

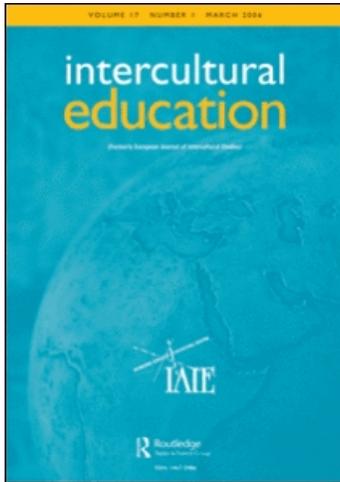
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EDITORIAL

Intercultural education as social justice

John sat nervously, tapping a pencil on his desk. As Blue River High School's dean of students, he had asked me to help 'mediate' the growing tension between the school's administrators and an increasingly organized group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. Located in the southeastern part of the United States – traditionally a bastion of conservatism and homophobic 'family values' – Blue River, an elite private boarding school, prided itself on being ahead of the cultural curve, a model of progressivism both socially and educationally. I sat on a small sofa across from John, shuffling through photographs of heterosexist graffiti scrawled with permanent black marker across the dorm room doors of two Blue River students. 'She should be here any moment,' John said. 'And I hope when she arrives we can put all of this behind us.'

Susan, one of the targets of the graffiti and an organizer among the school's LGBT students, had lobbied John and other upper-level school administrators for permission to initiate a formal student organization, tentatively called PRIDE, to fight homophobia and heterosexism at Blue River. When I asked her a few days before the meeting about the dean's reaction to her request, she sighed. 'The dean cares,' Susan replied. 'I know he does. But caring is not the same thing as understanding. He said he'd support PRIDE, but only if we changed it into a *diversity appreciation* club – only if we agreed not to limit it to lesbian and gay issues.'

'What do you think about that idea?' I asked.

'I think I'm tired of being appreciated,' she answered. 'And how can we be appreciated, anyway, when we have to hide who we are just to be safe?'

When Susan arrived at John's office, I invited both her and John to share their most recent thoughts on the heterosexist graffiti, the larger problem of heterosexism at Blue River, and the anti-heterosexist student group. Susan read from a list of carefully crafted recommendations composed by PRIDE earlier that morning. They requested support to continue developing PRIDE in their own image, not as an apolitical *diversity appreciation* club. They suggested, and volunteered to coordinate, a professional development workshop on LGBT issues for Blue River's staff. They asked, as well, for more transparency in the school's handling of the graffiti incident, sharing their concern that similar incidents had been 'swept under the carpet' by administrators and teachers. 'Speaking from my own experience,' Susan concluded, 'it seems to be easier to be homophobic here than to be a lesbian. Isn't that backwards, especially at a school that sells itself as progressive and diverse?'

John listened attentively, scribbling a few notes. He agreed that professional development was a good idea, but balked at the other two requests. 'This is a *community issue*, isn't it?' he asked. 'My sense is that all of this would be best resolved through

dialogue and intercultural respect. And how can we encourage intercultural respect when we endorse an exclusive student organization?’

After pausing for a moment, John continued, ‘This is a slippery slope – the student organization. What will we do when a group of our more conservative Christian students want us to support an exclusively *heterosexual club*?’

‘I’ve been at this school for three years,’ Susan answered, ‘and I’ve always felt like a stranger here. So you’ll tell them what I’m telling you: this *whole school* is an exclusive heterosexual club. We’re just trying to carve out a little breathing room and you won’t even allow us to do that.’

* * *

The problem at Blue River High School, like that at most every school I have visited, whether in India, Colombia, the USA, or anywhere else, is *not* a lack of commitment to intercultural education among its leaders. They are committed, and quite passionately, to intercultural education. In fact, I cannot recall a single instance in which I have asked a school administrator whether or not she or he was committed to equity or diversity or intercultural education or multiculturalism – and I *always* ask this question – without being answered with an emphatic *yes!*

One of today’s key discourses among intercultural educators in many parts of the world focuses on something called the ‘achievement gap’ – differences in levels of educational achievement, usually measured narrowly with standardized test scores, between a society’s privileged and oppressed communities. My purpose, and the purpose of this special issue of *Intercultural Education*, is to point to a different gap which, as I have argued previously in this journal (Gorski 2006, 2008), is, or at least *ought to be*, more fundamental to the intercultural education discourse. It is not a test score gap or one related to educational attainment. Rather, it is a gap of consciousness, a deepening fissure distinguishing the ways in which the most privileged among us prefer to conceptualize intercultural education – ‘This is a community issue, calling for dialogue and intercultural respect’ – and the ways in which the most oppressed of us define the problem that intercultural education should aim to resolve: ‘This whole school is an exclusive heterosexual club.’ This, I believe, is *the fundamental gap* in our discourse and a threat to the future of authentic intercultural practice in education – the gap distinguishing an overly-simplistic interpersonal (*can’t we all just get along?*) approach to intercultural education from a systemic approach that insists, first and foremost, on the construction of an equitable and just world.

I also believe, however unfortunate, that intercultural education as a field and movement remains, for the most part, in the control of people and organizations who share John’s enthusiasm for ‘diversity’ but lack the conviction to address, in any serious and systemic way, the grave injustices experienced by many of those we invite into interpersonal-intercultural festivities. As a result, most intercultural practice and scholarship, while focusing on cross-cultural relations, respecting differences, conflict resolution, and learning about this or that identity group, stops short of demanding a world free of injustice. Notice, for example, John’s focus on *resolving the conflict* rather than *eliminating the injustice*. This, to me, is the epitome of privilege: constructing a supposedly progressive movement in a way that requires disenfranchised people to build relationships and resolve conflict with people by whom they are oppressed while ignoring their oppression. I often tell my students – predominantly present and

future teachers – that the most critical question we can ask in any examination of social or political action is, *to whose benefit and at whose expense?* And so, when we practice an intercultural education that values inter-gender peace rather than gender equity, racial harmony rather than racial justice, immigrant acculturation rather than immigrant rights, we must ask ourselves: to whose benefit and at whose expense?

This themed issue of *Intercultural Education* represents one organized attempt to respond to this gap of consciousness by highlighting the scholarship of intercultural educators whose work foregrounds equity, social justice, and human rights rather than cultural understanding and intercultural relationships. Despite coming from a variety of sociopolitical contexts and disciplines, they share a determination to ask critical questions about what *is* and what *could be* in intercultural education. They insist that authentic intercultural practice begins with – indeed cannot exist without – the deconstruction of power, privilege, oppression, and the consciousness, or lack of consciousness, that these conditions engender in the oppressor and the oppressed. They demand of us contoured analyses of day-to-day educational goings-on such as John's interaction with Susan, not as a way to understand simplistic variants in culture, but to prepare us to help transgress apolitical models of intercultural education that, despite good intentions, run the risk of exacerbating existing injustices. And they invite us to consider how we might funnel deeper levels of intercultural consciousness into socially transformative educational and social activism.

We begin with an exploration of critical media literacy as a building block of multicultural education by Paul R. Carr and Brad J. Porfilio. They argue that the future of social justice consciousness relies upon a computer and media literacy that transcends 'tolerance' and 'respect.'

In her contribution to this special issue, Jane Quin describes the Trajectory Model, which she uses in South Africa to engage teachers in a reflective assessment of their socializations within oppressive societies.

Andria K. Wisler offers a critical take on an oft-identified goal of intercultural education: conflict resolution. She advocates for an approach to conflict resolution that foregrounds social justice concerns and, as a result, encourages democratic global consciousness.

Contextualizing intercultural education and critiquing reductionist practices in intercultural development programs, François V. Tochon and A. Cendel Karaman apply a critical-interpretive systems approach to intercultural education. The result is a re-conceptualization of 'intercultural reasoning' that insists upon social justice and considers the sociopolitical context of education.

Azadeh F. Osanloo argues that authentic civic education must be grounded in critical thinking skills and dialogues that span various public spheres. Osanloo describes universal elements critical to education that is 'civically responsible,' focusing particular attention on human rights education.

Using grounded theory, Maryan Koehler shares her research on immigration and integration policy for adult newcomers in the Netherlands. Particularly, Koehler discusses the implications of her finding that policymakers highlight 'assimilation' as an important element of integration.

Chavella T. Pittman's study raises questions about a common misperception – that changes in attitude regarding multiculturalism necessarily lead to changes in behavior and action. She turns this approach on its head, suggesting an approach to multicultural education that focuses on behavior change.

Finally, Lorraine Beveridge and Julie Hinde McLeod take on the misperception that our youngest students are incapable of critical consciousness in their description of a literature-based primary school action learning project in Australia.

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