Multicultural Art Education at the Millennium: Where to Now?

Rachel Mason

Abstract

In this paper, the author reflects on changes in multicultural art education theory, policy and practice over the past twenty years. Starting with an analysis of the ethnic reform orientation that was prevalent in Britain in the early 1980s, she identifies the major change in Western nation states as the acceptance of pluralism in official government policy and the impact on art education of cultural and racial politics in contemporary fine art. Whereas she understands it as a manifestation of the postmodern condition, her most significant finding about multicultural art education is that it is no longer exclusively a Western preoccupation and is being interpreted quite differently elsewhere.

Multiculturalism, understood as an attempt to respond to the inadequate accommodation of social equity with cultural diversity, has been the central theme of my art teaching and research for some twenty years. In *Art Education and Multiculturalism* (1998), I explained that my first multicultural curriculum experiments, in the early 1980s, were motivated by a desire to find out more about the aesthetic and cultural values of Gujerati speaking Hindu and Moslem students in the English education system. At the time, I was preparing art student-teachers, whose subject-knowledge was almost exclusively Western based, for placements in inner-city primary schools with large numbers of children of Indian ethnic origin. Sensing some cross-cultural inadequacies and following Dan Nadaner's lead (1984), I asked these children to communicate their life-experiences and culture to me in expressive drawings and paintings. My *human relations* orientation to multicultural curriculum was criticised then (as it would be now), by minority group representatives who resented my anthropological gaze. They advised me to study the art institutions which framed the curriculum we taught, and ask how and why they excluded nonWestern arts. While I disagree with their assertion that the children concerned learned nothing from my Western expressive arts stance, I accept that it neglected core issues at the heart of multicultural art education reform. But things have moved on in terms of my own conceptions of the phenomenon and public debate.

The first change is that official policy on multicultural art education is pluralist not ethnic. By this I mean that it has moved from the view that the arts and cultures of so-called minority communities should be added to the mainstream curriculum so as to improve their self esteem to the view that cultural variation should be represented and transmitted throughout the art curriculum so that all children will accept it (Berry et al., 1992). An antiracist orientation which held that racism in mainstream society must be addressed in schools as a precursor to effecting variation experienced a brief vogue in between. Whereas, this resulted in the development of some highly pertinent classroom strategies for analysing racism and stereotyping in visual images for media education, grounded in semiotics, they did not have much impact on art.

A second change is that British art educators seem less concerned about multiculturalism than in the past. One possible explanation is that the National Curriculum requirement that "pupils should understand and appreciate a variety of genres and styles from a variety of cultures" (Department of Education and Science, 1992, p. 3), has effected the necessary shift towards pluralism in British art education and the battle is won. But the struggle for control of the content of art history when the planning was underway suggests otherwise. Whereas, the publication of the working documents for the national curriculum instigated what promised to be a potentially significant debate about artistic identity and heritage in multicultural Britain, official policy on this matter was eventually high-jacked by the New Right, resulting in a subsequent retrenchment of view in favour of Western European exemplars.

This brings me to a third change in my understanding of multiculturalism. What interests me now is the politics of difference and rediscovery of local identities, histories, and traditions at a time of increasing globalisation in contemporary fine art. Whereas none of the three funded research projects I have directed since 1990 addressed these issues head on, they all yielded pertinent insights. A finding of the first project, which focused on the preparation and training of professional fine artists for residency work in schools, was that contemporary *Black British* artists are especially effective at cultural projection and at getting mainstream white teachers to question their curriculum control. The second project, which took the form of a national survey of craft education in secondary schools, led to realisation that the potential of craft for transmission of cultural identity and heritage makes it a crucial tool of multicultural reform. But provision for textiles, wood, ceramics and metal is fast disappearing from British schools (Mason, 1988). The difficulty I experienced obtaining funding for the third project which set out to investigate aesthetic value in the home, confirmed my suspicion that the British art establishment is not yet ready to redress the discrimination in art scholarship and education against *hidden stream* women's arts (Collins & Sandall, 1984) and that its commitment to pluralism is tokenist.

A fourth change is that multiculturalism is no longer a specifically Western phenomenon. Whereas its usage is often taken for granted, it is being interpreted differently in the various world regions. A book I edited recently with Doug Boughton (1999), tested out this hypothesis by commissioning chapters on the topic from art educators in 13 countries. We found that whereas North American and British art educators associate it with equality of opportunity for minority cultural groups, Japanese and Korean art educators associate it with strengthening national cultural heritage and identity. In Brazil, where multiculturalism is associated with resistance to Western colonialism, the term is beginning to be used in connection with reclaiming popular arts traditions that have been disenfranchised. In New Zealand which already has a bicultural curriculum (Maori and European), the debate is about ownership and control of those characteristics that affect one's culture and keep it alive and about iconographic appropriation. So, we found different visions of multiculturalism fueled by different political and national agendas. The commonalty is the general agreement that the Western canon which colonised the majority of the world's art education systems is untenable—not least because it perpetuates a

dominant white, discriminatory aesthetic and denies the global trend towards hybridisation of arts.

Practical solutions to canon reform are many and varied. According to Merrelman (1995), art educators in Western nation states who want to reconstruct their societies to facilitate increased participation of minority cultural groups have infusion or particularist strands of canon reform from which to choose. (Infusion projects the cultures of subordinate group cultures across the curriculum as whole and particularism confines them to specific courses.) Some European art educators who are critical of the North American model of multiculturalism on the grounds that it promotes diversity within the concept of a homogeneous society and views cultural difference as static, are promoting an intercultural curriculum that emphases mutual cultural influence and exchange. A more radical intercultural solution is to focus on deconstructing Western art history and *unlearning racist myths*. But art educators in nation states where resisting the Western hegemony and instilling a sense of national cultural identity and self reliance are the driving force for canon reform, are advocating essentialist reform tactics and a return to *native land*. In post colonial Africa, for example, *material culture studies* are commonplace within the art curriculum and multicultural art education signifies increased attention to local culture in Taiwan. Finally, a significant number of educators across world regions are arguing that art teaching should come out of formal educational settings (schools, universities, etc.) and become more community-based.

A fifth change is the realisation that multiculturalism is a postmodern phenomenon. I agree with Efland (1995) that the profession is currently in a state of transition between modernism and postmodernism—practice is predominantly modernist but postmodern change is inevitable. For better or worse, art educators who promote cultural diversity must count themselves as postmodern. The ramifications of a postmodern art education that is eclectic and pluralist in its acceptance of all kinds of art forms and styles are enormous. Regarding art making, this throws into question entrenched universalist pedagogies like those of the Bauhaus and the belief that the best art is always a highly personal and individual expression in the manner of the fine art avant garde. Once the concept of art is opened up to include not only popular and folk arts and crafts but also new technologies, the teaching of painting and drawing within a fine art idiom loses its privileged role. Moreover, the concept of pure art appreciation is untenable. Postmodern art education favours contextualist, instrumentalist, culture-bound and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of art; it brings external, as well as internal, matters to bear on considerations of artistic quality and considers the purposes of art not just its form.

A difficulty is that the postmodern debate in the specialist literature is predominantly American. The American social and educational experiment is atypical and not directly transferable to nations with longer established traditions of education, morality, and art. (The English national curriculum is living proof of an alternative art education tradition characterised by an emphasis, among other things on observational drawing and national art exams.) The social-reconstructionist vision of multicultural art education presently being promoted by a number of influential North Americans is not one I share. For political, demographic, historical, economic

and many other reasons, I believe this is a nation-specific reading of the postmodern condition and that alternative multiculturalisms will be more influential elsewhere.

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