The Place of History in Multicultural Education

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As a multi-disciplinary subject, history education has been perennially a case of interpretative management of narrative mythologies. In this, multicultural education as a reform process that strives for dignity, equity and social justice has a natural home in history education not just by affirming and empowering pupils marginalised by hegemonic narratives but through its potential in nurturing multicultural values that can benefit all pupils. This paper nevertheless contends that teaching of History and its multicultural component has been subjected to the overarching matter of History as a political, power embedment tool at national, regional and global levels. Within persistent History “wars”, rather than generating awareness, the drawbridges have been raised to counter perceived loss of “power” or influence by dominant groups. Through hyper-globalisation, increasing global inequity and an inherently racist framework in the “global war on terror” narratives, contestations of old continue to sustain and replicate institutionalised power in an “age of insecurity”. This paper contends that these are not new challenges and within the ambit of multicultural education advocates who can complement history education in the pursuit of social justice and global citizenship.

The Power of History=The History of Power

History and history education has the capacity and potential for powerful impact remains true before and more so now in this alleged “age of insecurity” (Judt, 2010, p. 33). History’s intrinsic task is to recount past narratives and with that express a storyline but History is also about the “power” and myriad influence to embed a specific narrative. Power can be manifested in various direct and indirect forms and can impact differently among groups of people. The powerful influence of History can indeed suggest possibilities for a more just world but the history of power underlines the fact that outcomes are affected by relational differences of an individual or groups based on their socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, faith or absence of faith, gender, sexuality, abilities and skin colour. In complex human encounters replete with culturally diverse people, the impact of History can be an unexamined privilege for some or a crippling marginalisation for the designated “other”.

As a multi-disciplinary subject, History and history education has been perennially a question of interpretative management and narrative mythologies. With the latter, the power of presenting the past goes beyond the ability to present a series of sequential “facts” but one that underlines the inextricable intersections of the past, present and future while subsumed by myriad, controversial political objectives. In conjunction with multicultural education as a reform process that strives for dignity, equity and social justice (Banks & Banks, 2005) framed by a respectful recognition of the individual
(Taylor, 1994) and the politics of dignity, history education has tremendous potential. Notably this is simply not a case of affirming and empowering narratives for pupils marginalised by the institutionalisation of hegemonic narratives, the potential includes the nurturing of standards and embedment of perspectives that can benefit all pupils as a continual education process that promotes critical awareness in challenging issues of discrimination, marginalisation and the perpetuation of embedded power structures.

What constitutes as multiculturalism or multicultural education, as with other terms used to discuss the nature of History or history education suffers from terminological variations and meanings, social and political inputs and the impact of personal and private experiences on and of policy framework, formulation and application. Generally however, multicultural education advocates concur on the aims of multicultural education as an equalising educational experience that is an ongoing, unending, structurally transformative reform process comprising significant educational and social dimensions (Banks & Banks, 2005, pp. 3-27). Why multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2005, p. 27) and its primacy?

Multicultural education is an idea stating that all students, regardless of the groups to which they belong, such as those related to gender, ethnicity, race, culture, language, social class, religion, or exceptionality, should experience educational equality in the schools. Some students, because of their particular characteristics, have a better chance to succeed in school as it is currently structured than students from other groups.

Therefore, in order to transform the school to bring about educational equality, all the major components of the school must be substantially changed. A focus on the any one variable in the school, such as the formalized curriculum, will not implement multicultural education.

History is about power and influence, and history education is one of the most inconspicuous expressions of that influence whether in Western industrialised countries or postwar newly independent countries in Asia and Africa. Ideologically unfashionable but Karl Marx’s insights on History still resonate (Marx, 1852):

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

**Question the Narrative!**

Multicultural education, as with history education, is vital because it reiterates the fundamental notion of an “education” as teaching to “question” while eschewing cultural assumptions or historical “truths”. Selective narratives transmitted through an education process that remains uncritical or ignorant of the fact that complex human encounters are products of past, present and possibly future systemic conditions. These conditions can impact devastatingly unequally on groups based on covert and overt responses to “difference” and are usually dictated by the privileged “dominant” groups upon the ‘other’ “subordinate” groups (Tatum, 1997, pp. 18-28). Though the experience of an “other” might have contextual deviations through time and space, core components of the subordinate’s identity have significant consequences. Identity markers will place the “other” on the margins in the circle of power of which the centre is where the most privileged resides and is considered “normal” or mainstream. The residents in the centre of power are
encased in unearned and unexamined privilege based on socially invested meanings based on overt (and covert) “difference” of colour, gender, faith, accent and other facets of identity. Multicultural education thus interrogates critically the disconcerting contradictory impact and “importance of culture, race, sexuality and gender and ethnicity, region, socioeconomic status, and exceptionalities in education process” (Klein, 2006, p. 16) and the need to address its uneven privileging and discriminatory outcomes.

Similarly, in history education, hegemonic, institutionalised narratives and national memories are considered “normal” (and sometimes static) with the history of the “other” expressed, at times, as a footnote and with that selected as of inferior worth. As explained succinctly by James W. Loewen (Loewen, 1995), the collective conscience of a triumphalist United States (US) history internalised selected cultures and nations as inferior to the US or white US. A proclivity not specific to the US, similar inclinations are noted too where the objectives of writing and teaching history ranges from unabashed triumphalism of alleged exceptionalism to consolidating a fragile identity for national survival such as the much vaunted “Singapore Story” narrative (Baildon & Affandi, 2014). Critically in such national narratives there are the designated “us” versus “them” narratives (Al-Haj, Spring 2005; Foster, 2014, p. 23). History books and textbooks do contain their own designated “bad guys” such as the “injuns” (Native Americans) in US (Loewen, 1995) or the portrayal of oppressed groups as “happy campers”: foils to the assumed inherent “superiority” or magnanimity of the dominant groups.

Essentially, it is about nationalistic mythmaking (Mearsheimer, 2012, p. 22) which sometimes suggests or cultivates the obscene “truth” of certain groups viewed through a prism of “deficient orientation” and thus as somehow culturally deficient. Such interpretations are “oppressive forms of thinking where the stronger or more powerful entity views others as inferior” (Klein, 2006, p. 16): an alleged “natural” inferior state and therefore cannot be changed. Both prisms are deleteriously toxic and profoundly racist but intoxicatingly popular as they simplify complex narratives and experiences while elevating power embedding, controlled “truth” as accepted, institutionalised narratives in both national and international arenas. The differentiated impacts on homogenous or diverse classrooms do not differ widely but embed a narrative that attempts to replicate systemic, societal power structures that may exhibit “soft forms” of bigotry but can also assume all the accumulative, debilitating effects of low expectations, self-fulfilling prophecies and continual acceptance of things (Allport, 1979, pp. 142-162) because they simply “are” instead of insisting on “why”?

History education is an invaluable partner in this enterprise: “History can teach us about other societies, other beliefs and other times, and so make us more tolerant of differences in our world and it can provide us with more democratic civic education to help us built a better world for the future” (Foner, 2005, p. 7). But History’s potential is not merely to teach but to question why the continued presence of disrespectful, demeaning or selective historical narratives. Other questions include why the intensity of the current History “wars” around the globe expressed as a resistance to a more inclusive narrative and inadvertently a preference for the protection of current political, social and cultural power structures from question and with that “change”? (Howard, 1993) History is and will continue to
propagate simplified and specious “truths” of the “other” as expressed by dominant groups unless a more critical eye is demanded and embraced both within and beyond the classroom. To question means to acknowledge the centrality of a complex truth that reflects diverse and equally significant experiences rather than acquiesce to the “power” that institutionalises as Judt describes “pleasant lies” (Grimes, 2010) stripped of the inconvenience of uncomfortable narratives for dominant groups.

In spite of claims being made for the inviolability of a History textbook with the “correct” answers, History and history education is never objective even with its canon of accepted “facts” as it is ultimately unadulterated interpretation (Carr, 1961) and therefore reflects the particular experiences, assumptions, aspirations and interpretations of a particular group. As Keith Jenkins famously concluded, “History is never for itself, it is always for someone” (Jenkins, 2003, p. 21). Similarly, while a historian would also like to think of him or herself as having no country and owes their allegiance to the craft, a multicultural educator and history teacher is inevitably a subjective creature with his or her own set of assumptions and motivations.

An inextricably linked effort between history education and multicultural education will have to internalise the generally unacknowledged aspects of History within the formal framework of an education enterprise. This means the process of knowledge construction and in the classroom, execution (Banks, 1993, p. 11; Levstik, 1997; Zanazanian & Moisan, 2012; 264). Notwithstanding the different perspectives of History for nation-building (Wang, 1968) or consolidating a fragile national identity, History works for national and international dominant groups for monumental celebratory and nostalgic reasons and also for judgment and condemnation: a form of judgment that does not occur in a vacuum but steeped with political orientations, personal experiences and cultural assumptions of the “other”. For multicultural education with the unquestioned value placed upon diverse experiences and respect, the demand is to be cognizant on how an “accepted” or mainstream version of history is institutionalised and in some cases should not be questioned. In questioning the impact of institutionalised history and multicultural education as a transformational reform process, it is fundamental to consider both subjects not just about power and influence but how these forces are being produced.

The questioning framework must include such questions as who gets to decide which, how, when and what versions of a narrative gets told in both traditional and cyber platforms of information. Power is facilitated by “control” and with that can keep its consumers “ignorant and stupid” (Griffen and Marciano in Loewen, 1995, p. 275). Unquestioned triumphalist history can be unalloyed legitimation exercises in maintaining control over groups of people based on class, colour, gender and faith with counter-narratives can be seen varyingly as unpatriotic and “dangerous” to “truth” but in most case, a threat to entrenched social-political order.

Notwithstanding the above, history education and multicultural education have produced affirming outcomes from questioning hegemonic narratives (Loewen, 1995) to introducing and transforming “uncomfortable” to acceptable narratives (Zinn, 1980). Other outcomes demonstrated an evolutionary inclusive narrative (Khamsi & Morris, 2014) and a signal an “awareness of the need for such a
change” (İnanç, 2014, p. 148). Concurrently the “multicultural explosion” of multiple expressions of recognition, acceptance and inclusion has also inevitably produced myriad forms and expressions of resistance sometimes described under the umbrella term of culture wars (Glazer, 1998, pp. 1-21). These counter-responses are part of an inevitable ongoing process of contestation over terminology, meanings, concepts, approaches, directions, intended outcomes and society in general: in essence, power to control, sustain and maintain hierarchical social-political order. All politics might be local, and all issues regarding history and multicultural education are indeed political but one cannot champion an interrogative approach to education without acknowledging the breadth and depth of these challenges within and beyond national realms. It is a tired cliché but George Orwell still hovers: “He, who controls the present, controls the past. He who controls the past, controls the future” (Orwell, 1949)

Raising the Drawbridges and Circling the Wagons

History is interpretation and with that selection (Carr, 1961). The late Eric Hobsbawm accurately noted that “we have now become far more aware than any previous generation of how narrow the selection usually is” (Hobsbawm, 1997) of who, what, why and when of a selected historical narrative. However, even with the presumed normalcy of myriad, diverse historical themes, the intertwined history education and multicultural education has still, not unexpectedly, been subjected to the overarching issue of the subjects still as a political, power embedment tool at national, regional and global levels.

Indeed, this paper contends further that instead of heightened awareness of difference and respect for diversity, some dominant groups have raised drawbridges and circled the wagons to counteract amplified questioning of the legitimacy of entrenched power especially in the classrooms. Amidst hyper-globalisation, increasing global inequity and an inherently and normalised racist Islamophobic framework in the “global war on terror” narratives, interpretative contestations of old have intensified in efforts to either sustain and replicate existing institutionalised powers. Dubiously, multiculturalism has been declared to have ‘failed’ (Connolly, 2010; Anonymous, 2011). The so-called “curriculum wars” fought most contentiously with the reform efforts in such subjects as History, Social Studies and even Sciences are outcomes to addressing major national and global education blind spots.

Accused of being victims of political correctness rather than advocates of multicultural education and with that social justice, multicultural education advocates are accused of being radical and out-of-touch with mainstream society and in some cases, unpatriotic and therefore automatically suspect as inherently ‘dangerous’. Criticised as intellectually weak and lacking recognisable standards, multicultural curriculum’s components of race and colour are critiqued as divisive, unhelpful, academically irrelevant and unpatriotic. Here citing patriotism, unlike Dr. Johnson’s celebrated comment, is not the “last refuge of a scoundrel”. Claims to “patriotism” or lack of are effectively reductionist and uncritically automated: a dog-whistle political form of debate of coded phrases, scare mongering tactics of proud privilege.

diversity in the curriculum is a grim reminder:

This instruction shall also include and instill in our students an appreciation of our American heritage and culture such as: our republican form of government, capitalism, a free-enterprise system, patriotism, strong family values, freedom of religion and other basic values that are superior to other foreign or historic cultures."

This has a continuing life in February 2015 with attempts to “go[ing] after history classes that don’t teach “American Exceptionalism”: a form of expunging “bad” History or “what is bad about America” (Thrasher, 2015). This is a US example of a global phenomenon of resistance to questioning hegemonic narratives. Other examples include the claims against promoting self-flagellating “black armband” version of history (Salusinszky, Carr Tops List of for History Summit, 2006); the efforts to remove “partisan bias” against Western history in national curriculum (Hurst, 2014); for the banning of certain types of “ethnic” History (Bigelow, 2012); the exhortations to (blinkered) triumphalism in commemorating the 100th anniversary of the First World War (Milne, 2014); the official proposal to abandon a multicultural History for “real” History proclaimed in such headlines as “The Return of History” (Editor, 2006) and the reluctance to assess major milestones critically (Han, 2015) in favour of “bread-and-circuses” approach. The preference seems to be a “selective, narrow view of the world; a shorthand version of history” (Miller, 1998, p. 77) or a History that reflects a dominant group’s agenda (Allan, January 2015). Specifically, as Al-Haj noted (Al-Haj, Spring 2005, p. 47):

…the introduction of a multicultural ideology seems to be an impossible task when a specific national ethos stands at the center of the school curriculum. This is especially true in states that are experiencing an “intractable conflict” in which the past is used to justify the present.

Another variation of circling the wagons might differ in context and motivation: heightened sense of nationalism (Banks 2008 p. 129, 132) producing “excessively ethno-centric” (Ting, 2014, p. 52) cautionary actions for hard fought but perceived imperilled rights. This can be construed as products of a hyper-globalised world with its increasing sense of insecurity (Elliot & Atkinson, 1998) with its uneven tangible and intangible global outcomes. Another variant included the challenges mount against the verdict of history as a “winner’s history” as seen by the recurring attention and debates over Japanese history textbooks and political narratives of World War Two (Jeans, 2005; Margolin, 2014). It can be interpreted controversially, as attempts challenging a historical narrative institutionalised by virtue of might rather than right (Fackler, 2013). Notwithstanding the reasons for circling the wagons, unlike some dominant powers which can afford the “luxury of denial” (Howard, 1993, p. 3) arising out of fear of diversity or refusal to confront a guilt (if felt) as beneficiaries of an unearned privilege (Howard, 1993, p. 4), some dominant groups will have to resort to exercising existing powers to leverage a position to secure their interests at the expense of an “other” view or rights (Banks 2008, p. 129-132).

The resistance to multicultural education, as defined itself by an intellectual hegemonic source, can be symbols of an “other” resistance to dominant powers who are reluctant to
recognise the sanctity of a “subordinate” group’s own difference and the right to assert those rights. Concomitant are claims that some values deemed to be for multicultural inclusion are really ethnocentric values of a dominant power, usually Western countries and somehow unhesitatingly superior with the notion that there is much for Western societies to teach the subordinate groups of majority south and “naturally” much for the latter to learn from the West too.

Concurrently, history and multicultural education can condescend to “safe” conversations of marginalisation and privilege which ignores the critical subterranean and complex identities of the “other” and with that consequences and implications of knowledge construction, knowledge transmission (Walia, 2007) and ultimately privileged hierarchical power and status quo. “Safe” multiculturalism (Ismail, 2010, pp. 33-34) of “play-nice encounters” (Ismail, 2014) within and beyond the classroom are cosmetic and patronising dominated by a tourist/disaster curriculum, ego-tourism of voluntourism, exotification and commodification of heritage: a continuation of a pity curriculum without the fundamental components for a respectful, dignified dialogic model of interaction between individuals or groups of people interacting with difference. Miller extends this contention further: “‘safe’ approach such as that offered within the pages of the mainstream text will not provide the impetus for change necessary if we are to move in the direction of understanding, showing respect for and for cooperating with the many different cultural groups” (Miller, 1998, p. 78).

Instead of understanding and interrogating the repressive structure and mechanics of oppression, what is being offered is further embedment of social, political, economic and psychological power structures with the latter ranging from the “victimhood” as natural condition of life, displayed as grateful passivity complemented by subliminal and/or blatant retrospective distortion of history. Currently solipsistic colonial apologists are peddling the same dubious narratives of the past (Raskin, 2015) and they need to be challenged not just for the sake of the integrity of history education but also for the cause of a global, multicultural education. The penchant to deal with one of the most reprehensible episodes of global European colonialism is to de-emphasise it as a racist, exploitative global theft but one that ranges from the expected “ornamentalism” (Cannadine, 2001) of Eastern culture as the exotic “other” or to the contention that it was not so bad after all (Ferguson, 2003). Recognition as asserted by Charles Taylor is a “basic human need” (Taylor, 1994) but the interpretive representation of that visibility or recognition is equally significant.

Globalisation: Of Flags and Folklores

In a globalising world, the tourist approach of a cosmetic “showcasing” of culture and difference has now included the “flags, folklores” approach to transnational movement. It is expansion of the superficiality and safe interaction with difference of a global ‘other’. The operating mechanisms remain relatively similar in its reluctance to engage and interrogate critically the complexities of international affairs, the intertwining connections of historical legacies and current political-economic policies at transnational levels and how they ultimately will have relevance both within and beyond the classroom (Chakravorti, Dong, & Fedosova, 2014). Globalisation is not a new phenomenon but the pace and face has definitely left significant
footprints in all facets of daily lives from the safe daily existence of a teacher in Seoul to the horrors of a refugee in the Middle East or to anxieties of climate change sufferers in Africa.

As a default answer, globalisation has been a highly efficient but deficient explanation to the complexities of imbalanced global economic practices and its associated issues. This can include among others environmental degradation, exploitation of cheap transnational labour especially from economically vulnerable economies and the growing global economic inequity. Looming large over all these concerns and intrinsically linked to the sense of global insecurity economically and militarily is the “race for what’s left” (Klare, 2013) of the world resources. From the battle lines being drawn in the Arctic, the below the radar militarisation of the African continent, the naval chess game in the South-China Sea, the acceptance of a “race to the bottom” of transnational labour and the naked re-colonisation of Iraq and Afghanistan are being executed and girded by politically expedient political and military justifications that exhibit both covert and overt forms of global racism.

As discussed by Donaldo Macedo and Panayota Gounari (Macedo & Gounari, 2006), globalisation with increased opportunities for more interactions across multiple differences did not enrich our appreciation of the value and worth of other cultures and thus human diversity. Globalisation unfortunately had facilitated the “globalization of racism” through global economic practices, dominant discourses and hegemonic control on how origins, implementations, outcomes and “interpretive” explanations have resorted to age-old but still useful narratives that appeals to simple, accessible but racist paradigms. This is the previously mentioned age-old “deficit theory” of interpreting difference with the “other” being played on a global scale and not for the first time. Unlike before, to provide an alternative perspective of a complex narrative would invite charges of being a communist, the current smear is “terrorist” with a particular, unquestioned terminological but religious equation to Islam or being a Muslim (Said 1997; Ismail, 2007).

As such the seemingly innocuous term of Islamophobia is a convenient all-purpose term to mask reprehensible “explanations”, attributions and suggestions on the entire global Muslim population. Whether to insist that Muslims should apologise for acts of violence by fanatical adherents, or to be judged exclusively on standards not asked of other religions, or to speak of the faith, its people, its practices in terms not tolerated by other communities are not questioned but accepted as a “truth”. Islam and the global Muslim population is an evolutionary case study of an institutionalised narrative by hegemonic powers that has made global racism and its outcome not only acceptable but seductively preferred: hence the casual indifference and disturbing silence on the violence of neo-imperial occupation and the terrorism of drone warfare on civilians in West Asia and the Middle East. Unless of course if such acts are committed by Muslims, and that requires no interrogation of complex historical, political and economic reasons as the answer of “Islam” or “Muslim” not only will suffice but accept as “natural”. The “success” of this example on the globalisation of racism is never more evident that the acceptance that Arabs or Muslims can be described as individuals of “terrorist descent”.

In this googlisation age instant
(mis)information, Macedo and Gounari (Macedo & Gounari, 2006, pp. 3-4) question the claim that we have somehow arrived at the “end of racism” Their riposte merits the following extended extract.

…this false proposition is intended to block all forms of interrogation concerning our understanding of race and racism while impending clear analyses of these categories. The closing-down of the field of interpretation for racism has the consequence of dehistoricizing the term and its discourses and material practices. Though this dehistoricizing, racism is often disarticulated from politics and the ensuing political projects that crystallize subjectives, agency and democratization. Individuals who embrace a dehistoricization process in their treatment of racism fail to recognize that racism is always historically specific and that it manifests itself differently in terms of geographical, cultural, ideological and material location…historizing the race debate is crucial to our understanding the racialization of discourses and the ensuing racist practices.

Global political directions and economic patterns such as global migration and foreign military “adventures” impacted significantly on and contributed to entrenched and manufactured perceptions of dominant and subordinate groups of the “other”. Intense global inequality amidst the sense that somehow we are all living through a new “age of insecurity” means that nationalism and globalisation will exist in a state of tension: both a challenge for both history education and multicultural education. The core imperatives here would be addressing these challenges for both national and global citizenship: the bridge in recognising that an individual or a nation has distinct differences that ought to be recognised while balancing these rights with those of being a member of a larger global community. The often heard mantra is to maintain a “unity within diversity” framework but as examined so far, one should be wary of this penchant to resort to cheerful but deceptive sloganeering to complex and urgent issues in which history education and multicultural education can play potentially transformative roles.

“participants in the creation of a better future”

The responses to the challenges of effecting truly transformative experiences through a reform process needs to consider myriad components of education, the experiences of past and present and the identities of all pupils. The natural home seems to be in the development, extension and integration of new curriculum models which places the idea of global and multicultural citizenship at its core: a layering of identities, responsibilities and with that perspective that aims for the ultimate objective in multicultural education, i.e. social justice. Banks’ contention explicates this clearly (2008, p. 129):

…effective and transformative citizenship education helps students to acquire the knowledge, skills and values needed to function effectively within their cultural community, nation-state, and region in the global community. Such an education also helps to acquire a cosmopolitan perspectives and values needed to work for equality and social justice around the world.

Framing these assertions are the contentions made earlier on importance of
interrogating narratives especially the suggestions on assimilative, universalist or liberal prisms of dealing with difference as acceptable norms. Similarly, there is also a need to reiterate the warning on not underestimating the impact of hard and soft power in its multidimensional forms from terminological definitions, conceptual formulation and policy executions. New curriculum models will be contested by “culturally problematic schools” (Hudson, 2003, p. 385) or a sovereign state will decide, as its right, to globalising on its own terms (Chong, 2006, Banks 2008, p. 132) with carefully calibrated control and balance between inclusion/exclusion, socialisation/criticality and nationalism/internationalism.

As with the nature of History as eternal contestation, so would be attempts to promote multicultural education that can embrace global and multicultural citizenship. Harmonising universal values of global membership with distinct narratives is daunting and it seems easier to submit to seemingly immovable and insurmountable structural forces. Conversely, the hope for outcomes for marginalized groups to attain civic equality and recognition (Banks, 2008, p. 131) are powerful incentives for multicultural educators who consider their efforts not as personal acclaim but as “participants in the creation of a better future” (Howard, 1993, p. 5).

The role of the teacher within and beyond the classroom is crucial both as empowering and oppressive tools ranging from “sharing voices of real people” (Miller, 1998, p. 77) to promoting “just a chorus of voices” (Levstik, 1997, p. 48). Notwithstanding the concerns of introducing a guilt factor (Wills, Sep 1996, p. 366) for privileged groups in the pursuit of empowerment for the marginalised, the pursuit of social justice is a never-ending reformative, transformational process interweaving both history and multicultural education. The latter education cannot hope to challenge hegemonic narratives or effect a process approaching structural equality alone. History as a vehicle of change is an essential partner.

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