The Challenge of Education in a Multicultural Setting

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the culturally responsive teaching and the importance of addressing cultural diversity in the classroom, with special focus on education in multicultural environments. Culturally responsive teaching requires certain adjustments and changes in the curriculum so as to build upon the cultures of diverse groups, no matter the subject taught. The school climate is an indicator of whether diversity and equality are respected and promoted in schools. We will therefore, stress the importance of teacher's understanding of their students' cultural background and hence, be culturally responsive in their approach. This paper will draw examples from the education circumstances in Macedonia and from my local experience as a lecturer at the South East Eurpean University (SEEEU) in Tetovo, Macedonia. It will also look at the legal frame referring to the education in Macedonia and see how it organizes the objectives and outcomes in respect to some general values, such as cultural diversity, creativity, democratisation of culture.

Key terms: multiculturalism, cultural diversity, culturally responsive teaching, cultural background, diversity

Introduction

Historically, the word "culture" came from the Latin word *cultura*, primarily referring to the cultivation of land and animals. However, from the 16th century on, the word started denoting the process of cultivation of the spirit. Later on, throughout the 18th and 19th century, this noun started having an ethnocentric connotation, and referred to a high cultivation of the spirit achievable only by the privileged European. It also became a synonym for civilization, thus describing a progressive process of the human development and evolution towards sophistication and order. What is of crucial importance for our paper here, is the reference about culture provided by Kuper (2000). He points out that culture is always defined in opposition to something else (2000: 14). It is actually, the authentic way of being different.

In order to open the terrain for further analysis of our proposed topic, regarding the challenges of multicultural education, it is of utmost importance to draw the attention to the fact that culture is learned, and not biological, that is, it is socially constructed,

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reinvented as well as, patterned and repetitive. Culture is made up of many components such as race, sexuality, social class, sex/gender, health, age, social status, ethnicity and nationality, as well as, the socializing agents such as family, community, school, peer groups, arts, workplace, print media, and the like. All of these components and the complex ways in which, they are defined, understood, misunderstood, shaped or reshaped, open vast space for stereotypes, prejudices, ethnocentrism, as well as intercultural communication and/or miscommunication.

Although all of the above aspects and socializing agents play an immensely important role in the creation or breaking of stereotypes, it goes without saying that pupils, as well as students, and teachers should be seen as agents for further changes. It is within them that a great deal of the potential for re-conceptualization of the notion of 'us' and 'them', where "us" is superior and "them" inferior, lies. This triggers us to detect what kind of negative ethnic stereotypes / prejudices have formed the mindsets and attitudes of the students, as well as, to seek ways for avoiding or erasing such stereotypes and prejudices altogether. Moreover, these topics, trigger one to ask, what could be the role of education in dealing with these issues and in healing the wounds inflicted to the society as a whole.

Multicultural Education and Multicultural Debates

The Sofia Conference on 'Educational Co-operation for Peace and Stability and Democracy' (1999) worked out a framework for action in the educational sector in the region (referring to Central East Europe), especially to develop inter-regional and multilateral initiatives to promote a comparative and complex understanding of teaching (content, materials and methods) in multi-ethnic societies. Furthermore, the creation of interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations between those who are working in the field was in the focus of attention. Yet, many societies, including Macedonia, still face difficulties in the process of accommodating of and catering for the multicultural integration in education. It certainly goes without saying then, that the role of education in a multicultural society is of paramount importance.

To demonstrate how difficult it is to promote an atmosphere of culturally responsive[2] teaching and challenging of the notions of "us" and "them" it is worthwhile bringing to the fore Gutman's observation, whereby although many countries today are culturally diverse, at a theoretical level we still lack a model of how to face the "challenge of multiculturalism" (Gutmann, 1994, p.3). Although much of the legal and theoretical framework of Macedonia for instance, shows impulses of a positive response to cultural diversity, there is no mutual consent as per the questions such as: Should schools in a multicultural society reinforce students' cultural identities and in what way? If they shouldn't, then why? These problematic issues regarding cultural diversity and multiculturalism in the classroom show that there are many challenges regarding multiculturalism, challenges which go deeper into the questions regarding ourselves, community and the world view.

In his complex study *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (1992), Taylor accentuates recognition as something that forges our identity in our interaction with others. As he puts it, "the monological ideal seriously underestimates the place of the dialogical in human life" (Taylor 1992: 33). Moreover, he radically claims that "my own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others" (1992: 34). Taylor's major standpoint is

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2. *Teaching that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates fundamental cultures, as well as, offers full, equal access to education for students from all cultures. It also recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning.*

that of a pro-multiculturalist who stands in favour of the recognition of distinct cultural identities. He maintains that cultural recognition is an important and necessary constituent of the value of treating individuals with equal respect. In the light of this argument, he argues that cultural recognition is important because its "refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it, according to a widespread modern view [...] The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort or oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized." (1992: 36). In accordance with this argument, Taylor urges us to see that to withhold recognition from others, or to even impose misrecognition, "can be a form of oppression" (1992: 36). This universal demand of equal respect and recognition "powers an acknowledgment of specificity," where specificity refers to the distinct nature of specific cultural groups as the basis for individual identity, that is, authenticity (39). Taylor calls on a recognition of equal value, that is, the equal worth of other cultures (64). Nevertheless, he strongly believes that the validity of the presumption whereby we owe equal respect to all cultures is by no means unproblematic, and that if taken for granted, as it most often is, it "involves something like an act of faith" (66). In this sense, Taylor appears to be very critical of the automatic, unquestioned assumption that non-inclusion inevitably means exclusion and that as such, it can harm, and is bad. To say that a culture has equal worth, according to Taylor, is not necessarily equivalent to saying that everything in that culture should be endorsed unconditionally.

Another well known multicultural thinker, Will Kymlicka, stands clearly in favour or recognition of other cultures, i.e. cultural memberships. He swings though between the position of liberalism and communitarianism and decides to lever the tension by proposing a dialectical model, which will serve as the solution. Such a mode, which would accommodate cultural membership within the framework of liberalism is the establishment of two different kinds of respect that liberals should have for individuals. "People are owed respect as citizens and as members of cultural communities" (Kymlicka, 1989: 151). The main challenge, nevertheless, is to achieve adequate balance, that is, reconciliation, between these two types of respect for individuals. Kymlicka's goal remains particularly difficult, if unattainable, in modern plural societies where the two do not always coincide. In addition, Kymlicka's major point of reference are Canada's aboriginal communities, which makes the applicability of his study on other regions even more difficult.

While Tylor's as well as Kymlicka's positions have been criticized by anthropologists" (Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson 2001: 17), who argue that that much of their arguments "often slips into a more reified rhetoric" where "cultures are referred to as distinct, bounded entities, even if they are not necessarily co-terminous with a national society, but rather, are 'commingled in each individual society', these authors clearly awake us to the fact that accommodating multiculturalism in education remains an enormously difficult task.

Challenges and Suggestions for Teaching in a Multicultural Setting and Teaching a Culture

So far, we have mentioned some of the challenges of multicultural education, which among other, include breaking the stereotypes about the Other and learning more about the culture of the other, which would lead to a recognition of a distinct cultural membership, as well as sensitivization of the teachers, who need to face their own limits, prejudices and bias and provide a culturally responsive learning. This leads us to conclude that multicultural education can and should be executed on at least two levels: the teachers who need to incorporate it in their syllabus as well as the way in which they approach the

group, as well as the school, being a policy maker and deciding on the curricula and other aspects of education. To begin with the former, that is, the position of the teacher, one can argue that while there are cases where courses on cultures and multiculturalism are being offered[3] teachers often content themselves by thinking that students will be exposed to cultural materials later in the course of their study of a number of courses they teach, but are not necessarily related to culture *per se*. Moreover, many teachers are not accepting the task of teaching a culture so easily, as they fear that they themselves, do not know enough about it. Galloway (1992) emphasizes the importance of recognizing the influence of culture on one's attitudes and beliefs, which can result in projecting one's native point of view on the culture being studies. Hence, introducing the students to a new culture must go hand in hand with making them understand, value and appreciate the differences, logic, and specific context of the culture learned. Galloway proposes that the best approach to understanding the culture of the other is to make students first understand their culture and frame of reference.

One point of departure is certainly the balance needed in creating a proper cultural syllabus. If we aim at creating an unbiased approach in teaching, we should be cautious to avoid stereotyping and informing our students about the difference between to avoid stereotyping and informing our students about the difference between *types* (common traits) and *stereotypes* (fixed images about the other (Patrikis, 1988: 18). We must also be very carefully in avoiding *triviality,* which would mean divorcing culture from its context, as well as, favouring and/or neglecting one feature of culture over another. Culture can also be taught at a very superficial level, and thus insufficiently sublime. Galloway (1985) points out 4 different ways, which range from teaching a mixture of visible traits of a culture, through focusing on folk dances and food, identification of monuments, rivers and cities, all the way to lectures regarding behavioural traits that would indiscriminately emphasize sharp difference. The problems with these approaches is that they often tend to exoticize culture, hence, accentuating rather than alleviating the process of Othering and hence, increasing the "us" and "them" gap. The optimal result of a successful multicultural education, infused with culturally responsive teaching, self-awareness of teacher, and hence, knowing ones personal limitations and possible stereotypes, would at its best achieve some kind of evolvement in the thinking pattern. Therefore, students should move from having superficial stereotypes to becoming aware of a culture as insiders, immersed in its context and hence free from ethnocentric images about the Other.

In order to achieve such an atmosphere in the classroom, it is of absolute necessity that teachers are also knowledgeable of the cultural background of their students and be able to translate that knowledge into effective and inspiring lectures and course instructions (Banks et al. 2001: 2). A multicultural education would also mean that all students have equal access to information and they are given the same opportunities regardless of sex, race, class, ethnicity or gender. Going back to the opening point of this paper, students should at all times be reminded of the social construction of knowledge and culture, which often reflects itself in biased approaches to the study of history, concepts, as well as other subjects. Such approaches put to the fore the dominant group, i.e. mainstream students, which often results in the marginalization of other groups of students. Above all, at the level of student engagement, extracurricular activities can be of incredible importance for

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3. *I am engaged in the organization and teaching of a course provided at the SEEU on Post-conflict reconciliation and Multiculturalism topics in cooperation with the NGO Loja from Tetovo and Kurve Wustrov from Germany.*

the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that will promote positive interethnic relationships. Such activities can include sports, academic clubs, ecological projects, and so forth.

Finally, students should be exposed to the phenomenon of stereotyping and become aware of its negative effects on interethnic relations. In order to counter the biased approach to, they have to be continually exposed to topics that will awaken them to the values existent in almost every culture and are almost tantamount to those of the UN Universal Bill of Rights. Becoming aware of the similarities that exist across cultures can open the space for nurturing more favourable interethnic relations.

Cultural/Educational Conditions in Macedonia: Legal Framework/Current Aspects/Future Challenges

Having looked at some of the multicultural debates, which mainly shift from accommodating cultural membership to the recognition of someone's specificity and distinctiveness of their cultural group as the prime foundation of individual identity, we now move to some factual state of affairs in Macedonia and the difficulty of accommodating multicultural education.

The Principle of Equality and the Cultures of the Nationalities

According to the latest census of 2002, the population consists of: *64.2% Macedonians; 25.2% Albanians; 3.9% Turks; 1.9% Serbs; 2.7% Romanies; 0.8% Boshnaks, Etc.* The members of the nationalities have the constitutional right to express, nurture and develop freely their own cultural, religious, and linguistic identity and national features. The Ministry of Culture includes the citizens particularly in the decision-making process about projects enrolled in open competitions, and in the creation of the yearly cultural programs. This is transparent and is disseminated in the annual program for culture, published on the web site of the Ministry of culture. The Government particularly takes care of the protection of the cultural identity of the citizens of different national and ethnic origin through: providing the conditions for the realization of their right to establish their associations and cultural institutions; having the same protection of copyright and other related rights irrespective of the nationality of the author; equal protection of cultural monuments regardless of their origin, i.e. with no reference as to whose confessional, ethnological or folklore heritage they represent; fostering and providing conditions for free creative work in the language and alphabet of the nationalities, etc. Article 48 of the Constitution, among other things, states: Members of nationalities have the right to instruction in their own language in primary and secondary education, and university education, as determined by law. With the amendments to the Constitution after the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 13.08.2001, the following has also been provided for the nationalities: - in the units of local self-government where at least 20% of the population speak a particular language, that language and its alphabet will be used as official, in addition to the Macedonian language and its Cyrillic alphabet.[4] In addition, the Law on Primary Education in Macedonia prohibits discrimination based on sex, race, nation, or social, political, religious background. The Law also allows for the education of pupils/students, who belong to the minority. These

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4. *On laws that directly concern culture, the use of languages, education, etc., the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia decides by majority voting of the present members of parliament, within which there must be a majority of votes from the members of parliament who claim to belong to the communities that are not a majority population in Macedonia.*

students can follow classes in their mother tongue. The same applies for the Law on High School Education.

Yet, unlike the theoretical, legal framework that we have just presented, it is not difficult to notice, that in Macedonia, in many sphere of life, the members of different ethnic groups live in isolation from each other and have only minimal peripheral contact. Their cultural and linguistic differences form private worlds that separate them from other groups (Najchevska, 2000). Moreover, in terms of the Laws on Education, which allow for education to take place in one's native language, it is important to see whether, such an education will promote, support or facilitate the process of integration in the Macedonian society, or it will lead to the widening of the gap and deepening of divisions along ethnic and linguistic lines, which can be hazardous for the future of the society as a whole. Even before the conflict in Macedonia of January 2001, various researches registered that the "relations between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the ethnic Albanian community were deteriorating, that the climate in the country was one of widespread pessimism, that dialogue and interaction between the two communities were virtually non-existent, that fears and lack of trust dominated the attitudes of both sides" (Balalovska 2002: 73).

The problem with segregated schools nowadays, as well as with the ethnically mixed ones, which include members of other nationalities, but in different time shifts, widens the already large gap formed between the ethnic groups. The schools have no strategies for improving social relations, and impressing among the students the principles of tolerance, respect, acceptance and the appreciation of diversity. Recent situations showed that violence is also present among different ethnic groups. On several occasions there were fights among children of different nationalities on the premises of the school. These conflicts originate from the presence of stereotypes and stereotypic images of each other, that as previously mentioned, are so important to counter but also understand as an inevitable phenomenon in the socializing process. In the research *Студии за мултикултурализам и меѓуетнички односи во образованието во Македонија/Studies for multiculturalism and inter-ethnic relations in education in Macedonia* by UNICEF (2009), we can see the amount of students studying in segregated schools and in ethnically mixed schools.

Language	School	Number of students	
Macedonian language	Mixed schools	17939	12.8%
	Segregated school	122375	87,2%
Albanian language	Mixed schools	22548	30,4%
	Segregated school	51555	69,6%
Turkish language	Mixed schools	4702	78,4%
	Segregated school	1297	21,6%
Serbian language	Mixed schools	137	32,9%
	Segregated school	280	67,1%

As we can see, bigger percentage of the students studies in monolingual schools, separated from each other. When asked why they do not make friends with each other, they

stated that the main reason is that they cannot understand each other (UNICEF 2009). When asked, which kind of school they would choose to study at, the bigger percentage of both Macedonian and Albanian answered that they would choose a segregated school.

This clearly leads us to the conclusion that, Macedonia faces something similar to what Kymlicka (2002) describes as the phenomenon of multicultural federations in the West European (WE) countries (Flemish, Catalan, Basque, and Quebec – all of which, have some level of regional autonomy and official language rights). Apart from some benefits for the wellbeing of the society as a whole, the results of such practices are often that citizens of the dominant group are indifferent to the internal life of minority groups and vice versa. There is a feeling of resentment, and the sub-state national groups feel that the ideology of the nation state has not been denounced, while the members of the dominant group feel the minority is ungrateful. As a result inter-group contact is avoided. We end up living in what Kymlicka calls, parallel societies.

All of the above brings to the fore the complexity of the process of education in such a multicultural setting in what is moreover, a post-conflict society. Teaching plays an important if not crucial role in developing the individual and collective identity of students. In South Eastern Europe teaching, especially in the field of history, the classrooms are often used to promote nationalistic ideology. Deconstructing national narratives, sensitivizing students, and moreover sensitivizing and training teachers for creating an inter-ethnic dialogue in the classroom, offering cultural responsive teaching and countering the stereotypes is a hard task that teaching in multicultural setting has to fulfil. Moreover, culturally responsive teaching requires certain adjustments and changes in the curriculum so as to build upon the cultures of diverse groups, no matter the subject taught. In other words, we are prompted to seek an answer as to what kind of institutional programs in education can or will promote inter-ethnic tolerance that would lead to decreased ethnic tensions in Macedonia (Fleet et al. 2000: 3).

It goes without saying that one of the major problems in implementing culturally responsive teaching in the classroom is the lack of properly educated staff that already suffers from stereotypes and bias. Teachers in the Republic of Macedonia have a lack of communication and collaboration among each other. The recent study conducted by UNICEF shows that the collaboration among Macedonian and Albanian teachers remains limited, mainly because they do not teach in the same language and attends classes in different shifts.

These are the answers provided to the question: *Do you have professional collaboration with teachers who teach in Albanian/Macedonian language?*

	Macedonian	Albanian
yes	55.2%	22.9%
no, because we teach in different language	19.4%	39.6%
no, different shifts	13.4%	6.3%
no, different teaching materials	10.4%	10.4%
no, we have different problems	7.5%	14.6%
no, they don't want collaboration	7.5%	29.2%
no, we don't want collaboration	/	/
no, other reasons	10.4%	12.5%

Conclusion

This paper has outlined some of the major issues and complexities regarding multicultural education. It focused on the need of schools and teachers providing culturally responsive teaching as well as curricula so as to build upon the cultures of diverse groups, no matter the subject taught. In order to address the multifaceted aspects and challenges of multicultural education, we have provided the major debates in multicultural theory and the accommodation of the rights of minorities provided by the pivotal authors in the subject, such as Kymlicka and Taylor. Building upon their arguments, the paper reviewed the difficulties and possible ways of accommodating differences and providing a quality multicultural education. Such education would be multilayered and would include at its best:

- teacher learning understood as teachers becoming aware of the complexity of ethnic groups and possibly even being provided with professional development programs that would help them understand the characteristics of the Other;
- Student learning, which would offer equitable opportunities to all students and provide them with a curriculum that would be either unbiased or open to addressing the limitations of previous approaches;
- Working on the improvement of intergroup relations in the classroom by introducing the students to the phenomenon of stereotyping and bias, while teaching them about the common values most cultures share.

Among other venues for action and promotion of cooperation, we have mentioned extracurricular activities as means to a solid collaboration between groups/nations/ethnicities. The issue of languages in which education is being offered in Macedonia has also been addresses, posing the question as to how much education in the native language can widen or close the gap between ethnicities. And while a number of issue remain to be tackled, as educators, we must remain alert and aware, that multicultural education must help students from what are otherwise known as marginalized groups or sub-state nationalities in achieving and experience academic success. This in itself would not count as sufficient, unless in the process, students were also taught how to develop skills and attitudes needed for positive interaction free of biases and stereotypes. Educating students in this manner is of utmost importance for bridging the already existent gaps in today's polarized world. To conclude, "schools must find ways to respect the diversity of their students and to help create a unified nation to which all citizens have allegiance" (Banks et al. 2001).

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