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# “Are we doing multicultural education yet?” Review article of Timothy’s Reagan’s Non-Western Educational Traditions

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### Are We Doing Multicultural Education Yet?

#### Non-Western Educational Traditions: Alternative Approaches to Educational Thought and Practice.

By Timothy Reagan. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996. 184 pp. Paper, \$17.50.

This book rests on the premise that educators in the United States and other Western countries have very poor knowledge of non-Western educational tra-

ditions and practices, and the reason we lack such knowledge can be directly linked to the ethnocentrism of the West—the belief that Western practices are the norm and other traditions may be quaint or interesting but not worthy of full inclusion in the education curriculum. Reagan's goal in writing this book was to "provide a starting point for the development of a more open and diverse view of the development of various approaches to educational thought and practice" (p. 2). In other words, Reagan wants us to become less myopic. He hopes that "someday the study of Aztec *calmécac* and *tepochcalli*, of the imperial Chinese examination system and its content, and the role of various African initiation schools, among others, might be as commonly taught in courses on the history of educational thought as the works of Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey are today" (p. 3). The book seems to be intended mainly as a theoretical and descriptive work, not as a practical guide for teachers.

The premise of ethnocentrism is the same one that drives curricular revision in many other areas—from language arts and social studies at the K–12 level to undergraduate core courses. In all of these cases, bitter struggles continue to be waged over the inclusion of material that presents nonwhite and non-Western, as well as feminist, gay, and lesbian perspectives. It should come as no surprise that courses designed to prepare teachers in the United States, such as educational foundations and history of education, in general suffer from the same malaise of Western, male, and heterosexual bias. However, as I will discuss later on, this kind of revisionism addresses only content; it doesn't deal with processes of teaching, nor does it deal with the positionality of the author, professor, and students.

The book is intended for "a very broad and diverse audience" (p. ix), including both preservice and in-service teachers as well as advanced students in graduate programs and faculty members. Reagan notes that it was written primarily with American audiences in mind, as is this review, and he assumes that readers are familiar with Western educational tradition. There are nine chapters altogether. The first presents the theoretical foundation for the study of non-Western educational traditions. Following that are seven chapters that focus on different non-Western traditions before colonization and the modern era, including African, Meso-American with a focus on the Aztecs, pre-Columbian North American, Chinese, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic. The final chapter draws together what can be learned from the comparative perspective Reagan has provided.

Because one of the challenges I pose later on has to do with positionality (making one's own position and biases clear), I would like to briefly touch on my own. My background in educational anthropology and sociolinguistics has prepared me to teach a number of teacher preparation courses and in-service workshops that deal with multicultural education, so I am familiar with the audience Reagan is trying to reach. My views are influenced by being white, female, and professional, but also by my conviction that the field of multicultural education is still being delineated, and we have a long way to go before we can claim sophistication in dealing with this area of study. I see this review as an opportunity to explore some themes I found especially interesting in light of current debates and discussions about multicultural education. Within each theme I discuss strengths of the book and also pose some challenges.

### **Does informal education count?**

An aspect of the book that I found especially refreshing is that the author dealt very evenhandedly with the range of educational processes from informal to formal. For example, he notes "the common tendency in our own society to conflate and confuse 'formal schooling' with 'education'—a tendency reflected in our concern with formal certification and degrees rather than with competence per se—has been far less common in non-Western traditions" (p. 142). Throughout the book, he discusses various examples of informal education, giving these the equal weight and respect I think they require if we are to make sense of human teaching and learning in all its varieties.

Although one of the aims of the book is to invite comparisons among the different traditions presented, the comparisons in some cases run aground because dissimilar structures are compared as though they were somehow equivalent. For example, the author stresses in his conclusion that non-Western educational traditions have tended to be community-based and communal. The implication is that Western education has been less communal. This is perhaps true if we focus only on *schools* in the West. However, if we examine Western informal educational practices, we find a similar community focus. When young people are not in school, other structures provide a context for learning, and these tend to be the very societal structures that are most enduring and present in a young person's life, even today: family, extended family, neighborhood, churches, and community-based organizations with programs for children and youth. To these we have added newer structures such as shopping malls, which seem to lack the communalism of the former structures. Yet the teenagers who hang out in malls tend to be the same kids who know each other from school or neighborhood—so from their point of view, hanging out in a mall is still a communal activity. It seems more likely that formality drives the degree to which learning is communal and community-based, rather than cultural traditions per se. All in all, the different foci on formal and informal learning in different chapters make comparisons shaky because we are not given information about equivalent practices in different communities.

### **How do we know what we know?**

How do we know what we know about the way an ancient society thought about and practiced education? If the study of contemporary societies raises questions of bias and inadequate methodology, then the study of historical traditions must raise even greater concerns. As Reagan points out, the study of the history of education has been characterized by "epistemological ethnocentrism, which deals not so much with individual assumptions and biases but, rather, with those common to an entire field of study" (p. 4). One of the strengths of this book is that it directly challenges the assumption that the history and philosophy of education should focus on a single educational tradition: that of the West. On the other hand, I wonder how information about educational thought and practices of long ago can be verified.

Reagan refers to "standard methods of historical and philosophical scholarship" and argues for expanding the methodological tools to include "anthro-

pology, cultural studies, linguistics, sociology, comparative literature, archeology, and others" (p. 6). He also notes Weibust's distinction among three types of tradition: "the historical tradition (i.e., what really took place historically), the defined tradition (what members of the culture believe to have taken place historically), and the contemporary tradition (the way in which the tradition is manifested in people's lives today)" (Reagan, p. 7, citing Weibust, 1989). He points out that in many cases the defined tradition, in lieu of anything more verifiable, serves as a proxy for the historical tradition. Although Reagan recognizes that this imposes severe limits on our understanding, I am still left with the uncomfortable feeling that large generalizations have been made on the basis of very sketchy evidence.

My own experience in a study of contemporary informal education in a Greek community serves to underline this discomfort, for I found that what community members said about their own informal teaching and learning practices was often quite different from what they actually did, as shown through analysis of audio and video recordings of their activities. For example, when asked to recall how they learned a particular skill as a child, people most often responded that they watched other people doing it and learned from that observation. Yet the recordings show that although observation is certainly part of the learning process, it is not all of it. Usually observation is accompanied by interactional processes in which the more skilled person guides the learner's activity (Henze, 1992). Such interactions are subtle and not easily remembered, which is why most people tend to recall only the observational part of it.

I am not suggesting that the study of historical traditions be abandoned because we cannot bring contemporary methodologies to bear on the past; however, we do need to be cautious about overgeneralizing what we know from a very small amount of evidence, as well as assuming our sources are objective. I would like to see more discussion in the book about the validity of its sources. I would also like to know more about the author's own positionality: What roles, life experiences, and biases might influence the interpretations he brings us in this book?

### **Same or different?**

One of the most difficult questions Reagan attempts to address is whether one can generalize about as large an area as the African continent, which comprises so many different societies. How can a single chapter deal adequately with the multiplicity of educational traditions and practices in a single cultural group, much less an entire continent? The answer, of course, is that it can't, and Reagan does not claim to be doing justice to the diversity that makes up Africa. However, he points out that "Africa . . . is one cultural river with numerous tributaries" (Asante & Asante, 1990, p. ix) and that it is indeed worth examining these commonalities.

A related issue Reagan takes up is, "If different, non-Western societies share many features, such as the role of an oral tradition, a communal approach to the education of children, a reliance on non-formal kinds of educational experiences, and so on, . . . is it . . . really necessary for us to study many different non-Western traditions, or would it not be sufficient for us to simply study

one tradition in detail?" (p. 9). To answer this question, Reagan draws on an analogy with the study of linguistic universals, pointing out that although certain universals may hold across many cultures, they might be manifested in different ways. For example, the goal of helping a child to become a "good person" might be common to many traditions, but the definition of a "good person" might vary from place to place.

### **What is tradition and what is culture?**

I have some problems with the preceding discussions about diversity and commonality, and they stem primarily from a conflict between Reagan's underlying assumptions and my own understandings of the notion of culture, which are rooted in work by anthropologists such as Rosaldo (1982) and Wolcott (1991). At a very basic definitional level, there seems to be some fuzziness in the understanding of the terms *tradition* and *culture*. In fact, Reagan never distinguishes tradition from culture, and in the brief paragraph on pp. 6-7 about "the concept of 'tradition' and its limits," one could easily substitute the term *culture* in every slot where the term *tradition* is used. I am therefore questioning whether the information about traditions in this book is really information about culture, and if so, why is it not informed by more contemporary concepts of culture?

For example, one of the older ways of thinking about culture was as if it were a program that determines how people behave, communicate, and so on within a given group that we would call a cultural group. This sort of cultural determinism is gradually being revised as we begin to understand that "there is more to human culture than the image of cybernetic steering functions suggests" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 102). Although we do learn from others and receive certain cultural knowledge that is passed on from generation to generation, culture is much more than this; we are both recipients and creators of culture in a dynamic, interactive process. An exclusive focus on norms and codes of behavior can make phenomena such as improvised activities drop out of sight completely, yet this is a potentially rich source of educational knowledge.

Reagan acknowledges that traditions, too, are processes and that we are looking only at snapshots of a tradition at a particular point in time (p. 7). However, this awareness tends to get buried in some of the chapters, as in the list of 10 items in the "core belief system of American Indians" (p. 61). Such lists tend to reinforce stereotypes and give a false impression of culture (or tradition) as a bounded, coherent, homogeneous whole, while masking the diversity that actually characterizes cultural practices. In fact, Wolcott (1991) argues that no one really acquires culture; rather, we acquire a unique version of cultural knowledge—what Wolcott calls *propriospect*—particular to our life experiences, gender, age, economic class, and other factors.

The chapters on Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic educational approaches are not subject to these same problems because the unifying concept here is religion, not culture or tradition, and religions do produce codified norms that are much more stable and homogeneous than culture itself. In other words, I found static generalizations problematic when framed in terms of traditional cultures, but when similar generalizations were framed in terms of religious traditions I could accept them more easily.

### **Educational traditions as power**

Some forms of multicultural education focus primarily on the cultivation of empathy, appreciation, and understanding, whereas others take a more political perspective "that teaches directly about political and economic oppression and discrimination, and prepares young people to use social action skills" (Sleeter, 1996). Along these lines, it seems to me that the study of non-Western educational traditions should also raise our awareness of how, in the past, certain traditions gained ascendancy over others. Reagan deals with this question admirably in the chapter on Aztec education, showing us how the Aztec empire established "ideological hegemony" in a territory that encompassed some 15 million people and 489 tributary towns. Yet issues of power are not evenly treated across the different chapters. In the chapter on Africa, for example, there is no mention of competing educational traditions among different tribes or of hegemonic practices. Are we to assume that all of Africa enjoyed a peaceful state of coexistence among its many peoples, or were there dominant groups whose educational traditions supplanted those of the conquered? This is an important question to consider if we are concerned about the marginalization of certain educational traditions in our own society. One could assume a sort of Darwinian perspective and say that because X culture wiped out Y culture, the educational approach of X culture must have been more adaptive and therefore better. However, I think such an assumption would be a large leap of faith. More military or economic power does not necessarily mean better education. It is important to take power into account not only when looking across groups at patterns of dominance and subordination, but also within groups when we want to understand how power is distributed. By using the lens of power to examine how non-Western traditions distributed education across social class, gender, and other categories, we may gain insights into how we can transform existing educational inequities in our own society.

### **Are we doing multicultural education yet?**

*Non-Western Educational Traditions* is an important step in right direction. That is, it provides a basic introduction to some traditional non-Western approaches to education. I see it as part of a larger agenda to transform the way new teachers are prepared for their profession in a diverse society in which cultural and ethnic boundaries "crisscross over a field at once fluid and saturated with power" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 45). In addition to this overview, however, I would vote for several other critical pieces. One of these would be in-depth study of one contemporary non-Western tradition. If we are going to really understand another educational tradition, we need to live with it for a while, and of course the best way to do this is to immerse oneself in the other culture for a year or more. If this is not possible, I would suggest a course that deals specifically with one cultural area and includes ample video footage so that students not only read about it but also experience it in a more visceral way through sound and imagery. What this does is to help us move beyond the level of stereotypes; stereotypes about people long dead may not be as damaging as those about people who are alive, but they are nonetheless limiting.

Another critical piece would be to build into the study of non-Western educational traditions a focus on process. Students learn as much from how we teach as what we teach, so curricular change must encompass both the what and the how (Slattery, 1995). A course in non-Western traditions of education might include several guest speakers who model traditional processes of education that are discussed in the book. Students might also be asked to attend a contemporary educational event whose roots go back to one of the traditions discussed in the book (e.g., a Buddhist ceremony, a Yoga class, a Chinese calligraphy class) and to draw connections between the contemporary experience they have had and the traditional approach to education as outlined in the book.

If we keep in mind that multicultural education is itself in process and that one book or curriculum is not going to do it all, then Reagan's book will be of value in stretching the boundaries of foundations and history of education courses beyond their usual scope.

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## PASSing as a Grand Theory: It's All in the Plan

### Cognitive Planning: The Psychological Basis of Intelligent Behavior

By J. P. Das, Binod C. Kar, and Rauno K. Parrila. New Delhi: Sage, 1996. 184 pp. Cloth, \$29.95.

Cognitive psychology needs a theory that is grand enough to encompass its disparate subfields and diverse findings. PASS theory, proposed by J. P. Das, Binod Kar, and Rauno Parrila, is a commendable attempt at this sort of synthesizing and meaning-making theory, but despite some interesting and novel insights from both the Western and Eastern traditions, it cannot fill this serious gap in our discipline.

PASS is an acronym for *planning, arousal/attention, simultaneous, and successive*—key concepts in this unusual definition of intelligence. It is a theory that