



Preparing Teachers for Diversity among Learners in the Classroom

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Abstract

The issue of preparing teachers for diversity in the classroom still has a marginal status in the mainstream teacher education literature. Hence, teacher education reformers have given no or if any, only little attention to review the teacher education curriculum from the perspective of diverse learners in the real classroom setting. The current article brings into focus how teacher education programme should be evolved for equipping teachers to deal effectively with learners in their diverse context. It emphasized that diversity should be considered as a phenomenon rather than a problem and thus developing new beliefs, attitude and dispositions on the part of student-teachers. It attempted to suggest the best ways, taking into account the findings of several studies, to be undertaken for restructuring teacher education programme for diverse learners.

Keywords: *Diverse learners, Teacher Education Reform, Multicultural and Interdisciplinary Teacher Education*

Introduction

In the present scenario of secondary education a teacher is recognised to be a quality teacher if he or she is capable to deal with diverse needs of students in a real classroom setting effectively. Hence, it is expected on the part of teacher education programme to equip

teachers with attitudes, knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to work effectively with an increasingly diverse student population. However, there has been relatively very little attention in the current literature of teacher education reform to ideas about how to prepare teachers to teach an increasingly diverse student population more effectively. When we talk about teacher education for diversity in the classroom following questions do arise in our conscious mind- What are the best ways to prepare teachers to deal with highly diverse classroom? What inputs are needed to be incorporated in the teacher education curriculum for this purpose? What transactional strategies should be adopted? How the prospective teachers should be evaluated? Ongoing changes in social and economic patterns have generally increased diversity within schools, where students with different religions, languages, socioeconomic status and cultural values interact every day. There is an urgent need to identify common challenges in teacher education in response to increasing cultural diversity and devising possible measures to overcome these challenges as well as determining the effectiveness of these proposed measures.

Classroom Diversity as a Tool for Enhancing Learners' Achievement:

Some studies have supported that increasingly multicultural societies have an impact on education and student achievement. The educational challenges posed by family background, socioeconomic context etc. can be used as a driving source for enhancing learning. Diversity is a source of potential growth rather than an inherent hindrance to student performance. However, this is possible only in the hands of an effective teacher and for this an appropriate support and training is essentially needed. Now, there is a paradigm shift in the classroom practices- moving from homogeneity to heterogeneity and then to diversity. Whereas homogeneity acknowledges differences among learners as a challenge and heterogeneity considers differences as a challenge to be dealt with, diversity is taken as an asset for improving students' performance (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/cei/>; Gay, 2000; Lason-Billins, 2001; Lee, 1993).

Beliefs and Attitude of Teachers in Reponse to Diverse Learners:

Many studies have shown that teachers' attitude and beliefs about racial, cultural and ethnic differences serve as ideological anchors of teaching decisions and behaviours and are considered one of the targets for educational reform. Hence, teacher education programme should emphasize on development of attitude and beliefs of prospective teachers respecting diversity among learners by developing their functional understanding of learners in their

diverse context. (Gay, 2009). The personal attributes of prospective teachers have significant effect on their acceptance of and social interactions with people with disabilities. According to Forlin, Tait, Carroll & Jobling (1999) found that only four percent of sample prospective teachers undertook any compulsory courses and only 18 percent had elective units in teaching children with special needs. Pre-service teachers who had at least weekly contact with people with disabilities perceived less discomfort with such interactions than did those who had less contact. Additionally, postgraduate students experienced greater discomfort than undergraduates did. These findings demand for the development of compulsory pre-service courses that focus on diversity and for subsequent changes in content. Thus, an attention must be paid towards revising teacher education programme for incorporating such inputs and practices which could develop positive attitude of student-teachers towards diverse learners.

Prospective Teachers' Orientation to Diversity:

Prospective teachers' meaning to diversity does play a vital role in reforming teacher education programme from a new perspective. It is found that the prospective teachers can bring much to the discussion of diversity among learners. They generally treat diversity as a problem rather than a phenomenon which can be used tactfully to enhance individual learners' performance. They tend to see classroom diversity as a static, abstract, idealistic and decontextualised issue emphasizing merely on individual differences among learners rather than conceptualizing it a practical, concrete, situational and dynamic issue to be tackled with more developed sense of categorical, contextual and pedagogical differences among learners rather simply enthusiastic appreciation of their personality factors. Hence such inputs and processes should be incorporated in teacher education programme which can take into account all four types of approaches to classroom diversity so that prospective teachers can be oriented holistically to the issue of diversity. The approaches are- individual differences, categorical differences, contextual differences and pedagogical differences among learners. An individual difference perspective draws on psychological and biological explanations of diversity. This orientation "directs teachers to seek the sources of pupils' problems and the solution of those problems, in the individuals concerned" (Dale, quoted in Beyer and Zeichner, 1987, p. 319). Categories of difference (gender, for example) should be seen as having other characteristics associated with them (behaviour, for instance). Direct attention should be given to examining the social construction of the category (e.g., why gender is a meaningful distinction in our society?) or explaining the nature of the link between the

category and its associated qualities. The third perspective that of contextual difference, builds on the first and second approaches. From this perspective, differences among individuals occur in patterns, yet these patterns are seen as connected to a social situation or embedded in a larger, dynamic context. Differences (e.g., women/men) are not fixed and dichotomized, but created, maintained, and changed by their interaction (Grant, 1988; Thorne, 1978). Categorical differences exist in part because of the social context; difference is understood as, in part, socially constructed (Mehan, 1992). This approach, in contrast to the other two, takes into consideration causes of difference. Finally, another approach to diversity considers differences not only in terms of causes but also in terms of implications. For educators, a pedagogical perspective on diversity assumes that differences are not simply random and interesting; they are understood as having pedagogical implications-consequences for both teaching and learning.

Some Essential Components for Restructuring Teacher Education Programs to Prepare Teachers for Diversity:

Understanding and appreciating what students know and then to use that knowledge to teach new concepts: It involves constructing and designing relevant cultural metaphors, and using cultural images to bridge the gap between what students know and what the teacher is trying to teach.

Allowing teachers the opportunity to learn the history and culture of the groups in their schools. In the teacher education programme the student-teachers should be provided with adequate scope for learning history and culture of their diverse learners which in turn will add to their ability to teach for diversity. Pre-service education students should be helped to develop a clearer sense of their own ethnic and cultural identities and to examine their attitudes toward other ethnocultural groups. They are should be taught about the dynamics of prejudice and racism and how to deal with them in the classroom. The teacher education curriculum should address the histories and contributions of various ethnocultural groups.

Social and educational practices leading to social inequality: Pre-service education students should be taught about the dynamics of privilege and economic oppression and about school practices that contribute to the reproduction of societal inequalities.

Knowledge of language and dialect: Obviously, if teachers can't understand children, they can't teach them. So, they need to be prepared to speak the language they will encounter. They should get academic credit for knowing or learning a second language. They need to

develop an ear for dialect.

Learning different cognition and learning styles: Teachers must become aware that not all children flourish under a single teaching style. They must know that all children, regardless of their race or ethnicity, have different learning styles. They should have a variety of teaching styles to suit the learning of each individual child.

Understanding how to communicate with parents and the larger community: Student teachers need community-based field experiences like day care, recreation, and youth centers to get know the communities in which they may teach and to know how to talk with parents, some of whom may be negative about schools because of their own experiences and thus helping them know how to help their children succeed in school during pre-service programmes. This will also provide them with opportunity to work with minority children before they enter the classroom.

Student-teachers' teaching experience: It is critical in the preparation process, and many students indicate that this experience is the deciding factor in whether to actually teach. Students should have the exposure of wide variety of schools over their teacher education program and for this multicultural placement programme should be adequately placed and organized in the teacher education curriculum. In addition, they should be provided with the opportunity of practice teaching in excellent schools with diverse populations.

Emphasis on sociocultural research knowledge about the relationships among language, culture, and learning: This will help the prospective teachers to use the students' linguistic and cultural specifics to improve their learning.

Assessing the relationship between methods used in the classroom and the students' preferred learning style in their community: Pre-service education students are taught how to assess the relationships between the methods they use in the classroom and the preferred learning and interaction styles in their students' homes and communities. They are taught how to use various instructional strategies and assessment procedures sensitive to cultural and linguistic variations, and how to adapt classroom instruction and assessment to accommodate the cultural resources that their students bring to school.

Training teachers to reform, reculture, redesign the schools they work in: The prospective teachers should be sensitive to the changes in learners' physical and social environment and should have the ability to restructure the school curriculum accordingly.

Recruiting people from minority as faculty in colleges of education: If schools of education

are not able to recruit and retain minority faculty, how will they ever provide diversity for their own students.

Considering diversity as a resource and asset to enhance students' academic achievement instead of heterogeneity and disparity: Student-teachers ought to be taught the strategies to use learners' diversity as a tool for improving their learning performance. (<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/policy09/preparation.html>; Zeichner, 1993)

Learner studies aspect of foundation of education curricular area should engage student-teachers in understanding children of different ages by interacting with them and observing them in diverse social, economic and cultural contexts besides psychological theories of child development.

Evolving Teacher Education programme as an Interdisciplinary and Multicultural Programme with issue of Equity at its core:

Teacher education programme should be evolved as an interdisciplinary and multicultural programme with issues of equity at its core. This will enable prospective teachers transmit not only skills and knowledge but also self-awareness and respect for others. Inclusion of professional development topics like inclusive education, gender equality, development of child in their diverse social, economical and cultural contexts etc. help the prospective teachers to teach diverse learners effectively. This will prepare teachers to work with students with disabilities and those belonging to socially and economically deprived groups and strategize an approach that develops educators who are better equipped to respond to "socially toxic environments" (Ball, 2011). To address these issues, Banks (1991) notes the importance of integrating multicultural education within the teacher education curriculum: "An effective teacher education policy for the 21st century must include as a major focus the education of all teachers, including teachers of color, in ways that will help them receive the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to work effectively with students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social class groups." (pp. 135-136). Chisholm (1994) notes that that multicultural education "is as essential to teaching as nurturing is to human development." She states, "To be effective and equitable teachers, education students must understand and appreciate human diversity." When preparing teachers for multicultural classrooms, emphasis should be placed on a broad education in the liberal arts, an initial course in multicultural education, infusion of multiculturalism throughout the teacher education curriculum, field experiences in a multicultural setting, and assessment of the cultural competency of each pre-service student-

teacher. Educating teachers for cultural and linguistic diversity means that teacher education programs must emphasize cultural sensitivity, linguistic diversity, and instructional strategies for teaching culturally diverse students (Parla, 1994). Of crucial importance in undertaking this task is the understanding that multicultural education is for all learners, all classrooms, and all educational institutions regardless of demographic composition or geographic location in cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas. Multicultural Teacher Education will help preparing prospective teachers to serve as effective teachers for all students by ensuring equity of opportunity to learn, both in the teacher education classroom and in the future classrooms of pre-service student-teachers by targeting those preconceptions of pre-service student-teachers that are relevant to educating school children of and for diversity.

Conclusion:

Thus, it can be concluded that in increasingly multicultural societies the education system demand for teachers with skills and capacities to tackle learners' diversity in the classroom as a tool to develop their learning performance rather than considering it merely a challenge to be dealt with. The teacher education programme should develop student-teachers' functional understanding of learners in their diverse context so that they can respond diversity in a more positive manner. The classroom diversity should be seen as a practical and concrete issue to be undertaken with more developed sense of individual, categorical, contextual as well as pedagogical differences among learners. For preparing teachers for diverse learners, student-teachers should be given opportunity to learn the history and culture of their diverse learners. They should be taught about social and educational practices leading to social inequality. They should be prepared to speak the language of their learners. They should be imparted with knowledge of a variety of teaching styles to suit the learning of each individual child. The teacher education curriculum should give enough scope for community based field experiences and multicultural placement programme to get pupil-teachers acquainted with beliefs, attitude and life style of minority children before practice teaching or internship. Moreover, minority teacher-educators should be recruited and an interdisciplinary and multicultural approach should be incorporated with teacher education programme to deal effectively with diversity in the classroom.

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