

No problem! Avoidance of cultural diversity in teacher training

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Research all over the world indicates that initial teacher training, as far as multicultural education is concerned, is grossly inadequate or, in many instances, non-existent. In many cases it is still regarded as a luxury which cannot be afforded in a time of scarcity of resources, or as a contentious politically sensitive area best avoided. Avoidance or so-called "no problem!" strategies are often the outcome of teacher training that fails or falls short of addressing issues of diversity in schools. There is much talk worldwide of permeating a multicultural perspective in teacher training programmes. Most educational stakeholders agree on the feasibility of training prospective teachers to teach in a multicultural society. In practice, however, very little, if anything (in some cases), is being done to impregnate existing initial teacher training courses with a pluralistic vision or perspective. Teachers cannot be expected to be effective in teaching multicultural content and working effectively with ethnically diverse student groups without being professionally prepared for this task.

Introduction

"... social justice was treated as irrelevant to their training ... Bringing the issue of race into the 157 interviews was often problematic. Students, teachers, mentors and lecturers were happy to discuss issues related to initial teacher training, but seemed surprised when I raised issues of equality and saw it as largely or entirely inappropriate ... The most conspicuous spectre that haunted my data was "silence". Beginning teachers and the people who trained them managed to avoid acknowledging the ethnic status of certain children they taught, or made ethnic minority children somehow white by proxy" (Jones, 1999: 137-138).

A recent study by Jones in the United Kingdom explored how student teachers in predominantly white areas came to understand issues of ethnicity during the course of their teacher training. In the United Kingdom, legislation put universities into partnerships with schools and shifted the balance of teacher training towards the commendable classroom and learning "on the job" model. During the professional training phase, student teachers spend longer periods in schools in order to learn the teaching profession as a whole through structurally planned school experiences. Feedback through extensive interviewing was obtained from student teachers in exclusively white classrooms during their professional teaching practice. The quotation above demonstrates the ignorance about ethnic and cultural issues during teacher education school-based training in the United Kingdom, which in no way differs from anywhere else in the world today.

Jones (1999:142) maintains that "... not only has racist behaviour in classrooms been systematically ignored, but also that institutional practices have effectively managed to spawn an entire generation of teachers who have no understanding of the situation or needs of ethnic minority children, who have no strategies to deal with racist behaviour in the classroom ..." Avoidance, or so-called "no problem!" strategies, are often the outcome of teacher training that fails or fall short of addressing issues of diversity in schools. Another easy way out is the frequently acclaimed and well-known "colour-blind" approach by teaching staff.

In the United States of America, currently the overall situation in teacher training is no different. Race continues to be a critical, complex and pervasive issue to which teacher education is not immune. Colleges and Departments of Education are under increasing attack for failure to address issues of racial diversity. Criticism ranges from failure of training programmes to recruit and retain graduate students of colour, to courses in teacher preparation curricula largely devoid of content and knowledge about various ethnic or cultural groups in multicultural America today. In 1996, the National Centre for Education Statistics emphasised the fact that student populations were becoming increasingly diverse, whilst the teaching force in the USA remained essentially homogeneous: 31.5% of students were from minority

groups but only 13.5% of teachers were minority representatives. In 2000, the USA teaching work force in schools was predominantly white and female, whilst demographic estimates revealed a school population that was made up of about 33% economically disadvantaged minority groups with special needs (Talbert-Johnson & Tillman, 1999:200). It is estimated that approximately 80% of all new entrants into the American labour market over the next decade up to 2010 will be women and minorities, which has particular relevance for higher education and teacher training in particular. If it is assumed that a society's work force should reflect the racial composition of society at large, America is up against a problem of critical magnitude.

All over the world there is a tendency of very few ethnic minority teachers within educational systems, whilst those who are in the system usually are poorly trained and at the lower scale of the promotional hierarchy. Special efforts should therefore be made to direct recruitment strategies towards securing excellent potential teacher material for the teaching profession. There is much talk world-wide of permeating a multicultural perspective in teacher training programmes. Most educational stakeholders agree on the feasibility of training prospective teachers to teach in a multicultural society. In practice, however, very little, if any (in some cases), is done to impregnate existing initial teacher training courses with a pluralistic vision or perspective (Talbert-Johnson & Tillman, 1999). Often the multicultural component is nothing more than merely a superficially, fragmentary, "tokenistic" and limited add-on to a traditionally dominant culture-oriented curriculum. It is well known that some subject areas are more readily "infused" or "permeated with new perspectives than others. Despite this, there are more areas that are currently ethno-centric in orientation and content.

Teachers can't teach what they don't know!

The assumption is often made that effective education in culturally diverse classrooms is realised automatically in any educational situation where learners of different ethnic or cultural groups attending the same school are assigned to the same classes. These mixed classes can, at best, constitute a multicultural education situation and do not guarantee effective education. When a multicultural class confronts teachers, they usually tend to betake themselves to either of the following two coping approaches (see Le Roux, 1998:56-58):

- The first possibility is that the teacher simply proceeds as always. This is the result of ignorance and a sketchy knowledge of multiculturalism. If trained for a model of "monoculturalism", the teacher calls upon tried and tested "recipes" as well as his or her experience in teaching. Most teachers in multicultural teaching situations still attempt to simply transmit their former school practice to the new multicultural class; usually not in resistance to the approach of multicultural education, but merely as a result

of their lack of knowledge in this regard. Learners from minority cultures are simply assimilated into the teacher's or the dominant culture. Assessment often does not test the skills and abilities of learners from minority cultures, but only evaluates the extent to which these learners "reside" in the cultural mainstream, without being optimally accommodated. This reactive model thus implies the following: It is assumed that intercultural communication, intercultural enrichment and positive acculturation to a multicultural class situation will develop spontaneously. No radical interventions or changes need to be brought about by the teacher. The teacher is no facilitator of a situation that has changed from a monocultural to a multicultural classroom setting; he or she simply in new circumstances continues using a recipe that has guaranteed success in the past.

- A second possibility is a radical and total reconsideration of the global education setting in all its facets. It requires a drastic change in attitude, an unprejudiced empathy, a critical review of one's own classroom practice and an explicit preparedness to change, to adapt and to learn anew. The teacher, as a facilitator of the multicultural class, takes deliberate and active steps to enhance intercultural interaction, intercultural understanding and cross-cultural appreciation, as well as a reappraisal of the individual's peculiar culture. In this class, the teacher manages, in a proactive manner, the learning experiences of a culturally diverse group of learners by being sensitive to culturally related styles of learning, culturally prejudiced styles of teaching and culturally unprejudiced evaluation strategies. This proactive model requires a new spirit, an innovative attitude, a cultural reappraisal and a co-partnership in building a new, democratic educational dispensation. Teachers are architects responsible for redesigning classes in this manner but also, as facilitators, the managers of the entire process of education for cultural diversity in our schools. Teachers are challenged to select the second possibility as the only realistic alternative, and to undertake this with enthusiasm and in a studious spirit. The way in which teachers deal with cultural diversity in classes serves as an example which will be emulated by all learners. Education for cultural diversity therefore implies a multitude of cultures represented in the subject content and not merely a multitude of learners from various cultures (Le Roux, 1998).

An important point needs to be made here: Teachers cannot be expected to teach multicultural content successfully and work effectively with ethnically diverse students without being professionally prepared for this task. Knowledgeableness is the first and utmost minimum condition for effective teaching. How can inexperienced newcomers to the teaching profession be expected to teach what they do not know? A natural tendency may be a reluctance to change from what teachers are accustomed to doing and an environment and practice that is familiar to them (Banks & Lynch, 1986). The following factors have been reported which fuel teachers' reluctance to change from a former monocultural education practice into one that is fully and truly multicultural in theory and practice: Feelings of inadequacy, a lack of professional confidence, few persuasive incentives and a scarcity of experienced multicultural teacher role models.

More than thirty years ago already, Smith's Teachers for the Real World (1969, in Melnick & Zeichner, 1998:88) identified the following problems in the preparation of student teachers to teach students from poor and deprived backgrounds in the USA:

- Teachers were unfamiliar with the backgrounds of poor students and the respective communities where they lived.
- Teacher education programmes usually did little to sensitise teachers with regard to their own existing prejudices and values.
- Teachers lacked the cultivation of skills needed to perform effectively in the culturally diverse classroom.
- Most teacher education programmes prepared students to teach children much like themselves.
- Most teacher education programmes were in need of major ad-

justments in as far as diversity and equity issues were concerned. To this day, little has changed. Although most teacher education programmes acknowledge in principle the importance of pluralistic preparation, in practice they are characterised by a so-called monocultural approach. Programmes perpetuate teaching practices that have historically benefited white middle-class students, thus failing to address the learning needs of those from cultural or ethnic origin other than the mainstream culture. Feelings of being unprepared experienced by novice teachers can be traced back to faculties and schools of education at tertiary level responsible for training teachers, also within the South African tertiary sector. The problem is that most teacher educators are like their students: limited in cross-cultural experiences and understanding, and culturally encapsulated. The expertise of teacher educators and the institutional environment in which teacher education is embedded, are critical in determining the success and efforts to prepare student teachers for a professional environment of working with diverse students (Melnick & Zeichner, 1998). Despite rhetoric to the contrary, this is the reality at most institutions world-wide. Darling-Hammond, Wise & Klein (1997:2) echo the urgent need for change in professional teacher education:

"This new mission for education requires substantially more knowledge and radically different skills for teachers... If all children are to be effectively taught, teachers must be prepared to address the substantial diversity in experiences children bring with them to school — the wide range of languages, cultures, exceptionalities, learning styles, talents and intelligence that in turn requires an equally rich and varied repertoire of teaching strategies ... and to match learning and performance opportunities to the needs of individual children."

Teachers are largely responsible for what and how students learn. Therefore, the degree to which education for cultural diversity is to be realised in our schools depends largely upon the attitudes, knowledge and behaviour of classroom teachers (Rodrigues, 1983). Many identifiable factors account for the progress, prospects and perils of multicultural education in both primary and secondary schools all over the world today. Essential among these factors are the preconceptions, attitudes, values, skills and commitments of classroom teachers (Rivlin, 1977; Banks & Lynch, 1986). Teachers' effectiveness, or the lack thereof, with a culturally diverse group of students and with multicultural curriculum content, is a direct reflection of the quality of their professional preparation.

Banks and Lynch (1986) make the important point that "teachers can't teach what they don't know". All over the world, history of cultural diversity management in schools have proven that the true impediment in the way of cultural pluralism is culturally deficient educators attempting to teach culturally different children (Aragon, 1973). The failure to include education for cultural diversity in teacher training programmes has been largely responsible for these inadequacies. Limited multicultural experience and a shortage of resources available for pre-service and in-service teacher training tend to be sporadic, fragmentary and superficially add-on "optional extras" to an already overloaded school curriculum (Craft, 1981).

Possible changes to existing teacher education curricula

Research all over the world (see references cited in this article) indicates that initial teacher training as far as multicultural education is concerned, is grossly inadequate or, in many instances, non-existent. In many cases it is still regarded as a luxury that cannot be afforded in a time of scarcity of resources, or as a contentious politically sensitive area best avoided. In both initial and in-service training courses where multicultural issues are addressed, the training focus tends to be on multiculturalism rather than on race and educational issues.

Instead of creating identifiable separate slots in the curriculum timetable, pre-service training rather has to take account of all multicultural education facets throughout the students' curriculum. Sociology of Education, for instance, could include themes of Race Relations, whilst Psychology of Education could include a perspective on the

development of prejudice and how it affects emotions and self-concept formation. Subsequently, Philosophy of Education could raise the critical question of whether there are cross-cultural questions of rationality identifiable. Professional Studies and Teaching Practices could explore the implications of learning theories for the multicultural classroom, and the multicultural dimension of each subject could be developed. Both pre-service (PRESET) and in-service (INSET) teacher education programmes should include aspects of individual and institutional racism in a racism awareness initiative. Student teachers have to be sensitised to their prevailing low expectations of students from cultures other than their own (Handbook for Teachers in the Multicultural Society AFFOR, 1983). Often they are not aware of these lower expectations and of how it affects teaching and learning. All of us tend to be guilty of stereotyping and pre-suppositions. During teacher training, students need to be equipped to manage such stereotyping in ways conducive to effective teaching and learning.

Education for cultural diversity should be infused throughout the total teacher education program. A superficial add-on approach would never work (Grant, 1994). Inculcating sensitivity towards diversity issues should be an overriding ethos of the total teacher education programme, even for those beginning teachers going into monocultural schools. Teacher training thus should impact on the ways teachers-in-training see themselves and others, the structuring of social patterns in the classroom and the prospective teacher's mastery of appropriate knowledge about subject and diversity issues. Besides being knowledgeable in various subject content areas, future teachers will also have to be trained to master a variety of methodological techniques in order to adapt to different learning styles by students. In a multicultural classroom, diversity in cultural background ensures diversity in learning preferences, perspectives and experiential levels. Although traditional approaches to teaching could still be useful to beginning teachers, flexibility in his or her approach is required from the beginning teacher (as from all teachers). The following realities of classroom diversity need to be taken into account in (Garibaldi, 1992):

- Lesson preparation
- Organising effective instructional situations
- Motivating students and managing classrooms
- Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of all students
- Encouraging co-operation between students in the classroom, but also between their respective families and the school at large.

Within a multicultural teacher training curriculum, skills and knowledge of the following areas are essential and should be addressed (Garibaldi, 1992):

- Establishment of a classroom climate where the optimal realisation of all students' potential is assured. Teachers therefore have to demonstrate a sincere and genuine belief that all students, despite differences, can succeed. These positive expectations that enhance student self-concepts should be communicated to all students on a constant basis.
- Prospective teachers need to acquaint themselves with the philosophy underlying multicultural education and to acquire the skills to accommodate a diversity of world-views as well as (often conflicting) perspectives and backgrounds in a common classroom.
- Lesson planning strategies, the formulation of learning objectives and anticipated outcomes as well as lesson exposition should be reconcilable with the broad objectives of multicultural education.
- Teaching materials, language used, written comments, work cards, assignments, educational aids, classroom decorations, prescribed textbooks, teaching methodology, assessment strategies, in fact, the whole educational approach by the teacher, should be unprejudiced and "culture-friendly".
- Pre-service teachers furthermore have to be trained to pursue a different approach and modalities that accommodate the distinctive learning styles of students from different racial and ethnic groups.
- Novice teachers have to acquire the skills of modifying traditional teaching methods into movement-oriented, participatory

and exploratory activities for students within a classroom spirit of co-operation.

- Expertise in educational assessment is critically important for teachers, since teaching skills can be significantly enhanced when teachers know how to monitor student progress and diagnose their respective strengths and weaknesses. Personal expectations of minority culture students should not interfere with the teacher's academic evaluation of them.
- Prospective teachers should develop a sensitivity for the vitally crucial relationship that exists between educational assessment and teacher perceptions.
- The skills of motivating students, constructing learning activities in interesting and stimulating ways and reinforcing student success, deserve more specific attention during pre-service teacher training courses. Similarly, student teachers need to learn how to handle situations where students are not motivated and do not succeed.
- Teacher students should as soon as possible during teaching practice sessions be assigned and exposed to a variety of students and schools, in order to confront them with real practical situations of cultural and ethnic diversity. This "reality test" will assist them to adjust, plan and rearrange their teaching styles and approaches accordingly.
- Student teachers need to learn to take the context of the school and the diversity of students into consideration in the planning, organising and implementing of appropriate pedagogical techniques in different classroom settings.
- A holistic approach to teacher training that takes the strengths and contributions of different cultural groups into consideration, has to be developed instead of embarking on a typical "deficiency model" approach that merely aims to evaluate all in terms of majority culture criteria.

There are identifiable obstacles in the way of university-based teacher education becoming truly multicultural (see Haberman, 1996:112). These programmes are usually taken from the mainstream culture's perception from which criteria of "normality" or "excellence" are derived:

- Research indicates that teachers on the whole are not just ill-prepared to deal with diverse populations. They are in fact ill-prepared to deal effectively with any school population of children and youths in cultural terms.
- People usually do not choose to become teachers because they want to work with children in cultural terms. Often children are stereotypically regarded as so-called prototyped "children" outside their particular cultural background context.
- The knowledge base in teacher education usually makes use of personality constructs (and "acceptable" social behaviour) instead of cultural constructs to explain human behaviour.
- Teacher educators who guide practice (student teaching, fieldwork, etc.) often rely on explanations other than cultural ones to understand and predict children's behaviour.
- The focus in traditional teacher training programmes is on "normal behaviour" and "normal development", whilst urban living, poverty, cultural diversity and the likes are conditions that cause individual children to develop special needs. Terms such as "minority" have merely become euphemisms for adverse conditions that intrude on individual development and learning.
- Minority status therefore cannot be perceived as a normal condition if the observer regards it as less desirable in status and a handicapping condition to be compensated for.
- The concept of "normality" is often made synonymous with the concept of "healthy" and "desirable". Any deviation from this norm is regarded as "abnormal", and future teachers are prepared to deal with such "abnormalities" in schools.

The following options could be considered to equip student teachers during professional training (as well as during in-service sessions) to deal with classroom realities of diversity in schools more effectively

(Corson, 1998:215):

- A flexible and self-directed approach to diverse students could replace a didactic teaching style for working with students from different backgrounds.
- A readiness to meet unusual classroom situations in an imaginative and ingenious ways instead of a methods-based approach for handling classroom situations.
- A person-oriented approach, sensitive to the different values and norms of diverse students, could replace whole-class responses to conflict resolution.
- A curriculum that develops critical thinkers who are in control of their lives could replace existing curricula that often bind students to abstract knowledge.
- Instead of a curriculum that "takes the rough edges off society" and its social problems, a curriculum that asks the following questions should rather be considered: Who makes the decisions? Who benefits from them? Who suffers because of them? How can change be brought about?
- Assessment methods that highlight students' weaknesses could be replaced by an evaluation system that builds and challenges students to higher levels of achievements.
- Instead of a professional persona of objectivity and detachment, a professional engagement with diversity that celebrates differences could be put in place.
- The school itself could critically be looked upon as a possible source of educational failure, rather than solely blaming students for their failure.
- Instead of viewing the school as an isolated institution, education could be approached as being in the grip of social formations that are open to change.

Conclusion

Finally, it is important to carefully re-examine the whole culture and philosophy that underlie teacher training. To cosmetically add on a clause about respect for other cultures (which is commonly done), serves no purpose. Achieving a qualified teacher status should imply becoming a reflective and empathetic educational practitioner who at all times will be alert and sensitive to the needs of all students. The real foundation of effective teaching is the relationship between teacher and student based on mutual trust, sensitivity, understanding and the needs of each individual student. This relationship is not based on measurable outcomes or the subject curriculum expertise of the teacher, but on demonstrated respect and acknowledgement of diversity by someone who values being different as an asset, rather than a classroom hindrance (Jones, 1999). The ethics of such an approach to teaching need to be acquired and fostered during pre-service teacher training programmes. To be successful in preparing prospective teachers for a multicultural school population, the training of university and college trainees (lecturers and tutors) needs to be the starting point of infusing a spirit of cultural diversity into all teacher training, both INSET and PRESET.

Hunter (1974:11) emphasises that, if education is to meet the needs of all people,

"... it must have a blood of multicultural content in order to be sociologically relevant, philosophically germane, psychologically material and pedagogically apropos".

Teachers need to acquire the skill of deeply understanding cultural norms other than their own. This sensitivity needs to be instilled

during teacher education training. One of the most important problems experienced by beginning teachers is the cultural mismatch in background between teachers and students (Boyer, 1996). Difference between home and school culture often negatively interferes with effective teaching and learning in classrooms (Hollins, 1995). It could result in students being confronted with opposing and conflicting views and values where home and school is experienced as opposing or contrasting societal institutions. Teacher education programmes should therefore attempt to influence pre-service teachers' perspective and understanding of cultural diversity in classrooms (Marshall, 1996) and beyond. Only then will schools succeed to effectively prepare students for the realities of a diverse society. Prospective teachers need to learn that multiculturalism is more than a question of adding specific aspects to various school subjects. It indeed incorporates an approach, attitudes, learning material, and the reality of various learning and teaching styles as well as implicit assumptions. It provides a wider, more realistic and all-inclusive syllabus that has a sensitising effect on students' development of a positive attitude to cultural diversity.

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