Challenging Multiculturalism

Is It Right for Everyone?

Erica Mohan

University of British Columbia, Vancouver

Given the rate at which North American classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, this case lays the groundwork for urgently needed conversations among all preservice and practicing school administrators. The case prompts students to consider the shortcomings of standard multicultural approaches, particularly as they relate to multiethnic students, and to develop meaningful and constructive alternatives for addressing the educational experiences of minority students. Far from merely depicting a short-lived dilemma faced by the school’s principal, this case presents the evolving and ongoing complexity of enacting school reforms in the face of competing interests and further complicates existing debates surrounding multicultural education.

Keywords: multicultural education; multiethnic; mixed-race; bicultural; students; inclusive schooling; school diversity

Case Narrative

Ron Wilson returned to his office after the final planning meeting for Mira Linda High School’s annual International Fair. The school’s inaugural International Fair took place during Ron’s first year as principal at Mira Linda and for the past 4 years has grown in magnitude and scope. The planning committee now includes Ron, the student council, four parent volunteers, and three teachers. This year’s fair will include a pre-lunch activity in the gym to demonstrate the diversity of the student body, an international buffet with food provided by local restaurants, and an after-school celebration with music and performances of traditional dances from around the world. In addition, Ron invited the district superintendent, Judy Richardson, and the local news team to attend the day’s events.

With the fourth annual International Fair just 1 day away, Ron sat in his office reflecting on its expansion and changes to the school during his tenure as principal. Ron developed the idea for the annual International Fair during his first year at Mira Linda, an urban school in the western United States serving an ethnically diverse population of students. Most of the students come from working- and middle-class families, many of whom have recently immigrated to the country. When Ron took the position of principal at Mira Linda, one of the first challenges presented to him by Superintendent Richardson was to address the traditionally low student retention rate.
Because the majority of the early school leavers were ethnic minorities, Ron, himself a white administrator with little experience in such a diverse school, explored methods to better meet the needs and expectations of his minority students. After reading several books on multicultural education, Ron came to the conclusion that many of the minority students who leave school early do so because of a sense of alienation from the broader school community and a lack of identification with the curriculum, faculty, and school culture. Therefore, Ron implemented the following strategies:

- diversify the predominantly White faculty through strategic hiring practices,
- identify and encourage the use of multicultural teaching resources, and
- increase students’ knowledge and acceptance of diverse cultures through activities such as the International Fair.

Although these strategies emerged from a concern about the retention rate of minority students, Ron felt that, given the steady diversification of the student body and the surrounding community, all students would benefit from them. In short, Ron unquestioningly embraced multiculturalism as a sound practice benefiting all students.

Admittedly, the minority student retention rate has increased only slightly in the past 4 years; however, one third of the school’s faculty members are now visible minorities. In addition, several teachers, most notably English and social studies teachers, make use of his recommended multicultural teaching resources. Although Ron remains troubled by the high number of minority students who do not graduate, he is particularly proud of the International Fair, a well-attended event that seems popular among parents, teachers, and students. With the final arrangements completed, Ron left for the day excited about tomorrow’s fair.

As Ron walked to his office on the morning of the fair, he overheard several groups of students talking excitedly in the halls. Some mentioned their pleasure about the shorter class periods to accommodate the day’s events, others discussed their expectations for the after-school celebration, and others made predictions about the types of food to be served at lunch. However, Ron also noted a group of rather disgruntled-looking students talking quietly in the foyer of the school.

At 11:00 am, the students of Mira Linda crowded into the school’s gymnasium for the start of the fair. Because no chairs were provided, students stood in the middle of the gym while Ron made several attempts to quiet them from his podium on the stage. When at last he had their attention, Ron welcomed the students, teachers, Superintendent Richardson, and the local news representatives to the fourth annual International Fair. After a few brief comments about the hard work of the committee and his pride in the growth of the event during the past few years, Ron directed everyone’s attention to the posters covering the walls of the gym. Each poster displayed the title of an ethnic group surrounded by photos and “fun facts” (traditional food and dress, homeland details, languages spoken, etc.) about each group. The represented
ethnic groups included Hispanic, White, Black, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native American. Those attending the event were invited to walk around the gym and view the displays for 20 minutes. At the end of 20 minutes, Ron once again attempted to get everyone’s attention from his podium on the stage. With the gym now quiet, Ron asked the students to stand by the poster representing the ethnic group with which they identify so that all could marvel at the diversity of Mira Linda’s student body. Several minutes later, the students had rearranged themselves near the posters; however, approximately 20 students stood in the middle of the gym. Not sure why these students were refusing to participate in the activity, from his position on the stage, Ron said, “We have several students who don’t seem to know where to go. May I ask why this is?” One of the students standing in the middle of the floor responded loudly with, “That’s just it; we don’t know where to go. I am half Black and half Hispanic and I identify with both categories. Why should I have to choose just one place to stand in the gym?” Another student in the middle of the gym said rather angrily, “Yeah, I am half Irish and half Egyptian, where do I belong in this activity?” One of the students standing next to the Middle Eastern poster then called out, “Well, you don’t belong here. Look at you, you look White. You’re not Middle Eastern.” Before anyone could respond, another student in the middle of the gym shouted, “I am Black and White, and I refuse to deny any part of my heritage. I can be both at the same time!” “No you can’t,” responded a White student “come back next year when you know who you are!” Before Ron knew it, several shouting matches between students broke out and two students on the verge of throwing punches were separated by nearby teachers. Shocked by the outburst, Ron hastily yelled into the microphone that the activity was finished and that all students should head to the school’s cafeteria for the international food buffet. Students quickly fled the gym to the cafeteria where a wide selection of food from around the world awaited them. As Ron was leaving the gym with several teachers and the superintendent, he noticed that the students who had stood in the middle of the gym remained there talking quietly. Eager to break the uncomfortable silence as they walked to the cafeteria, Ron said to Judy, “Well, looks like we’ll have another category for next year’s fair.” Following the lunch, Ron sat in his office perplexed by the happenings in the gym. Hoping that it was an isolated event and that the after-school celebration would ease tensions, he headed back to the gym to assist with the setup for the celebration. By 2:30, the musicians and performers had arrived, and by 3:00, the gym was full of students ready to watch the performances and dance to music from around the world. All seemed to be going well at the celebration as students watched the performances respectfully and enthusiastically danced to a diverse range of music. However, at 5:30, just 30 minutes before the end of the event, a fight broke out in the back of the gym between several students, including four of the students who had not participated in the prelunch activity. Once the students were successfully pulled apart, Ron quickly took the microphone, thanked the performers, DJ, parent and teacher volunteers, and the organizing committee, and ended the celebration 20 minutes early. Not
sure of what else he could do at the moment, he informed those students who had been involved in the fight that he expected to see them in his office Monday morning. With the gym now empty and the cleanup completed, Ron left Mira Linda for the weekend.

Ron drove home disheartened and exhausted, wondering how the day had unraveled and how he would deal with the students involved in the fight on Monday morning. He had held such high hopes for the fair and was now worried that it had done more harm than good. Almost reluctantly, Ron decided to watch the local evening news, knowing that it would include coverage of the International Fair. Although not surprised, Ron was disturbed to find that the shouting match and fights between the students were aired and that one of the students involved in the outburst had been interviewed. As she said in her interview, “The activity was totally ridiculous. There was no category for multiethnic students like me, and we decided not to choose just one category like we are always forced to do. And even if I did want to identify only with my Egyptian heritage, isn’t it absurd to put all Middle Eastern people into one category? We don’t all share the same history, culture, language, religion, and so on. It’s all just superficial nonsense and I am tired of it.” She then added, “I feel like there is no place for me at Mira Linda.” Even more despondent than before, Ron switched off the television.

After a troubled weekend of reflecting on possible responses to the multiethnic students’ concerns and future adjustments to the International Fair, Ron entered his office Monday morning to find the phone ringing and a mounting collection of phone messages and e-mails from concerned parents. Although Ron expected some strong reactions from parents, he had not anticipated this level of response. Knowing that he could not ignore the parents, Ron delayed meeting with the students involved in the fight and began sifting through the messages and e-mails. To his astonishment, there was very little consensus between the concerned parents, and issues that he had not predicted began surfacing quickly. Although a few parents offered messages of support for Ron and the International Fair (mostly those on his organizing committee), others complained that the fair and his multicultural agenda are a waste of valuable classroom time and distract students from more essential curriculum. Not to Ron’s surprise, the parents of multiethnic children were the most vocal and frustrated, complaining that their children were often ignored by the school and forced to fit into inappropriate categories. Other parents complained that since his targeted hiring practices and the diversification of the faculty, academic standards at Mira Linda had declined. Several parents echoed the sentiments of the student interviewed on the evening news, stating that to teach essentialized and simplistic versions of diverse ethnic groups reinforces stereotypes and is more detrimental than beneficial. Finally, numerous parents expressed concern about the safety of their children and asked Ron what he intended to do to prevent ethnic conflict and fighting at Mira Linda. By 10:00, Ron got the call he was dreading from the superintendent. Judy, too, had spent the morning fielding similar calls and e-mails from parents and asked Ron to attend a Wednesday morning meeting at which she expected
Ron to provide a plan of action to address the parents’ concerns. Judy, who had hitherto seemed wholly supportive of Ron’s initiatives, now sounded anxious and irritated.

Until now, Ron had assumed that his initiatives aimed at improving the educational experience and retention rate of minority students were well-directed and generally accepted as good practice for all students. However, Ron suddenly finds himself confronted with numerous competing interests. On one end of the spectrum are parents advocating a color-blind approach to education with more emphasis on “essential curriculum,” and at the other are those wanting a more meaningful and inclusive approach to multicultural education. Also, Ron feels that the concerns of the multiethnic students and their parents are legitimate and deserve immediate attention, yet he is not sure how to proceed. How can he make the school more inclusive of multiethnic students? Should he stop promoting a multicultural curriculum and activities? What alternatives exist to address the experiences and improve the education of his minority students? How can he ease the tensions between students and calm the angry and concerned parents? In short, what should be his plan of action and what should he tell Judy Wednesday morning?

Teaching Notes

This case presents a challenge that is likely to confront many school leaders now and in the future, yet few resources exist to assist them in formulating solutions. Although students may find it useful to explore existing work on multicultural, critical multicultural, and antiracism education when addressing the questions below, the scarcity of sources attending to the education of multiethnic students creates the need for innovative thinking and problem solving.

Suggested questions for discussion and classroom activities:

1. At the end of the case, Ron is confronted with the following questions:
   - How can he make the school more inclusive of multiethnic students?
   - Should he stop promoting a multicultural curriculum and activities?
   - What alternatives exist to address the experiences and improve the education of his minority students?
   - How can he ease the tensions between students and calm the angry and concerned parents?
   - What should be his plan of action, and what should he tell Judy Wednesday morning?
   - What other approaches and strategies might Ron have explored?
   - What could he have done to preempt the concerns of parents?
   - With whom could Ron have consulted before enacting his reforms?
   - Although Ron’s strategies were well-intentioned, how did they fall short of authentic school reform?
2. Ron is faced with competing interests from parents. The parents can be loosely grouped into four categories: those advocating a color-blind approach to education who feel that multiculturalism and similar activities are a waste of valuable classroom time, those advocating multiculturalism as an effective strategy and good practice, and those parents (most notably the parents of multiethnic students) who support the intention of multiculturalism but feel that in its current configuration is superficial and detrimental. Assign students to the above categories and have them debate their positions. Although not present in the case, a fourth interest group advocating antiracism education (typically the most vocal opponents of multiculturalism) may be created for classroom discussion. For background on each of these perspectives, see the references below.

3. Write a plan of action for Ron that includes new strategies for Mira Linda and a defense of their position. Do you feel that Ron’s idea of adding another ethnic category (multiethnic) to the International Fair is an appropriate response?

4. Consider Ron’s original goal of addressing the retention rate of minority students. To what does Ron attribute the low retention rate? What other reasons may prompt minority students to leave school early? Consider factors such as historical and contemporary racism and persistent educational, economic, and social inequalities along racial lines. What structural barriers might minority students face? Are there alternative approaches to improving the retention rate that might pay more attention to issues of social identity and cultural contexts than those devised by Ron?

5. Well more than half the parents at Mira Linda contacted Ron in response to the events at the International Fair. However, Ron is also concerned about those parents who did not contact him. Ron wonders if their lack of response indicates indifference to or disengagement from the school, neither of which Ron considers ideal. Should Ron be concerned that their voices are not being heard? How should he attempt to determine the causes of their unresponsiveness? Why might these parents not respond to the troubling events at Mira Linda?

Suggested Reading

Calliste, A. M., & Dei, G. J. S. (2000). Power, knowledge and anti-racism education: A critical reader. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.

Dantley, M. (2002). Uprooting and replacing positivism, the melting pot, multiculturalism, and other impotent notions in educational leadership through an African American perspective. Education and Urban Society, 34, 334-352.

Dei, G. J. S. (2000). Removing the margins: The challenge and possibilities of inclusive schooling. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars’ Press.

Grant, C. A. (1994, Winter). Challenging the myths about multicultural education. Multicultural Education, 4-9.

Kailin, J. (2002). Antiracist education: From theory to practice. New York: Rowan & Littlefield.

May, S. (1999). Critical multiculturalism: Rethinking multiculturalism and antiracist education. London: Falmer.

Nieto, S. (2000). Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.
Root, M. P. P. (1996). *The multiracial experience: Racial borders as the new frontier*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schwartz, W. (1998, November). *The schooling of multiracial students*. New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED425249)

Shields, C. M., & Bishop, R. (2005). Overcoming disparity: Repositioning leadership to challenge the conceptual underpinnings of antiracist education. In V. O. Pang & E. W. Ross (Eds.), *Race, ethnicity, and education: Racism and antiracism in education* (pp. 301-318). Westport, CT: Praeger/Greenwood.

Sleeter, C. E. (1996). *Multicultural education as social activism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Sleeter, C. E., & Grant, C. A. (2003). *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class, and gender*. New York: John Wiley.

Sleeter, C. E., & Grant, C. A. (2006). *Turning on learning: Five approaches for multicultural teaching plans for race, class, gender and disability*. New York: John Wiley.

Tatum, B. D. (1997). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books.

Wardle, F. (2000). Children of mixed race: No longer invisible. *Educational Leadership*, 57(4), 68-71.

Wardle, F. (2000). Helping multiracial and multiethnic children escape no man’s land. *Our Children Magazine*, 25(5), 6.

**Erica Mohan** is a doctoral student in the Educational Studies Department at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Her work focuses on multicultural and antiracism education, student identity construction, and the educational experiences of multiethnic students.