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Unity in Diversity: Is There a Common Denominator?

Gheorghita Faitar¹
D'Youville College

Abstract

The 21st Century world is characterized by growing populations belonging to diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds that migrate to economically advanced regions. In dealing with diversity, societies need to find solutions for an effective reconciliation of apparently conflicting demands. Different cultures, societies and religions emphasize the importance of educating members of an international community in such a way that they become better representatives and active exponents for a brighter global future. However, it is not an easy task. Nonetheless, we still believe that we can achieve milestones in youth's education by imposing a set of basic (humanistic) character or moral values that will guide our lives regardless of nationality, age, gender, spiritual beliefs.

The purpose of this paper is to prove that although we might be from different cultures, societies, and religions, a set of core moral values still applies and it is trusted in our everyday individual lives. Particularly, the research topic was formulated to understand how this set of core moral values is perceived by individuals from different religions and cultures. Their views and opinions are investigated through the qualitative research technique employing a survey offered to exponents of four major religions: Hindu, Islam, Christian and Buddhism. It encompassed questions designed to address main issues of a generally-accepted character values' code present in contemporary societies. A common denominator of individually formulated beliefs that appeal to general ones will be given as a conclusion of the paper.

“If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place.” ~ Margaret Mead ~

Keywords: *Multiculturalism, moral code, character value curricula*

¹ Assist. Prof. Gheorghita Faitar is affiliated with Department of Education, D'Youville College, 320 Porter Ave. Buffalo, NY 14201, USA Telephone: (716).829.8219, E-mail: mfaitar@yahoo.com

Introduction

The different cultures, societies and religions emphasize the importance of educating members of an international community in such a way that they may become better representatives and active exponents of a global future. It is not an easy task. Nonetheless, we still believe that we can achieve milestones in youth's education by emphasizing a set of basic humanistic values that guide our lives regardless of nationality, age, gender and spiritual beliefs. Every aspect of a human's life has value whether or not we are religiously or even spiritually bonded. The main question that arises in a multicultural environment is whether these values are similar in all religions, societies and cultures. Furthermore, is there such a thing as a universal set of values that guide us humans regardless of culture? Are there values that are based on natural laws? Do we all really follow these values regardless of where we come from or what religion we follow?

Societies face a problem of integrating their members into a cohesive social whole. Since the diversity can neither be suppressed nor can be dispensed with unity, we need to find ways of reconciling apparently conflicting demands. Different societies are bound to do this differently, depending upon traditions, history and culture.

Multiculturalism is a term without a fixed set of meanings and theorists such as Giroux (1997), Banks (1993) and others, including Grant and Sleeter (1986), have agreed to this concept as well. Paul Gorski's multicultural pavilion site includes an article called 'Defining Multicultural Education' that also situates multiculturalism as a mean for teaching crucial societal skills. He considers that multicultural education is a transformative movement in education, which produces critical thinkers and socially active members of society. It is not simply a change of curriculum or the addition of an activity or topic of study. It is a movement, which calls for new attitudes, new approaches, and a new dedication to laying the foundation for the transformation of the society. He also explained that the social change aimed for a multicultural education incorporates three strands of transformation: 1) the transformation of self, 2) the transformation of schools and schooling and 3) the transformation of society (Gorski, 2003).

Multiculturalism and Education

Today 'diversity' is a much-discussed subject. Diversity is considered to encompass two dimensions: primary and secondary. Primary dimension comprises those components that are biological and usually visible, such as age, gender, race, and ethnicity. Secondary dimensions, on the other hand, are components that are socio-cultural in nature and are usually invisible, such as, language, education, values, occupation, culture, learning styles, etc. Therefore, people bring to the stage a set of diversities, which potentially give rise to conflicts. However if they are managed well, it can result in a synergetic unity,

where the effect of all working together is greater than the total sum of all the parts working independently.

Multiculturalism in societies makes people aware of their similarities as well as their differences, their strengths and limitations. It encourages significant self-consciousness and genuine pride and humility. Immigrant cultures provide societies with vitally necessary critical information. Even if the other culture is less sophisticated, the immigrants' culture will pose inquisitive questions that hold a mirror to the established culture, in which it can recognize its specificity and biases. It also brings along with it new forms of imagination, new ideas of beauty and goodness, new forms of resourcefulness and skills, new sources of energy and dynamism, and add to its cultural capital (Annan, 2003).

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights ushered in a multiplicity of human rights texts that are international and which educators can confidently use as standards in any circumstances. In schools in which linguistic, cultural, religious and ethnic pluralism is a fact of life, these principles are helpful guidelines for conduct and policy. All major human rights texts start with a reaffirmation of a commitment to equality of rights and equality of dignity. Programs to develop race or gender equality and to enhance opportunities for those with special needs and disabilities are essentially concerned with human rights (Starkey, 1992).

There are several sources for cultural diversity in our modern society. Many of these societies comprise of different ethnicities, religious and cultural beliefs with more or less distinct ways of life. A society cannot be held together unless its members share certain basic values. If some of these societies did not see the point of reciprocity and fairness in every human relation and insisted on living in society on their own terms, or if they denied obvious facts about the social and individual self-expression and rejected the empirical and scientific mode of reasoning about them, no common life would be possible within.

Contemporary representatives of Western societies are shaped by liberal individualism and take pride in having their own perspectives, as well as making their own choices by naturally arriving to different views of life. This has been reinforced by the breakdown in the traditional moral consensus that requires and makes space for individual choices. In addition, globalization has exposed each society to different currents of thought, with its members responding to these in different ways.

There are numerous good reasons why each society should respect the cultural, religious, societal differences that exist within them. Every individual's culture is a part of his or her distinctiveness. It profoundly shapes who they are and what they become, and therefore it is of great importance and meaning to them. Their self-respect is coupled with respect directed not only toward members of different cultures, as individuals, but

also toward these cultures at large. Respecting cultural minorities would actually imply respect for their culture. This is not to say that their culture may not be criticized for any pitfalls or even some of its practices precluded. However, we need to keep in mind that that there is no culture that is self-authenticating.

Kofi Annan (2003), the former Secretary General of the United Nations considered that respecting another culture means that one does not dismiss it out of hand, that one owes an obligation to understand it in its own terms, that one does not self-righteously take one's own culture as the standard for judging all others, and that one credits its members with enough intelligence and good sense to be able to explain why they hold certain views and to change those that are indefensible. Respect in this basic sense is owed to all cultures.

Multicultural education can help instructors legitimately use a variety of teaching methods and an expanded array of assessment methods so that students can learn more effectively and their comprehension of content can be evaluated more accurately. A major challenge for multicultural education as a field is the gap between theory and practice. In part this gap has resulted from the challenging nature of the insights provided by multicultural education. Additionally, multicultural education research has rested, often implicitly, on a critique of the reproductive function of education that has diminished its impact on practice (Bruch, Jehangir, Jacobs and Ghore, 2004).

However, multiculturalism does not only include cultures, ethnicity and religion. It also includes race, class, gender and people with disabilities. Ronald Takaki (1998) asks the question: "how does class difference factor into multicultural education? People often discuss multiculturalism in terms of race and ethnicity, but what about class?" To answer this question, he explains that class is indeed important and furthermore, had it not been for the demand of labor, or a demand for something else, we would not have had multicultural societies. It is the distinction in class that allows a community to function. However, class is not always a positive feature. For example, in India, the distinction of class is a very prominent factor of what the family possesses and how high up in status it is. The working class comprising people who cleaned homes as an occupation is probably, still considered the lowest on the hierarchical societal ladder. This is not what Takaki means when he considers class important. He simply means that for a community to function, its members need to collaborate. In his opinion, class is a hidden reality that is considerably overlooked. This idea is central to any ethnic experience. "This is where multiculturalism can bring us together" concluded Takaki (1998).

All teachers have a responsibility for the children they educate. In order for a teacher to be able to carry out his/her responsibility, diversity and multiculturalism should be integrated into the curriculum. They also have to emphasize the overarching influence of five basic values which cultures hold in common: truth, righteous action, peace, love, and non-violence (Kapani, 2000). Integrating multicultural education can

sometimes be a challenge and a lot of times because teachers are unsure, they teach it in an isolated manner instead of an integrated approach. By doing so, the children are unable to make connections, which are critical for understanding reality through a multicultural approach.

J.A. Banks answered the question on how multiculturalism can be taught when he introduced what is known as the 'Decision Making Social Action Approach'. This encourages children to find a social problem and design an appropriate action by developing strategies that can be followed in order to solve the problem. Information that teachers are provided with from a multiculturalism or diversity course can help them understand the issues that exist. It would help them teach their students not only about the differences but also the commonalities among them. Without the knowledge from such a course, multiculturalism can not resonate with people's beliefs.

Educators need to recognize that programs consisting of various cultural manifestations, ethnic foods, festival aspects, folklores and fashion are not the focus of a multicultural classroom. These studies rely on the skewed views of ethnicity, gender and minority cultures, but rather than producing multicultural relationships, they mostly emphasize the differences. This teaches the children to be tolerant of the others, but it does not help them understand the reasons. Teachers and students can challenge their own values and beliefs through examining the life stories of others. Reading biographical stories, corresponding with a culturally different pen pal, or interviewing an individual whose experiences have been different from one's own, can enlarge a student's worldview, provided that these activities focus on the deeper meanings of values, beliefs and feelings rather than on superficial differences (Meyer and Rhoades, 2006).

In his paper 'An approach to teaching multiculturalism: Pragmatism as a pedagogy and problem-solving tool', Henry (2005) discusses that instead of looking at multiculturalism as a rich source of information and culture, teachers ignore the fact and teach without taking into consideration that there are children in the classroom who might see things differently or might not even make the connection to what is being taught. The purpose of his analysis is to explore the moral essentials that would facilitate multiculturalism in a classroom from a pragmatic point of view.

Stables (2005) considers in his study entitled 'Multiculturalism and moral education: individual positioning, dialogue and cultural practice' that multicultural education can seem generally premised on two assumptions. The first is often made explicit: children should learn not to discriminate unfairly on grounds of ethnicity, gender or culture. To this degree, multiculturalism is clearly morally educative, encouraging children to see others in terms of their common humanity rather than their cultural differences. The second is more implicit and diffuse: sensitivity to cultural and ethnic differences promotes social justice among people.

Methodology and Research

According to Arweck, E., Nesbitt, E., & Jackson, R. (2005), children should be taught values. These should however be adjusted to their cultures and common beliefs. They emphasized that every person has these values within as they are universal and simply need to be activated through a curricular moral value program.

The aforementioned statement reflects the conclusions of a research study performed during the 2005-2006 academic year at the D'Youville College (Buffalo, NY, USA), as part of a multiculturalism and diversity awareness course. This study was implemented at the college level and was developed and applied by a graduate student and interpreted by the professor coordinating the multicultural awareness class. The results of the survey were analyzed based on the methods of analysis implied by the qualitative analytic techniques.

The international character value survey was given out to sixteen college students of different religions, such as: Hindu, Christian (Catholic, Baptist, and Greek-orthodox), Islam, and Buddhist (Appendix 1). Based on a one to five Likert scale, all of the college-level students had to answer a set of questions: 1) whether or not to perform an act by balancing the positive consequences of the act against the negative consequences of it; 2) the existence of potential harm to others is always wrong, irrespective of the benefits to be gained from someone's actions; 3) is one religion better than the others; 4) is telling the truth paramount; 5) is keeping a promise toward a child quintessential; 6) whether or not to help a human fellow in need. The incoming results of the survey were compiled and analyzed based on percentage preponderance. All interviewed students agreed to the idea of not performing an act if the negative consequences outweigh the positive consequences of that particular act. For the second statement, all students agreed to an overwhelming extent that the existence of a potential harm would be conducive to not aiming for any kind of benefits from performing the act. The above two statements implemented in the international survey along with other several moral and character value questions prove that certain human values, such as power, respect and control over oneself actions are highly valued in many religions and by many nationalities of the world (Faitar, 2008).

Interestingly enough the survey also took in consideration the idea of prevalence of a religion above any others. The idea of religious tolerance, and freedom regarding religious beliefs was also discussed by the survey. All of the interviewed students agreed to the idea that: "No culture (religion) is superior to any other culture; all cultures (religions) are equally good." The above-mentioned idea may contradict some of the views that are prevalent in societies of the North-American continent. A study performed in 2009 and released by the *National* newspaper, in Canada, talked about the limits of religious tolerance: "72% of Canadians hold a positive view of Christianity. Only 30%

think the same of Sikhism” (*National*, MacLean’s, May 04, 2009). The message that transpires is related to the fact that the mass of general population in one region, or country, may not reflect ideas held only by the college-trained individuals of that region. The survey only took in consideration general themes encompassed by the answers of college-level students of different religious (ethnic) backgrounds. The individuals participating in the survey were graduate students aiming to get college degrees at their institutions.

Another aspect of a common basic sense of a similar code of moral values was emphasized by underlying the importance of truth in any of our sayings and actions. Not all of the interviewed members would agree to the idea that: “It is important for people, including ourselves to tell the truth despite the circumstances or consequences”. Most of them (with one exception) agree, not strongly agree, though, to this statement.

The never-ending problems of mundane life cruelties and violence toward youth in Western societies were highlighted by the survey. The question trying to deal with such a preeminent issue was more construed toward understanding the reaction of parents, guardians, educators that are responsible vis-à-vis of fulfilling moral duties geared to children’s upbringing for all of the respondents. “It is important for parents/elders to keep promises to children, even if eventually it could harm the child”. Most of the interviewed college students from all the various nationalities would disagree to this statement. The overall well-being of a child is a sensitive and powerful issue and the educators, guardians and parents are responsible for a healthy individual having a physically, mentally, psychologically and morally fit preparation for the complexities of life.

Another important aspect of living in a harmonious society was presented by the idea of having mutual understanding and empathy in all parent-child relationships. The issue was addressed by the question asking if it is important to always help our parents and fellow human beings in need. All of the interviewed students agreed or totally agreed to this statement.

In summary, many of the views regarding a morally healthy Western society, as its citizens envision it, were encountered in all of the other survey answers coming from the interviewed subjects. It actually reinforced the idea of a similar moral code purported by every member of a society in the world.

Conclusion

In multicultural societies, children are often affected by cruelties such as social, moral, religious, economic, political inequalities, lack of self-esteem and last, but not least important, violence. A consensus of both teachers and parents delineates the importance

of a value program that would help solve some of these issues. There needs to be a connection between the growth of the society and the support of full human development.

As Kohlberg and Hersh (1997) concluded:

“Whether we like it or not schooling is a moral enterprise. Values issues abound in the content and process of teaching. The interaction of adults and students within a social organization called a school results in human conflict no less so than does such interaction in social organizations labeled ‘families’ ”.

Nonetheless, in the past, moral education has been viewed as the exclusive duty of the family and/or the church. As we know, the idea of moral perfection is an illusion, and consequently, thinking that any one social system can best exemplify or promote the good life for all is overstated. These somewhat broad, perhaps maliciously general statements are fundamentally flawed by the realization that ethical life, in all its variety and diversity, with all its conflicts, will only be attained under a system that accepts value-pluralism as a fundamental fact and creates the necessary institutions and policies to deal with conflict. The socialization impact of school promoting social justice, tolerance, and understanding in any society should become a full-force ascendant vector of progress in any contemporary society. Teachers, educators, parents and students alike have to come together to the realization that we can change and promote a climate of unity in diversity if we act based on the common grounds of self-determination coupled with respect, understanding, tolerance and positive action toward conquering global goals.

After reviewing the results of the internationally distributed survey of the above-mentioned study, it is interesting to remark that the importance of generally accepted themes such as: moral duty toward individual and society at large, religious tolerance, the importance of preserving the truth, freedom of action and respect in any society, humanitarian will, as well as the need for balance and harmony, are the most encountered categories in the answers of the surveyed college population. All of the interviewed students were inclined to demonstrate that, through their own social, moral, religious, ethnical heritages, they are exponents of the ideas delineating guiding principles encountered in a universal code of human values. It is worthwhile mentioning that some of the limitations of the study may come to the forefront knowing that the survey took in consideration only college level subjects. An extensive study, encompassing larger segments of the population may become more relevant in the future. Nonetheless, the message of the necessity of implementing a unifying moral, character value set of principles in school curricula has to be addressed by educational and administrative leaders.

It is not necessary for us to try to discover new values of our age, nor do we have to advocate one particular, secular set of values. In this era of shrinking distances, rapid

communication and increased cultural contact, we have become heirs to the rich moral, scientific and technical advanced heritage of all mankind (Kapani, 1990). Our horizons have widened. The philosophical, ethical, legal and cultural diffusion of the world's great heritage reaches across cultural and doctrinal boundaries through the common denominator of basic human values. The universal code of everlasting moral values ought to be considered part of the master puzzle that solves a myriad of problems that contemporary societies are faced with. The curricular importance of a universal character-value program might be the answer for many of our societies' inequalities, insecurities and mishaps.

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Appendix 1

Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following items. Each represents a commonly held opinion and there is no right or wrong answers. Rate your reaction to each statement by circling a number from 1 to 5 where:

5= Strongly Agree 4= Agree 3= Neutral 2= Disagree 1= Strongly Disagree

- a. The possession of any dangerous drug, such as heroine, should be illegal;
- b. No culture is superior to any other culture; all cultures are equally good;
- c. People should be free to accept or reject whatever religious beliefs they want to;
- d. Affluent countries, such a s the U.S., have no moral obligations to help people in remote poor parts of the globe;
- e. By outweighing the impact, people should make certain that their actions never intentionally harm another, even to a small degree;
- f. By performing certain actions, the outcome of potential harm to others is always wrong, irrespective of the benefits to be gained from that actions;
- g. Deciding whether or not to perform an act by balancing the positive consequences of the act against the negative ones is immoral;
- h. The dignity and welfare of the people should be the most important concern in any society;
- i. It is important for people to keep promise if they can;
- j. It is important for parents/elders to keep promises to children, even if eventually it could harm the child;
- k. It is important for children to help parents.
- l. It is important that people, including ourselves, do not take things which belong to others;
- m. It is important for people to tell the truth despite the circumstances or consequences;
- n. It is important to obey the law.

About The Author

Gheorghita Mihaela Faitar, Ph.D. teaches “Multiculturalism and Diversity” and “Philosophical and Social Foundations of Education” graduate courses in the Department of Education at the D’Youville College, Buffalo, New York. Her research interests encompass international comparative education, science education, multiculturalism and globalization.

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