Delivering a Multicultural Education

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Background

Multicultural education is essential for enabling students to develop multicultural competencies in the increasingly multicultural American society. The United States is known worldwide to be the land of opportunity for immigrants seeking a better life. The influx of non-European immigrants has changed the racial, religious, and ethnic composition of the United States as these immigrants bring a variety of cultures and languages to America. The impact of multiculturalism has been felt in the education sector as schools are increasingly becoming multicultural. A clash of ethnic identities in the school setting may distract students from optimal learning and influence a negative effect on school climate. Ethnic minority students may experience challenges in their academics due to being cultural misunderstandings and stereotyping from other students. A curriculum rich in multicultural education provides a platform for a multicultural society by teaching students about the benefits of a multicultural society.

This essay examines strategies that are integral to delivering a multicultural education system based on several factors that impact student learning. These strategies include the following: culturally responsive curriculum; unbiased assessment methods; confrontation of racism and ethnicity within classrooms; intergroup relations; and bilingual education.

Culturally responsive curriculum

Integration of a culturally responsive curriculum is an essential aspect of multicultural education geared towards encouraging respect for and support of ethnic differences within the classroom and the larger society. Furthermore, it is a break away from the traditional curriculum that has been predominantly reflective of the dominant culture. According to Gollnick and Chinn

(2009), the traditional curriculum portrays the perspective of Western culture – in this case, the Northern and Western Europe. Unlike the traditional curriculum, a culturally responsive curriculum should guide students in understanding that the school community and the society at large are increasingly becoming diverse insofar as culture and ethnicity are concerned.

The traditional curriculum does not teach students about the existence of racism and oppression in American society and how these acts have prevented the progress of certain ethnic groups to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Furthermore, the curriculum does not shed light on various non-Western cultures, including Africa, South, and Central America as well as Asia (Gollnick and Chinn, 2009). The traditional curriculum reinforces the notion that Western thought or culture is superior to all the other cultures, thereby entrenching a sense of ethnocentrism in the minds of students. A culturally responsive curriculum rectifies the myths and stereotypes that have characterized certain ethnic groups by providing a different perspective concerning these groups' social, economic and political history (Banks, 1993). For example, one stereotype often associated with African Americans is that they lack ability and motivation which results in their cycle of poverty and poor socioeconomic conditions. In this instance, a culturally responsive curriculum would demystify such stereotypes by bringing students into contact with knowledge of various African Americans who have contributed towards the betterment of the American society and overcame cultural and socioeconomic barriers.

In a culturally responsive curriculum, students are provided with ethnic studies courses that highlight the history – as well as the contemporary conditions – of various ethnic groups (e.g., African Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians, and Latinos, among others). For maximum impact, these ethnic studies courses should be open to all students from all ethnic groups. This would help students from the dominant culture shed stereotypes and biases they

have towards other groups and foster better relations among all students in the school community.

Additional resources that enhance a culturally responsive curriculum include bulletin boards and films that reflect racial and ethnic diversity within the school community and society. Within the classroom level, classroom instruction and resources used by teachers should reflect ethnic diversity and not silently reinforce the notion that one culture is dominant or superior to others. Implementing discussions of historical and current issues considers the perspectives of different ethnic groups and increases multicultural understanding. This is not the case for the resources used in the traditional curriculum, such as textbooks, which only highlight issues from the perspective of the dominant culture. Textbooks written in a culturally responsive manner, emphasize multiculturalism often because they are often authored by people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

One specific challenge that confronts a culturally responsive curriculum is some students may find it difficult to extinguish their stereotypes and biases towards other racial groups. Kobayashi et al. (2007) note this may be the case when the subject of discussion focuses on rooted instances of racialism and oppression in society. Some students – especially from the dominant culture – may refuse to accept the reality some of the predicaments faced by certain groups are a result of historical injustices and inequalities motivated by racial bias. Teachers can surmount this challenge by establishing clear ground rules for discussions of such issues. This ensures that the discussions do not degenerate into personal attacks and the use of racial slurs.

Confronting racism and ethnicity within the classroom

Multicultural education cannot become a success if educators shy away from discussing issues related to racism and ethnicity in the classroom. As much as they may assume that keeping quiet is the solution, racial and ethnic tensions are bound to emerge among students, especially with a diverse student population. Most teachers – especially White Americans – prefer to avoid discussing issues of race and ethnicity within the classroom because this would force them to confront their own racial biases and stereotypes (Gollnick and Chinn, 2009). Putting their heads in the sand – as far as race and ethnicity is concerned – only serves to reinforce the notion of white privilege while seeking to deny the existence of racial inequality in the education sector as well as the American society.

Gollnick and Chinn (2009) note that many teachers claim they are color blind and that their treatment of students is not influenced by their racial backgrounds. In essence, such teachers are insinuating that race is not a factor that influences the ability of students to learn. Kobayashi et al. (2007) disagree with this notion by noting that race and ethnicity are a key influence on many students as well as their families, which subsequently impacts their communications and interactions with students and teachers from other racial groups. Confronting racism and ethnicity issues in the classroom molds students for their future lives in a multicultural, diverse America. By enabling students to confront issues of racism and ethnicity, students will be proactive in eliminating racism within the student community and their surroundings in the external environment. Even as teachers' moderate classroom discussions on racism within American society, they should be alert to personal stereotypes and biases related to particular groups. As implementers of multicultural education in this regard, teachers should first examine and rid themselves of stereotypes and biases towards certain groups; failure to do so may make them uncomfortable to discuss these issues let alone lead the students in discussing

them. In Lander's (2011) study, many secondary school teachers were unprepared to handle issues of racism and ethnicity in their classrooms and thus dreaded the likelihood of such scenarios cropping up among their students.

Additionally, confronting and ridding oneself of racial stereotypes and biases helps teachers develop realistic academic expectations for their students based purely on the intellectual capabilities of these students. Gollnick and Chinn (2009) reveal that many teachers – especially Caucasians – have been guilty of developing discriminate academic expectations of their students based on their racial backgrounds and socioeconomic conditions. Consequently, teachers may develop high academic expectations for White American students based on the notion that White Americans are intellectually superior because White Americans have a higher high school graduation rate when compared to students from other racial or ethnic groups. Teachers are likely to expend more resources towards helping White American students realize and maximize their potential than students from other racial groups, such as Latinos and African Americans. Such actions perpetuate and compound inequalities that the education sector and resulted in a wide achievement gap between White Americans and ethnic minorities. In other words, such biased academic expectations go against the ideals of multicultural education.

Confrontation of racism and ethnicity within the classroom may not be smooth-sailing, considering the feelings it may evoke in certain students, especially White Americans. A study by Rhoades (1991) reveals that such students may react by keeping quiet, becoming confrontational or emotional. As moderators, it is important that teachers set a tone that racist behavior and language in the classroom is unacceptable. Such incidences are opportunities for the teachers to make it clear to the perpetrators that their behaviors will not be tolerated.

Perpetrators need to be taught that racism has no place in society by demystifying common prejudices and stereotypes that have been perpetrated about certain racial groups.

Mentorship programs and career talks

One of the reasons for inequalities in the American education sector is gender stereotypes have been transferred into the classroom setting. These stereotypes are reflected via classroom instructions that are influenced by the behaviors, needs, and interests of girls. These gender stereotypes also reflect in the way male and female students select their subjects, which in turn influences the career opportunities available to both genders. According to Gollnick and Chinn (2009), female students are more likely to opt for reading and language courses whereas more male students choose to specialize in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) areas. The disproportionate number of female students in STEM and male students in reading and language can be rectified by implementing career talks and mentorship programs. These programs can motivate more male and female students to register for reading and language and STEM courses, respectively.

Educators can organize career talks headlined by various experts in the aforementioned fields to come and talk to the students. For example, female professionals in STEM careers can demystify the stereotype that male students are innately more adept to succeed in STEM courses and careers. This can encourage many female students to enroll in these courses in pursuit of a career in the STEM industry. Gollnick and Chinn (2009) reveal that students from ethnic minorities may not believe they have the intellectual ability to pursue a career in the STEM industry as part of a self-fulfilling prophecy perpetrated by the achievement gap. Career talks headlined by STEM professionals from similar ethnic groups as these students may help to

shatter this belief. These professionals can enlighten students on what they need to achieve in preparation for a career in the industry, as well as the numerous career opportunities that await those who enroll for STEM courses. It is important these students of ethnic minorities realize that the STEM industry is projected to grow regarding career opportunities. Career talks are one of the strategies meant to ensure equitable treatment of the two sexes in the curriculum insofar as their interactions with teachers, extracurricular and instructional activities are concerned. Gollnick and Chinn (2009) note that this would enable male and female students to participate in stereotypical activities associated with both of the sexes.

Mentorship programs involve connecting students with professionals that share certain demographic traits. For example, a male student interested in pursuing reading and language courses can be paired with a male author. Similarly, an African American student interested in STEM courses can be paired with an African American professional in the STEM industry. The objective of the mentorship programs would be to enlighten these students on how to surmount any challenges they may face in the pursuit of their courses or career opportunities. The support offered by the mentors may positively impact the academic achievements of these students who would be naturally expected to perform poorly in certain subjects because of gender or racial stereotypes. In their study, Dennehy and Dasgupta (2017) revealed that women mentorship programs have improved the academic scores of female students involved in such programs, thus encouraging female students to pursue and complete their advanced courses in STEM. The video, *Do You Believe in Me?* by Dalton Sherman, highlights the need for students to feel that someone believes in them. In the video, Sherman urges his teachers to believe in him and his fellow students of ethnic minorities. He emphasizes that those who believe in them will motivate them to maximize their potential. In this context, Sherman's comments corroborate the fact that

mentorship programs and career talks instill positive beliefs in students who have often shied away from applying themselves because of racial and gender stereotypes.

Use of better assessment methods

Another approach to multicultural education is to eliminate the traditional methods of student assessment that research has concluded is biased against students from ethnic minorities. Standardized assessments have been inaccurately exalted as measures of students' competence and their intellectual abilities. This method of assessment has been responsible for the achievement gap between White American students and those from ethnic minorities, such as African Americans, American Indians, and Latinos. Gollnick and Chinn (2009) note that a large proportion of students from these ethnic groups do not graduate from high school because of their failure to meet the cut off scores for standardized test set by different states. Coincidentally, most students from ethnic minorities come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, which further inhibit ethnic minority students' ability to perform well on traditional assessment methods (Steele, 1997). Focus on this assessment method and the historically poor performance of students from ethnic minorities has fueled the stereotype that students from these racial groups are either unmotivated or lack academic ability. Many of these students come to believe this stereotype of themselves and are compelled to drop out of school. In regard to teachers, the obsessions with SATs as a measure of competence has unfortunately pushed many teachers to ignore other skills that students may have and instead focus solely on preparing students to sit for these tests.

Considering that a hallmark of multicultural education is that it encourages equal access to education opportunities for all students, it is imperative for teachers to use other methods of

assessing students, such as observations, projects, essays, and portfolios. These assessment methods can be categorized as either direct or indirect; direct assessment methods require students to demonstrate their learning, whereas indirect assessment methods entail students reflecting on their learning. Gollnick and Chinn (2009) note that unlike the use of SATs, they provide teachers with information on whether they have attained the student learning outcomes (SLOs). Examples of direct assessment methods include portfolios and capstone projects, whereas observations focus groups and reflective essays are examples of indirect assessment methods.

As an indirect assessment method, teachers can conduct an observation of students to understand their behaviors and attitudes that may not typically be captured through tests. Opportunities to undertake observation include social gatherings, study sessions, playground activities, and group work. Information about the behaviors and attitudes of students can guide a teacher on how to develop instructional strategies that will help these students maximize their potential. Indirect assessment methods provide information on the process adopted by students to perform certain tasks, including reading a book, solving a problem, or asking questions. Focus group discussions (FGDs) can be conducted with students continuously or at the end of the learning period to collect information on their learning experiences during the course, attitudes and beliefs developed as a result of their stint in the classroom. Alternatively, reflective essays provide teachers with an understanding of their students' perceptions and opinions of the course content. This assessment method helps teachers gauge if their students acquired critical analysis skills, as well as, their level of comprehension of course content. A capstone project provides students with the opportunity to integrate concepts, knowledge, and skills acquired during their studies. It is a continuous assessment of students' achievement during the course. The portfolio

consists of personal essays, self-evaluations, case studies, reports, research papers and exams all of which are geared towards assessing students' understanding of the course content throughout the study. This assessment method consists of a common scoring guide or rubric that is used to assess the students' work.

The use of the assessment methods aforementioned can further contribute to multicultural education by enabling successful integration of ELL students into the American education system and the society in general. Gollnick and Chinn (2009) note that many ELL students have been mistakenly categorized as special education students on the basis of their dismal performance in SATs. What many educators do not consider is that the traditional assessment method has been developed to measure student competence in line with the dominant White American cultural standards. Subsequently, ELL students from a different culture perform poorly in these tests due to their limited knowledge of the English language. These students are subsequently categorized as having a learning disorder and placed in special education classes as was the case in the *Guadalupe Organization Inc. v. Tempe Elementary School District No. 3*. The defendants were found guilty of using biased assessment instruments that resulted in the incorrect placement of a high number of Mexican American and Yaqui Indian students in special classes for students with mental challenges (Mitylene and Lassman, 2003). This was the same outcome in *Diana v. State Board of Education* where the plaintiff proved that scores of Mexican American students had been erroneously categorized as low IQ owing to the use of inaccurate assessment methods. In contrast to the use of traditional assessment methods, such as SATs, the aforementioned direct and indirect assessment methods guide teachers into developing realistic academic expectations for their students by providing teachers with an accurate picture of these students' abilities. Consequently, this provides all students will equal access to the curriculum.

Bilingual education

Bilingual education refers to the use of two languages by the students and teacher to enable foreign students or ELL students more easily acclimate to the American educational environment. As part of multicultural education, the rationale for this method of teaching is that ELL students often encounter challenges in keeping up with their schoolwork due to their lack of proficiency in English, which is the language of instruction in most classrooms. Gollnick and Chinn (2009) cite Latino immigrant students as a category of ELL students that have grappled with the American education system as attested to by their high drop-out rates. The likelihood of dropping out of school is exacerbated by the intensity of adapting to a new culture in addition to grasping new subject matter insofar as their studies are concerned. Without bilingual education, these students would be studying at an unequal level compare to their English-speaking peers.

Bilingual education requires that teachers should familiarize themselves with the cultural backgrounds and language of their students. Teachers should understand that interaction and communication with ELL students may be influenced by the cultural background of their students. This cultural influence may be evident in the non-verbal communication of the students, including posture, personality, attitude, and tone (Tiechuan, 2016). Some of the non-verbal communication by the teacher may seem obscene to the student and vice versa. Familiarizing oneself with the cultural background of the students would help avoid such uncomfortable scenarios for both parties.

The native language of the ELL student is used to help students acquire knowledge, skills, and concepts in various subjects; this information is further reinforced through the English language. Bilingual education enhances a smooth transition into the use of the English language

for the ELL students without making them feel as if their cultures are being trampled upon or

dismissed in favor of a dominant culture. Instead, it sends the message that their cultural

backgrounds are valued, which boosts their self-image and self-worth. By becoming proficient in

English, the ELL students are further prepared for integration into American society by

improving their multicultural competencies. Proficiency in the English language also provides

better career opportunities – something that teachers should always emphasize to the students.

According to Gollnick and Chinn (2009), due to their limited proficiency in English, many

immigrants end up in low-paying jobs, which further confine their children to more challenges in

their academic pursuits.

Another form of bilingual education is the dual immersion programs that bring together

English-speaking students and their ELL counterparts. Lindholm-Leary and Block (2009) note

that these programs enable English-speaking students to develop multicultural competencies by

giving them the chance to become proficient in other languages, such as Latino, Mandarin,

Japanese or Spanish, among others. Even where bilingual education may not be possible, the use

of English as a Second Language (ESL) is necessary to ensure equal access to the curriculum for

all students, including ELL students. Although English is the only language of communication in

these classes, ELL students are not mixed or measured against their English-speaking

counterparts until they are proficient in English. The ESL classes, which are less than a year in

length, ensure that ELL students do not find themselves in unfavorable competition with

English-speaking students as far as academic achievements are concerned. After a year, students

who are not yet proficient in English can apply for a waiver to enable them to continue in the

classes for another year.

Intergroup relations

If students are not proactive participants in the aforementioned efforts, the goal of enhancing the development of multiculturalism education will not be achieved. Intergroup relations entail peaceful co-existence among students from different racial, religious, gender, or ethnic backgrounds.

Eyler et al. (1982) note that students may be divided along racial lines even though the school policy itself might be inclined towards desegregation. Instances when segregation may be evident include in the cafeteria, classroom, and on the playground. It is commonplace to see African American students sit together at one table during lunchtime, as is the same case, with Latino and White American students. Furthermore, Gollnick and Chinn (2009) point out that female and male students tend to socialize separately from one another when given the opportunity. This is identified on the playground where girls may focus on activities that have been stereotypically labeled as female activities, whereas, boys may focus on games usually associated with the male gender.

One activity to foster intergroup relations between students is cooperative learning, where students are grouped heterogeneously. This means that students from different backgrounds will find themselves in one group (Altun, 2015). Cooperative learning provides a chance for these students to familiarize themselves with one another's backgrounds and thus demystify the myths or stereotypes that they may have had about one another. By collaborating on various tasks in the classrooms, cooperative learning enables students to identify common problems, ground, or feelings. This activity also contributes to equal access to the curriculum by uplifting the performance of low-performing students, some of which, come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. According to a study by Reszel (2016), cooperative learning was responsible for

the improved performance of 23 third grade students in mathematics most of who had developed

confidence and a positive perception of math exercises, such as division and multiplication.

Outside the classroom setting, there are various initiatives geared toward promoting

intergroup relations. A prime example is the Mix It Up at Lunch project of the Southern Poverty

Law Center that seeks to encourage desegregation of students in the cafeteria. Composed of an

estimated 3,000 participating schools, the initiative involves the use of creative and fun activities

to bring together students from different backgrounds. For example, students can be assigned to

different tables in the cafeteria based on their birthdates, favorite sports teams and types of treat.

These techniques improve interracial friendships by helping students realize that there are many

other interests that bind them together, such as, sports teams and birth dates. Initiatives, such as

the Mix It Up at Lunch, are the starting point for students to develop friendships through which

they can build each other up by benefiting from their respective strengths. For instance, a

friendship between a high performing student and a low performing counterpart would help

improve the performance of the lower performing student.

Equally important in desegregation are teachers who should walk the talk insofar as

improving intergroup relations is concerned. According to Gollnick and Chinn (2009), teachers

may be unwittingly perpetuating segregation by sitting according to their racial identities during

events, such as lunchtime or even sports events. Students who observe such behavior may

subsequently think that it is okay for them to segregate according to racial, religious, gender or

ethnic lines. Thus, it is essential that teachers actualize desegregation by 'mixing it up' with each

other regardless of their different backgrounds. This sends the message to students they need to

embrace multiculturalism and further heightens the importance of multicultural education in the

American education system.

Conclusion

The American education system has traditionally reflected inequalities inherent in the general society. This is reflected through the achievement gap between White American students and their counterparts from ethnic minorities. Consequently, the education system reinforces the notion that Western culture is the dominant culture, as evidenced by curriculum trends that favor Western culture. However, developing and implementing multicultural education can rectify this notion and dispel stereotypes and myths that have always been associated with certain racial groups. Continued development of multicultural education will benefit society as a whole as the positive effects trickle into the everyday lives of American citizens.

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