

**Good Intentions Are Not Enough:
A Decolonizing Intercultural Education**

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Abstract

Despite unquestionably good intentions on the parts of most people who call themselves intercultural educators, most intercultural education practice supports, rather than challenging, dominant hegemony, prevailing social hierarchies, and inequitable distributions of power and privilege. In this essay I describe a philosophy of decolonizing intercultural education—an intercultural education dedicated, first and foremost, to dismantling dominant hegemony, hierarchies, and concentrations of power and control. I argue that attaining such an intercultural education requires, not only subtle shifts in practice and personal relationships, but also important shifts of consciousness that prepare us to see and react to the sociopolitical contexts that so heavily influence education theory and practice.

I remember the invitations: red text on a white background, the title of the event in curly bold face surrounded by a crudely drawn piñata, a floppy sombrero, and a dancing *cucaracha*. A fourth grader that year, I gushed with enthusiasm about these sorts of cultural festivals—the different, the alien, the other—dancing around me, a dash of spice for a child of white flighters. Ms. Manning distributed the invitations in mid-April, providing parents a few weeks to plan for the event, which occurred the first week of May, on or around Cinco de Mayo.

A few weeks later my parents and I, along with a couple hundred other parents, teachers, students, and administrators crowded into the cafeteria for Guilford Elementary School's annual Taco Night. The occasion was festive. I stared at the colorful decorations, the papier machet piñatas designed by each class, then watched as my parents tried to squeeze into cafeteria style tables built for eight-year-olds. Sometimes the school hired a Mexican song and dance troupe from a neighboring town. They'd swing and sway and sing and smile and I'd watch, bouncing dutifully to the rhythm, hoping they'd play *La Bamba* or *Oye Como Va* so I could sing along, pretending to know the words. If it happened to be somebody's birthday the music teacher would lead us in a lively performance of *Cumpleaños Feliz* and give the kid some Mexican treats.

¡Olé!

Granted, not a single Mexican or Mexican-American student attended Guildford at the time. Although I do recall Ms. Manning asking Adolfo, a classmate whose family had immigrated from Guatemala, whether the Taco Night tacos were "authentic." He answered with a shrug. Granted, too, there was little educational substance to the evening; I knew little more about Mexico or the Mexican American experience upon leaving Taco Night than I did upon arriving. Still, hidden within Taco Night and the simultaneous absence of real curricular attention to Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Chicanos, and other Latinos, were three critical and clarifying lessons: (1) Mexican culture is synonymous with tacos; (2) "Mexican" and "Guatemalan" are synonymous, and by extension, all Latino people are the same, and by further extension, all Latino people are synonymous with tacos (and, to a similar extent, sombreros and dancing *cucarachas*); and (3) white people really like tacos, especially the kind in those hard, crunchy shells, which, I learned later, don't actually exist in Mexico.

Thus began my intercultural education: my introduction to the clearly identifiable "other."

And I could hardly wait until Pizza Night.

Introduction

As I look back, twenty-six years later, through my educator and activist lenses, what I find most revealing—and most disturbing—about Taco Night and my other early experiences with intercultural education is *intent*. Or, more precisely, *lack of intent*. I assume that the adults—the teachers and administrators—at Guilford Elementary School believed that this event had educational merit. I am sure they believed that events like Taco Night were more age-appropriate for fourth graders than, say, a critical examination of U.S. imperialist intervention in Latin America. And I am equally certain that they *intended* for my classmates and me to leave that evening with an appreciation for

Mexican or Mexican American culture. I am certain, all these years later, that the educators at Guilford did not intend to inflate the stereotypes about Chicana/os and Latina/os into which the media and my parents and church had been socializing me since birth. I am equally certain that they did not intend to reify my growing sense of racial and ethnic supremacy by essentializing the lives and diverse cultures of an already-oppressed group of people, then presenting that group to me as a clearly identifiable “other.” But that is exactly what they did.

Unfortunately, my experience and a growing body of scholarship on intercultural education and related fields (such as multicultural education, intercultural communication, anti-bias education, and so on) reveal a troubling trend: despite overwhelmingly good intentions, *most* of what passes for intercultural education practice, particularly in the U.S., accentuates rather than undermining existing social and political hierarchies (Aikman, 1997; Diaz-Rico, 1998; Gorski, 2006; Hidalgo, Chávez-Chávez, & Ramage, 1996; Jackson, 2003; Lustig, 1997; Nieto, 2000, 1995; Schick & St. Denis, 2005; Sleeter, 1991; Ulichny, 1996). And this is why the very framework we construct for examining and encouraging intercultural education reveals, among other things, the extent and limits of our commitments to a genuinely intercultural world. The questions are plenty: Do we advocate and practice intercultural education, as too often happens, so long as it does not disturb the existing sociopolitical order?; so long as it does not require us to problematize our own privilege?; so long as we can go on celebrating diversity, meanwhile excusing ourselves from the messy work of social reconstruction?

And can we practice an intercultural education that does not insist first and foremost on social reconstruction for equity and justice without rendering ourselves complicit to existing inequity and injustice? In other words, if we are not battling explicitly against the prevailing social order, are we not, by *inaction*, supporting it?

Such questions cannot be answered through a simple review of teaching and learning theory or an assessment of educational programs. Instead, they oblige all of us who would call ourselves intercultural educators to reexamine the philosophies, motivations, and world views that underlie our consciousnesses and our work. Because the most destructive thing any of us can do is to oppress or otherwise disenfranchise people in the course of attempting to *do* intercultural education.

In this essay—my response to a request from the International Association for Intercultural Education (on whose Board of Directors I sit) to share my philosophy of intercultural education—I offer my continuously evolving, always incomplete reflections on these questions. I organize these reflections into two primary arguments. The first of these arguments is that, in fact, any framework for intercultural education that does not have as its central and overriding premise a commitment to the establishment and maintenance of an equitable and just world can be seen as a tool, however well-intentioned, of a sort of educational colonization in which inequity and injustice are reproduced under the guise of interculturalism. Secondly, I argue that transcending a colonizing intercultural education and engaging one more authentically intercultural requires in educators deep shifts in consciousness rather than the sorts of simple pragmatic or programmatic shifts that too often are described *as* intercultural education.

I begin by providing a brief contextualization for these arguments and how U.S. and world sociopolitics inform my analysis. I do so to demonstrate what I believe to be the most important shift in consciousness for intercultural educators: one from the

interpersonal to the sociopolitical. I contend that the invisibility, minimization, or softening of sociopolitical context in the dominant intercultural education discourse (Gorski, 2006)—particularly that related to systemic economic exploitation through racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other oppressions—feeds unintentionally colonizing intercultural education practice. I contend, as well, that it is particularly critical that those of us who are practicing intercultural education from positions of privilege (including me—a white, male, first-language-English-speaking, U.S. university professor) connect our work explicitly to sociopolitical context.

Sociopolitical Context

The world may be flat, as Friedman (2006) wrote, for the corporate elite, but for the rest of us—the workers, the teachers, the wage-earners, those of us without stock options and lobbyists—the world is as round and inhibiting as ever. Even while economic power brokers invite us into an unabashed celebration of globalization, corporate elites—often with the help of legislative co-conspirators—demonstrate greater and greater propensities for expanding their markets and finding ever-cheaper labor. They demonstrate, as well, propensities for accelerating economic inequality worldwide (Chossudovsky, 2003). And so globalization, although pitched as the pathway toward economic growth and stability, even in the poorest countries in the world, has proven to be little more than a contemporary form of mass economic exploitation—a vehicle for what Harvey (2005) calls the *new imperialism* and what Chossudovsky (2003) calls the *globalization of poverty*.

Corporations and their government allies employ a variety of techniques to maintain among the people something on a continuum between compliance and complicity with this exploitation. In Colombia, U.S. corporations such as Chiquita Brands International fund paramilitaries to protect their interests, often through the most physically and psychologically violent means (Bussey & Dudley, 2007). It is not uncommon for Colombian teachers who dare to voice an opinion about, for example, their government's complicity with U.S. corporate interests, to be assassinated (Klein, 2004). Within the U.S., where federal education policy is firmly under the thumbs of corporate elites in the form of the Business Roundtable, the public education system itself (along with increasingly conglomerated corporate-controlled media) is becoming, more and more explicitly, a vehicle for socializing citizens into compliance and complicity (Chomsky, 2003; Gabbard, 2003). We can observe this infestation of corporate influence on the education system in one of its most disturbing manifestations in the emerging hegemony regarding the purposes of education in the U.S. Although the idea has long existed that education's primary purpose is to prepare people to find employment and economic stability, only recently has the language commonly used to describe this attitude—preparing students *to compete in the global marketplace*—become so explicitly capitalist and market-centric.

As corporations and their lobbyists garner more and more control over all manner of policy and legislation, they gain greater and greater access to the systems, such as education, that facilitate the flow of ideas, access to knowledge, and popular perception. A clear and complex illustration of this process can be found in analyses of the

weakening over the last decade of laws prohibiting the very sort of media super-conglomeration happening today in the U.S. The outcome of these processes is the centralization of control of virtually every mainstream newspaper, magazine, film studio, television station, and radio station in the country into the hands of five corporations (Bagdikian, 2004). And as a result, these media, like the education system, have become tools for socializing a compliant and complicit populace into a market hegemony that normalizes consumer culture (with the help of a president insisting that we respond to the 9/11 attacks by shopping), glorifies corporate imperialism (with language such as *liberating the Iraqi people*), and conflates capitalism with democracy. The ideals underlying and driving these shifts often are described as neoliberalism.

One of the key neoliberal strategies for socializing the masses into complicity with corporate interests is the propagation through media and schooling of deficit theory—an approach for justifying inequality that is enjoying a resurgence in the western world today. Deficit theory, a remnant of colonial and imperial history (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005), holds that inequality is the result, not of systemic inequities in access to power, but of intellectual, moral, and spiritual deficiencies in certain groups of people (Collins, 1988). Deficit theorists draw on stereotypes already well-established in the mainstream psyche (Osei-Kofi, 2005; Rank 2004; Tozer, 2000)—such as through television shows that paint all African American people as urban thugs or all gay men as promiscuous—in order to pathologize particular communities rather than problematizing the individual or systemic perpetrators of their oppressions (Shields et al., 2005; Villenas, 2001).

Deficit theory has been used throughout history to justify imperial or colonial pursuits. For example, European colonialists justified Native American genocide and slavery in the U.S. in part by painting native peoples and African slaves as “savages” who required taming and civilizing—the white man’s burden. Deficit theory is used in similar ways today, such as to justify imperial U.S. intervention in the Middle East.

But it is used, as well, to justify the dissolution of human rights and the quickening transfer of power from the people to corporations. In order to accomplish this justification, capitalist elites use their access to the media and schools to effectively blame certain groups of people, such as the poor and indigenous communities, for a plethora of social ills and the general decay of society, rendering them, in the public’s eye, undeserving of economic or social justice (Gans, 1995). In the U.S., economically disadvantaged people, from the homeless to poor single mothers, have become particularly vulnerable targets for deficit theorists, as have undocumented immigrants. The capitalist fruits of this process are two-fold: (1) the deterioration of support for public policy meant to alleviate social, political, and economic marginalization, which, among other things, helps justify the erosion of welfare programs in the U.S.; and (2) the diversion of the public’s attention and energy away from movements that critique continued corporate empowerment and toward movements that intend to eradicate inequality by “fixing” deficient people instead of colonizing systems. “Fixing” in this case often means assimilating—as in assimilating poor students into the very structures and value systems that oppress them, as today’s dominant discourse on poverty and education in the U.S. calls on educators to do.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—President Bush’s landmark federal policy for U.S. schools, composed largely by the Business Roundtable and other big business

cooperatives—epitomizes the deficit approach. Its reliance on a largely corporate model of standardization and accountability demonizes schools (and as a result, students, teachers, and school administrators) based on a narrow conception of student performance even while it wholly ignores the very structural conditions—including those within the system, such as inequitable school funding, and those outside the system, such as the scarcity of living wage jobs—that so heavily influence students’ educational opportunities. Meanwhile, several aspects of the legislation, such as mandated testing and an insistence that schools use so-called “scientifically-based” reading programs, provide additional economic pipelines from a supposedly public education system to the big businesses that provide these materials and services.

As I explained in a previous essay (Gorski, 2006), most of what people refer to as intercultural or multicultural education—including scholarship, teacher preparation courses, or educational programs—fails to take this sort of context into account. As a result, we expend much energy fighting symptoms of these larger oppressive conditions (such as interpersonal cultural conflicts) instead of fighting the conditions themselves. And this is exactly the point. It is what we are socialized to do. The powers that be are thrilled that we host Taco Night instead of engaging in authentic anti-racism; that we conduct workshops on the so-called culture of poverty instead of holding corporations and governments responsible for the growing economic inequities that inform systemic educational inequities.

As an intercultural educator in the U.S., the journey toward acknowledging this sociopolitical context leads me daily into a corridor with two doors. I see most people who call themselves intercultural educators stepping through the first door—the one, easiest to reach, that allows access to a space where they can avoid this cynicism and concern over power and oppression; a space where these conditions are accepted, either as normal or inevitable; a space where we celebrate diversity, communicate interculturally, and resolve conflict without spending an ounce of energy on reconstructing society at any fundamental level. And I am tempted to follow suit, to participate, with good intentions, in intercultural dialogue and skim along the surface of cultural awareness. I see few people and even fewer organizations choosing the second door—the one, heavy and inconveniently placed, that leads to a space of personal and institutional vulnerability. Like every intercultural educator, I must choose: will I comply, doing intercultural education in ways that do not disturb these sociopolitical realities? Or will I choose vulnerability, practicing intercultural education for nothing less than social reconstruction? And what does my decision reveal about me?

Colonizing Intercultural Education: To Whose Benefit?

I have spent—and continue to spend—countless agonizing hours in that corridor, slipping in and out of both doors. And I have arrived at this conclusion: the practice of intercultural education, when not committed first and foremost to equity and social justice—to the acknowledgement of these realities and the disruption and destruction of domination—*might*, in the best case, result in increased cross-group awareness and conflict resolution at an individual level. But in many cases, such practice *is domination*.

And in any case, ignoring systemic oppression means complying with it. And to whose benefit? Who or what are we protecting?

In her discussion of the emergence of intercultural education in Latin America, Aikman (1997) observes that it “developed out of concern and respect for indigenous knowledge and practices, but primarily in response to the exploitation, oppression and discrimination of indigenous peoples” (p. 466). With this conception in mind, Aikman reports, indigenous organizations throughout the region lobbied extensively for intercultural education. Governments responded and, along with organizations they enlisted to articulate and promote their “intercultural” visions, began codifying their commitments to intercultural education—or, more precisely, to candy-coated versions of it. For example, Foro Educativo (as cited by Aikman, 1997), an NGO hired to help the Peruvian government conceptualize intercultural education, offered this definition:

Interculturality in education is a space for dialogue which recognises and values the wealth of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity in the country, promotes the affirmation and development of different cultures which co-exist in Peru and constitutes an open process towards cultural exchange with the global society. (p. 469)

This vision echoes themes found in most conceptualizations of intercultural education—especially those offered by people and organizations in positions of power and privilege. Cushner (1998), a leading U.S. voice in the field, offers a similar vision, explaining that intercultural education

recognizes that a genuine understanding of cultural differences and similarities is necessary in order to build a foundation for working collaboratively with others. It also recognize[s] that a pluralistic society can be an opportunity for majority and minority groups to learn from and with one another, not a problem as it might be viewed by some. (p. 4)

These views synthesize the sorts of goals most often identified within definitions of intercultural education: the facilitation of intergroup and intercultural dialogue, an appreciation of diversity, and cultural exchange. But they also demonstrate why intercultural education quickly became a target of scorn and scrutiny among many of the indigenous communities who once enthusiastically supported it (Aikman, 1997; Bodnar, 1990). This sort of framework for intercultural education, they argued, according to Aikman (1997), “maintains the distribution of power and forms of control which perpetuate existing vertical hierarchical relations... Thus, this interculturality remains embedded in relations of internal colonialism” (p. 469). In other words, an intercultural education constructed on the basis of these visions becomes a tool for the maintenance of the very marginalization that progressive educational movements ought to dismantle (Gorski, 2006; Lustig, 1997; Sleeter, 1991)—marginalization that supports, at a systemic level, the interests of the powerful at the expense of the oppressed.

Take, for example, the goal of intergroup, cross-cultural, and intercultural dialogue—a hallmark of intercultural education practice. Research indicates that participation in these sorts of intercultural education experiences can result, at least in the short-term, in changes in attitudes and cross-group relationships among individual people (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Rozas, 2007; Vasques Scalera, 1999). However, absent from this scholarship is evidence that intergroup dialogue has any positive effect whatsoever on eliminating, or even mitigating, systemic inequities or injustices, either

within educational organizations or across one or more societies (DeTurk, 2006). But this body of scholarship *does* include several studies that reveal the colonizing and dominating outcomes of intergroup or intercultural dialogue when it is not grounded explicitly in an acknowledgement of inequities in access to power—including *imbalances of access to power among the participants themselves*—and a bigger movement toward social reconstruction for equity and justice (DeTurk, 2006; James, 1999; Jones, 1999; López-Garay, 2001; Maoz, 2001; Wasserman, 2001).

This sort of colonization and domination through intergroup or intercultural dialogue reveals itself in a variety of ways. For example, such dialogues usually involve groups that, according to Maoz (2001),

are involved in asymmetrical power relations. Such are the planned contacts between Whites and African Americans in the United States, Whites and Blacks in South Africa, and ... representatives of the Jewish majority and Palestinian minority in Israel. (p. 190-191)

But far too often these experiences are facilitated—*controlled*—in ways that assume that all participants sit at an even table (Jones, 1999), one at which all parties have equitable access to cultural capital. According to Jones (1999), such dialogical experiences tend to focus on the goal of mutual empathy—a goal that requires dominated people to empathize with people who are, or who represent, their oppressors. Jones (1999) asks,

What if ‘togetherness’ and dialogue-across-difference fail to hold a compellingly positive meaning for subordinate ethnic groups? What if the ‘other’ fails to find interesting the idea of their empathetic understanding of the powerful, which is theoretically demanded by dialogic encounters? (p. 299)

Which people and systems do we protect when we request such empathy from dominated groups without *first* demanding equity and justice from the powerful?

Dialogue experiences and other intercultural education practices reinforce prevailing colonizing and dominating hegemony as well when, absent a central focus on social reconstruction for equity and social justice, the rules of engagement require that disenfranchised participants render themselves more vulnerable to the powerful than they already are. In fact, on some level, this demand necessarily exists during any dialogic encounter between two or more people who inhabit different points on the dominator-dominated continuum. Jones (1999) explains what she calls the “imperialist resonances” of such conditions for cross-cultural exchange: “In attempting, in the name of justice, to move the boundary pegs of power into the terrain of the margin-dwellers, the powerful require them to ‘open up their territory’” (p. 303). The powerful—who, as individuals or institutions, usually control (whether implicitly or explicitly) rules of engagement in intercultural education experiences—tend to leave unacknowledged the reality that the marginalized voices they invite into these dialogues *do not need*, either educationally or spiritually, organized opportunities to hear and consider the voices of the powerful. After all, they already are immersed in these voices (Jones, 1999) through the media, education, and so on. So not only are these sorts of intercultural education experiences ill-conducive to a movement for real social change, but they also reify existing power hierarchies (Maos, 2001).

What is worse: participants from dominant groups, according to Vasques Scalera (1999), enjoy personal growth and fulfillment from these intercultural practices at higher rates than those from subordinate groups. And isn’t this—the powerful gaining cultural

capital on the backs of the oppressed, who often, regardless, are compelled to participate (as they are in school curricula, teacher education courses, or staff development workshops)—an example of colonizing education?

This brand of intercultural education, in which we focus on interpersonal relationships and cultural awareness, the power hierarchy firmly in place *even within our intercultural practice*, is exactly the kind of diversion-in-the-name-of-interculturalism that serves the colonizing interests of the powerful. I believe that we can call ourselves authentic intercultural educators only when we ensure that our work—every moment of it—pushes against, rather than reifying (even if unintentionally so), colonizing education.

Decolonizing Intercultural Education

One of the most dangerous dimensions of prevailing educational hegemony in the U.S. and, increasingly, across the western world, is a culture of pragmatism. Exacerbated by a flood of education policy that requires assessment of student, teacher, and administrator performance on the basis of standardized test scores, the culture of pragmatism dissuades deeply theoretical or philosophical discourses among educators in favor of discourses focused on immediate, practical strategies and resources. I find, for example, that educators who attend my workshops increasingly show resistance to activities and discussions aimed at deepening theoretical understanding and consciousness. Many seem to want, instead, a series of lesson plans immediately implementable in their own classrooms. To be certain, I do not blame my fellow educators for this desire. After all, we all are victims of this culture of pragmatism; of its de-professionalization of the teaching professions; of its power to lure us away from a discourse of what *could be* in education; and of how it limits the education reform discourse to minor shifts in practice—to Taco Nights and intergroup dialogues and cultural exchanges—that, despite good intentions, colonize more than they liberate.

Unfortunately, because we, as educators, are socialized into this culture, because we are immersed in it, there seems to be little resistance to it. This is why I contend that the first step toward authentic intercultural practice is undertaking critical shifts in consciousness that acknowledge sociopolitical context, expand the discourse, raise questions regarding control and power, and inform, rather than centering, parallel shifts in practice. It is difficult work—transcending dominant hegemony, turning our attention away from the cultural “other” and toward systems of power and control. Those of us who choose this door must acknowledge realities which we are socialized not to see. We must contend with cognitive dissonance. We must admit complicity. But how can we do otherwise, risking the possibility that our well-intentioned work will devolve into sustenance for the status quo, and still call ourselves intercultural educators?

I describe here several shifts of consciousness that, I propose, are fundamental to preparing a larger shift from a colonizing to a decolonizing intercultural education. Many of these shifts, in the most basic terms, refer to seeing what we are socialized not to see and pushing back against dominant hegemony; against its diversions from systemic dominance and our complicity with that dominance.

I see these shifts as developmental in nature. I continue to struggle, from my place of relative privilege, with many of them.

Shift #1: Cultural Awareness Is Not Enough

Rather than focusing on cultural awareness or understanding differences, I must expose hegemonic meaning-making regarding difference (as compared with hegemony's appointed "norm"). Culture and identity differences may inform individual interactions, but even more importantly, they affect one's access to power. The powerful exploit differences from the hegemonic norm to justify dominance and oppression. I especially must avoid the sorts of cultural awareness activities that *other* or essentialize non-dominant groups or that, absent a commitment to social justice, require dominated groups to make themselves even more vulnerable for the social or educational benefit of the privileged.

Shift #2: Justice First, Then Conflict Resolution

Too often, intercultural educators conflate conflict resolution and peace with justice. When equity and social justice are not firmly in place, peace and conflict resolution merely reify the existing social order. I must not allow intercultural education to become yet another vehicle for the maintenance of order by resolving conflict, meanwhile leaving injustices unresolved.

Shift #3: Rejecting Deficit Theory

Any approach to intercultural education that explains inequality by demonizing disenfranchised communities should be exposed as colonizing practice and abandoned. I must be wary of any supposed intercultural model or paradigm that, like the "culture of poverty" myth, attributes traits, values, or world views to any group based on a single dimension of their identities. I must recognize deficit theory as a diversion from a commitment to dismantling systemic oppression.

Shift #4: Transcending the Dialogic Surface

Like conflict resolution, intergroup or intercultural dialogue rarely occurs among people with equal access to power. So instead of facilitating such experiences with the false assumption of an even table, I must acknowledge the power imbalances, both individual and systemic, in play. In addition, I must avoid facilitating dialogic experiences in which the least powerful participants are expected to teach the most powerful participants about bias and oppression. Similarly, I must not contribute to colonizing practice by focusing exclusively on commonalities between the powerful and oppressed, minimizing disenfranchisement.

Shift #5: Acknowledging Sociopolitical Context

A few years ago I attended a symposium on globalization intended primarily for corporate CEOs and upper-level managers. Between presentations I stood in the hallway with a group of attendees as they *debated* the optimum unemployment level for the

U.S.—the optimum, that is, not for securing living wage jobs for all workers, but for maximizing their profits. One attendee, white and middle-aged, argued that “his people” insisted that *the current level of unemployment was perfect—just enough to ensure sufficient demand for jobs*. Another attendee, a little older and flanked by a younger colleague, explained that “his people” informed him that *a half-percentage or so rise in the unemployment rate would sure help keep wages down and curb workers’ bargaining power for better benefits*. I stood, jaw agape, while these men, polished from head to toe, compared notes on how many of their fellow citizens should be sacrificed to the gods of capitalism by the wealthiest of the wealthy.

Today, as I attend symposia and conferences on class and poverty, I find an equally troubling reality: a dominant discourse that, ignoring this sociopolitical context, centers on ending poverty by “lifting” individual people into the middle class (often without even acknowledging the existence of the biggest socioeconomic strata in the U.S.—the working class) through job skills and education. If I, as an intercultural educator, fail to see how ludicrous such propositions—like the idea that we can end poverty or economic exploitation without dismantling a power hierarchy that sustains itself on un- and under-employment, on the globalization of poverty—are, given the present sociopolitical context, then I am doomed, despite good intentions, to doing the bidding of the powerful in the name of intercultural education.

Shift #6: “Neutrality” = Status Quo

People often ask me why I *make education so political*. Shouldn’t I, as an intercultural educator, be more balanced and neutral, appreciative of all opinions and world views? But I must remember that I practice colonizing education when I claim or attempt neutrality in my intercultural work. In fact, the very act of claiming neutrality is, in and of itself, politically value-laden and supportive of the status quo. As such, my intercultural work must be explicitly political and value-laden, against domination and for liberation; against prevailing hegemony and for critical consciousness; against marginalization and oppression and for equity and justice.

Shift #7: Accepting a Loss of Likeability

Practicing decolonizing intercultural education requires that I speak truth to power and explicitly challenge prevailing hegemony and hierarchy. I have come to the unfortunate conclusion that I cannot undertake these challenges authentically without being disliked by many individuals and most institutions. In fact, I must acknowledge that, as a white, heterosexual, first-language-English-speaking man in the U.S., I have access to a degree of institutional likeability that most people of color, lesbians and gay men, people who speak first languages other than English, and women do not enjoy, and that this discrepancy is based on nothing more than unearned privilege. So I, in effect, must be willing to *spend* my likeability, to take on dominance and systemic oppression so vigorously that I risk losing the trust and respect of the powerful. After all, if I and my educational practice are not seen by the powerful as threatening to their dominance, as terrifying to their sense of entitlement and control, then I am not an intercultural educator.

Conclusion

I have not intended in this essay to offend the sensibilities or question the commitments of those of us who refer to ourselves as intercultural educators. To the contrary—much of my analysis begins with my own practice and my own struggles to abandon the path of least resistance and choose a more authentic intercultural education.

This analysis has led me to a philosophy of intercultural education that insists, first and foremost, on the establishment and maintenance of an equitable and just world. It has led me, as well, to the conclusion that such a philosophy cannot be achieved through intercultural programs or slight curricular shifts. I cannot effectively enact authentic intercultural education so long as I—in mind and soul—am colonized; so long as I allow myself to be socialized to do the bidding of the powerful through well-intentioned, colonizing practice. I must begin by liberating myself, determined to deepen my consciousness about the sociopolitical contexts and implications of my practice. And only then—when I can say that my work decolonizes instead of colonizes; that my work challenges dominant hegemony rather than reifying it; that my work transcends Taco Night and prevailing intercultural discourses of cultural awareness, conflict resolution, and celebrating diversity—can I call myself an intercultural educator.

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