

PROMOTING MULTICULTURALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN DIGITAL ERA

PROMOVAREA MULTICULTURALITĂȚII ÎN INSTITUȚIILE DE ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNT SUPERIOR ÎN ERA DIGITALĂ

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Abstract. Education should empower all students to attain their maximum potentials as learners. Equally, it makes them socially acquainted and dynamic people in local, national, and international situations. Multicultural education emphasizes the essential need to set up institutions to promote the transformation of society in general and the elimination of misconceptions, prejudice, oppression, and injustice. This study analyses university teachers' perceptions and pedagogical strategies for fostering multicultural education in Moldovan higher education. The concepts of education, culture and multiculturalism are examined and used to offer insights to the whole study. The findings of this study show an important pedagogical tool in teaching students of different backgrounds.

Keywords: multiculturalism, higher education, digital era, diversity, equal opportunity, curriculum

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, many borders have disappeared following the intensification and consequences of globalization, coupled with ever-growing movement of people from one country to another. As a result, national identity has been shaken to its focal point, prompting the transformation of many into multicultural states [Aydin, 2014]. While there is no universal consensus on a specific description of multiculturalism in education, it remains a very broad concept with numerous models and different dimensions. Multicultural education or multicultural pedagogy is an educational mediation labelled as multiculturalism, which works from the real context of the presence of two or more cultures. It aims for the appreciation of both common characteristics and differences [Arslan & Rata, 2013]. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that multiculturalism is an ideal to admire when it can develop and enrich individuals. At the same time, blind multiculturalism might be upsetting when one group rejects or does not recognize or at least tolerate other people's cultures and viewpoints.

Understandably, there is also a thoughtful need to foster social cohesion and tolerance of cultural differences through education. Multicultural education "supports and extends the concepts of culture, diversity, equality, social justice, and democracy into the higher education settings" [Gollnick and Chinn, 2013, p. 3]. The higher institutions in our global world are fast changing and consequently the world in which this change takes place has equal effects. Moreover, the interest for higher education is increasing, and the international dimension of advanced learning is as well turning out to be more critical. Generally, the educational systems in recent years have started to struggle with the difficulties of diversity and to consider which subgroups are not yet being included and appropriately served [UNESCO, 2016]. "The social forces that gave rise to the intergroup education movement grew out of the consequences of World War II" [Banks, 2014, pp. 7-8]. The authors noted

that reducing bias and creating multicultural understanding among students from different national, racial, and religious groups is one of the fundamental goals of MCE.

Moreover, the goal of multicultural education according to Aydin is to get ready the students for the world with an ever-growing diversity, and to build up the students' capability for interactive with others by making them to take active part in the course of learning and by stating their competencies in a safe classroom setting. Aydin argues that effective teaching in a MC classroom requires cultural compassion approaches and the creation of equal chances for academic success and individual development for every students. He also assumes that the "teachers' perception of and attitude towards multicultural education are directly related to how they will implement multicultural education, in other words, how they will integrate the differences in the classroom into the educational process around common values" [Aydin, 2014, p.31].

Diversity and multiculturalism are often used interchangeably and the two terms are related. Diversity is a representation of people that exemplifies all cultural and congenital differences. Diversity is an essential component of multiculturalism, but multiculturalism encompasses more than diversity.

Multiculturalism seeks to promote the valuing of diversity and equal opportunity for all people through understanding of the contributions and perspectives of people of differing race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and physical abilities and disabilities. A multicultural curriculum provides a more comprehensive, accurate, intellectually honest view of reality; prepare all students to function in a multicultural society, and better meet the learning needs of all students. [Morey & Kitano, 1997].

"The term multiculturalism refers to the consideration and appreciation of diversity of cultures as addictive to and enriching for global humanity and social order" [Hellstén, 2007, p. 988]. Although there is general support for multiculturalism as many researchers demonstrate, it differs depending upon the problem and context, and there is additionally some inner conflict about multicultural plans and their consequences on social cohesion [Markus, 2011]. Again, multiculturalism or multicultural policy remains a comparatively new concept that suggests the presence of numerous different cultures living together. Also, culturally diverse societies are societies with different cultures because of having simultaneously lived together [Noble & Watkins, 2014]. Multiculturalism is an approach in following commitment, understanding, and cultural discussion among cultures, so that various cultures can peacefully co-exist with less tension [Sadeqy, 2012].

One of the basic principles of learning and teaching in multicultural education, as Banks put it, is to combine the heritage, point of views, and experiences of different cultures, by establishing relations between the real life experiences and what is learnt at higher educational establishments (HEE) for diverse cultural students. Education ought to empower all students to attain their maximum potentials as learners and equally make them socially cognizant and dynamic people in local, national, and international situations [Pandey and Misra, 2016]. For that reason, multicultural education acknowledges the part that higher educational establishments play to achieve some educational objectives; such education emphasizes the essential need to set up the establishment for the transformation of society in general and the abolition of misconception, prejudice, oppression, and injustice.

Although we all may look different from one another, we are the same in other ways. Thus, this is the right time for humanity to work earnestly together if we actually want to end acts of discrimination, marginalization, and all kinds of conflict in our world today.

Furthermore, recognizing how influential cultural differences are, [Gollnick and Chinn, 2013] maintained the idea that attitudes and essential values for mutual group effort in a democratic society must be encouraged in HEE. Besides, the idea of multicultural education in higher educational institutions

needs to be extensively conceptualized; its various dimensions call for more exact definitions in different contexts [Banks & Banks, 1995]. However, MCE have some key principal beliefs:

- Cultural differences have very influential power and highly valued regard. Educationalists are very vital for students learning skills, including qualities like frame of mind, values, and responsibilities they should have to become useful citizens;
- HEEs of all levels must be a representations for the indicator and practice of human rights and ought to have respect for collective and cultural differences. Teachers and family groups can build the environment that is supportive for multicultural setting and equal opportunity for all [Gollnick & Chinn, 2013].

All of these definitions from different multicultural advocates in general are presented to draw reader's attention, specifically to the educators of higher learning on the important need of fostering multiculturalism in their teaching.

2. Multicultural Initiatives

Multicultural initiatives run the gamut at higher education institutions. [Garcia et al., 2001] recommend a four-dimensional model of multicultural teaching and learning that focuses primarily on curricular initiatives. The dimensions include pedagogy, content, faculty, and students and each dimension addresses the range of possibilities in that dimension. At the curricular level, multicultural initiatives in higher education institutions have focused on multicultural course requirements, course and curricular transformation, recognition of diverse teaching and learning styles, and the pursuit of multicultural research and scholarship. Several approaches have been explored for multicultural curricular initiatives such as additive (adding designated multicultural courses to the curricula), integrative (integrating multiculturalism as part of the curricula), or transformative (transforming the curricula multiculturally) [Adams and Strother-Adams, 2001]. Due to the breadth and depth of curricular programs at HEE, the multicultural curricular initiatives are often tailored to suit particular programs or institutions.

Garcia proposed a four-dimensional model of campus diversity and multicultural initiatives that addresses education and scholarship, access and success, campus climate and intergroup relations, and institutional viability and vitality. He emphasizes that for multicultural initiatives to be successful and have a lasting impact, access and success, campus climate, and institutional issues should be addressed along with curricular issues. Access and success deals with recruitment, retention, and inclusion of under-represented groups on all aspects of academic life on campus, [Sotello and Turner, 2002]. A supportive campus community would promote positive intergroup relations and create a campus climate that is welcoming of under-represented and marginalized groups. At the institutional level, the university's mission, policies, funding, commitment, perception, etc. should reflect its support for the initiatives. The context in which the institution functions locally, nationally, and globally can also influence the initiatives. It is important to note that the four dimensions are closely interrelated and the relationships should be taken into consideration in the assessment process.

3. Why Institutions of Higher Education?

Institutions of higher education in the world today are made of culturally diverse student and faculty populations. This cultural pluralism makes such models of the pluralistic democracy. As such, the application of the core principles of the global perspective of multicultural education in the teaching and learning practices among diverse populations at these institutions is more important now than ever. Most institutions of higher education have become models of the communities in which

they are located, and as such have become pillars for academic excellence, models for multicultural competence in society, and models for an interdependent world, as well as models for equity and democratic values.

3.1 Institutions of Higher Education Are Models for Academic Excellence

The principles and tenets of multicultural education make it possible to promote excellence in performance of all students [Sleeter & Grant, 1999]. The fundamental principles of the global perspectives of multicultural education that make it possible to increase academic excellence among diverse groups of students on many campuses in the world. [Green, 1989], [Gollnick & Chinn, 2002] include the following:

1. Cultural differences have strength and value.
2. Institutions of higher learning (IHL) should be models for the community in reflecting respect for cultural differences and expression of human rights.
3. Social justice and equality for all people should be of paramount importance in the design and delivery of curricula.
4. Attitudes and values necessary for the continuation of a democratic society can be promoted in IHL.
5. Teaching in institutions of higher education can provide the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for redistribution of power and income among diverse groups of people.
6. Educators at IHL work with local communities to create an environment that is supportive of respect for diversity and multiculturalism.

Institutions of higher education whose leaders embrace these principles of multicultural education and attain high academic standards become models for the various public schools and for the communities in which these schools are located. The practices adopted by persons at the institution of higher education also become exemplary to the individuals in the public schools and the communities.

3.2 Institutions of Higher Education are Models for Multicultural Societies

In the world, educators' major concerns at institutions of higher education should be to promote the academic, social, and political success of all students [Green, 1989]. The increase in diversity reflects the diversity of the world. There is now a real need more than ever to include minority citizens in the economic, social, and educational mainstream [Gollnick & Chinn, 2002]. This reality becomes more apparent on campuses where there is increasing diversity in minority student as well as faculty populations than in those that are less diverse.

3.3 Institutions of Higher Education are Models for an Interdependent World

The students, faculty, and staff on many campuses in the world today come from various countries. These students, faculty, and staff have various cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, today it has become mandatory for universities to admit students and employ faculty from various cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. It has also become mandatory that university communities provide a supportive environment that respects diversity and provide programs that are inclusive for all who are part of it. University administrator and professor should be aware of the various cultural elements in order to be able to provide equitable services.

3.4 Institutions of Higher Education are Models for Democratic Human Values

Studies on human relations on university campuses in the past 25 years have shown that student performance, student-student interactions, and faculty-student interactions and expectations reflect the abilities, perception, values, and attitudes among those in the campus communities and type of curricula offered to the students attending the students [Pang, 2001]; [Wiles & Brondi, 2002]. College and university administrators and professors worldwide reiterated the importance of welcoming diversity on college campuses by highlighting approaches to develop inclusive programs for all students at institutions of higher education. The long-term benefits of the global view of multicultural education greatly outweigh the short-term detriments that usually result from the anxiety experienced by ill-prepared or un-informed educators and administrators [Blair, 2003] who use the self-defeating assimilation or "melting-pot" perspective. Adequate understanding of the various cultural elements and how they differ among people from diverse cultures is a promising way to develop positive relations among persons from different cultures and to provide inclusive programs for diverse student populations [Schulman & Mesa-Bains, 1993].

4. Where to start and what has to be done?

Well, discussions about the best ways to create and sustain an atmosphere of diversity and multicultural appreciation are currently taking place at universities around the globe, particularly in Moldova.

Reflecting on the diversity nature of our society today, the front question will always be: what are the specific education programs and approaches, which seem to work best and under which particular conditions?

The growth of ethnic and religious diversity poses both opportunities and challenges to Moldovan policy-makers and societies as a whole. It is expected that this diversity will continue to increase. At the same time, recent studies show that tolerance and social inclusion are increasing. Education has a key role to play in preparing societies for dealing with these phenomena. It also plays a vital role in the political socialization of Moldovan citizens.

In the light of these facts, higher education policies that strengthen ethnic mingling are needed to create conditions for ethnic collaboration and fostering tolerance. This is very important in the contemporary society, because, it appears obvious that gathering young people from various backgrounds physically together is insufficient to lessen misconception and prejudice and create positive intercultural relationships. Therefore, higher educational establishments need to sincerely create and make the conditions for all students and staff to build up their intercultural competence and suitability that suits present multicultural democratic and modern society in general:

1. Setting the tone

One of the key ingredients in promoting cultural diversity and awareness is to make tolerance and inclusion a priority. Establishing university-wide policies that outline student and faculty conduct are one way to make it clear that discriminatory and harassing behavior is not welcome. In doing so, it is critical to communicate these standards to students using the most efficient communication and information technologies, such as emails, messengers, electronic newspapers, clearly defining what actions are and are not appropriate.

2. Online Degrees of education

Several universities now offer online courses specifically designed to foster cultural awareness and diversity, with some even making them mandatory for the attainment of undergraduate degrees.

3. Make diversity awareness activities a party

When looking to drive awareness around inclusion and diversity in higher education, many colleges schedule diversity awareness activities to promote cultural awareness or even set aside entire weeks to promote cultural diversity on campus. Some campuses host international food fairs, knowing that good food is the best avenue for encouraging campus diversity and building cultural bridges. Thus, it is better to make it in Moldova as well.

4. Diversity Awareness Training

Online diversity awareness training can prove to be an invaluable tool when promoting cultural awareness on campus. By offering students the chance to develop the ability to communicate respectfully with peers from other backgrounds via broadband internet, you better prepare them to operate in the ever-shifting workplace and society as a whole.

5. Conclusions

Institutions of higher education whose leaders embrace the global perspective of multicultural education will not only reap the benefits of multicultural education but also become pillars of academic excellence, models for democratic pluralistic societies, and attractions for international economic and human resources as they promote good human relations within their own nation and with other nations in today's increasingly interdependent world.

It is expected that education has a major role to play in preparing societies for managing these phenomena. Education is a joint responsibility amongst higher education establishment and different shareholders; consequently, educators require varied training. And again, the intercultural competence of lecturers in institutions of higher learning in Moldova is necessary and should be encouraged.

Furthermore, diversity needs to be better incorporated in higher education curriculum.

Since cultural differences have very influential power and highly valued regard, educationalists are very vital for students' learning skills, including qualities like frame of mind, values, and responsibilities they should have to become useful citizens.

Higher educational establishments must be the location where human rights are sustained and ought to have respect for collective and cultural differences.

Initiatives are effective and are valued by faculty, staff, and students at the institution of higher learning, and continued funding and support of the initiatives is warranted. Some of the key recommendations from the effort are already being considered for implementation by the university. This effort helps the assessment team understand the importance of campus-wide collaboration and support needed for assessing multicultural initiatives due to the sensitive nature of the issues, data collection and analysis. Apart from dealing with the sensitive nature of the assessment topic, some of the challenges the assessment team might face include the extraction of data from existing data sources at the institutions of higher learning, compilation of feedback from various diversity committees and groups on campus and drawing meaningful conclusions from them, encouraging campus units to take ownership of relevant segments of the assessment plan, and developing appropriate recommendations.

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