



✘ The photo is composed by portraits of children at Kingsmead Primary School in London. It shows the remarkable diversity of the school where 95% of the pupils are from an ethnic minority. The school strives to achieve the highest standards, with academic achievement above the national average.

After having been a mantra for decades in countries like Australia, Canada and Britain, multicultural education has been put in the dog house. Education policies now focus on **creating democratic and Western-minded citizens** who “won’t get into trouble”. Leading education researchers warn against decrying multicultural education and leaving ethnic minorities behind in a time where diversity is growing immensely.

EDUCATING ‘THE GOOD CITIZEN’

By CHRISTIAN BLOMGREEN & NINA SUENSON

* Not many years ago ‘the inclusive classroom’ was still an ideal on both state and teacher level in many countries. One of the teacher’s primary goals was therefore to make space for racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious pluralism in the classroom and to encourage the children to develop intercultural capabilities. This was seen as important because many ethnic minority groups were persistently underachieving when it came to education and academia. This education discourse was especially strong in countries like Canada, Australia and Britain.

But two planes crashing into a New York skyscraper and a series of bombings in central London changed the direction dramatically. Since then, the focus on accepting and encouraging diversity has receded to the bottom of several societies’ list of priorities. Diversity is no longer seen as a strength but a threat to the country. The argument being that the multicultural approach creates ethnic enclaves and leads young people to criminality or extremism, which undermines safety and security. The new ideal is thus social coherence created through educating ethnic minorities into sharing British ideals of democracy, free speech and civil and human rights.

The education sector is a battlefield

In 2009, the British Government developed the educational programme PVE – Prevention of Violence and Extremism. The programme focuses on averting the next generation of potential terrorists by combating extremist Islamist ideology, which might produce them. PVE is especially focused on Muslims since funding was given

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Professor **Heidi Sadia Mirza**

to local authorities with a high number of Muslims in their population.

“It sees the education sector as key in battling extremism,” Heidi Safia Mirza explains, Professor of Equalities at Institute of Education, London.

“Since the bombings by Muslim youths born in Britain, multiculturalism in England has been politically demonized as fostering segregation and separateness. New and virulent forms of faith-based racism in the form of Islamophobia has gripped our Western multicultural societies. And PVE exemplifies this hysteria,” Mirza says.

Practical advice or ‘witch hunt’?

The PVE tool kit outlines what it considers to be practical advice for schools. Its end goal is to develop a school ethos which accommodates shared values and critical thinking. The PVE curriculum is centred around four

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core areas one of them is to challenge and manage risks and to respond to events. The programme is controversial as it monitors risks through reporting suspicious behaviour using pupils and networking within the local community and other groups.

Stakeholders in the Muslim community, such as religious leaders and educationalists, have described PVE as a form of surveillance and tantamount to a ‘witch hunt’ against them. Professor Mirza explains:

“In singling out Muslim communities, programmes like PVE may further marginalize and isolate the young men they target by implying an innate connection between them and violent extremist ideology.”

We may question PVE’s success and focus, Heidi Safia Mirza says.

“It is trying to change ideological threads rather than the structural barriers which lead to marginalization, for instance it does not tackle institutional racism in schools, the job market or in housing.”

Britain is not alone

In Canada, Professor Reva Joshee from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, has observed a discourse similar to the British. For decades, Canada has been a pioneer and the prime example for supporters of multiculturalism.

But in a relatively short span of time the official state position on multiculturalism has gone from valuing diversity as a strength to decrying diversity as a threat to the safety and security of the country. The shift has two tones. The first tone is a neoliberal approach where everything is focused on economy, Reva Joshee explains.

“Success in the education sector is defined by how we can educate people to support our economy. We also think about immigrants in that way and focus only on them as consumers and workers,” Reva Joshee says.

The other tone she has observed is a neoconservative logic and ideology where ‘the good old days’ are idolized. The neoconservative vision is basically that we should work towards a particular type of society. And certain groups of people are seen as an obstacle to reach this society. That is why they have to be modelled into a ‘certain way of being Canadian’ through the educational system.

“What these two ways of thinking have in common is an assumption that diversity is a threat – towards a stable market or towards what is considered Canadian,” Reva Joshee explains.

Teachers experience difficult times

Since the multicultural approach has been a tradition for years in Canada it still has deep roots within the education system. Teachers often try to carry on with this tradition but they experience difficult times.

“Research shows that teachers who want to work towards multicultural ideals have very little support to do so. Schools are assessed on how well their students perform in exams, and there is a pressure from both provincial ministries of education and from parents to focus on preparing children for exams. This does not leave any room for a multicultural approach where the end goal is broader and not ‘testable’,” Reva Joshee says.

It is too early to see any dramatic consequences from

this shift of ideals, but Reva Joshee expects we will.

“For many years, children of immigrants have had better educational outcomes in Canada than anywhere else in the West. This, I believe, is about to change. We will also experience higher dropout rates because a neoliberal or a neoconservative approach to education, which focuses primarily on teaching information that can be memorized and recalled for tests, is alienating for many students including bilingual students and ethnic minorities. Additionally, with a neoconservative curriculum focussed on a narrow vision of who is Canadian, they will not feel represented in the curriculum.”

Why multicultural education matters

But why is multiculturalism so important? And why should it be a priority of the education systems?

With the ascendancy of globalization, transnational flows of migrants are now an inherent part of the modern world. It is therefore essential to have educational systems that accept and value the differences minority ethnic groups bring rather than assimilate them. The idea is to create equal and enriched educational oppor-

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tunities to all. Without this, there is a gross waste of human capital and skills in all societies from the continuing failure to achieve equal educational outcomes for all. But this is not easy.

“To create a multicultural climate, the country must challenge racism and transform fixed notions of homogenous or monocultural national identity. It requires bold, progressive, visionary educational and political resources to develop policies that facilitate change,” Heidi Safia Mirza says.

The pluralistic melting pot

South of the Canadian border, in the United States, there is a dynamic tension between the ideal of multiculturalism and the ideal of homogenizing cultural and ethnic minorities. Here however, Americanization of immigrants is a deeply rooted part of history and not a new trend triggered by 9/11.

Since the early settlers from Western Europe left the Mayflower ship in the year 1620, ‘the original American’ has been an elusive ideal. Later on – in the 1780s – Americans created the metaphor ‘melting pot’. The metaphor refers to the idea of a big cooking pot wherein different elements (new immigrants) blend together into a harmonious whole with a common culture. And the metaphor is still – at least in part – alive.

“Federal and state policies tend to reflect the melting

What is the biggest challenge to multicultural education today?



Professor **Amy Stambach**,
University of Wisconsin-Madison

"The biggest challenge to multicultural education today is fear that studying and learning about diversity will undermine national unity. However, multicultural education can overcome this challenge by showing students and educators the strength of diversity."

Professor **Reva Joshee**,
Ontario Institute for Studies in
Education, University of Toronto

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Assistant Professor **Aydin Bal**,
University of Wisconsin-Madison

"A significant challenge to pluralism or multicultural education is a deep-seated assimilationist response to diversity. Internationally, we witness a series of legal, political and social actions (e.g. immigration laws or educational policy initiatives) that aim at discarding the existence of diverse non-mainstream cultural practices and values.

One consequence of this approach is that immigrant students and native minority students are educated in extremely segregated, high poverty urban schools, which lack even the minimal physical, social, emotional and academic conditions for student learning and development. In the United States, the second and third generations of immigrant students have worse academic, social, psychological and even medical outcomes than that of their newly arrived counterparts."

Professor **Heidi Mirza Safia**,
Institute of Education,
London University

"Since 9/11 and the 7/11 bombings by British born Muslim youths, multiculturalism in England has been politically demonised as fostering segregation and separateness. New and virulent forms of faith-based racism, in the form of Islamophobia, has gripped our Western multicultural societies."

pot metaphor; yet, they also enable a space within which schools, communities and workplaces value diversity and multiculturalism. Some may even say that multiculturalism as taught in US schools is itself a form of Americanization," as Amy Stambach notes, Professor at the Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

More diversity to come

Together, Professor Amy Stambach and Assistant Professor Aydin Bal recently wrote a report on multicultural education in the United States. Here they indicate two interesting trends; one is that demographic projections in the United States show that by 2050 more than half of the student population in the US will self-identify as non-white, and the other is that immigrant students, along with historically marginalized students (e.g., African-American students), are excluded from equal educational opportunities through highly segregated

and impoverished schools and students' disproportionate representation in special education classes.

Aydin Bal, Assistant Professor at the Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, explains that both of these trends are especially apparent around issues of language instruction:

"Concepts like integration and assimilation sometimes mean that non-English speakers' linguistic and cultural practices are seen as deficits that should be fixed in remedial classes. Many of the Spanish speaking states like Arizona and California have stopped the bilingual education programmes, which they successfully ran in the 70s and 80s. These closures point to a need for culturally responsive educational programmes to become even more inclusive to address immigrant students' complex life experiences and to challenge the disabling social and systemic issues that these students face in US schools."

Care and respect

Reva Joshee and Heidi Safia Mirza argue that if multicultural teaching should stand a chance of a comeback, it is necessary to focus on how we educate teachers. Studies show that when teachers finish their education they do not feel they have the tools to tackle the different issues students bring with them from their different cultures:

"They are under-equipped because understanding different cultures and how to interact with them is not a big part of their training as teachers. Sometimes they only have a one or two hour session on diversity during their entire course. Most of the teachers in England come from a white middle class background with little understanding of the ethnic minorities they teach, and who now constitute a majority in our cosmopolitan urban cities. This means they can prejudge a black African Caribbean or a Muslim boy's behaviour seeing it as hostile or fearsome, and this sets up as a self-fulfilling prophecy which can lead to exclusion and anger on all sides - which is definitely not fruitful. What we need is the teachers to feel more confident about addressing issues in the classrooms in a non-racist way, where cultural misunderstandings and assumptions do not get in the way. This can be done, but it requires political will and funding to make it the core of our teacher training," Heidi Safia Mirza says.

She recently visited a very multicultural school in London's inner city. Here she saw a big display portraying the classic Old English heroic poem Beowulf set in Scandinavia. Heidi Safia Mirza explained it illustrated what is good about multicultural teaching:

"Little 7 year old British Muslim boys from Somalia and Pakistan had written essays inspired by Beowulf and brilliantly translated an ancient Anglo-Saxon poem about heroes, monsters and love of the father into to their world. It is an excellent example of how diversity should be done in the education sector. The themes spanned cultures, time and history - making links about humankind that is common to all societies. Good teaching will basically always be good teaching. And if you ask anybody what good teaching is, it always involves care and respect. Today, racist culture too often gets in the middle of that." ■