression of art. However, it is important to let educators give a clear guide to teenagers at a young age, to distinguish entertainment from reality. On the other hand, it is because such oppression is occurring in reality, that sexualization scenes and lyrics would appear in the artworks frequently.

4. Solutions

Therefore, it is important for educators to avoid indoctrination and include a variety of diverse voices and contents in the circular curriculum. Yoon et al. cautioned that educators should critically reevaluate the curriculum content to avoid tokenism and superficial integration, advocating people to uncover hidden biases and gaps in representation [3]. Their findings revealed that assimilationist ideas are presented through many educational contents in the resolution of the story and through the portrayal of a glorified dominant culture [3]. Teacher reflexivity and self-awareness should thus be highlighted as key components, as educators need to recognize their own biases and privileges before attempting to dismantle oppressive structures. This is not to suggest a critical framework should reinforce victimization narratives, but to advocate the education system to navigate the challenge of balancing academic rigor with activism. Challenging power structures can sometimes lead to polarization and hinder constructive dialogues, but effective open discussion has the potential impact on students' critical thinking, self-awareness, and civic engagement, which are highly pro-social.

Oppression stems from the power of the privileged group for historical, social, and political reasons; hence, it cannot be simply removed by embracing each others' differences. According to scholar Bettez, "not only is it important that we embrace vulnerability to claim the marginalized parts of our identities without shame, we must also enact courage to speak up against injustice, against racism, transphobia, sexism, classism, and all the other forms of oppression that exist" [9]. Teachers should hold conferences or discussions to let minority students talk about their stories and share their experiences, or there will just be "a single story," the one that is promoted and repeated by the Western mainstream media. Additionally, educators should constantly give them confidence and give them constructive suggestions to help them better communicate their opinions to the public and to raise

more awareness [9]. Not only should minority students speak up for themselves, but should other students from the majority group listen to their words, their first-hand experiences, and reconsider what the mainstream media has long been saying. For example, the Western broadcasts are constantly capturing stories about Islamic violence and terrorist groups, while de-emphasizing the positive side in the Islamic society. This is one of the reasons that exacerbate xenophobia and islamophobia. If other students could hear more perspectives and learn a holistic view about the Islamic countries, they may develop more empathies and stop stereotypes. There is no guarantee that speaking up will always gain positive results, but the story about the oppressive group should not be one-sided, and the society needs more voices from minority groups.

Beyond engaging students in critical multiculturalism and encouraging actions toward social changes, educators should also clarify their solidarities and defend their students in order to ensure a safe, inclusive learning environment. As Au stated, Trump's election has created splits between white elites and others and sparked concerns within minority groups, with students asking whether they would experience repatriation [10]. This is called the "Trump Effect," and unfortunately, many teachers are unable to stand with their minority students. Au has pointed out that teachers should protect their students from being taken away by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) [10]; however, under such a chaotic political environment, teachers have limited power to fight against the government and ICE and may endanger themselves by losing their jobs. Nevertheless, teachers should have an inclusive attitude toward immigrant students and make clear statements that schools will stand by students' sides. Although one person's power is limited and can make little positive change, Darling Hammond pointed out that Trump also has a limited power to deport minorities or to create splits in society. In addition to that, it is crucial to teach students how to defend themselves and stand against racism in the future. Many educators who are committed to the liberal framework of multicultural education would believe that schools should just focus on academics but not politics. However, just as Sensoy and DiAngelo put it, school is not, and is never an apolitical place [8]. Pollock discussed that teachers should engage students with controversial topics – including Islamophobia, xenophobia, white supremacists, and politics – through research, data, and channels other than media [11]. Teachers should thus talk about political issues, including both historical and concurrent topics, in the classroom to help students understand the ongoing oppression on the societal front. Teachers should also establish clear solidarity with their students. Students with socially progressive thoughts need to be supported so they can have the courage and confidence to navigate their struggles and stand up for their rights.

As the U.S. population becomes more racially diverse, the critical framework of multicultural education with emphasis on actions toward transformative justice should be implemented, for immigrants have made up a major labor force of the country and they can potentially create more values for the society. The literal framework of multicultural education is not enough, as it does not provide positive outcomes for societal changes in the long run. If there were no race-based oppressions, the U.S. GDP could have been \$525 million higher in 2008 [12]. Gonzalez-Mena claimed that the blending of different perspectives of cultures can make social progress [4]. Isolating or oppressing minority groups cannot make the privileged group better-off because they may lose the contributions from minority groups. Understanding each other should be the first step of multicultural education, while teaching students to correctly confront oppression and to defend themselves should be the major step that leads to a more just future.

5. Conclusion

The critical framework of multicultural education, centered around the concept of anti-oppressive classrooms, offers a compelling and transformative approach to addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion in education. By recognizing the deep-rooted power dynamics and structural inequalities

that shape our societies, this framework challenges educators to go beyond surface-level representation and engage in meaningful discussions about social justice [13]. It encourages students to critically analyze the systems of oppression that persist and empowers them to become agents of change in their communities.

Implementing an anti-oppressive approach requires a commitment to dismantling existing power imbalances and providing a platform for marginalized voices to be heard. It involves fostering a learning environment where difficult conversations about race, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity can take place openly and constructively. By examining curriculum content, teaching methods, and classroom dynamics through a critical lens, educators can help students develop not only academic skills but also a deeper understanding of the complexities of the world around them.

However, it's essential to acknowledge that adopting a critical framework is not without its challenges. It demands ongoing self-reflection, continuous learning, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths. Striking a balance between encouraging activism and providing a balanced education can be a delicate task. Nevertheless, the critical framework's emphasis on social justice, equity, and empowerment resonates powerfully in an ever-evolving global context where the need for inclusive and transformative education has never been more urgent. As we navigate the complexities of oppression in the 21st century, embracing the principles of anti-oppressive classrooms within the critical framework of multicultural education can guide us toward a more just and equitable future for all.

References

- [1] Jenks, C., Lee, J. O., & Kanpol, B. (2001). *Approaches to multicultural education in preservice teacher education: Philosophical frameworks and models for teaching. The urban review*, 33, 87-105. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010389023211>
- [2] Miled, N. (2019). *Educational leaders' perceptions of multicultural education in teachers' professional development: A case study from a Canadian school district. Multicultural education review*, 11(2), 79-95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2019.1615249>
- [3] Yoon, B., Simpson, A., & Haag, C. (2010). *Assimilation ideology: Critically examining underlying messages in multicultural literature. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(2), 109-118. <https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.54.2.3>
- [4] Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2008). *Perceiving and responding to differences. In Diversity in early care and education: Honoring differences (pp. 9-24). essay, McGraw-Hill.*
- [5] Alismail, H. A. (2016). *Multicultural Education: Teachers' Perceptions and Preparation. Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(11), 139-146.
- [6] Fowler, D. J., & Brown, K. (2018). *Data-driven decisions: Using equity theory to highlight implications for underserved students. AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice*, 14(4), 18-29. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A531709915/AONE?u=anon-be7296fc&sid=googleScholar&xid=20c07e5c>
- [7] Merolla, D. M., & Jackson, O. (2019). *Structural racism as the fundamental cause of the academic achievement gap. Sociology Compass*, 13(6), e12696. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12696>
- [8] Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal?: An introduction to key concepts in social justice education. Teachers College Press.*
- [9] Bettez, S. (2017). *Flipping the script from talking to teens about "celebrating diversity" to promoting equity through embracing vulnerability and enacting courage. Multicultural Perspectives*, 19(2), 90-97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2017.1301091>
- [10] Au, W. (2017). *When multicultural education is not enough. Multicultural Perspectives*, 19(3), 147-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2017.1331741>
- [11] Pollock, M. (2001). *How the question we ask most about race in education is the very question we most suppress. Educational Researcher*, 30(9), 2-11. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X030009002>
- [12] Amadeo, K. (2022, January 29). *How the Achievement Gap Affects Students (And the Rest of Us). The Balance.* <https://www.thebalancemoney.com/how-the-achievement-gap-affects-students-4690462#:~:text=The%20achievement%20gap%20negatively%20affects,there%20had%20been%20no%20gap.>

- [13] Daniel, C. L. (2008). *From liberal pluralism to critical multiculturalism: The need for a paradigm shift in multicultural education for social work practice in the United States*. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 19(1), 19-38.