
Doing “Diversity” at Dynamic High: Problems and Possibilities of Multicultural Education in Practice

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Abstract

In this article, I examine how students, teachers and staff understood and addressed cultural difference at an urban, public high school in the United States. My research reveals that the school's multicultural practices contradictorily sustained and exacerbated problems and made teachers resistant to multicultural education. Simultaneously, my research elucidates the ways in which pedagogy that focuses on tensions and conflicts that arise from cultural differences offer important possibilities for multicultural education.

Keywords

multicultural education, urban education, ethnography, immigrant students, Lao, Hmong

In our era of territorial displacement and globalization, where the presence of refugee and immigrant students and families have dramatically increased in U.S. schools and communities (Suarez-Orozco, 2001), what it means to be “American” has become a primary site of contestation. Among other things, we see this in the increasing struggle with anti-immigrant attitudes and questions

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of national allegiance and identity in the aftermath of 9/11 (El Haj, 2002). This “multicultural condition” (Goldberg, 1994, p. 1) heightens the salience of racial, ethnic, national, class, gender, religious, and linguistic differences. For educators concerned with educational equity for all students, it is perhaps more pressing than ever before to teach against what Goldberg (1994) calls the “monoculturalism as intellectual ideology and institutional practice” of “Eurovision” (p. 5). In education, attempts to account for cultural difference manifests most frequently as “multicultural education” (Banks, 1995; Nieto, 1992). As numerous scholars have demonstrated (see e.g., Allard, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Mohanty, 1994), multicultural education has proven to be an inadequate remedy for addressing difference. According to Sheets (2003), this is because of the fact that research rarely attends to the theory to practice gap or solutions to the problems. More specifically, the difficulties schools and teachers have translating theory to practice often lack description and detail.

In this article, I illustrate the ways students, teachers and staff understood and addressed cultural difference at an urban, public high school in the United States. Conversing with educational theorists’ critiques of multicultural education, I explicate the ways the school sought to foster tolerance, acceptance and understanding for all forms and ways of being human. My research reveals that as practiced, multicultural education contradictorily sustained and exacerbated problems related to difference, and made teachers skeptical and resistant to multicultural reform efforts. At the same time, my research sheds light on how focusing on the tensions, power relations, and conflicts that comprise cultural difference may provide an avenue to better enact the transformative, social justice goals of multicultural education.

Background

Under the umbrella of multiculturalism and multicultural education members and allies of racialized groups, ethnic groups, gays and lesbians and feminists have united to combat the monocultural norms and normative structures of straight, White-Anglo, middle-class male society (Goldberg, 1994). For example, the struggle for the recognition of difference in education has been an impetus for infusing new canonical knowledge into higher education (Banks, 1993). Over the past several decades, programs in Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies and Gay and Lesbian Studies have been created to make room for the voices, knowledges, and experiences of historically marginalized groups.

The efforts to recognize cultural difference has fueled intense curricular debates on what counts as “knowledge” (Apple, 2000) and how difference should be represented and taught (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995). The attempt to

acknowledge the existence of numerous groups and cultures plays out most frequently within the overarching philosophy of “multiculturalism.” As a political philosophy of “many cultures” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) “multiculturalism” attempts “to subsume this plurality of cultures within the framework of a national identity” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 35). Scholars, politicians, community members and educators have and continue to struggle with addressing cultural difference (Ashcraft, 2004; Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995) in ways that are “inclusive” while keeping careful watch to ensure against the “balkanization” of U.S. society (Ravitch, 1990; Schlesinger, 1991).

In schools, the numerous approaches to multiculturalism are most commonly known as “multicultural education” (Banks, 1995; Bennett, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 1987). Multiculturalists agree that the primary goals of multicultural education include *transforming* educational institutions so that students from different racial, ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds may have the opportunity for educational equity and success (Banks, 1995; Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Melnick & Zeichner, 1997). It is also well-established that culture makes a difference in the teaching and learning process (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, there is disagreement on the best way to design and implement teacher education programs (Cicchelli & Cho, 2007). The theoretical fusion of multicultural education and critical pedagogy in the late 1980s and 1990s specifically emphasized multicultural education as a reform movement, grounded by concerns for social justice and equity (Gay, 1995; Nieto, 1992; Sheets, 2003). However, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) have argued, multicultural education often ends up being reduced “to trivial examples and artifacts of cultures such as eating ethnic or cultural foods, singing songs or dancing, [and/or] reading folktales” (p. 61).

Educational theorists have pointed to at least three problems with this “stomp and chomp” (Allard, 2006, p. 328) approach to multicultural education. First, it emphasizes “healing past wounds” (Mohanty, 1994) of violence and exclusion. Marked by efforts of “inclusion” and “celebration,” this approach negates histories of power inequities, of real harm and oppression (Burbules, 1997; Mohanty, 1994; West, 2002). By focusing on “making peace” with the past, it ignores structural and ideological power relations that continue to construct inequality. Multicultural education in practice disregards the fact that differences in physical features, customs, and lifestyles are not the problem; but the “negative characteristics and qualities ascribed” to these differences (West, 2002, p. 4).

Second, the prominence of themes of “appreciation” or “celebration” in multicultural education, often results in the simplification of difference into discrete, essentialized categories. Cultural difference is paraded out and

highlighted through isolated “tolerance units,” “multicultural weeks,” or “history months.” This claim to honor and “celebrate diversity” positions and reinforces difference as “exotic,” something to be viewed as perhaps curious and quaint (Burbules, 1997). Here, culture is simultaneously reified and exoticized. The exoticization of people, food, music, clothes, customs, among other things, continues to sustain power hierarchies and boundaries between “Us” and “Them” (Burbules, 1997; West, 2002).

Finally, the focus of multicultural education is often on teaching empathy, respect, understanding and tolerance of difference. As cogently argued by Megan Boler (1999), the logic here is that if “I take up your perspective. . . I can know your experience through mine” (p. 157). At one level, Boler (1999) argues that the assumption that another’s experience (of deprivation, discrimination, and pain) can be so easily known is critically problematic. At another level, it is questionable that empathy, understanding or tolerance would allow for any shift in power relations or changes toward educational equity (Boler, 1999). Tolerance or celebrations of difference are not the educational outcomes of multicultural education (Burbules, 1997). Rather, multicultural education was intended to be a reform movement to address educational inequality by implementing change (Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In practice, it often fails to live up to its conceptualized ideals (Gay, 1995; Sheets, 2003).

In this article, I draw on these critiques of multicultural education to analyze how one progressive, urban, public high school attempted to address issues of diversity. By revealing how multicultural education plays out in practice, my research offers insights into the practice-theory gap of multicultural education (Sheets, 2003). I particularly point to the ways in which multicultural practices at the school continue to perpetuate problems that have been identified by multicultural theorists. My study further demonstrates the ways multicultural practices may in fact contradictorily create and sustain differences, and foster skepticism about multicultural education among teachers. Focusing on the existence of conflict and tensions in the school and classrooms, I ultimately suggest we need to develop theoretical and pedagogical strategies that center the power relations and conflicts that comprise cultural difference.

The Study

Context

The methodology used in my research was ethnographic, also known more generally as interpretive research (Eisenhart, 2001; Erickson, 1986). This

article draws on data from an ethnographic study that explored the ways in which we teach and talk about cultural difference within the contexts of “culture” and “cultural identity.” Research questions for this project included: (a) What are the role(s) of school, peers and/or mainstream U.S. society in the construction of culture and identity among immigrant youth? (b) How are schools teaching and addressing issues of culture and identity? and (c) How are immigrant students reworking, contesting, and constructing “culture” and “cultural identity”? In this article, I focus on the discourse and practice of multiculturalism and diversity at Dynamic High School.¹ The guiding questions for the article include: (a) How do teachers, staff and students attempt to address differences of culture and identity? (b) What are the contradictions of their multicultural practices? and (c) How might multicultural theorizing and practice respond?

Similar to other qualitative research, my study was designed to examine issues of culture and cultural difference in great depth. As a result, my research design did not include a large sample that was randomly selected. Thus, in this article, I do not seek to generalize with confidence from a sample of the population of urban teachers and students (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, 1985; Peshkin, 1993). Instead, my research seeks to explicate and contextualize practices of multicultural education. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981), the strength of qualitative inquiry is in its attention to context. In response to criticism about the inability of qualitative studies to generalize, they ask, “What can a generalization be except an assertion that is context free?” (p. 62). By focusing on a small number of participants, I hope to illuminate the details and contexts of the ways in which issues of diversity played out in the everyday practices of teachers and students at one urban, public high school. Although my research is limited in scope, it was designed to explore the experiences of teachers and students at an urban high school in-depth. Understanding the nuance of multicultural practices is critically important, given the current struggle to teach about culture and difference. Although this study highlights the experiences of students and teachers at one urban high school, examining their experiences in-depth allows us to understand how difference plays out more generally in schools and society (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). More specifically, my research contributes to knowledge about the experiences of students and teachers in similar contexts of public high schools in urban settings with multiracial and multiethnic student populations.²

The primary site of my research was at Dynamic High, a large, urban, public high school in the Midwestern United States. Dynamic was one of seven high schools in Lakes City. Located in a poor to working class industrial area of

the city, the high school enrolled approximately 1,482 students from across the city. The school brochure highlighted its richness in cultural and ethnic diversity, noting that students and staff spoke 41 languages and dialects. The majority of the students in the school were either African American (43%), Asian American (mostly Hmong American immigrants) (38%), and White (16%). During the 2001-2002 academic year 8% of the Asian American students at Dynamic were Lao American. Although the socioeconomic status of the students ranged from working class to middle-class, the majority of the students (75%) qualified for free or reduced lunches (compared to 67% in the school district). Of the seven high schools in the district, Dynamic High had the highest poverty rate at 75%.³

Dynamic High had a mythical reputation in the district and state. Ten years ago, it was almost shut down because neither students nor teachers wanted to be at the school. The third floor of the school was closed because of poor attendance and dilapidated facilities. Students were violent, did not listen to teachers or administrators, and basically ruled the school. Since the mid-1990s the school has undergone a major change. The staff acknowledged that the major changes was attributable to the leadership of the current principal, Mr. Gibson. During my study, Dynamic was described as a "model" school, one of the top two most desirable schools in the district for both teachers and students. An overwhelming number of the teachers and staff members at the school emphasized and applauded the school for its progressiveness, academics, and leadership. The school was doing so well that schools from neighboring states sent their staff members to learn about its programs and organizational structures.

Data Collection and Analysis

My data collection took place from September 2001 through July 2002. During this time, I immersed myself in the daily activities of students and teachers at Dynamic High. The primary participants⁴ in my study included seven focal Lao American students and four focal teachers. In addition, I interviewed and observed thirty other Lao American students, their Hmong American, Liberian American, White American peers, teachers, and school staff. The immigrant (i.e., Hmong, Lao, Liberian) students who participated in my study either recently came to the United States (first-generation) or immigrated when they were still very young (1.5-generation). They came from poor, blue-collar families and lived in neighborhoods close to the school. Their parents were on welfare or worked on the assembly line in various factories. Many of the students worked jobs to support their families or themselves. They all received free or reduced lunches.

One of my primary data sources included field note data collected through participant-observations at the school. I spent 4 to 5 days a week at Dynamic High observing students and teachers inside and outside of the classroom and participating in various school activities. I attended classes, school dances, club meetings, and athletic events. I also participated in more casual activities with students, such as hanging out with them in the hallways, in the library, during lunch, and in front of the school. Outside of school I spent time with students in their homes and at parks, church and family gatherings. During my fieldwork I collected documents such as daily announcements, school and community newspapers, year books, class handouts, and event fliers. Moreover, my data sources include transcripts from audio-recorded, semistructured interviews with students, teachers, and staff. These interviews lasted an average of 2 hours and took place after school in the library, empty classrooms, or in the homes of students.

I coded and analyzed my field notes, interview transcripts, and cultural documents in two separate phases. In the first phase, I fleshed out all of the possible ideas, themes and issues by open-coding the data line-by-line (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Charmaz, 2000). I then engaged in focused coding in the second phase. Here, I analyzed and organized the data line-by-line, using specific themes that I identified especially of interest (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Wolcott, 1994). For instance, I focused on themes related to “multicultural education,” “diversity,” “race,” and “gender.” In making sense of and writing the larger study, I focused on this smaller set of ideas in the creation of major topics and themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Wolcott, 1994). For example, the theme “diversity” included topics such as “curriculum,” “symbolic displays,” and “description of school.” My interpretive analysis is inductive, informed by constructivist “grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2000). At the same time, as a constructivist, I recognize that my data does not “speak for itself” (Scott, 1992).

As qualitative methodologists have pointed out (see e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), as researchers, our commitments, experiences, and worldviews pervades all stages of our research, from design, collection, analysis to writing (Fine, 1994). As an educational researcher, I am interested in illuminating the ways in which schools advantage some groups over others, as well as they ways schools are sites of social and cultural transformation. I am committed to issues of social justice in education (Kumashiro & Ngo, 2007), especially critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy.⁵ This article is informed by these commitments, and as such, is written with a perspective that is particular to my experiences. Other researchers, working from different perspectives, would collect, analyze, and interpret research findings in different ways (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In the following article, I explore how Dynamic High teachers and students grappled with understanding, teaching, and learning about issues of cultural difference. In the first section, I reveal the school's multicultural practices and the contradictory impact of these practices on teachers and students. In the second section, I focus on an unplanned class discussion to elucidate productive possibilities for teaching about difference.

Doing “Diversity” at Dynamic High School

Posters, Celebrations, and Clubs

Similar to many schools in the U.S. Dynamic High School discursively and symbolically encouraged the celebration and respect for differences that exist in our multicultural society. The symbolic recognition of diversity appeared on walls, bulletin boards, and display cases in the hallways as well as inside classrooms. During the course of the year, several displays throughout the school showcased the multiplicity of students' heritages. For example, one large display at the entrance to the school exhibited masks, costumes, and artifacts from African tribes. Another display by the main office exhibited small Asian “Barbie” dolls in Hmong dresses. Beside the dolls were page-length explanations which elucidated the origins of the different costumes. Posters in the hallways and classrooms exhorted students and staff to “Celebrate Diversity.” One popular poster conveyed what it meant to “respect” diversity at the school. In bold letters at the top of the sign were the words: “RESPECTING DIVERSITY.” In the middle, behind a NO bar were the words: Chink, Bitch, Nigger, Fag/Faggot, Ho/Whore, Retard, Dyke, Pimp/Trick, Cracker. Beneath these words was the message: “Words that show disrespect, make fun of or put down others are NOT acceptable.” This poster made clear that pejorative terms that denigrated people on the basis of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability or gender were unacceptable at the school. Other posters represented the variation of family composition, from mixed-race families, families with adopted children, to same sex households.

In addition to symbolic efforts, Dynamic also addressed issues of social and cultural difference materially through school policies and programming. The material inclusion of difference was epitomized by groups (e.g., Safe Staff, Asian Cultural Club) and celebrations of a “month” (e.g., Asian American History in May, Black History in February) or a “day” (e.g., Coming Out Day in October). As other researchers have pointed out, this contributions approach to multiculturalism is the approach most extensively practiced in schools (Banks, 1993). It ubiquitously focuses on holidays, heroes, cultural traditions, food,

music, and dance as discrete elements of cultural difference. As an illustrative example, consider the practices of the school's Asian Cultural Club.

The Asian Club

The practice of celebrating the culture and achievements of a group through the school's sanctioned programs is perhaps best exemplified by the activities of the Asian Cultural Club, also known as the "Asian Club" to students and staff. According to Mr. Her, the Asian Club advisor and Hmong bilingual teacher, the Club served two primary purposes. First, it offered Asian American students a place to belong at the school. Mr. Her shared that when he first came to the school the Asian American students were "outcast" in the school community and felt like outsiders. The Club changed this by fostering among Asian American students a space for belonging and ownership by instilling cultural pride through Club activities. Second, the Asian Club provided students with leadership opportunities. Mr. Her emphasized this sentiment when he spoke to approximately 100 students at the first Club meeting and again to me in an interview later in the year:

Mr. Her: Yes, with the Asian Club we are what I have in mind and I make it clear to students are one to develop their leadership and secondly that's a place where they can really have time to get to know each, talk and play—everybody's in the playing field. . . .But here is the place where if you're good at something you can shine. You can bring it to the group. You can show them and exercise some leadership. . . .So if you make it, the Club to *a place where everybody feel [sic] like they belong* (emphasis added).

Significantly, Mr. Her did not explicitly frame the role of the Asian Club as a conduit for sharing or passing on Asian "culture." According to Mr. Her, the importance of the Club was in offering Asian American students a space to develop leadership skills at the same time that it gave them a place where "everybody [can] feel like they belong."

Although Mr. Her emphasized the Asian Club as a space to foster belonging and leadership skills for Asian American students, in practice, the primary purpose of the Club's activities underscored the unique contributions and experiences of Asian American students. This played out in a variety of activities that the Asian Club organized for the student body throughout the year, including a dance in the winter and the spring as well as a dinner for Asian American parents. Of these activities, perhaps the Club's largest and most

significant event was the “Asian Show.” This event took place during Asian American Month in May and featured fashion, music, and dance. In a memo to faculty and staff, Mr. Her referred to the show as the “Asian Cultural Club Assembly” and explained the purpose in this way: “The purpose of this year’s program is [to] use musical performance to show cultural transitions Asian teenagers have undergone—from traditional to modern.”

Teachers had the option to sign up for the assembly. As Mr. Her noted in his memo, there was limited space, because the Show was only offered during the second and fifth periods of the day. I attended both of the Shows and sat in the company of Lao and Hmong students during both performances. Each of the shows featured eight acts, and the acts were different for each show. The acts combined clothes fashion with dance and music. As Mr. Her’s indicated in his memo, the acts were designed to transition from more “traditional” clothes, music and dance to more “contemporary” clothes, music and dance. For example, in the beginning student performers wore clothes of Hmong people from the mountain villages of Laos. By the end of the show, students wore jeans, cargo pants and t-shirts and danced to English-language hip-hop songs.

Throughout both of the performances, students and staff cheered enthusiastically. Students stood up and danced to the music and sang along with songs that were in English as well as in Lao or Hmong. For example, one performance featured three Hmong girls in Lao “traditional” dress and danced to a Lao song. One of the Lao American students next to me raised and extended his arm in support. As he followed the beat of the music by moving his arm to the left and right, the student said “Heeey.” As I sat observing the scene, I realized the physical, vocal, and emotional responses that the Show evoked were similar to pop music concerts or pep rallies.

At the conclusion of the show, Toua, the Vice President of the Asian Club addressed the audience from a prepared script:

Toua: Hey so how you guys enjoy this Asian fantasy? I hope you guys was [sic] touch and left with a piece of memory embedded in your heart of the touch of Asianicity. My name is Toua Yang, I am the Vice President of Asian Club. There’s been a lot of confusion with the Asian Club⁶. The purpose of this Asian Club is to educate and teach others about the Asian culture. The world suffers with discrimination because the world lacks knowledge of other cultures. We the Asian Club is trying to make a difference starting with teaching our school, the best school ever, Dynamic High School. Thankx.⁷

From Toua’s perspective, the purpose of the Club was to teach students and staff about the culture and experiences of Asian Americans—or as he put

it, a “touch of Asianicity.” This “Asian fantasy” approach to addressing issues of cultural difference was phrased in terms of a need to “educate and teach others about the Asian culture” because the “world suffers with discrimination because the world lacks knowledge of other cultures.”

Toua’s view that the role of the Asian Club is to combat inequality by providing students with “knowledge of other cultures” resonates with the transformative, reform goals of multicultural education. However, these practices assume that there is some sort of “authentic” or “real” culture, identity or custom to recover. While teaching about difference through discourses of “information” and “affirmation” (e.g., posters and special days or months) may be attempts to address discrimination and create empathy and “tolerance,” this approach may also contradictorily reinforce discourses of Othering. As Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, and Dombia (2003) persuasively argue, inclusion and exclusion—or the production of margin and center—were part of the same process. Teachers and staff were able to make claims about inclusion and tolerance by pointing to the Asian Show, posters, and clubs. Yet, the insidious consequence of information and affirmation approaches is a “mentioning” that serves to preserve the status quo. Writing about how dominant culture is maintained, Bennett (1986) argues:

Dominant culture gains a purchase not in being imposed, as an alien external force, onto the cultures of subordinate groups, but by reaching into these cultures, reshaping them, hooking them and, with them, the people whose consciousness and experience is defined in their terms, into an association with the values and ideologies of the ruling groups in society. Such processes neither erase the cultures of subordinate groups, nor do they rob “the people” of their “true culture”: what they do do is shuffle those cultures on to an ideological and cultural terrain in which they can be disconnected from whatever radical impulses which may. . . have fuelled them (p. 19).

Bennett offers a lens for understanding the impact of multicultural practices at Dynamic High. The “reshaping” of cultures at the school obscured attempts to contest existing power relations. The “radical impulses” of groups such as the Asian American students were neutralized in practices such as the Asian Show. Although teachers such as Mr. Her may want the Asian Show to demonstrate changes in Asian students’ lives, it instead reified students’ cultures and experiences. Likewise, even though students like Toua may want to critically address discrimination, the Asian Show reduced oppressive experiences to song and dance. As the next section illustrates, these multicultural practices negatively affected students and teachers at the school.

The Contradictions of Multicultural Practices

Conflict Among Students

The politeness and cheeriness of “diversity” efforts at Dynamic belied enduring racial and ethnic tensions. During my research I witnessed subtle and overt acts of racism and racial conflict. I heard African American and White American students make fun of the smell of food that Hmong American students brought to school as part of projects. Students were sexist and homophobic (Ngo, 2003) and segregated themselves along racial (i.e., Black, White, Asian) and ethnic (i.e., Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese) lines.

One of the places that I saw striking evidence of this was in the cafeteria. Similar to the work of other researchers (see e.g., Olsen, 1997; Tatum, 1997), I found that one could walk into the cafeteria on any given day and know that particular areas belonged to particular groups of students. During first lunch at Dynamic, the African American students sat at tables and booths at the far right side of the lunchroom, Liberian students sat at the left side and Hmong students sat in the middle and right side of the lunchroom closest to the entrance. White American students sat in pockets in the middle and right side.

For Lao students like Vannaphone and Suthisa, the cafeteria was an especially uncomfortable space. These female students usually sat at a two-person booth flanked on one side by a wall and on the other side by one of the two lunch lines in the cafeteria. Because the table was barely big enough for their lunch trays, they had to balance their books on their laps while eating. When I sat with them I pulled up a chair next to their table, and further exacerbated the crowded space and lunch line problem. On three occasions I suggested that we move to a bigger booth or table nearby. Each of these times Vannaphone and Suthisa looked at each other and then at me. Vannaphone then responded to my suggestion by hesitantly saying no. When I asked her why, she told me that the other tables “belonged” to other students. After some prompting, she explained that the tables belonged to the Liberian and African American students. If they sat at the tables, the students would “get loud” and mad at them.

During my research, it became evident that Vannaphone and Suthisa were afraid of the Liberian and African American students at Dynamic High. Moreover, they were developing resentment toward them. For example, I was sitting next to Vannaphone one day in the ELL science class composed primarily of Liberian and Hmong students, with a few Lao American students. Class began as usual, with the teachers trying to quiet the students and get them seated. The day was unusual in that Ashley and Katrina, two Liberian girls, were focusing their attention on Vannaphone, who tried as much as possible and at all times to avoid attention. Ashley and Katrina teased Vannaphone

about a red mark on her neck, remarked that it was a hickey she got from her boyfriend, and laughed loudly. Embarrassed, Vannaphone turned to me and explained that the mark was from pinching the skin on her neck to relieve the tension. Once class started, Vannaphone passed me a note that said: "I do know that I hate some Black girls." She then explained that she did not like the Liberian female students because they were too loud and were jealous of her. For students like Vannaphone, multicultural education's manifestation as affirmation and celebration did not address the racial tensions that were part of her school life.

In the case of the Asian Club, the reduction of the cultural politics of difference to performance and celebration of "Asian" culture homogenized the experiences of all Asian ethnic groups. As Toua alluded to in his remarks at the close of the Asian Show, there was disagreement about the purposes and representation of Asian Club. Since the Club was dominated by Hmong students in number and leadership, many non-Hmong students pointedly called it the Hmong Club. When I asked Lao students why they did not participate in the Asian Club or talent show, all remarked that it was not really "Asian" but exclusively "Hmong." Informed by priorities of harmony and civility (Mohanty, 1994), inclusion at Dynamic created contradictions in students' experiences in at least three ways. First, it masked historical and continuing tensions between various Asian ethnic groups. Second, it maintained and exacerbated Lao American students' marginalization. And third, it ignored the ways that students racialized themselves and others (Olsen, 1997). Altogether, the incongruities and tensions of difference are unexamined, presuming a "unity of difference" where all differences—experiences and inequalities—are construed to be similar (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62).

Unlike the common discussion about race and racism within multicultural education that dichotomizes racism into a Black–White binary (Goodwin, 2002), at Dynamic High salient tensions existed not only between White students and other students of color; but also among and between African American, African, and Asian American groups. As one teacher, Ms. Perry, put it, "We have a lot of feuds between Liberians and Somalis. We have a lot of feuds between Hmong students and Liberians or Somalis." Ms. Jenkins, another teacher, elaborated on this comment:

Ms. Jenkins: There's definitely racism. I believe between Asian students and African Americans....We often think of this as being a Black/White issue....racism goes between every which way between all people....It's not just one group versus another....It's not always necessarily outright spoken. But you can tell when they're sitting in groups

and you have one African American male who's in a group with all Asians and the way the desks are set up to sort of exclude him.

For Ms. Jenkins, racism at Dynamic High was not just a "Black/White issue," but rather "racism goes between every which way between all people." Yet, the emphasis on "understanding" and "celebration" of multicultural practices at the school could not account for the racial (e.g., between Lao and Liberian students) and ethnic (e.g., between Lao and Hmong) tensions.

Skepticism Among Teachers

While my research revealed that multicultural education practices at Dynamic inadequately responded to the tensions and unequal power relations fostered by cultural difference, I also found that uncritical practices fostered a significant skepticism among the teachers. In numerous remarks, teachers articulated a concern about talking and teaching about difference in ways that were "authentic" and did not "tokenize" or "patronize" various groups or dimensions of difference. For example, Ms. Anderson spoke about how Dynamic addressed issues related to diversity and equity in this way:

Ms. Anderson: To be honest probably not as much as it should be, given how diverse our student body is. I was chair of the Multicultural Committee last year (laughs) so I can kind of say this without feeling like I'm criticizing necessarily anyone else other than myself. I think we struggled with the Multicultural Committee—this year it's called the Diversity Committee (laughs)—with trying to do meaningful multicultural stuff that's not tokenistic. And it's really hard because really to do meaningful, what's really meaningful happens in people's classrooms and so you don't always know.

I want to highlight three aspects of Ms. Anderson's remarks. First, the name change from "Multicultural Committee" to "Diversity Committee" is noteworthy. It alludes to an uncertainty about meanings attached to terms such as "multicultural" and "diversity" as well as an uneasiness with the form and function of multicultural education at the school. Second, Ms. Anderson especially expressed concern about doing "meaningful and multicultural stuff that's not tokenistic." Her apprehension about the tokenizing effect of multiculturalism implicitly points to the inclusion of groups only through superficial, symbolic efforts such as posters and celebrations. Finally, rather than highlighting difference through special days, units or clubs, Ms. Anderson suggested that "meaningful" multicultural education occurs in more subtle ways in classrooms.

This preference for individual discretion and execution seems to resist the ways that multicultural education has been included in the official school curriculum.

The problematic ways in which diversity practices spotlight difference was repeated by several other teachers. Ms. Sanders, for instance, believed that addressing difference should occur “seamlessly”:

Ms. Sanders: You know it’s the same trick, the same problem I have with multicultural stuff generally. I don’t see, to start off with, no, I don’t see it very much. I’m going to talk from an English perspective. I think for a lot of English teachers we deal with that same tension between ‘If I highlight this am I being patronizing, why am I highlighting it? If we were truly diverse and multicultural, wouldn’t it just be seamlessly, wouldn’t we be looking at all these things and talking about them as part of the human story?’

Likewise, Mr. Sullivan, another English teacher, explained his dilemma with multicultural education in this way:

Mr. Sullivan: And I think I speak for many people here. I sort of don’t want to ghettoize it and say, “Well we’re going to have a month. All we’re going to do is talk about black people or we’re going to talk about the gay people.” Or “This is the gay people’s month.” Because it trivializes it. It makes it seem like if you can fit it in a box then you don’t have to worry about it there. There, it’s over there, and when I want I can walk over there and open it up and look inside.

As the above remarks illustrate, Mr. Sullivan and Ms. Sanders were both uneasy about explicitly teaching about difference. The trouble or “trick” with multicultural education was its patronizing, trivializing effect. For Ms. Sanders, highlighting difference is contradictory because a “truly diverse” school and society would not need to point this out. Diversity would just come out “as part of the human story.” Instead, as Mr. Sullivan pointed out, multicultural education puts difference in a box and brings it out in isolated moments. Mr. Sullivan further noted multicultural education’s detachment from social relations by bluntly saying: “I think they learn more from [my relating life experiences] than they do from me putting up a poster that says, ‘Tolerate gay people.’”

In their critique of multiculturalism Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that as “a paradigm that attempts to be everything to everyone [multiculturalism has] consequently become[] nothing for anyone” (p. 62). This seems to

have occurred at Dynamic High, leaving teachers deeply critical and dismissive of multicultural education. Teachers' pedagogical and philosophical struggles attest to the tenuous position of multicultural education in theory and practice. Frequently manifested as posters, celebrations and clubs, multicultural education has become synonymous with tokenism for teachers at Dynamic High School. In the next section, I share a discussion I observed in a classroom that allowed students to engage in a conversation about difference that moved beyond mere celebration.

The Importance of Conflicts

Issues Day

Once a year, Dynamic teachers and staff organized an *Issues Day*. Andrew Flowers, a prominent leader from the Lakes City community, started *Issues Day* in the early 1990s in response to incidents of sexual and racial violence. For example, female students were sexually assaulted, a gay student was forced to strip in a boy's restroom, and the Blood and Crip gangs repeatedly fought at school. Flowers organized leaders from various community organizations to speak to students about issues that were salient in their everyday lives. Instead of attending regularly scheduled classes, students signed up for workshops that addressed various social and economic issues.⁸ The 2001-2002 *Issues Day* was organized by a small group of students and teachers, solicited input from teachers and students and planned for speakers over a period of several months. The schedule of the sessions was extensive and spanned a range of topics. Movies that were offered included: *Gandhi*, *Princess Mononoki*, *Finding Forrester*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Hoop Dreams* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Other sessions addressed concerns from homelessness, credit card debt to eating disorders.

The broad and disparate "issues" that were addressed during this special day is important for addressing issues of cultural difference and inequality. As intended by its inception, *Issues Day* attended to the concerns and difficulties students faced in their homes and communities on a daily basis. Sessions on "Race and the Police," "Dating Violence/Date Rape," and "Abortion, Adoption and Parenting" raised issues that were salient in the lives of the urban students. However, *Issues Day* was not altogether unproblematic. At another level, as a "special day" it was an additive approach to multicultural education, and did not always engage students in a critical examination of diversity. For example, students who attended movies such as *Hoop Dreams* and *The Joy Luck Club*, came into the classrooms, sat down at desks or tables, and the movies were switched on by the teacher assigned to the session. At

the end of the hour, the teacher switched off the movie, and the students filed out of the room. Time was not allotted for the discussion of the issues of race and persistent poverty in *Hoop Dreams* or the issues of race and intergenerational conflict in *The Joy Luck Club*.

Talking About Difference as Competing Interests and Values

At the same time, I suggest that *Issues Day* offered a springboard for teaching and talking about cultural difference in more critical ways. During my observations, I found that on the day following *Issues Day*, teachers' follow-up activities primarily took two forms. Teachers either did not mention the day at all or planned a warm-up activity that asked students to free-write about their *Issues Day* experiences. In Ms. Anderson's Advance ELL class, she started with the latter activity, and asked students to write about where they went and what they learned. When students were ready to talk about their responses, two Asian male students shared that they attended a session where an African American community leader spoke against interracial marriage. Ms. Anderson picked up on the anger in the students' voices and remarked that she wanted to talk about it because she heard that many students and teachers were upset by the session. She asked the class, "Are all White people racist?" Ananh, a male Lao student said no. Christopher, a Liberian student, said that everyone is a racist. Marcus, another Liberian student added that he tried to date eight Asian girls and they all said no to him, some telling him "straight up" that they were not allowed to date Black boys. In response, Ananh pointed out that Asian girls are dependent on their parents and therefore must obey their parents' order to not date outside of the Asian race. As a result, they cannot date Black boys. Franklin, a third Liberian student, countered Ananh's explanation and remarked that he sees Asian girls date a lot of White boys, but no Asian girls dating Black boys. Several students—Liberian and Hmong—commented that they would let their child be with whomever he or she wanted to date or marry. As several students emphatically stated, "Race does not matter."

At this point, Ms. Anderson asked students who had not participated to contribute to the conversation. She stressed that she wanted to hear from the girls, because the boys had dominated the conversation. Marcus, one of the Liberian boys turned to the back of the room where I was sitting, pointed to me and said loudly, "I want to hear from Author." Ms. Anderson smiled and asked if I wanted to say anything. I was impressed with students' engagement and frankness in the discussion about racism. Thus, I took the opportunity to point out the similarity between racism and homophobia. I asked the students that if they were okay with their children dating people of another race, would it be okay if their children dated people of the same sex? Christopher, who argued that he

would allow his children to date out of their race, exclaimed "I would kill them!" In addition to Christopher, several other Liberian and Latino American students spoke vehemently against homosexual relationships. At the same time, two male students, one Lao and the other Hmong, argued that they did not have problems with homosexuality because it was "not a matter of choice."

For me, this class discussion sheds light on productive possibilities of multicultural pedagogy. It allowed students to grapple with and invest emotional honesty in a discussion about diversity issues in a way that was distinctly different from posters and the Asian Show. It also poignantly highlighted the difficult work of teaching about difference. Although students such as Christopher were able to see oppression based on race as unconscionable, he could not see similar reprehensibility with oppression based on sexual orientation. Thomas West (2002) reminds us that "[m]ulticulturalism often works from a kind of historical amnesia" because it "continues to represent difference *as diversity*, it often advances pedagogies and curricular reform that elide histories of difference *as alterity*, as the politics of 'othering' people for particular reasons" (p. 28). In other words, difference is most prominent and becomes a problem in the struggle over values or resources (Bhabha, 1994). However, multicultural education's frequent focus on "diversity" and the celebration of "difference" in terms of different lifestyles, different languages, different food, different clothes and different artifacts of culture positions multicultural education within a discourse of *accommodating* difference (West, 2002). The passion with which Ms. Anderson's class engaged in discussion about racism and sexual orientation points to the need to move beyond additive multicultural education. While the class discussion affirms the need to teach multiculturalism in a way that underscores the richness of our diversity; it further raises the question: How can we better teach about difference as competing ideas, beliefs, and values?

Discussion

As a case study, Dynamic High School is illustrative of the struggle of schools, teachers, and students to understand and teach about culture and difference. By examining how multicultural efforts play out at the ground level of the school, my study offers directions for addressing the theory to practice gap of multicultural education (Sheets, 2003). My research at Dynamic High suggests that the focus on celebration and appeasement is working for neither students nor teachers. For teachers, uncritical approaches negatively affected their attitudes toward multicultural education. Teachers such as Ms. Anderson worried about "tokenizing" students and cultures. For students, the school's efforts to address equity and diversity were unable to address homophobia

and racial and ethnic tensions. In Vannaphone's experiences, this included marginalization in the spaces of school. In addition, my research raises the specter of pop concert or pep rally effects of practices such as the Asian Cultural Show that leave these tensions unaddressed.

And yet, practices at Dynamic High School also offer critical insights into theorizing about multicultural education. In particular, *Issues Day* points to ways forward for researchers and educators who wish to address issues of diversity and equity. It was important for at least two reasons. First, bringing topics related to poverty, crime, sexuality, race and other themes related to the socioeconomic and political aspects of students' lives is essential for connecting and making relevant students' experiences to their education. The importance of culturally relevant teaching for student achievement have been well-documented by multicultural theorists (see e.g., Gay, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Second, the dedication of an entire day to address the myriad manifestations of "diversity" in the realities of students' homes and communities proved to be a catalyst for an important discussion in at least one class. *Issues Day* raises the possibilities for critical multicultural education that allows students and teachers to explicitly talk about struggles, conflicts and inequities of cultural difference.

The critical conversation in Ms. Anderson's class moved beyond attempts to mollify conflict through discourses of celebration and appeasement. It demonstrates the importance of making spaces in classrooms for students to talk about and play out the tensions that exist in their daily lives. Here, we might conceptualize classrooms as what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) calls "contact zones" or "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (p. 34). Imagining classrooms in this way might help us develop strategies to respond to the competing interests and views that currently exist in our schools and society, such as those related to race and sexual orientation. Addressing multiculturalism in this way brings attention to the values, judgments, and power relations involved in the creation of difference (Burbules, 1997; West, 2002). It attends to the presence of power struggles that construct particular groups as "Other" based on race, gender, sexuality, religion, and other dimensions of difference.

In addition, engaging students in difficult conversations means that student-teacher relationships matter. As we saw, Ms. Anderson believed that more "meaningful" multicultural practices happen in classrooms. Similarly, from Mr. Sullivan's perspective, students learn more from him sharing his life experiences than from posters or special "days." As affirmed by Talbert-Johnson (2008), teacher dispositions toward diversity, students and families matter in urban education. My research suggests the importance of preparing teachers so that "teachable moments" such as the one from Ms. Anderson's class are not rare accidents.

Our scholarship has long-critiqued additive approaches to multicultural education. However, gaps persist between what we know and want out of multiculturalism and what is happening in schools and classrooms. As a way forward, my research points to the possibilities of pedagogy that engages students in talking about the tensions and conflicts of cultural difference. It pushes us to examine questions such as: How might theorizing about culture and pedagogy respond when teachers view multicultural education as patronizing and tokenistic? How might teacher education prepare teachers to cultivate classroom spaces where students are able to articulate with honesty and emotions their differences?

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Notes

1. The names of people and places are pseudonyms.
2. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that qualitative research does not seek “generalizability” but “transferability.” As they explain: “The degree of *transferability* is a direction function of the *similarity* between the two contexts, what we shall call “*fittingness*.” Fittingness is defined as degree of congruence between sending and receiving contexts. If a context A and context B are “sufficiently” congruent, then working hypotheses from the sending originating context may be applicable in the receiving context” (p. 124).
3. The average rate of the District was 58%.
4. I spent the majority of my time inside and outside of school with these participants.
5. For a discussion of the ways in which my Asian American identity influenced my research, see Ngo, 2009.
6. The “confusion” stemmed from a debate that the Asian Club was really a Hmong Club because was dominated by Hmong American students and excluded students from other Asian ethnic groups. I address this later in the paper.
7. Toua prepared this statement on a piece of paper and read directly from it. I asked for the paper after the show.
8. Parents have the option to excuse their children from school on Issues Day. According to several teachers, the number of complaints from parents has markedly decreased since its inception.

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Bio

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