

Cultural Diversity in a Teacher Training Life Orientation Programme at a Higher Education Institution (HEI), South Africa

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ABSTRACT A great problem faced by many South African teachers is how to incorporate cultural knowledge in their teaching, starting at the Foundation Phase (Primary school level). Learning from different cultural backgrounds can be made valuable, interesting and exciting if approached multi-culturally, especially in a Life Orientation teacher training programme at the Higher Education Institution, that is, University. Unfortunately, the term 'multicultural' is interpreted differently by many researchers, educationists, parents, students and teachers for their own needs and interest, resulting in the term having a negative connotation for minority groups. Conceptualising 'cultural background' as embracing class, genetic make-up, culture, race, gender and religion, this paper therefore focuses on theory within a context of cultural diversity in a Life Orientation teacher training programme at the University in South Africa. It examined National Government policy documents and various perspectives from literature to argue that cultural diversity in a teaching and learning environment is here to stay if we want to promote equity and inclusivity in our education system. Qualitative generic research method was used in this study where survey questions were employed for data gathering. There was also interaction with student teachers specialising in Life Orientation Learning Area (subject) methodology. The findings from this study were that students needed the Life Orientation teacher training programme to be more improved and also be exposed to practical issues dealing with diversity and barriers to learning.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a drastic change in policy formulation in education with the aim of redressing the imbalances of the past since the new democratic country in 1994. The policy formulation came into effect with an aim of promoting equity and social justice that was caused by the previous government. The introduction of Life Orientation (LO) as a relatively new Learning Area (subject) in the South African Education system is based on the belief that this unique compulsory Learning Area forms the foundation of holistic development of the learner, guided by Learning Outcomes which focus on personal, social, career and physical and recreational development. LO is an inter-disciplinary subject that focuses also on the diversity of learners as human beings in their totality and the self in relation to society. It is also seen as a dynamic subject as it equips the learners with the ability to cope with challenges of life (National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Grade 10-12, Department of Education 2002). On this note, this study is important because it attempts to provide information on culturally diverse LO students from South African context at a University level.

This study is conducted at the University

where I am lecturing Life Orientation Subject/ Learning Area Methodology. The participants were both the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) FET and B.Ed Life Orientation Senior phase fourth year culturally diverse students with a total number of hundred and ten. They were diverse because they were from different racial, cultural, ethnic and economic groups. These concepts encapsulate the overall essence of respect for diversity. There was interaction with them three times a week. Group discussions, collaborative teaching, case studies, presentations and debates were some of the methods used in teaching these students.

Theoretical Framework

The framework, within which this study is based on, is Vygotsky's socio-cultural (social interaction) theory. This theory plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition through mediation. Vygotsky (1978) explains the development of cognition by stating that every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level. The socio-cultural theory in the context of this study stresses the integration of cultural diversity into the curriculum, where

teachers/lecturers are expected to have the knowledge of cultural differences so as to improve their teaching and attitudes towards students.

This theory is supplemented by the Constitution of South Africa (Act No. 35 of 1997) as it develops every student's knowledge, value and skills necessary for a diverse society. By using this framework, students will be able to learn to see their own identities in harmony with those of others. This is strengthened by the proposed framework developed by Tajfel (1982) which is "social identity" theory. The logic in this theory is that it helps in the understanding of why the individual may hold negative attitudes towards cultural diversity. According to this social identity theory, belonging to a cultural group creates a psychological state within an individual that confers a collective self or social identity. The individual comes to know him/herself by interacting with the self to help form an identity. This means that social identity theory serves as a foundation for explaining the negative effects of cultural diversity on team work. This is because while social identity generates group solidarity and conformity, at the same time it can also produce negative outcomes. It happens when individuals attribute a negative social status to those outside their social group and identify only with those who share the same social identity.

The above theories are therefore important and relevant to this study as we are in the currently changing education system. The system that needs constant positive interaction between individuals as mentioned above. This implies that interaction can be viewed as an important concept that has a positive connotation, as it leads in most cases to the awareness of cultural diversity.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative ethnographic design as students were observed formally and informally during their interaction with others in and outside the classrooms. Strauss and Corbin (1990) support the above statement by describing qualitative research as any type of research that produces findings or results by not using statistical methods. In this study results will therefore be described, after Post Graduate Certificate in Education FET (PGCE) and B.Ed Senior Phase fourth year Life Orientation students have completed answering survey questions designed by (Beekman 2009).

Problem Statement

South Africa has eleven official languages that most of them are spoken by diverse students at some of the Universities. Universities are, therefore, expected to accommodate heterogeneous students as contained in the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, which stipulates that there should be no discrimination when admitting students at Universities as long as they meet the entry requirements. Thus, this statement brings to the fore cultural diversity in an educational setting.

Education all over the world is a Constitutional right and not a privilege. In the case of South Africa as outlined in the (Constitution of South Africa Act No. 35 of 1997), the following values are clearly outlined, human dignity, the achievement of equality, advancement of human rights and freedom, non-racialism and non-sexism, yet people time and again violate them.

No country in the world has legislation that promotes racism, discrimination, sexism etc. The last of such legislations had been scrapped in South Africa before and after 1994. In addition to the (Constitution of South Africa Act No. 35 of 1997), the National Plan for Higher Education 2004 was approved by parliament and resulted in Higher Education Institutional mergers. This means that universities which were having a high percentage of white students merged with those with a high percentage of black students. Higher Education Institution (HEI) from South African context refers to universities and colleges. As a result of this Act, the composition of students in South African Universities became diverse in nature. This brings an issue of diverse student population to the fore and is a pressing complex challenge, hence an ongoing research studies. It is, therefore, imperative to instil the culture of openness, sensitivity, inclusivity and tolerance amongst students in order to accommodate and live with them in harmony.

The Aim of the Study

Based on the discussion above, the aim of this study is formulated as: exploring cultural diversity in a Life Orientation teacher training programme at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) from South African context. HEI in this study as stated in the previous section refers to Universities. It is hoped that the information from this study could be used by universities and other related institutions to conduct further research.

The Context of Cultural Diversity in This Study

The widely held misconception about cultural diversity is that people think it is static and not changing. Some even think that it deals with learning about all of the historically under-represented groups in the society or community. From this statement, students should be made aware that cultural diversity is not static. They should also be encouraged to explore their own culture and the changes that they have gone through as a result of changing contexts and societies. Within the context of this study, one can state that cultural diversity when applied intelligently can bridge the gap between personal conflict situations and those remote conflicts within groups. In other words, the need to acquire cultural diversity skills, to think critically and creatively in our daily cultural diversity situations is very important as teachers/lecturers.

Life Orientation and its Role on Cultural Diversity

As stated in the preceding section, Life Orientation is a unique compulsory non-examinable subject in Senior and FET phases in South African schools from January 2006. This has necessitated teachers to promote cultural diversity in any teaching environment. The promotion of cultural diversity in this study is enhanced by the following five learning outcomes: Learning Outcome 1 which deals with health promotion

Learning Outcome 2 with its focus on social development

Learning Outcome 3 dealing with personal development

Learning Outcome 4 focussing on physical development and lastly Learning Outcome 5 focussing on career education Department of National Education (1997). All these five Learning Outcomes are integrated. For example, Learning Outcome 1 which deals with health promotion can be linked with Learning Outcome 3 which deals with personal development as they both emphasise health. Learning Outcome 2 dealing with social development incorporates physical development in the form of team work and human rights in sport (Singh 2002).

On this note, Life Orientation can be seen as a Subject/Learning area that can enhance cultural diversity. The reason is that the themes on inclu-

sivity, diversity, human rights, gender issues, violence and teamwork are all infused in the five Learning Outcomes.

Teaching Culturally Diverse Students in a Life Orientation (LO) Classroom Setting

Cultural diversity according to (UNESCO 21 October 2005) refers to the ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expressions. These expressions are passed on within and among groups and societies. Parla (1994) describes cultural diversity as the understanding of multicultural education for all children. This means that teachers, students and parents should understand and appreciate human diversity irrespective of the socio-economic background of individuals. The meaning of cultural diversity arising from these definitions is that we should encourage, protect and promote understanding of the importance of diverse cultures through educational and public debates.

When we teach a culturally diverse LO classroom, we should attempt to make students feel at home and be accepted by seeing them as all the same but unique. We need to try to also learn to know their different cultures. That can be done through role play, poetry, team work and dramatisation. Sleeter (1995) explains that one need to understand values, beliefs and traditions of cultures different from one's own. The recognition of cultural diversity should, therefore, occur throughout the teaching process, with its curriculum which has to sensitively address ethnic background, social class and gender.

The preceding statement is in line with what we teach in the Life Orientation classroom at the University as stated in the previous section. If one does not apply the above approach some students may feel separated, ignored and their education will suffer. Thus, running counter to South Africa's Constitution which states that all the learners have the right to basic education Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Bill of Rights (section 29 (2), 1996). The Constitution of South Africa further states that everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice. No one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights (Act 108 section 30, 1996). This means that cultural diversity of students, teachers and society at large should be respected.

An LO classroom should be a model for de-

mocracy and equity. In this context it means developing activities that accommodate and allow access to every student. Sleeter (1995) believes that students who do not readily fit because of cultural background and language require teaching strategies that remediate difficulties or build bridges between the students and the school. A similar conclusion was reached by Lasley II et al. (2002) who argue that all youngsters can learn at significantly higher levels if teachers instructional practice changes to accommodate culturally diverse students. This means that teachers should take time and effort to choose teaching strategies related to the students' culture. It can, thus, be reasoned that in any teaching situation, teachers should employ teaching strategies that can accommodate students' cultural differences. In that way we will be showing respect, tolerance, openness and sensitivity to one another, despite our different backgrounds, attempting, thus, to find common ground and build unity in our country South Africa.

To support the issue of using teaching strategies that can accommodate students' differences, Killen (2007) points that there are different teaching strategies such as discussion, group-work, problem -solving , student research, direct instruction and co-operative for teaching students in culturally diverse classrooms. In this study, the focus is on co-operative teaching strategy as it is also relevant to embracing cultural diversity. It embraces cultural diversity because it allows and helps different students to interact and share their experiences in their groups as they discuss.

Co-operative Teaching in a Culturally Diverse Classroom

In the literature on educational studies, Dune and Bennet (1994) as well as Davidson and Kroll (1991) see co-operative learning as learning that takes place in an environment where pupils in small groups share ideas and work collaboratively to complete academic tasks. This means that students work together as a team with an aim of developing communication competencies in a multicultural environment. It is a holistic approach which addresses culturally diverse students in the classroom environment. This is the method the author prefers using in the PGCE FET and B.Ed Senior Phase Life Orientation classes where students are from different cultural

backgrounds. The aim being to let them be aware of others' cultural diversity. According to Calitz (2000), collaboration includes problem-solving, decision-making, planning and intervention strategies. From the context of this study, collaboration means working together in order to share expertise, diverse specialised cultural knowledge and skills in a culturally diverse classroom.

Some of the characteristics of collaboration that can benefit this study are derived from Sethosa (2001:92) and are stated as:

- Participation must be voluntary
- A belief system that all members of the team have unique and needed expertise
- Commitment to a shared vision
- Recognition that all members' opinion are valuable
- Encourage individual freedom of expression and accept differences, needs, concerns and expectations.

These characteristics are important as they can increase students and peer interaction especially in big classes. For example students can learn to improve their understanding and develop co-operative group skill. They can also gain an appreciation and respect for different cultures in the classroom as well as promoting acceptance of individual differences hence acknowledging cultural diversity. This idea is supported by Watson et al.(1993) when stating that culturally diverse teams out-performed homogeneous groups under certain conditions. Caspersz et al. (2004) add that working in culturally diverse teams help in improving students' creativity in problem-solving and skills in managing diversity. This implies that when culturally diverse students work together, sharing they usually do better than a mono-cultural group of students.

Through collaboration one begins to learn to understand and accept things that make us different and also to see that we are all unique but equal. From this statement, students can be prepared to change the bias and discriminating aspects of society, aiming at developing the intellectual, social and personal growth of individuals to their highest potential.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through survey questions designed by Beekman (2009) on inclusivity and diversity. This instrument was preferred for collecting data with an aim of ensuring reliability in

this study. Merriam (2002) supports this idea by stating that although replicating a qualitative study will not generate identical results, there can be several interpretations of the same data. The survey questions were distributed to all the PGCE FET and B.Ed. Senior Phase LO student teachers at the University during their tutoring session. The author then identified categories and interpreted the information using content analysis after receiving the completed responses from the students. This ensured the validity of the study because the author was the primary instrument for data collection. The author further ensured validity of the outcomes of this study by “bracketing” my personal beliefs about cultural diversity in a PGCE FET and B.Ed. Senior Phase Life Orientation classroom. This is in line with Merriam (2002) when describing validity as the congruency of research findings with reality.

See some of the examples of the survey questions and the students’ responses below:

Table 1: Questions for FET phase Life Orientation PGCE student teachers and their responses

<i>PGCE student teachers for FET phase</i>	
Question1: Teach the concepts, knowledge and skills of your subject, learning area in ways to enable pupils to learn.	• LO good • LO prepared me well
Question 2: Overall, how well do you feel your programme prepared you for the teaching profession?	• LO good
Question 3: What have you found of particular value in the programme?	• Learning about barriers and teaching strategies • Teaching strategies, diversity • That we have different children not one is the same • Inclusive education. Teaching in SA context.
Question 4: How can the programme be improved?	• No suggestions about inclusivity, diversity or LO specifically

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Examining the findings from the questions and responses from Tables 1 (Questions for FET phase Life Orientation PGCE student teachers and their responses) and Table 2 (Questions for Senior phase Life Orientation Fourth year B.Ed student teachers and their responses) as well as the literature in the preceding section. It is clear

Table 2: Questions for Senior phase Life Orientation Fourth year B.Ed student teachers and their responses

<i>Fourth year B.Ed student teachers for senior phase</i>	
Question1: How well do you feel your programme prepared you for the teaching profession?	• Focus more on addressing the barriers • More exposure towards the practical in ways that students deal with issues such as discipline and diversity – should have been more exposed to us.
Question 2: What have you found of particular value in the programme?	• Learner diversity • Learning about inclusive education.
Question3: How can the programme be improved?	• More on barriers not HIV/AIDS • How to deal with inclusivity in different schools.

that students were taught and were aware of inclusivity and diversity, which they experienced as valuable. Students also found the teaching on diversity and inclusivity in Education was of value to them. But, they needed the Life Orientation programme to be more improved and also be exposed to practical issues dealing with diversity. For example, some requested more focus on barriers to learning in a classroom environment. These two findings are a bit confusing because, firstly the university has a module on barriers to learning. Secondly, diversity is practically done yearly during the university educational excursion with the purpose of enhancing cultural diversity among students.

Even though students found the value of cultural diversity in the university Life Orientation programme. They requested that we should not continue teaching about HIV/AIDS as they have acquired enough knowledge. This to me was a questionable finding because HIV/AIDS is a Government initiative project needed to be included in all University Education curriculum. Secondly, HIV/AIDS as a disease is not yet widely explored and also not well known by the rural communities. Jackson (2002) supports the above idea by mentioning that there is an urgent need to research extensively on HIV/AIDS pandemic.

With regard to teaching strategies in a culturally diverse classroom setting, they responded positively saying that they were taught how to teach a culturally diverse classroom. This response is supported by Killen (2007) when stating that there are different teaching strategies such as discussion, group-work, problem –solv-

ing, student research, direct instruction and co-operative for teaching students in culturally diverse classrooms.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this study, one can state that teaching and becoming culturally diverse students is an on-going complex process, and not a destination to be reached soon. We should search what we need to change through relevant teaching methods in order to provide students with opportunities to understand, accept and appreciate each other. Our commitment to teaching should be in the context of evolving knowledge-based. From this study, positive findings of students from the survey questions were found. This is an evidence that students in an LO classroom at the University value cultural diversity. Thus, as lecturers we should consider using relevant teaching methods that embraces cultural diversity. Such methods should also be against unfair and exclusive practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above discussion one recommends that:

- Continuing research on cultural diversity be considered in order to understand and spread its complexity within South African context.
- Faculties and Departments within the Universities be involved in including cultural diversity in their curriculum.

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