Paul C. Gorski, George Mason University
Guest Contributor

This blog entry is part of the Equity Issues Portfolio's series on 'interculturalism and pluralism'. History teaches us that many progressive initiatives, if not nurtured carefully, risk growing to reflect the very ideologies against which they were formed. This is a risk faced by multicultural education. So certainly we need to organize ourselves against attempts to discredit the value of multicultural education by those who are most invested in maintaining the status quo. To dismiss multicultural education is, after all, to dismiss ideals of equity and social justice.

To be sure, discrediting voices always will exist. And they will crescendo as we make advances toward greater equity and justice in schools and society. As a long-time board member of the National Association for Multicultural Education, I found cause for celebration when I learned that conservative organizations were infiltrating our conferences. The threat of progress inspires organizations hostile to multicultural education to unleash the shouters and naysayers. We must be at the ready to respond.

Troubling the Multicultural Education Choir

There is, however, an even more insidious threat to multicultural education and the ideals of educational equity and justice. I often hear people who care about equity concerns say, "We're preaching to the choir." In my experience, when it comes to multicultural education and advancing equity and social justice, the most dangerous threat comes from *within* the so-called "choir."
Allow me to explain: Even those of us who fancy ourselves as 'progressives,' somewhere on a continuum between *liberal* and *radical,* are subject to the influence of dominant ideologies.

How conscious we are of this influence, and how we respond to it, matters. There are, for example, a number of my multicultural education colleagues in the United States 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 scholarship or practice over a so-called "achievement gap." Paradoxically, they tend to describe this gap exclusively in terms of standardized test scores.
I have observed, as well, that, although many of us who would reject the notion that we can assume anything about a student's needs or aspirations or challenges or talents based on a single identity dimension, many buy into grossly simplified paradigms, like the "culture of poverty" myth or models that suggest 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 United States and, increasingly, in Canada.
Celebrating Diversity Is Not Enough

So when I consider the future of multicultural education, my fear is hastened less by *resistance* from naysayers than by misdirection by multiculturalists. My worst fear is that a vast majority of the initiatives, practices, and policies enacted in the name of diversity or multiculturalism appear, at closer look, to resemble, at best, cultural fluffery and, at worst, cultural imperialism. I've traveled around the world studying this phenomenon: a "multiculturalism" which has been whittled down so far that its equity and social justice roots no longer are evident in practice. Particularly in the colonized lands of the Americas, multiculturalism 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, anti-sexism, 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 multicultural 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 multiculturalists, turn our backs on inequity and injustice and do the bidding of the powerful in the name of "multiculturalism."

- *Listen to Paul C. Gorski, "*[*Celebrating Diversity in not Enough: Finding Authentic Pathways to Equity*](#)*."*
- *Read: Paul C. Gorski's "*[*What we're teaching our teachers*](#)*."*

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

Ten Commitments of a Multicultural Educator

I propose the following "Ten Commitments of a Multicultural Educator" as a place to start. 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.

(1) *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 anti-racism if I am not doing anti-heterosexism, anti-sexism, 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.

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

(3) *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 multicultural work. I will not minimize educational inequity to test scores; refer to people as "at-risk" or families as "broken"; or discuss multicultural 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.

(4) *I commit to never reducing multiculturalism to cultural activities or celebrations*. I will transcend the "4 Ds" (dress, dance, diet and dialect). Although multicultural festivals and food

fairs can be part of a bigger initiative toward multiculturalism, 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 unravel them.

(5) *I commit to never confusing multiculturalism with universal validation*. Multiculturalism is not about valuing every perspective equally. For example, multiculturalism does not value heteronormativity or male supremacy *even when one explains that these views are grounded in her or his religion*. A multicultural space – a school or classroom, for instance – cannot be both multicultural *and* hegemonic.

(6) *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 multiculturalism is not enough; in fact, it might be the best evidence that the person or approach fits snugly into the status quo.

(7) *I commit to being informed*. I will do the work to find strategies for bolstering equity and social justice which 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.

(8) *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 multicultural work, but also in my *processes* for doing that work.

(9) *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 which disenfranchise them.

(10) *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 which 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 which might be understood as the exact opposite of authentic multiculturalism.

At the heart of the 'Ten Commitments of a Multicultural Educator" is a commitment to self-reflexivity, and to asking myself – to never stop asking myself – how the work I do in the name of multicultural 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*, I will commit to doing something else.

Paul C. Gorski is an assistant professor in Integrative Studies at George Mason University in Washington, DC, and the founder of EdChange and Multicultural Pavilion.