Multicultural Education:
Reconstructionism Coming of Age

By T. Mathai Thomas

In this article I will examine multicultural education from the perspective of reconstructionist philosophy of education. At this time, when the debate over multiculturalism seems to be polarized, a new understanding of the topic from an appropriate philosophy of education may be helpful. A philosophical examination of multicultural education enables us to see both the strengths and weaknesses of this innovative effort as well as of the recent education reform movement.

What is Reconstructionism?

Reconstructionism is one of the four major philosophies of education, along with progressivism, essentialism, and perennialism. Among them, I have selected reconstructionism because this philosophy sees education as cultural transformation while the others present education as cultural moderation, cultural transmission, or cultural restoration, respectively (Brameld, 1971). Also, reconstructionist philosophy of education seems to be most suitable to deal with the realities of a "crisis-culture" such as ours. The key educator who formulated the basic principles of this philosophy was Theodore Brameld (1904-1987); 25 years ago, in 1969, the Society for Educational Reconstruction was formed in order to further reconstructionist ideals and beliefs.

T. Mathai Thomas is a professor of education at the University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

For his interpretation of education, Brameld recognized the centrality of culture. Education can serve as an agent in achieving cultural transformation. There is a reciprocal relationship between education and culture, one influencing the other, Brameld maintained. In our efforts to improve education, we have to see this relationship and deal with the ills and problems of a larger society. The changes needed for our social institutions are not evolutionary in nature, but revolutionary. According to Ozmon and Craver (1990), this means that changes are made in the structure of institutions.

These fundamental changes are guided by broad social goals or ends. One such goal is the creation of a new world order. Beyond the present nation states, reconstructionists stand for a world community of nations. In the present interdependent world, problems must be shared on a global scale. Perhaps Brameld's most important contribution to global education was his recognition of common purposes and strivings among people of every race and nationality. Drawing from the contributions of leading anthropologists, including Clyde Kluckhohn and David Bidney, Brameld explained the concept of "cultural universals" (Shimahara & Conrad, 1991).

Democracy is another goal that reconstructionists want to implement in schools and in society. While the majority rules, the minority has a due place in a democratic society. Conflicts are resolved not by imposing the majority will upon all people, but by genuine dialogue between groups. Participants are encouraged to take a stand on issues. In opposition to both neutrality and indoctrination which are extremes, Brameld(1971) developed the concept of "defensible partiality:" we can be partial as long as it is defensible.

Development of Multicultural Education

James A.Banks (1993), a pioneer in the field, traces the beginning of multicultural education to the 1960s, a decade that is unique in American history. Banks writes: "Multicultural education grew out of the ferment of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. During this decade, African Americans started a quest for their rights that was unprecedented in the United States" (p.5). Evelyn Hu-DeHart(1993) agrees and comments upon the anti-war movement and student occupation of administrative buildings along with the civil rights movement about 25 years ago: "Students of color demanded better access to higher education, changes in the curriculum, the recruitment of more professors of color, and the creation of ethnic studies programs. These programs were the beginning of multicultural curriculum reform in higher education"(pp.50-51).

Initially, courses and programs were developed without the thought and careful planning needed to make them educationally sound. Later, educators realized that structural changes were needed for an effective implementation of multicultural education in schools. Banks(1993) came up with four levels of integration in the

multicultural content: 1. The contributions approach (focuses on heroes, holidays, etc); 2. The additive approach (content, concepts, themes, and perspectives are added to the curriculum without changing its structure); 3. The transformation approach (the structure of curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups); and 4. The social action approach (students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them). The last two levels, which are closest to reconstructionism, have been attempted by some multicultural educators in recent years.

Defining Multicultural Education

What is multicultural education? In our efforts to describe multicultural education, we select a few characteristics and examine them from the perspective of reconstructionism. For this selection, I have considered the definitions of multicultural education formulated by Banks, Sonia Nieto, Pamela Tiedt, and others.

Opposing Racism and Discrimination

Nieto(1992) argues that "Multicultural education is antiracist education" (p.208). She discusses this characteristic as one of seven characteristics in her effort to define and explain multicultural education. "Antiracism, and antidiscrimination in general, is at the very core of a multicultural perspective," she maintains(p.208). Nieto observes that racism and discrimination are destructive and demeaning not only to those who suffer, but also to everybody in the society. Hence, she advocates an inclusive curriculum.

I support the antiracist struggle of multicultural education because of the harmful effects that racism has manifested all over the world today. Since multicultural education emerged from the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the fight against racism and discrimination has become its central goal. However, it seems to me that multicultural education, being an "education" effort, must look more seriously into integration by developing a broader view of an ideal society. In this context, we look to the reconstructionist view of "utopianism."

"Utopian" here does not connote a flight from reality or impractical daydreaming. Rather, utopianism provides "a vision of what can be and should be attained in order that man may be happier, more rational, more humane, than he has ever been" (Brameld, 1971, p.347). Following Lewis Mumford, Brameld differentiates between "the utopias of escape" and "the utopias of reconstruction:" "The first leaves the external world the way it is; the second seeks to change it...." (p. 347). The utopian vision in the second sense is the one advocated for multicultural education. The present tension and fights among racial groups must give way to racial harmony and integration. Beyond desegregation, we aim for racial integration where changes are made in attitudes and values for accepting and affirming diversity.

Ethnic Studies and the Activist Impulse

An ethnic revival has been taking place in the United States during the last two or three decades. Programs and activities, though different in their nature and scope, are all designed, according to Banks (1988), "to help students from diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and social class groups experience educational equality and increase their academic achievement" (p. 19). Today, Hu-DeHart (1993) notes, there are more than 700 ethnic studies programs and departments in the United States.

Ethnic studies programs challenge the prevailing academic power structure and Eurocentric curricula of colleges. Hu-DeHart (1993) distinguishes ethnic studies from "area studies" which arose out of imperialism in the Third World and bear names such as African Studies, Asian Studies, and Latin American Studies. On the other hand, ethnic studies grew out of student and community grassroots movements and aimed to establish alternative values and visions. Along with ethnic studies, multiculturalism grew on the nation's college campus. Though there are questions regarding the boundaries between these two fields of study, it makes sense to deal with them in one general category as they focus on the culture of groups long neglected in the United States.

Here we note an "activist impulse" shared by reconstructionists. The empowerment of powerless groups in the name of equality and justice is a major goal of reconstructionism. Brameld (1965) believes that "knowledge is power." The knowledge we impart may result in a new awareness of our social situation with its exploitation and oppression. If so, such knowledge helps to reconstruct society for a better world. The status quo is challenged as it incorporates many social evils. Education takes off the "happiness and peace" associated with the existing order and recognizes disturbance and conflict for the sake of a new social order. Multiculturalism cannot back away from this vision of a new society.

Critical Pedagogy for Social Action

According to Nieto(1992), multicultural education is critical and liberal education: "A multicultural approach values diversity and encourages critical thinking, reflection, and action... Its opposite is what Freire calls 'domesticating education' that emphasizes passivity, acceptance, and submissiveness" (p.219). Education for domestication is a process of transferring knowledge or simple transmitting the cultural heritage from one generation to the other. Freire (1970) advocates a liberating education where knowledge leads to reflection and action.

Reconstructionism stands for cultural transformation. It is not satisfied with the prevailing view of learning in which new knowledge is simply added to the existing body of knowledge. Different from this view, reconstructionists believe that knowledge transforms the whole, on both personal and cultural levels. Today schools are preoccupied with the task of "adding" knowledge rather than "trans-

forming" persons and culture by the use of knowledge. The reconstructionist notion of education for transformation is a valuable one and multicultural education can benefit from philosophic discussion of this concept. Indeed, the Greek meaning of education, *Paideia*, is transformation.

Action for Social Justice

In his discussion of "praxis," Freire (1970) relates learning to practice, thus bringing together theory and action. Nieto (1992) explains it well: "developing a multicultural perspective means learning how to think in more inclusive expansive ways, reflecting on what we learn, and putting our learning into action. Multicultural education invites students and teachers to put their learning into action for social justice" (p. 216). She continues:

> The fact that social structures and power are rarely discussed in school should come as no surprise. Schools are organizations fundamentally concerned with maintaining the status quo and not exposing contradictions that make people uncomfortable in a society that has democratic ideals but where democratic realities are not always apparent. Such contradictions include the many manifestations of inequality. (p. 217)

Reconstructionism, as a philosophy of education, encourages debate and dialogue on issues, even controversial ones, so that people can take a stand or "take sides." As noted before, positions taken must be defensible. Today, with the growth of multicultural education, such debates are intensified because of the inclusion of peoples who, for a period of time, have been kept on the margins. When these marginal groups are included and recognized, along with the dominant segment of the population, the social structures have to change. The purpose of such revolutionary change in the social order is to achieve justice and peace in the world today. My study of justice (Thomas,1988), used in a course at the University of Bridgeport, reveals the need for global transformation; changes must be world-wide, rather than national. Multicultural education has to grow beyond the national level to the global.

Unity in Diversity

Pluralism has received greater recognition in the United States recently. This country is a land of immigrants, consisting of people with diverse cultural backgrounds. Theoretical assumptions of assimilation were accepted for a long period of time and hence many cultural groups were expected to conform to an already established way of life related to "Americanization." In place of the assimilation theory of the past, pluralist theory gains acceptance with the growth of multicultural education. Critics of multicultural education attack pluralist theory and diversity on the grounds that the country is being divided as a result of these new trends. Arthur

Schlesinger (1992) is strong in his attack, developed in his book *The Disuniting of America*: *Reflections on Multicultural Society*. These critics, like Schlesinger, attack multicultural education in the name of national unity and common values.

These two theoretical positions (pluralism and assimilation) explain diversity differently as manifested in multiculturalists and Western traditionalists. Banks (1993) opposes the stand of Western traditionalists who argue that "multicultural education will divide the nation"(p.22). At the same time, Banks tries to bridge the gap between these two groups:

> Multicultural education is designed to help unify a deeply divided nation rather than to divide a highly cohesive one. Multicultural education supports the notion of *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one.... The multiculturalists view *e pluribus unum* as an appropriate national goal, but they believe that the *unum* must be negotiated, discussed, and structured to reflect the nation's ethnic and cultural diversity. (p. 22-23)

Banks and other multicultural leaders can gain from reconstructionism in their efforts to admit *unum* and reach Western traditionalists. "Unity in diversity" is an accepted motto of reconstructionism. Also, this philosophy of education has developed the concept of "cultural universals" by drawing from leading anthropologists, as mentioned earlier. Brameld was ahead of other educators of his time, leading Shimahara and Conrad (1991) to conclude: "Perhaps Brameld's most important contribution to global education...was his recognition of common purposes and strivings among people of every race and nationality"(p. 250).

Diversity and differences are facts of life everywhere and at all times. Throughout history people have identified with a specific group whether it was by religion, tribe, race, language, nation, or other. The problem always has been that people fought in the name of differences. The greatest challenge of our times is to accept differences, affirm diversity, and live in peace. I believe that both multicultural education and reconstructionism can respond to this challenge and work together to build a better world, a world of unity in diversity. This is a world rooted in peace and justice.

Conclusion

American society is, and has always been, diverse and pluralistic. What is special in recent years is a change in the attitude towards diversity and pluralism. Such a new attitude toward differences of all types—racial, language, ethnic, religious, or cultural— is indeed a phenomenon of the contemporary world. Still, we have to learn a great deal more how to accept differences and achieve "unity in diversity."

The philosophy of education concerned with such issues on a global scale is reconstructionism. Multicultural education has developed theories and practices for dealing with ethnic and other differences in the American context. Indeed, we

see the flowering of reconstructionism in the recent interests and achievements of multicultural education. This educational "reform" movement in America contains a "revolutionary" outlook because it implies structural changes in our present social institutions including education. Such systemic changes have been a central concern of reconstructionism, even from its inception in the contributions of Brameld and others. Indeed, this philosophy which has been considered as a set of beliefs way ahead of its times is coming of age in multiculturalism and other contemporary education movements that advocate structural transformation.

Today multicultural education seems to maintain a national focus dealing with the diversity of American society, and this certainly seems appropriate. But reconstructionism draws our attention to a global understanding of issues or a world vision. While working with each culture, whether it is in the United States or elsewhere, we need to embrace a larger vision which transcends any particular culture. The accepted assumptions and practices of any specific group will be seen in a different light when the global vision is focused. Improvements are made at the local level or specific culture while keeping a larger vision, in keeping with the reconstructionist motto: "Think globally and act locally."

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