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Rethinking teacher competencies to work in a multicultural environment

Abstract

Openness to change is a fundamental step towards development of environment supportive of multicultural teaching and learning. In this process key role have the teachers. Different teaching and learning traditions call for a reconsideration of contemporary realities and practices in education. In order to build capacity for multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills the teachers should enhance their own self-reflection and test their motives for the ways of thinking and acting in multicultural environment.

This paper focuses on the open questions in the area of teacher competency for work in multicultural environment in global, as well as, in national level. In that context, it is developed in two directions: using a theoretical approach to present what is relevant knowledge that will help teachers implement a multicultural program in the classroom, and, exploring the students' attitudes and beliefs regarding teaching and learning challenges in multicultural environment.

Key words: *teachers, competencies, multiculturalism, attitudes, beliefs*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching as a profession consists of a set of highly complex practices and competencies based on the knowledge of curricular content areas, personal characteristics and pedagogical capabilities of the teacher. The main professional task of the teachers is to inspire the students to strive to become a better person and to manage their own lives effectively. They should be able to use methodologies, strategies, and practices that are appropriate for the age and needs of the learners. Particularly is important for the modern teachers to understand the cultures and apply knowledge of the cultures in the classroom. They should demonstrate fostering the cross-cultural understanding between the students which is more than necessary nowadays, in the increasingly changing world.

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The philosophy of inclusive education pedagogy becomes a guide for each teacher to be able to recognize diversity of students' cultural and learning needs. With this philosophy teachers can enhance both their multicultural and international competence to perform more effectively.

There are numerous issues that today arise in front of theorists, educators and teachers in terms of multicultural education of the young people: what should accept from the old system of values, which values can adapt to new conditions of life, what is novelty in the field of axiology and so on. To give an adequate response to them, it is a broader historical and philosophical analysis of the specific material and spiritual agents that enable the emergence of new global civilization. Cross-cultural contacts in the sphere of education impose the need for constructive communication. In this context we can talk about change the role of the teacher in the educational process.

In other words, improving the quality of teacher education at the same time means improving the humanity as a whole. Good education simply presumes high quality of teachers. Qualified teachers are not just professionals who demonstrate various forms of knowledge and ability to apply them in their work. Moreover, they are emotional and passionate beings who are connected with their students on many levels. According to opinion of some scholars, competence is defined as complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and desire, which leads to effective embodied human action in the world, in a particular domain (Deakin Crick, 2008). In this sense, the teachers should demonstrate his qualities on different ways: through the structuring of the lectures and its evaluation, through the choice of the curriculum and pedagogy, through the cultivating of intellectual and moral virtues, finally, through his own behavior in the classroom and workplace. In other words, the teacher's skills and competencies should be conceptual, empirical, and interrelated with sensitivity for professionalism and school culture (Campbell, 2003). Therefore, researching of the each of this elements, singly contributes for the creation of clear perception about what is quality teaching staff. In this context, teachers are seen as key players in values education. Also, it's clearly that teachers' emotions, endeavors, desire and hope can motivate, help or inspire their students, especially in a multicultural classroom.

2. HOW CAN TEACHERS GO AGAINST THE CULTURAL AND ETHNIC PREJUDICES AND USE THEIR CLASSROOMS TO WORK IN THE SERVICE OF ALL STUDENTS?

The classroom practice, with concentration on culturally specific issues is a natural place of multiculturalism. Multicultural approach to teaching and learning is generally based upon consensus building, respect and tolerance between all participants in educational process. Usually, ethnic minority students are potential objects of school exclusion relative to the ethnic majority. At the same time, the hidden curriculum in the schools can produce emergence of division of ethnic superiority and inferiority.

In the past many societies were homogeneous. The upbringing of its members in largely was such that they were less ready and capable to accept the culture of other people who are different. Recently, the world find it difficult to absorb the new wave immigrants as homogeneity was previously the norm. The social homogeneity nowadays can animate the isolationism and stereotyping due to lack of information or consciousness.

From there, the teachers should turn themselves into an advocates for sweeping stereotypes and creating essential change in education. They must prepare themselves for the challenge of interacting and communicating with cultural diversity in the classroom. Therefore, although the ethnic prejudices are very alarming issues in education today, the schools can help students to overcome ethnic barriers by openness to cultural differences as well as by using multicultural curricula.

What is the main teachers' task to work in the service of all students?

They should start with clearly outlining the rules, and what the teachers will do if they are violated. According to some researches (De Melendez and Beck, 2013, p. 203) the main directions which may guide the teachers in their work in a multicultural environment should be the following:

- To teach children to respect others' cultures and values as well as their own.
- To help all children learn to function successfully in a multicultural society.
- To develop a positive self-concept in those children who are most affected by racism – "children of color".

- To help all children experience both their differences as culturally diverse people and their similarities as human beings in positive ways.
- To encourage children to experience people of diverse cultures working together as unique parts of a whole community.

Teacher in each discipline can analyze their teaching procedures and styles to determine the extent to which they reflect multicultural issues and concerns. An equity pedagogy exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of all students because children come to school with many negative attitudes toward and misconceptions about different racial and ethnic groups (Banks and McGee Banks, 2009, p. 22).

Multicultural competency of the teacher can provide a positive and collaborative atmosphere in the classroom. The teacher competencies involves a number of elements, including personal identification, language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions that are often specific to ethnic, racial, religious, geographic, or social groups. Some scholars think that "the competence is nothing more than an improved modern term applied to an ancient human value; for example the right way of doing things in the competent way, the right way to perform a job, the right way to live and work in association and cooperation with others" (Singh, 2010, p. 29).

Indeed, yet Socrates has claimed that between knowledge and value exists indestructible connection. Consequently, the man with good attitudes and values should be a man of knowledge and vice versa. There arises the question for what kind of knowledge speaks Socrates. The Scottish scholar Guthrie describes this knowledge as „minding your own business“, doing the thing, or following the way, which is properly your own, and not mixing yourself up in the ways of other people and trying to do their jobs for them. (Guthrie, 1975, p. 7). So, when Plato uses the word "justice" he simply means acting in the way that one normally does in one's situation. For example, the bricklayer to make a wall, the navigator to navigate, the doctor to heal, the teacher to teach, and so on.

Finally, what should be the aim of education and why? The education should give us freedom from any kind of dogmas and violent ideologies. Because of that, every educational system is established on principles and values. The authentic creators of the capability's development for education are, and always will be the honest teachers (Gulevska, 2013). The teacher who wants to deal honestly with ethnic relations in the school may sometimes find himself in a difficult circumstances. His opinions and views can be unacceptable for the members of teaching profession because of many reasons: the domestic policy of the state,

the historical context connected with prejudices and so on. However, multicultural education is a part of a larger fight for justice and cultural inclusion in schools and society.

3. TEACHER COMPETENCIES TO WORK IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT: MACEDONIAN CONTEXT

The cultural and ethnical diversity of the civil society in Macedonia creates such circumstances in which educational institutions get a crucial role in promotion of ethical values and ideas like justice, equality, freedom, peace, compassion and charity, which are valued by many cultural traditions among young people. Having in mind that school is still the most important factor which builds common goals and values among people, national policy makers met with a necessity of finding curricular solutions in Macedonian educational system in order to cultivate welfare and goodness in society. During the last ten years, the purpose of such educational investigations was to formulate a coherent conception of integrated education. Government's programs and legal framework promote interethnic communication, but implementation of principles as respect, tolerance, and acceptance of diversity in the school life still is reduced only on using different languages of ethnic communities in teaching process (Petroska-Beska, Najcevska, Kenig, Balazi, and Tomovska, 2009). From the beginning of the last year, Macedonian Civic Education Center (MCEC) in Skopje has developed project for multiethnic integration in education (IIEP) which was supported by USAID. The project aims to make an integrated educational system and intensive collaboration between the schools, municipalities, teachers and parents. Having in mind the previous multicultural researches in the country, coordinators of the IIEP have planned numerous forms of interethnic interactions in the schools. For example:

- Extracurricular actions of short duration with the students (excursions, celebrations, festivals and etc.);
- Extracurricular actions of long duration with the students (project – sections, multicultural workshops and etc.);
- Common activities with the students in regular teaching (teaching in nature, projects in the frame of subjects and etc.);
- Professional collaboration between the teachers who teach in different languages
- Collaboration between the parents and local community.

The trainings for interethnic integration in education for the School Integration Teams include 40 municipalities and 183 secondary and primary schools. Throughout the trainings, participants have the

opportunity to get to know each other, to acquire new knowledge on the topic of ethnic stereotypes and prejudices. Students with different ethnical background have opportunities to interact, gain knowledge about their different cultures and improve interethnic relationships in the schools and within the local community generally.

However, harmonious inter-ethnic relations cannot be taken for granted by this concept and how they can be fostered remains problematic (Verma, Zec, and Skinner, 2012). Therefore, future teachers in pedagogical faculties in Macedonia should acquire knowledge for non-violent approach to conflict transformation and gain skills on the methods of extra-curricular activities. Thus, they will be main support of the democratic process which contribute for a peaceful coexistence, cooperation and dialog between all ethnic groups in the country. Also, through this, the educational system in Macedonia should be strengthened. Teachers' competencies area is considered together with duties that teachers are expected to fulfill. According to the *National Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for Republic of Macedonia* (Bahtovska, Janevska, and Neshkovska, 2011), the learning outcomes can be categorized and specified in various ways and may be expressed in a "qualification descriptors" for each of the cycles or levels. There are general descriptors of the qualifications in the National Framework, and they reflect the usual skills and accomplishments of the students and relate to the qualifications that indicate completion of specific study cycle. Specific descriptors of qualifications that determine learning outcomes for individual study program from the corresponding cycle are prepared by the higher education institution. The NF-HEQ has the flexibility to accommodate diversity and innovation. From there, the list of teacher competencies is never complete nor fixed. It is dependent from the vibrant form of the life in the classroom: learning needs of the children as individuals, their different social, ethnic, religious and cultural background and so on. The teacher's role in the contemporary school is becoming ever more complex, thus also establishing new challenges and tasks in the education of teachers (Valenčič Zuljan and Vogrinc, 2011).

In order to acquire information about students' opinion regarding the key teacher competencies to work in multicultural environment, at the Faculty of Education in Bitola was realized the following research:

3.1. Methodology

The aim of our research was to investigate the opinion of the students regarding the key teacher competencies to work in multicultural environment. The survey was realized among undergraduate students enrolled at fourth year of study. The sample included 15 students (6 male, 9 female). It was selected such sample because the students

enrolled at fourth year of study already had some experiences in the teaching practice in multicultural environment. Data collection took place from April 28 through May 14 of 2014. Methods of the research were the observation and questioning.

3.2. Findings

We found that students' achievement is closely linked with building awareness for negative influence of prejudices and bias toward other ethnicity. The tolerance was actually defined by summing the prejudices measures and reversing the score. The prejudices measures were negatively correlated with the students' achievement, indicating that higher levels of prejudices are more likely to be found in the students who evidence lower levels of achievement. At the same time, a moderate positive correlation found between tolerance and students' achievement indicates that higher levels of tolerance are more likely to be found in the students with higher levels of achievement.

According to opinion of the participants in the research, the future teachers should accomplish the following competencies to work in a multicultural environment:

Table 1: Teacher Competencies to Work in a Multicultural Environment

| Competency | Activities |
|---|--|
| The teacher has deepened knowledge and understanding of the terms "identity", "ethnicity", "culture", "interculturalism", and "multiculturalism". | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Knows his culture and expresses readiness to meet other cultures. ○ Promotes equality between students and acceptance of differences. ○ Argues against any kind of discrimination and hate speech. |
| The teacher applies knowledge of the | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Promotes acceptance, adaptation and integration of ethnic and cultural diversity in the educational process. ○ Initiates a collaborative effort between students of different ethnic background in the classes and extracurricular activities. ○ Provides adequate attention and support for all students regardless of their ethnic and confessional affiliation. ○ Collaborates with the parents and builds cooperative environment. ○ Identifies stereotypes and prejudices and |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>objectives and characteristics of the concept of interethnic integration in education in practice.</p> | <p>makes recommendations to overcome them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Avoids any kind of discrimination against colleagues, parents and students. ○ Promotes cultural diversity by selecting the appropriate decoration of the classroom. |
| <p>The teacher makes judgments, analyzes, evaluates, and presents information, ideas, and concepts relevant for a multicultural environment.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Conducts self-evaluation of his/her own work in multicultural environment and obtained results uses to adapts the classroom and lectures to students' needs. ○ Considers the motives and effects of his judgments linked to resolving problems in the multicultural classroom. ○ Makes democratic and transparent decisions about teaching and pupils' progress. |
| <p>The teacher develops effective communication and creates a positive school climate.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Maintains a clear focus on the communication using experiences and activities to motivate interpersonal communication between all students with different ethnicity. ○ Develops frequent and friendly contacts with all subjects of the educational process regardless of their culture and ethnicity. ○ Communicates effectively with the parents and the local community entities. |
| <p>The teacher takes initiative to identify learning needs for further knowledge about multicultural relations in education with a high degree of autonomy.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Participates in projects related to solving interethnic problems in education. ○ Follows the new scientific achievements in the field of pedagogy of equity and multicultural education. ○ Identifies the needs and interest on life long learning and professional development. |

4. CONCLUSION

According to some thinkers, multicultural education as reform movement is bound by an educational platform that calls for the total transformation of schooling in ways that affirm cultural diversity, support human dignity, and foster educational accomplishment for all youth (Boyle-Baise, 2012).

Macedonia is one of the most diverse countries in the Balkans, and this diversity is reflected in the needs of the students. Therefore, the abilities of the teachers to address the learning needs of all students form real challenge.

The results of the paper research show that endeavours within faculties of education in Macedonia to initiate and develop students' reflective thinking power both in and out of the classroom are likely to have an accompanying positive influence on their tolerance and achievements levels. The multicultural competencies of the teachers are acquired through a long process in which the personality of the teacher is trained to evaluate, to believe in better, and to solve problems related to cultural diversity. However, according to the findings, *conditio sine qua non* in this process is the upgrading curricula at the higher education. From there, an increasing number of professional educators in the country has been involved in different projects related to interethnic integration in education and reforms in national curriculums. The research imply also that specific curricular interventions can develop students' reflective judgment power and improve their achievements in learning. These intentional interventions in curricula should to facilitate the development of teacher multicultural competencies as an important goal in initial teacher education.

Based on the findings of this paper, the future teachers should also do additional efforts to maintenance of the acquired multicultural competencies during their professional development in the area of building tolerance and developing respect for human diversity.

Finally, on basis of the National Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (NF-HEQ) in Macedonia has been developed Catalogue of Key Competencies for Teachers through analysis of national and international teacher competencies and consultation with members of the teaching profession.

Nonetheless, the list of teacher multicultural competencies which was made by the students, participants in this research, can serve as a framework for future reconsideration and rethinking in this specific educational domain.

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