

## **“Occupy” Teacher Education: Countering Normative Neoliberal Discourse**

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That teacher education is responsive to dominate political expectations and unresponsive to critical approaches to multicultural education is not a new argument. The purpose here, instead, is to place normative teacher education in a context of contemporary political reactions toward the rise of diversity and multiculturalism. I conclude with four “occupy” strategies for critical multiculturalists to counter neoliberal discourse both in and outside of teacher education. To begin, however, a brief national and global overview is presented, starting with a talk delivered by United States President Barack Hussein Obama.

In 2010 Obama used the occasion of his annual “Back to School” speech to public school children to laud diversity and difference as positive traits that make life “precious”:

Because it’s the things that make us different that make us who we are. And the strength and character of this country have always come from our ability to recognize ourselves in one another, no matter who we are, or where we come from, what we look like, or what abilities or disabilities we have. (¶22)

This observation comes from the first publicly identified black individual in U.S. history elected as president. Reactions to his 2008 election had ranged from declaration that the world had entered a post-racial era to a white populist outrage that their historic “home land” identity was being eroded. Hence, in his speech Obama (2010) also recognized that opposition exists to difference and that it can result in harassment or something “more serious” (¶21). Within two months after Obama’s speech to school children,

significant numbers of conservatives in the U.S. did make successful electoral bids under calls to return America to a romanticized homogeneous and unified past.

Europe, too, was experiencing its own backlash against diversity. Germany's chancellor Merkel reacted to increased immigration by declaring that "the multicultural concept...has failed, and failed utterly" (Connolly, 2010, ¶3). In response to France's decision to expel Roma people, the European commissioner for justice and fundamental rights condemned the actions and made comparisons to Nazi practices during World War II (Waterfield & Samuel, 2010). Sweden joined Norway and Denmark with successful, anti-immigrant political parties (Castle, 2010). The fast growing Northern League in Italy professed an allegiance to "local culture" that approved of one of its representatives who "provocatively threw a pig's head on the ground where a mosque was planned" (Donadio, 2010, p. A6). Furthermore, analyses concluded that racist populists in newer nations from Central Europe who had joined the European Union have effectively "diluted the quality of democracy in Europe" (Hockenos, 2010, p. A18). In Russia anti-homosexuality was widely supported politically and religiously and detention of gay activists common practice (Russia: Protest over gay rights, p. A8), all a legacy of intolerance that has left the nations of the former Soviet Union with widespread ethnic tensions (Levy, 2010). Outside of Europe, the rise of neo-Nazi groups that support the concept of ethnic purity and oppose foreign influences have been on the rise in Israel, Chile, Taiwan, India, and Mongolia (Branigan, 2010; "Global Reach of Neo-Nazis," 2010). Within this contested multicultural environment the political condition of women across the world are reported to share the effects of patriarchal-based discrimination (United Nations, 2010).

Common among nationalists' backlash against diversity and the interests of marginalized populations is a political unwillingness to find common ground with

multicultural advocates (e.g. Donadio, 2010). In the U.S. this was exemplified by a leading federal conservative politician who has frequently declared, "This is not a time for compromise, and I can tell you that we will not compromise on our principles" (cited in O'Brien, 2010). Political polarization in the U.S. that excludes even moderate views and considerations of equity issues for economically and racially marginalized groups of people is considered to be at its highest since the post-Civil War era of Reconstruction (Pappas, 2010). All of this has transpired under an umbrella of patriotic nationalism in which neo-conservative segments of U.S. society created campaigns that questioned whether Obama was actually born in the U.S., his Christian religious affiliation, his racial identity, and ultimately his actual right as an individual identified as black to serve as president in a nation historically conceived as white.

Next, we turn from these recent national and global anti-diversity trends to their relevancy for the multicultural education of teachers.

### **Historical Vacuum of Normative Teacher Education**

President Obama's assertion that a nation can find strength and unity through its diversity is highly contested as previously noted. Obama's concurrent assertion of "more serious" resistance to multiculturalism remains a dominant socio-political condition not only in global politics but in the halls of teacher education programs as well.

In this context teacher education has historically and into our contemporary era postured with a pretended neutrality while operating as if history and political economy were tangential or simply irrelevant to teaching, learning, and schooling (e.g., Spring, 2008; Vavrus, 2002, 2010). Although pockets of critical multiculturalists exist within normative teacher education, hegemonic faculty are those in departments of

educational psychology, instructional methods, and assessment who trumpet the importance of instructional techniques and preparing children for standardized tests.

This hegemonic condition continues to create a political and historical vacuum within teacher education programs. Both preservice and inservice teachers learn a narrative that teaching techniques exist outside history and that teachers can actually quantify the results of something as politically charged as public education. Analyses of diversity ideologies that undergird the political spectrum remain absent from mainstream teacher education (see Vavrus, forthcoming). Meanwhile, managers of teacher education programs – from department chairs, directors, and deans – become preoccupied playing handmaidens to neoliberal demands with a predictable dance to demonstrate how steps are regularly taken to discipline their faculty to be well-behaved in meeting the demands of capital and anti-diversity forces (Vavrus, 2010).

### **Strategies to Counteract Conservative Hegemony in Teacher Education**

Critical multiculturalists need to create their own “occupy” movement (see OccupyWallStreet, 2011) and learn from recent pro-union strategies of teachers (e.g., Uprising in Wisconsin, 2011) in order to awaken their colleagues from their apolitical slumber. Like the current movements that erupted across the U.S. in the Fall of 2011, demands within education programs and to state and NCATE’s multicultural conservatism (Vavrus, 2002, 2010) can be also be expressed.

Within and across programs four “occupy” demands might at a minimum include as a starting point the following:

1. Teach critical histories of white economic and political privilege across a program’s curriculum – rather than existing primarily in marginalized social foundation courses

2. Incorporate political economy perspectives in all courses to balance the asserted neutrality of educational psychology, assessment, and instructional methodology courses
3. Engage education students in critical reflections – in relation to all of their course work and internships -- on their place and actions in a racialized and economically inequitable society
4. Unify with programs across a state to strike against participating in reductionist accreditation standards that offer silence or tamed versions of multiculturalism

The challenges are significant for critical multiculturalists to shift the narrative focus to visions of equitable schools (Marsh, 2011) and can result in critical multiculturalists being ostracized from program deliberations. On the other hand, critical multiculturalists working strategically with other like-minded teacher education colleagues at other campuses and with supportive liberal arts faculty can create a traction for bringing a broader public voice in support of these demands and counter centrist and right-wing discourse.

### **Keeping a Critical Multicultural Eye on the Horizon**

The task is daunting for critical multiculturalists if immediate results are the goal. The history of racial and economic oppression is a major thread throughout U.S. history and remains in its contemporary form today. By focusing on the long-run with an eye on the horizon of equity and social justice, critical multiculturalists can lay a foundation of hope and possibility for future generations.

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