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Cultural Diversity and Universal Knowledge: Education in Multicultural Contexts

Postmodern, post-colonial and particular forms of cultural studies put considerable stress on moving away from grand narratives and ‘universal truths’ to culture specific knowledge systems, ‘small communities’ and plural explanations. As a political stance that questions the dominant, the irrefutable and the universal forms of knowledge, and analyzes them from the standpoint of colonization of mind mediated by power relations, many of these studies are strongly seductive in proposing agendas of resistance to dominating and suffocating knowledge systems, ideologies and political systems.

This seduction however needs to be explored with care and rigour, since it is accompanied with a baggage of problems, particularly in the area of production and reproduction of knowledge. In an extreme form, if the diversity of knowledge systems is accepted to coincide with cultural diversity, this greatly questions the existence of any form of universal knowledge, thus forcing us to accept that all knowledge is fundamentally relativistic and there is no ‘universal’ criteria to validate any form of knowledge – thus denying any notion of ‘true’ or ‘false’ in the production and reproduction of knowledge. The knowledge system in any culture or sub-culture is therefore autonomously valid or ‘true’, and can not be evaluated in terms of any universal ‘truths’, or even perhaps, universal values. All that is of value therefore is the autonomy of the ‘little community’ or the ‘little culture’, which must be zealously defended.

This poses serious challenges regarding education of children in multicultural contexts. In India, for example, there are around 1067 spoken languages (mother tongues), seven religions, hundreds of different ethnic groups, cuisines and food habits that change from place to place, scores of different musical traditions and dozens of traditional medicine systems – it is as multicultural as you can get. Each of these diverse cultural groups has its own belief and philosophical system, in particular as regards Nature. The standard universal system of education that studies Nature in all forms is generally what we call the Sciences. The question that can be asked rather candidly is: what should be the approach to learning standard universal science in a culturally diverse situation such as India? Should one discard the universal elements in favour of local beliefs about Nature and its functioning? Or can there be a way to combine the particular with the universal; that respects the particular while at the same time opening the mind to the universal. That in turn opens up serious questions regarding the epistemology of the universal (science) and the particular (the cultural context), and their interrelationships.

Using empirical insights from a thirty year long science teaching program in multicultural rural Indian schools the author was involved in, the paper shall explore some these complex issues in crafting educational programs in multicultural contexts.