

Intercultural Education:  
Turning Off the Burner Under the Melting Pot  
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History of American Social Thought

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## **Introduction**

Intercultural education is both a theory and a methodology. The term was first used in 1935 when the Progressive Education Association established the Commission on Intercultural Education. Rachel Davis DuBois, a pioneer of Intercultural Education, however, had created the concept during the Woodbury High Assembly Program as a Social Studies Teacher in 1924. Intercultural education, as it had become known, had its genesis in Rachel Davis DuBois' concept which she describes in her All This and Something More autobiography as "dreaming ahead". She developed this thought process while searching for alternatives to her non-inspiring civics text that she was required to use in her freshman social studies classes. She gained permission to use Dr. Harold Rugg's pamphlet series which provided a much more intriguing examination of America's cultural diversity. DuBois believed that Rugg's pamphlets provided her students with, "...all sides of every social problem...peace-war, labor-management, as well as equal rights for minorities." During her tenure at Woodbury High, DuBois began to think of ways to make a weekly assembly more interesting and engaging to students and teachers. The superintendent of schools asked DuBois to take charge of the assembly programs and it was then that her thoughts became the reality for the rest of her career.

The model of the assembly program was brought by DuBois to many education and community groups over the course of her career which promoted the idea that cultural differences are strengths, and not weaknesses of our country.

In her book, Get Together Americans, DuBois poses the question, "Are we trying to build an American culture patterned after only one culture group in American life – the one that gave us our language and our basic law, the Anglo-Protestant? Experience

shows that to do so develops inferiority feelings in the members of the so-called minority groups and thus lowers the quality of their citizenship.” (DuBois 1943) DuBois goes on to conclude that the melting-pot policy has been “tried long enough” to be deemed “do-nothing”, “laissez faire” and responsible for the muddled state of our country’s democracy.

Throughout our studies of American Social Thought, we have reflected on numerous examples how various groups have manipulated government, community and education policies to exclude various groups according to who is in power at that moment in American History. In this paper, I will seek to examine ways in which various groups have created their own version of the melting pot stew and how Intercultural Education has worked to turn off the burner under what was currently cooking in American society at the time. Also, I would like to examine successful examples of Intercultural Education in practice and finally how the topic of intercultural education has influenced my own work in the classroom.

## **Melting Pot Stew**

In American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion, Shklar states, “In any modern state and especially in an immigrant society, citizenship must always refer primarily to nationality. American citizenship as nationality has its own history of exclusions and inclusions, in which xenophobia, racism, religious bigotry, and fear of alien conspiracies have played their part.” (Shklar 1991) The Melting Pot is a term which refers to the Americanization programs that, according to James Banks were designed to, “...assimilate the immigrants into the mainstream culture and to eradicate foreign influences.”(Banks 1996)

Diane Ravitch laments in her article entitled, Celebrating America that an elementary school in New York City did not encourage students to appreciate American culture. She goes on to say that the school she visited was attended, "...by children from nearly forty different nations and cultures and that it went to great lengths to encourage the students to have pride in their cultural heritage." Ravitch has deemed this practice of Intercultural Education to be a "paradox" and obviously disagrees with the school's philosophy that the children's "self-esteem is firmly linked to a positive relationship to their ancestral culture but not to the culture of the country in which they live..."(Westheimer 2007) Ravitch's ideology is firmly linked to a nativist approach that all things foreign must be left behind to become loyal and patriotic to the culture of America. The tenets of Intercultural Education disagree with Ravitch's viewpoint since this theory is based on the concept that the diverse fabric of a nation is its strength. There is common ground in every culture such as childhood memories, songs, dances and traditions which allow us to get to know, appreciate and accept one another.

The following four sections examine some of the obstacles to Intercultural Education that have been prevalent in American Social Thought.

### **Xenophobia**

In the related documents section of Twenty Years at Hull House, an article by Edward Alsworth Ross paints a disparaging picture of the quality of immigrant who is coming to our shores. Ross wrote in 1914, "...it is fair to say that the blood now being injected into the veins of our people is sub-common. To one accustomed to the aspect of the normal American population, the Caliban type shows up with a frequency that is startling....You are struck by the fact that from ten to twenty percent are hirsute, low-

browed, big-faced persons of obviously low mentality.” In addition, Ross actually blames an increased rate of sterility in America on the “...advent of the immigrant flood.” This fear of strangers by Ross is also laced with claims of the lack of standards in the immigrant homes because, “They can’t see into American homes, and no Americans associate with them.”(Addams 1999)

Nativist sentiments were articulated by sociologists such as Henry Pratt Fairchild. In 1926, Fairchild protests that, “...immigrants were responsible for lowering the American standard of living, increasing crime, burdening society with a disproportionate number of people in insane asylums and for the declining quality of American life.”(Banks 2005)

It is into this Nativist atmosphere of American Social Thought that DuBois expanded her original School Assembly program into Neighborhood-Home Festivals. In addition to homes, DuBois brought her “Festival Method” into churches, Americanization classes, parent-teacher associations, schools and community centers. DuBois admits that the most difficult of all of the Festivals to arrange were the home meetings. She comments, “No doubt this lack is caused partly by the natural reluctance of people who wonder what they would find in common with strangers. Instead of having “obviously low mentality” as Ross claimed, DuBois found that the “Neighborhood-Home Festival has proved to be an answer to that need, for it offers a type of conversation that never fails to bring out the best in these well-read, and well-traveled Europeans. It gives an opportunity also for American hosts to see at first hand the best minds of Europe...”(DuBois 1943)

DuBois book Get Together Americans is intended for use by group leaders of Intercultural Education. It documents actual accounts of the Neighborhood-Home Festivals that successfully bridged the gaps between members of various races, creeds and nationalities throughout America. The book is dedicated, "To my friends, Jew and Gentile, Negro and white, Oriental and Occidental, old-stock American and recent immigrant, who are working together developing a richer American culture."

### **Racism**

In Dr. Martin Luther King's final published statement, he writes of the differences between the Europeans' escape from poverty and discrimination and the Negro's ability to escape similar conditions. In 1968, King wrote, "The Negro today cannot escape from his ghetto in the way that Irish, Italian, Jewish and Polish immigrants escaped from their ghettos fifty years ago. ...After all, no other minority has been so constantly brutalized and deliberately exploited." (DuBois 1984) This quote appears in DuBois' autobiography as part of her discourse on racism.

Cherry A. McGee Banks admits that, "Most intercultural educators did not seem to recognize or were not prepared to address the enormity of the multilayered problems of prejudice and discrimination with respect to racial and ethnic minorities." (Banks 2005)

In Pak's article, Teaching for Intercultural Understanding in the Social Studies: A Teacher's Perspective in the 1940s, we hear of Ella Evanson, a teacher in a racially and ethnically diverse Seattle school district. Pak relates how Evanson documented her teaching experiences which utilized the tenets of Intercultural Education Theory. Yet, Pak admits that, "While Evanson advances and broadens the scope of what it means to be

an American through her stories, she also perpetuates certain racial and ethnic stereotype of the students she describes.”(Woyshner 2004)

### **Religious Bigotry**

In his article entitled, Jewish Education for Intelligent Citizenship, Jacobs states, “As an ethnic minority striving to retain their distinctiveness within a society that tended towards homogenization, American Jews had no choice but to put their faith in the idea that participatory democracy depends on cultural pluralism. In the minds of cultural pluralists, America was not a melting pot that melded all of its sub-groups into one uniform “American” type. Rather, Jews (and other minorities) were entitled to develop themselves culturally, so that democratic society could in fact support the full growth and free interaction of all individuals and groups, and thereby become even more democratic.”(Woyshner 2004)

Cultural Democracy is a key concept in Intercultural Education. In her book Get Together Americans, DuBois states, “...the whole concept of cultural democracy is based on the idea of retaining those differences that are socially valuable and sharing them with others. We impoverish our own cultural life, our own religion, by ignoring the true and beautiful in others.”(DuBois 1943)

### **Fear of Alien Conspiracies**

Ironically, Rachel Davis DuBois was viewed as a radical for her work in promoting ethnic pride and understanding among the variety of cultures which settled in the United States. She was approached by members of the Woodbury American Legion and asked to resign her position as teacher because she was considered a Communist.



Yet, the Committee on Un-American activities was asked why the Ku Klux Klan was never investigated as subversive to our country. A chief sponsor of the Committee on Un-American activities, Ranking, replied that, “the Klan wasn’t un-American, it was American.”(Banks 2005) The Klan is anti-Black, anti-Jew and anti-Catholic. It was feared that communists would target religious and ethnic groups who were already angry over discrimination and prejudice.

### **Successful Examples of Intercultural Education in Practice**

Intercultural Education is all about Leadership. It is idea which fosters building bridges among all ethnic groups, races and creeds. While groups such as the Ku Klux Klan are attempting to fuel the fire, literally and figurative, leaders such as Rachel Davis DuBois, Hilda Taba and John Granrud were all taught by their families and communities to respect and accept ethnic and racial diversity. DuBois was a Quaker, Taba an immigrant from Estonia and Granrud, a child of Norwegian immigrants all brought their upbringing of tolerance to the forefront of Intercultural Education.

DuBois, credited as creating the Intercultural Education Movement, beginning in 1924. (Banks 2005). From the Woodbury Assembly Program, to the Neighborhood Festivals, to her work in Germany to assist in the Reconstruction after World War II, to finally the Civil Rights Movement, DuBois work was deeply effective and global in nature.

Taba, who was born in Kooraste, Estonia, became a leader in the Midwest as director of the Center for Intergroup Education. Taba studied at Columbia with John Dewey. His influence of student-centered education is evident in her statement that,

“only by studying what children know, understand, feel, and can do can teachers decide what they need to learn next.”(Banks 2005) Taba’s work led to training workshops for educators at the University of Chicago designed to teach methods to reduce prejudice.

John Granrud, who developed and implemented the Springfield Plan in Massachusetts public schools, noticed a student population which was ethnically and racially diverse was only being taught by Anglo-Saxon Protestant teachers. He deemed this a hidden curriculum and changed this by recruiting teachers of different races and creeds from Teachers College Placement Bureau. Granrud realized that, “limiting the ability of some citizens to fully participate in society could ultimately undermine democracy and limit everyone’s freedom.”(Banks 2005) Granrud not only wanted the students to learn about democracy, but to experience it.

The account of Benjamin Franklin High School in New York City in the 1930’s and 1940’s was particularly intriguing. The school was considered a student-centered, rather than a subject-centered school. The administrators and teachers of BFHS recognized that the ethnically diverse, low-income, immigrant community that it served did not leave their problems at the curb when they entered the school building. Teachers at BFHS, “sought to identify and build on their students’ personal and cultural knowledge.”(Banks 2005) The school sought to get to know their students’ place of birth, country of origin of parents, siblings, language spoken at home, employment status, student difficulties at school and at home. Students were even asked for their ideas as to how they could be helped by BFHS. A true Intercultural Education concept of reaching out was practiced and acted upon.

## **Conclusions**

### **How Intercultural Education Has Influenced My Work**

I am currently working MS256 and MS258 on West 93<sup>rd</sup> Street in New York City. Of the 170 students at MS256 and 225 students at MS258, the ethnicity of the population is primarily Black and Hispanic. A small percentage of students are recent immigrants from areas of the world such as Bosnia and Albania. Up to eighty-two percent of the students are eligible for free lunch and both schools receive Title I Funding.

My job at MS256 and MS258 is to assist classroom teachers in the implementation of technology into the curriculum. One recent project was the implementation of an Astronomy unit in the eighth grade science classes. The unit was divided into three “Challenges” utilizing the Legacy Instructional Design model. During Challenge One, we asked the students to develop their understanding of their “Universe Address” beginning with the address of their school at 154 West 93<sup>rd</sup> Street. We used Google Earth to show the students an aerial view of the school building as their starting point. Then, we pulled out farther and farther away from Earth to display Manhattan Island, New York State, the United States and North America. Then we gave the students the opportunity to “Fly To” wherever they wanted to go. Typically, they flew to their home address in New York City. But to our surprise, instead of flying to personal areas of interest such as Yankee Stadium, most of them flew to their personal country of origin. Being an ethnically diverse group, students visited the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Bosnia and Albania.

As teachers conducting an Astronomy unit, we had wanted to take them quickly into Space using other programs such as Google Stars, Celestia, and Stellarium. We

realized, however, that they needed to spend more time on Earth to begin to understand the aerial views of our planet before we could take off for the Universe. In attempting to understand our learners, we had to realize that the opportunities afforded to these students do not necessarily match our own. If up to eighty-two percent receive free-lunch from the City of New York, their social-economic status might not provide them with a home computer. It is within the realm of possibility that these students do not take vacations via airplane. They might not have looked out of an airplane window to view the Earth as it looks high up in the air.

The students also began to share views of their country of origin with each other, thereby practicing the Intercultural Education aspect of “group discussion” to share information about themselves with their classmates.

We also utilized the concept of Zodiac signs as an introduction to constellations which could be shared by the students in the class. We attempted to provide an area of commonality to the students who were broken into groups by zodiac sign to build their knowledge of constellations. By doing so, we afforded the students with the opportunity to work with a classmate that might not be in their current clique. At times, a student might discover that they were asked to work with a classmate that they usually do not get along with. I was told on several occasions, “I don’t get along with her.” I responded, “You can today because you both have the same zodiac sign.”

Rachel Davis DuBois used starting points such as memories of Autumn Festivals, such as Thanksgiving, childhood memories, dance and song to bring together groups of various ethnic origins, races and creeds. Taba brought intergroup experiences and activities and experience into curriculum at all grades and all subject areas to build

bridges among students and put out the fires of hate and prejudice. Granrud's Springfield Plan was community wide and included adult education classes including ethnic cooking, and exemplified the idea that "tolerance could be taught." (Banks 2005)

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Has the fire under the Melting Pot Theory of a homogeneous society been doused? No, it has not. Cherry Banks has some frightening quotations, some as recent as 2002 when Pat Buchanan reiterates the viewpoints of the sociologists that were quoted in the beginning of this report, Ross in 1914 and Fairchild in 1926 when Buchanan claims that, "... immigrants are responsible for a wide range of ills that are afflicting the U.S., including the high cost of welfare, health care and education, as well as the rising crime rate and unemployment." (Banks 2005) While these are not necessarily the views of a majority of Americans, you only have to look at our states bordering Mexico to watch walls being built, borders being guarded by armed citizen patrols and the subject of immigration as a key topic in the Presidential You-Tube debates.

A Venn diagram of American Social Thought would still show circles of xenophobia, racism, religious bigotry and fear of alien conspiracies. Intercultural education, represented by the final circle of my proposed diagram, would certainly represent the intersection of Intercultural Education dousing the fire under a very old stew of Melting Pot Americans.

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