
By Gabriel Santiago Jurado-González

Abstract

This paper examines Angelina E. Castagno’s text “Multicultural Education and the Protection of Whiteness” published in 2013. I suggest that, even though Castagno’s gives great insights on multicultural education as practiced by teachers, she does not criticize the theory behind its practice. The text also expands the literature in the topics of multicultural education and critical whiteness studies. I begin by summarizing Castagno’s methodology and main conclusions then I introduce what, in my opinion, was not included as part of her analysis and finally I remark the importance of critically approaching multicultural education and any other method used to construct a more equitable environment for education.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Angelina E. Castagno’s text “Multicultural Education and the Protection of Whiteness” published in 2013. My critical approach to this article attempts to expand Castagno’s considerations about multicultural education and its relation to racism and whiteness. Specifically, I criticize her focus on problematics of the execution of multicultural education and not on both theory and praxis. In my view, the article can be framed in the fields of multicultural education and critical whiteness studies as it draws on literature from both fields and tries to analyze the connections between one another.

Castagno’s main objective is to illustrate the tension between the theory of multicultural education and its practice in relation to patterns of dominance and marginalization that support inequalities within schools. The author relies on data collected from a year-long ethnographic

---

1 Angelina Castagno is an associate professor of educational leadership and foundations at Northern Arizona University and current director of the Ethnic Studies Program.
fieldwork that included passive and participant observation and formal and informal interviews with teachers in two schools from the Zion District in the state of Utah. The study provides new insight into the way teachers engage and understand multicultural education. Moreover, it sheds new light on the relation of the educational praxis and larger patterns of whiteness in schools.

Castagno begins by acknowledging that in the last four decades academics have been advocating for a multicultural approach to education that in sum will bring equity to the school contexts. Moreover, she argues that critically oriented scholars have suggested that this educational approach could work as a way to “challenge the persistent and pernicious ‘whiteness’ in both educational system and society at large” (101). In this sense, it is worth mentioning, that following Dayson (1996), Maher and Tetreault (1998), and McLaren (1998), Castagno understands whiteness as a pervasive ideology that serves to justify the dominance of one group over others. At the same time, this ideology works as a “form of social amnesia” (McLaren quoted in Castagno 102) that indulges “[w]hite people to forget or ignore how we are implicated in the maintenance of systems of privilege and oppression” (Castagno 102).

As it was already mentioned, the research draws on data gathered from a year long ethnographic fieldwork developed in the schools Birch and Spruce from the Zion district in Utah. The interest of Castagno in this particular district comes from a “relatively recent dramatic increase in racially and linguistically diverse students within the district” (104) that motivated institutions to commit to multicultural education in order to promote equality for all students. The schools Castagno selected fulfilled three criteria: they were attended by i) English-language learners (ELL), ii) students of color, and iii) low-income students. In this manner, the two schools were selected due to their specific and opposite characteristics: “Birch served almost 80% ELL, 90% students of color, and 100% low-income students” while Spruce served “15% ELL and 25% students of color and low-income students” (104). Although Castagno acknowledges that in the selection of the schools, she was looking to find differences in the ways teachers in both schools engaged and understood multicultural education, in the study she found multiple similarities that show how most educators are not aware of whiteness prevalence and end up reproducing inequalities. It is worth noting that most of the teachers that participated in the study were middle to upper class white women (106). In fact, she argues that their socio-

---

2 No specific name of the schools was given. The names of the teachers that were interviewed were changed by pseudonyms.
economical position gave them little reason to disrupt the status quo and the current relations of power, which (unconsciously) results in the denial of the significance of race and privilege embracing a ‘colorblind perspective’ that favored assimilation goals for their students.

For her, multicultural education is an educational praxis whose main objective is to impact the curricula, pedagogies, and policies, in order to improve school experience for all students and, overall, make the school environment equitable. Moreover, following the literature on this topic, the author states that previous studies identified “a range of approaches […] that facilitate assimilation, enhance human relations, encourage bicultural awareness, and work toward general social justice” (105). However, Castagno argues that the debate about multicultural education has been focusing mostly on its theoretical underpinnings, and far too little attention has been paid to its practice in schools and among real teachers. Considering that racism and whiteness are permanent and pervasive, and that both structure all institutions and their practices, she proposes that carrying out ethnographic research is important to understand how the U.S. educational system remains inequitable, even with all the theoretical debate about multicultural education and the interest of teachers in implementing their knowledge on this topic. One of her answers to this ambiguity is that “multicultural education has become a weasel word” (107) that only works as a way to describe the situation of diversity but in praxis tends to reproduce and legitimate conditions of inequality and dominance, “encouraging both a recognition and a denial of difference” (107).

In order to justify this argument, Castagno addresses the results of her study analyzing the different ways in which teachers engage with multicultural education. In this regard, the author identifies two categories: “powerblind sameness” and “colorblind difference”. The first category is formed, on the one hand, by the notion of sameness, the belief that all students are the same and that their differences do not have any influence on their teaching and learning process (107); on the other hand, by the idea of powerblindness that refers to “our reluctant avoidance of race, social class, language, gender, sexuality, and other politicized aspects of identity that are linked to power and the distribution of resources […]” (107). In this regard, her results show that teachers in both schools tend to associate multicultural education with addressing different learning styles and/or with a commitment to improving human relation skills, which ends up erasing any form of difference related to conflict-laden topics like discrimination, privilege, and oppression. In other words, teachers tend to ignore categories of
differentiation such as race, class, gender, and privilege in their discourses about what multicultural education entails. Aspects like individual learning skills, politeness, and respect for others are highlighted instead, which reflects their loyalty to a “powerblind ideology”, and ultimately their denial of the close links between power and difference.

The second category, the colorblind difference, is related to a “colorblind ideology that ignores race and posits that race and racism do not matter in the lives of students” (114). In this sense, teachers have the tendency to ignore the aforementioned aspects of identity, but some are willing to recognize specificities like the language and socioeconomic status of students. According to Castagno, these characteristics appear in teachers’ discourses to code a colorblind perspective: they are not willing to differentiate directly under the notion of race but do categorize some of their individual students under the parameters of certain social characteristics, like being an ELL or member of a low-income family. Furthermore, teachers seemed to have lower expectations from students with low-income and ELL backgrounds, falling into notions of “deficiency” that posit a natural connection between low academic achievements, students’ backgrounds and social relations outside the schools (119). In the end, according to the teachers’ discourses, multicultural education is one that includes those who struggle with education due to their position as nonnative English speakers or economic conditions and helps them get up to speed with the white middle to upper class mainstream population. This functions as a way of “Othering” students based on their socioeconomic status and language, obscuring race and inequalities and keeping social and labor structures and hierarchies intact and unquestioned.

Castagno concludes that both, “colorblind difference” and “powerblind sameness” are in constant tension as they tend to appear simultaneously and interlaced in the discourses and activities of teachers in both schools. Moreover, she argues that these categories are a reflection of teachers’ understanding of and engagement with multicultural education. Therefore, in opposition to the promises made by this educational practice, this is a clear example of the ways whiteness shapes discourses and institutions, guiding the debate towards individual aspects rather than structural arrangements, hierarchies, inequalities, and relations of power. This prevents social change, protects the status quo and whiteness, and, I would say, white supremacy itself. Furthermore, for Castagno, there is a discrepancy between the theory of multicultural

---

Following Lipman (1998), Castagno connects teachers’ impressions about low-income and ELL students to a “deficit model” that offers a sort of explanation for the students’ low academic achievements and the teachers’ perpetual frustration when trying to help them.
education and its application in schools that has its origin in a lack of awareness and knowledge about race, racism, and power in teachers’ educational training.

Castagno’s analysis of teachers’ discourses and actions around multicultural education is original and gives new insight about the praxis of this educational approach. Her theoretical approximation and arguments around “powerblind sameness” and “colorblind difference” are demonstrative examples of the way a structural concept like whiteness is reproduced in everyday life, including educational and institutional contexts. However, a drawback of her study is that more than problematizing multicultural education both in theory and praxis, she exclusively focuses on the problems related to its execution. For example, she may have included an alternative to this model or a deeper reflection on the ways in which it could be transformed from the root.

Multicultural education, for instance, has a direct relation to “multiculturalism” which, as Stuart Hall (2000: 209) argues, entails the strategies, attitudes, policies, and actions used to approach or manage cultural diversity. So, in my opinion and as I will show, the same problematic aspects of multiculturalism can be found into the current notion of multicultural education. It is in this regard that Castagno’s reflection falls short. More than including teacher training programs for discussing race, racism, and power, which are important and necessary in the curriculum, the whole conception and role of multicultural education needs to be reevaluated. This is so, due to the fact that the word itself hides social discrimination and the real current state of racialized individuals in multiethnic communities, cities, institutions, or countries as Verna St. Denis proposed criticizing the concept.

Likewise, the notion of a multicultural environment, inferred from the idea of multicultural education, depicts a tolerant and innocent atmosphere were differences get to be shaded under the understanding of existing diversity, without acknowledging the practical and symbolic implications of being different. As schools in the U.S. are part of a white dominated system of power, the decision of which differences are highlighted as part of the multicultural perspective of education rely on the invisible “white norms” and structures that produce and reproduce whiteness and White Supremacy. In this sense, the ways in which teachers engage and interpret multicultural education associating it to courses for ELL, low-income students or

---

4 See Applebaum (2016) “Critical Whiteness Studies”.
classes about human relations, could be interpreted as a consequence of the whole theoretical construct that surrounds this kind of educational practice. Therefore, both praxis and theory are problematic.

Moreover, Castagno did not consider the different political perspectives in which multiculturalism can be framed depending on the visions and goals for approaching cultural diversity. For example, on the one hand, from a conservative point of view, multiculturalist policies have been proposed as a way to reduce cultural differences in order to minimize prejudices and biases. On the other hand, a liberal perspective on multiculturalism (one of them) aims to empower diversity in individuals, promoting the recognition of cultural and ethnic plurality but still in closed unities. Accordingly, establishing the difference between, both liberal and conservative multiculturalism would have given the reader a broader understanding of her opinions on the ways teachers understand multicultural education.

On the same line, Castagno gave scant attention to the social and ethnical affiliations of the teachers that participated in her study. She did mention that most of them were white and middle to upper class but not much about their position as such was discussed as she solely argued that they did not have reasons to disrupt the status quo. However, it would have been suitable to dig deeper and consider their attitudes towards education in a multi-cultural setting in relation to the advantages that their position as white people gave them. For example, considering white privilege as part of her argument could have broadened the scope of the study giving a better understanding of the reasons why teachers tend to ignore or deny potentially threatening forms of difference.

Overall Castagno’s arguments are valid and contribute to render visible and problematize the reproduction of whiteness in educational institutions, nonetheless, she seems to ignore the theoretical problems behind multiculturalism and its influence in the praxis and design of multicultural education. Consequently, her research ends up supporting multiculturalism as a possible way to face diversity, which as St. Deni (2011) argues hides the current status of racialized individuals.

---

6 Here I use the hyphen to describe a condition of coexistence of multiple ethnicities and races.
7 See Jensen (2011) “Whiteness”.
Nowadays, at least discursively, the importance of cultural diversity in educational settings is recognized. Migration (national and international; forced or not) and globalization have left their mark in schools, universities, and training centers. As a consequence, these spaces have been transformed into gathering points where students from different economic backgrounds, genders, ethnicities and so forth meet, so institutions, educators, and academics find themselves with the need of approaching this situation from an inclusive perspective that respects differences. Multicultural education has been proposed as an answer that, nonetheless, must be criticized, especially in relation to patterns of dominance and reproduction of inequalities that are linked to white privilege, white supremacy and in sum whiteness, in order to fight their centrality and pervasiveness not only in the U.S. but also around the world.

**Bibliography**


