CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE FROM THE INSIDE-OUT: TEN COMMITMENTS FOR INTERCULTURAL EDUCATORS

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History teaches us that transformative education movements, if not nurtured carefully, risk growing to reflect the very ideologies and practices against which they were fomented. Consider, for example, the historical record regarding the emergence of intercultural education in Latin America. In her synopsis of this history, Aikman (1997) observed that the movement for intercultural education "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, indigenous organizations throughout the region lobbied extensively for intercultural education. Governments responded, and, along with the organizations they enlisted to articulate and promote their "intercultural" visions, began codifying their commitments to intercultural education.

The trouble, of course, was that in the hegemonic hands of the institutional power structure – as well, perhaps, as the hands of well-intentioned practitioners – intercultural education was reframed and operationalized in ways that were not quite so attentive to exploitation and oppression. For example, Foro Educativo (as cited by Aikman, 1997), an NGO hired to help the Peruvian government "brand" its version of 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)

There is nothing inherently wrong, of course, with recognizing and valuing diversity; with affirming the coexistence of different cultures; or with cultural exchange. There is nothing inherently wrong with educational initiatives meant to celebrate diversity and improve cross-cultural awareness. These are positive initiatives; all of us, as educators, should endorse and practice them. But can they, in and of themselves, be rightly called "intercultural education"? Is this where our commitments to intercultural education end – at interpersonal relations and acknowledging difference?

I argue in this chapter that, no, this focus on celebrating diversity and cultural affirmation is not enough; that calling myself an intercultural educator requires deeper commitments to transformative principles of equity and educational justice. I begin by describing some of the ways I believe intercultural education theorists and practitioners, like Peru's government, have reframed intercultural education in ways that render it no threat at all to existing systems of privilege and power – in ways, perhaps, that support, rather than disrupt, those systems. I then introduce *10 commitments for intercultural educators* that are, in essence, points of critical self-reflection that have helped me, as an intercultural practitioner, assess the extent to which I am practicing intercultural education in ways that challenge or reflect the oppressive ideologies and practices I abhor.

Mis-directions in Intercultural Education

Despite the many shortcomings of Peru's official conceptualization of intercultural education, it reflects the most popular themes found in intercultural education definitions today, and especially those endorsed 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)

What is most important to understand here, perhaps, is that Cushner's definition is not unique. His conception synthesizes 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.

His definition also helps to demonstrate why intercultural education quickly became a target of scorn and scrutiny among many of the indigenous communities that 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 commitments actually can be a tool for the maintenance of the very marginalization that transformative educational movements ought to dismantle (Gorski, 2006; Lustig, 1997).

Perhaps it is difficult to imagine, for those of us who are fond of intercultural initiatives designed primarily to support cross-cultural awareness or to celebrate diversity, how these initiatives might sustain, rather than eliminate, marginalization. Don't all initiatives that help bring people together in order to strengthen interpersonal relationships and to bolster attitudes toward diversity have intercultural value?

I would argue that all such initiatives *can have intercultural value* but that, absent parallel attention to matters of educational equity and social justice, they can do more damage than good. Consider, for example, the goal of intergroup, cross-cultural, and intercultural dialogue. Research indicates that participation in these sorts of intercultural 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). 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). Meanwhile several studies do reveal the ways in which intercultural dialogue initiatives replicate existing power and privilege dynamics, often because they are not grounded explicitly in an acknowledgement of the inequities in access to power among dialogue participants (DeTurk, 2006; Wasserman, 2001).

This replication, rather than elimination, of domination is demonstrated through intercultural dialogue initiatives in several ways. For example, dialogue initiatives, like conflict resolution and peer mediation initiatives, often involve individuals or 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 programs are facilitated – *dominated* – in ways that assume that all participants sit at an even table, one at which all parties have equitable access to cultural capital.

Additionally, according to Jones (1999), intercultural dialogue experiences tend to focus on the goal of mutual empathy, requiring 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)

I am reminded of the many sorts of intercultural programs that require dominated people – Roma people, African Americans, poor people, Hmong refugees, or LGBTQ people, perhaps – to make themselves increasingly vulnerable so that more privileged people can continue to nurture their own intercultural awareness. In place of anti-racism or economic justice, then, we have increased cultural competence among the privileged; a result that has little to do with equity and social justice.

Dialogue experiences and other intercultural education practices reinforce hegemonic conditions 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).

Another example of how inequitable dynamics are operationalized through intercultural education can be seen in Mix It Up at Lunch Day, perhaps the most popular dialogue-based diversity initiative in U.S. schools today. Founded and organized by Teaching Tolerance, a fabulous and far-reaching organization that has created scores of free anti-bias

resources for schoolteachers, Mix It Up at Lunch Day is a sort of national celebration of cross-cultural relations. Based on the Teaching Tolerance model, schools are encouraged to ask students to sit during lunch with students with whom they normally would not sit. For students from dominant identity groups, this sort of initiative can be a boon to intercultural awareness. What, though, of the students from disenfranchised communities, who spend their school days surrounded by peers from dominant groups? What, for instance, of Mexican or Central American immigrants in a predominantly white U.S. school; students for whom lunch is the only time of day when they can sit with students who speak their home languages? Several years ago I was speaking with a group of African American and Latino high school students at their predominantly white school, which was sponsoring Mix It Up at Lunch Day later that week. Each student was suspicious of the program. One, a Mexican-American young woman, explained, "I don't need an event to learn about white people. I'm drowning in whiteness at this school." An African American young man responded, "You want to know what I think? I think Mix It Up at Lunch Day is for white people."

Like other dialogue-based intercultural initiatives, Mix It Up at Lunch Day is a powerful example of how the privileged – who, as individuals or institutions, usually control (whether implicitly or explicitly) rules of engagement in intercultural dialogue experiences – tend to leave unacknowledged the reality that the marginalized voices they invite into dialogue *do not need*, either educationally or spiritually, organized opportunities to hear and consider the voices of the privileged. After all, they already are immersed in these voices (Jones, 1999) through the media, education, and other institutions. So not only are these sorts of intercultural education experiences ill-conducive to a movement for real educational change, they also reify existing privilege hierarchies (Maoz, 2001).

In fact, when I reflect upon other popular intercultural education initiatives and approaches, from "anti-bias" workshops to "cultural competence" courses, and what they suggest about the ultimate commitments of most intercultural educators, I am filled with anxiety for the future of our movement. I am concerned that much, if not *most*, of the energy and resources expended in the name of intercultural education are expended on initiatives that pose little threat to the grave injustices we ought to be abolishing. I previously have described some of the common principles of these initiatives and how they reflect commitments to *conservative* rather than *transformative* operationalizations of intercultural and multicultural education (see Gorski, 2006). These include (1) a commitment to

individual, but not institutional, change; (2) a commitment to universal validation; and (3) a commitment to nonthreatening cultural programming.

Individual, but not institutional, change

In an article bridging feminist and intercultural education pedagogies, Enns et al. challenge "trainers and teachers to consider how the positions they hold influence their perceptions of reality and how their pedagogical strategies may oppress or empower particular groups or individuals" (2004, pp. 425–426). This theme – the need for reflection on one's prejudices – echoes throughout intercultural and multicultural education literatures (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Quezada & Romo, 2004). It is, unquestionably, a critical commitment for intercultural educators.

But at what point have we focused on critical reflection to the disregard of changing unjust conditions through critical action? Can we assume that reflection predicts action?

Professional development on anti-bias education, one vehicle for this sort of reflection, when not whittled down to, for example, "understanding Latino culture" or "Roma culture" or even "girl culture," often seems to focus on how to live in cross-cultural harmony. Rarely does it reach the level of a critical examination of racism or nationalism or sexism in educational systems or structures (Cochran-Smith, 2004). And when these workshops do dig deeper and consider equity concerns, the resulting dialogue and diversity awareness are not, in and of themselves, institutionally transformational. In fact, research indicates that anti-stereotyping workshops generally do not translate into intercultural teaching practice (Vavrus, 2002).

Although greater awareness and self-reflection help us facilitate change, they do so at an institutional level only when they lead to policies and practices that are equitable and just (Cochran-Smith, 2004). As Woodard (2003, p. 167) explained, "awareness of forms of resistance is not enough; we must learn, teach, and apply deliberate strategies for resisting resistance." But how often do anti-bias or cultural competence workshops help participants make this connection? How often do they avoid, in Nieto's (2000) words, approaching multicultural or intercultural education "as if it were divorced from the policies and practices of schools and from society" (p. 9)?

It is true, no doubt, that anti-bias and cultural competence work can be a step toward equity and social justice. But when we pour energy and resources into self-awareness, do we divert attention from the larger transformative goals of intercultural education? Can we assume, as many

do, that intercultural hearts will prevail when it comes to creating more equitable policy and practices (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gorski, 2006, 2008)?

Universal validation

A common complaint about intercultural education from those who are threatened by its potentials is that it is not "intercultural" at all. The argument is that it comprises a set of beliefs that exclude people who do not think in "intercultural" ways. Lawrence Auster, writing for *FrontPageMagazine.com* (2004), a right-wing publication in the U.S., called this "the fraud of inclusion." Jeanne McDonnell, writing for the conservative think tank, the Heritage Foundation, went so far as to blame people who fight racism for de facto segregation. She argued:

> Sadly, some of those who fought so hard for desegregation now fight for re-segregation—in the name of multiculturalism and diversity. They forget the very lesson they taught America 40 and 50 years ago, the message of Martin Luther King Jr.: That people be judged not by the color of their skin but by what's in their hearts and minds.

The insinuation is that we, as intercultural educators, should not question the legitimacy of any point of view; if we do, we fail to practice what we preach (or teach).

But intercultural education is not about validating all "diverse" points of view. Nor is it politically neutral (Vavrus, 2002). It is about identifying and eliminating educational inequities, a task we cannot accomplish by validating oppressive beliefs or practices. As Nieto (1995) has explained,

> some might call for 'equal time' for the Nazi point of view during World War II or for the plight of the White segregationists during the civil rights movement, claiming that all viewpoints have equal validity … Here, then, is another clear instance where the curriculum might be reduced to no more than a variety of contesting folklores. (p. 197)

I often have observed this phenomenon in the ways in which intercultural educators address (or fail to address) heterosexism. Are we more willing to excuse heterosexist attitudes than nationalist, racist, or sexist attitudes, particularly when religion is cited as justification?

I also often hear people talking about a "balanced view" in intercultural education; that we must consider "*both* sides of an issue" (as if any issue only has two sides). While I agree that any informed action requires attention to the many complexities inherent in every cultural and political

context, I do not accept the idea that this means that intercultural educators must entertain heterosexism as a legitimate "point of view" in intercultural practice, any more than we would entertain male supremacy or Christian hegemony. I cannot be at once a champion of justice and a validator of injustice. As an intercultural educator, my spheres of influence cannot be spaces in which we debate the legitimacy of queer rights, but it should be spaces where we debate the most equitable and just path to queer rights.

Hegemonic cultural programming

It seems, at times, as though we, as intercultural educators, value the comfort of the privileged over the destruction of their privilege; that entire intercultural education initiatives are predicated on ensuring the safety of the most privileged participants. I have written satirically, but no less honestly, about Taco Night, my foray into diversity education as a fourth grader at Guilford Elementary School (Gorski, 2008). When I ask my students – mostly undergraduate college students studying to be teachers – today to describe their experiences with diversity and intercultural education in school, they are quick to recall multicultural festivals, cultural exchanges, Mix It Up at Lunch Days, and diversity fairs. Rarely, though, have any of them experienced schools with anti-racism initiatives, feminist pedagogies, or economic justice curricula.

For example, anti-bullying programs are extremely popular in U.S. schools these days, a result of several high-profile cases of suicide among bullied teenagers. Oftentimes these initiatives include anti-bias and anti-bullying workshop components for teachers and students as well as community anti-bullying pledges. Unfortunately, these initiatives too often lack examinations of the sociopolitical dynamics that underlie bullying. Research has demonstrated, for instance, that bullying is classed; that poor and working class youth are more likely than their wealthier peers to be bullied (Nordhagen, Nielsen, Stigum, and Kohler, 2005). Bullying, in this case, is a symptom – a *vehicle* – for classism and economic injustice. It is unfortunately rare, though, for schools ostensibly committed to intercultural education to offer much more than interpersonal attention to these concerns, as through anti-bullying programs, or socioeconomic mitigations, as through free or reduced-cost meal programs.

Similarly, anti-homophobia programs in schools, when they do exist, tend to focus on bullying (Ferfolja, 2007). Certainly, bullying is a well-documented manifestation of heterosexism in and out of schools. It is not the only manifestation, however. In fact, when we address these concerns solely through anti-bullying initiatives, we risk failing to pay adequate

attention to the more subtle forms of heterosexism, like heteronormative curricula that implicitly validate some teachers' and students' attitudes toward lesbian-, gay-, bisexual-, transgender-, and queer-identifying youth.

I am not arguing, of course, that anti-bullying programs are regressive or unnecessary. Rather, I am arguing that they ultimately are no threat to existing inequities. And if this is the case, can we really refer to them as "intercultural education"?

There are myriad other sorts of intercultural programming that privilege individual awareness over institutional change. These include diversity student clubs, many service learning programs, and intercultural food fairs, among others. Again, what these programs share is that they are no threat to injustice. In fact, they can, if not carried out thoughtfully, recycle biases and inequities (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Underlying these concerns is the reality that too many educators at every level think of these sorts of programs *as* intercultural education. In fact, when we commit our time and resources to intercultural programming while forgoing efforts for institutional transformation, we affirm and support a vision for intercultural education that protects the privileged at the expense of the disenfranchised. As Díaz-Rico (1998, p. 71) has explained, "Anything less than dedication to the ideal of educational equity for students reduces multicultural education to a 'stroll down ethnicity lane'."

Troubling the Intercultural Education Waters

To what, then, are we, as intercultural educators, committed? How conscious are we of how we are subject to the influence of ideologies that devalue intercultural education, pressuring us to reshape our intercultural practice in hegemonic, rather than transformative, ways? I am reminded of several of my intercultural education colleagues in the U.S. who criticize high-stakes testing regimens as "culturally biased" or "unjust" and then proceed to comply with the neoliberal thrust behind these regimens by obsessing in their own scholarship or practice over a so-called "achievement gap." Paradoxically, they often describe this gap exclusively in terms of standardized test scores.

I have observed, as well, that, although most intercultural practitioners would reject the notion that we can assume anything about a student's needs or aspirations or challenges or talents based upon a single dimension of her or his identity, many buy into grossly simplified paradigms, like the "culture of poverty" myth or models that suggest that there are "female" and "male" learning styles. The "culture of poverty" approach was dismissed in the social sciences forty years ago. Nonetheless, this form of

deficit thinking still seems to drive conversations about class, poverty, and education in the U.S. and, increasingly, elsewhere.

So when I consider the future of intercultural education, my fear is hastened less by resistance from naysayers than by the misdirected commitments of interculturalists. My worst fear is that a vast majority of the initiatives, practices, and policies enacted in the name of intercultural education appear, at closer look, to resemble cultural fluffery at best and, at worst, cultural imperialism. Particularly in the colonized lands of the Americas, interculturalism seems to be heavy, and getting heavier, on Taco Nights, intercultural dialogues, and multicultural festivals, and light, and getting lighter, on economic justice, racial equity, feminist pedagogy, and queer rights. And to whose benefit? Who or what are we protecting?

Don't get me wrong. Festivals and dialogues have their places in intercultural initiatives. But when efforts for racial harmony replace movements for racial justice; when we find ourselves learning about stereotyped class "cultures" rather than examining economic injustice (or at least inequities in access to quality schooling); when we come to believe that cross-group dialogue is transformative in and of itself rather than what prepares us to be transformative: this is when we, as interculturalists, turn our backs on inequity and injustice and do the bidding of the privileged in the name of "intercultural education."

How, then, might we work to ensure that we are not undermining our own commitments to intercultural education? How might we ensure that we are working *against* oppressive ideologies rather than replicating them in the name of interculturalism?

Ten Commitments for Intercultural Educators

I propose the following "Ten Commitments for Intercultural Educators" as a place to begin. I offer these commitments, not in a spirit of judgment, nor with any illusion that I have reached any appreciable level of proficiency with them. Rather, I offer them as somebody who struggles each day to embody them. I offer this challenge to my colleagues, but no more so than I offer it to myself.

I commit to working at intersections. Too often, those of us doing equity and justice work become so focused on a single identity or oppression – I have been focused largely on class and economic justice lately – that we fail to consider how identities and oppressions are intersectional. I cannot do racial justice if I am not doing queer justice, gender justice, and so on. I commit to understanding more fully how issue-specific organizations are forced, even if implicitly, to compete for

whatever little piece of pie (e.g., financial resources, media attention) we are afforded, perhaps in order to ensure that we do not organize ourselves and insist, instead, on a bigger piece of pie.

I commit to understanding the "sociopolitical context" of schooling. What Sonia Nieto (2000) calls the "sociopolitical context" of schooling requires me to see the bigger picture, to understand intercultural work in the context of neoliberalism, corporatization, consumer culture, and other conditions that inform dominant ideologies regarding social and educational access and opportunity.

I commit to refusing the master's paradigms. I will not endorse neoliberal or corporate-centric principles by incorporating them, even if implicitly, into my intercultural work. I will not minimize educational inequity to standardized test scores; refer to people as "at-risk" or families as "broken"; or discuss intercultural competencies as essential to "preparing us to compete in the global marketplace." I will not call something an *achievement* gap when it more precisely can be described as an *opportunity* gap.

I commit to never reducing intercultural education to cultural activities or celebrations. I will never settle for celebrating diversity or for "food, festivals, and fun." Although cultural festivals and food fairs can be part of a bigger initiative toward intercultural education, they do not, in and of themselves, make any school or organization or community more equitable and just. In fact, they more likely will strengthen stereotypes than eliminate them.

I commit to never confusing interculturalism with universal validation. Intercultural education must never become about valuing every perspective equally. For example, interculturalism does not value heteronormativity or male supremacy *even when one explains that these views are grounded in her or his religion.* An intercultural space – a school or classroom, for instance – cannot be both intercultural *and* hegemonic.

I commit to resisting simple solutions to complex problems. While simple and practical solutions may be tempting they are a distraction from what needs to be done to resolve complex social problems and conditions. I commit to resisting the temptation to buy into models and paradigms that over-simplify complexities, regardless of how popular they are. That the town or school district next door endorses a person or an approach to intercultural education is not enough; in fact, it might be the best evidence that the person or approach fits snugly into the status quo.

I commit to being informed. I will do the work to find strategies for bolstering equity and social justice that are based on *evidence of what*

works. I will look at this evidence in light of what I know about my own community. Moreover, I will not limit "evidence" to quantitative studies; I will seek the voices of local communities and stakeholders in the sorts of deep and narrative ways that cannot be captured in a quantitative survey.

I commit to working with and in service to disenfranchised communities. I must practice the ethic of "working with" rather than working *on* disenfranchised communities or *on their behalf*, particularly when I am in a position of privilege relative to them. I will apply my commitment to equity and social justice, not just in the *content* of my intercultural work, but also in my *processes* for doing that work.

I commit to rejecting deficit ideology. I will refuse to identify the source of social problems and conditions by looking *down* rather than *up* power hierarchies. I reject the notion that people are disenfranchised due to their own "deficiencies." I commit to challenging any suggestion that the way to fix an inequity is to fix the people most disenfranchised by it rather than by redressing the conditions that disenfranchise them.

I commit to putting justice ahead of peace. Although conflict resolution and peer mediation programs can be useful in the face of some forms of conflict, they should not replace efforts to redress an injustice. Never, under any circumstance, should equity concerns be handled through processes that assume that parties occupy similar spaces along the privilege-oppression continuum. And in the end, peace without justice renders the privileged more privileged and the oppressed further oppressed; a condition that might be understood as the exact opposite of authentic interculturalism.

At the heart of the 'Ten Commitments for Intercultural Educators," is a commitment to self-reflexivity, and to asking myself – to never stop asking myself – how the work I do in the name of intercultural education is making a school or community or society more just. When I find that I am unable to answer that question, or that I have become so comfortable with what *is* that I fail to consider, in as deep a way as possible, what *could be*, then I commit to doing something else: something more transformative.

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