

Requirements and Challenges of Multicultural Education in Iran

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is an exploration in the features of multicultural education in Iran along with highlighting requirements and challenges. This is followed by some suggestions for solutions. Now, people from, at least, thirteen (Iranian) ethnicities live together in Iran. The languages and dialects spoken within the borders of contemporary Iran includes; Farsi, Turkish, Arabic, Turkmen, Kurdish, Lori, Bloch, and Armenian. Such diversity implies the requirement of conversations that address multiculturalism in Iran's educational system. However, due to existent of the political and ideological conditions, multicultural education is poorly discussed and face challenges. In this article, through a descriptive – Analytic method, I will review the current situation of multicultural education in Iran. This will be followed by discussing the needs and challenges in the way of developing multicultural education within the highly political context of education in Iran. Finally some solutions for this situation will be proposed.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Multicultural Education, Iran.

Introduction

People have become different from each other due to various factors (biological, geographical, ideological, socio-cultural etc.) This differentiation continually increases especially due to social mobility in and among countries. This increase in differences and the importance attributed to them has led to some changes in countries (Polat & Barka, 2012). In recent decades, multicultural education has been widely depicted as an educational approach to deal with the social and cultural diversity that exists within individual countries. Enhancing schoolchildren's multicultural awareness has been conceived as a vital means for promoting social unity, especially in countries with a high level of diversity (Cha, Ham & Yang, 2017).

Someone thinks, having a system of multicultural education, absolutely belongs to multinational countries. While, today's most of countries in the world require multicultural education system, because different cultures have different systems of knowledge (Aghajanian, 2010). Specially, the countries which are formed different nationality, different culture, race and ethnics. But this does not mean that other countries do not need to multicultural education. I think all countries need a multicultural educational system. But some of them don't have option other than this. These countries are divided into two groups; one of them is clearer and familiar for everyone. It is the group of countries that have multinational live in. For example Canada, US, UK and Australia. Multicultural education was taken up in several other

countries as well, its meaning always involving struggle between people of color and Whites. Canada, for example, adopted a national Multicultural Policy in 1971. Designed to complement the 1969 Official Languages Act, that policy subsumed multiculturalism within an English–French bilingual framework. In the United Kingdom, multiculturalism in national policy was directed toward assimilating immigrants from its former colonies by emphasizing shared culture and values as well as appreciation of cultural differences. In both countries, minoritized people experiencing racial discrimination countered (along with some White allies) with anti-racist education as a much more potent alternative because of its emphasis on racism as the core problem (Sleeter, 2018). Second group of these countries have no multinational live, But those have multiethnic groups. For example Iran. Iran's 7000-year history has more than 20 religions and 25 sects' (Ahmadi, 2005). This is one of them. Some are: Moslem, Zoroastrian, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Baha'i (Delavari, 2012). All of them have a one nation and all of them are Iranian. Now, raise a question. Is Iran a multicultural society?

What is Multiculturalism?

Basically, what is multiculturalism and what are the levels of multiculturalism? As you know, different people have different definitions for multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is dealt as a set of beliefs and applications which a group of people use to make sense of themselves and the world and to arrange their

personal and collective lives (Demir & Yurdakul, 2015). Banks and Banks (2006), Parekh (2008), Race (2011) Grant and Sleeter (2007) have defined the multiculturalism. The most repeated words in these definitions are: Equality, Anti-discrimination, social justice, peace, civilization, culture, race, ethnic and ethnicity. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the multiculturalism is looking for more human friendly life. Now, my definition of multiculturalism is: "The presence of several different ethnics and cultures in the context of unified geographic boundary in order to achieve social justice and a peaceful life."

With the multiple definitions and explanations, there is not necessarily an agreed definition of multiculturalism and multicultural education among scholars and practitioners. What all agree is that there is room for further discussion about the definition and application of multicultural education in nation's schools (Özturgut, 2011).

There is an important relationship between culture and education since the culture of teachers and students affect education processes in the classroom. Thus, culture includes everything that makes one group or community within a society distinctive from another: language, values, literature, worldview, food, religion, clothing, holidays, beliefs, and behavior that construct a specific group's lifestyle. Classrooms are becoming increasingly multicultural, and this leads to new challenges for teachers. Traditionally, students coming into the multicultural classroom are at a deficit because they must learn how to navigate unfamiliar people, their cultures, and language. Thus, teachers have the added responsibility of leading students through this unfamiliar territory towards achievement. This requires specialized learning techniques, practice, and education in order to effectively accomplish. Teachers who unite classrooms with activities both inside and outside of the classroom stand a better chance at boosting student achievement and ameliorating the negative effects that have been observed in multicultural classrooms in the past (Alsubaie, 2015).

Multicultural education refers to the learning of appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills related to the respect and appreciation of different cultures and other differences which include race, ethnicity, religion etc (Abdullah, 2009). Multicultural education is dealt as an idea or an educational movement that gets students to achieve academic success and a reform movement that changes all elements of the educational enterprise, including its underlying values, procedural rules, curricula, instructional materials, organizational structure and governance policies to reflect cultural pluralism (Demir & Yurdakul, 2015). Multicultural education encompasses practices and theories that support

equitable opportunities and academic achievement for all students (Alsubaie, 2015).

Banks (2004) identified five dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction, and school and social structure empowerment. These dimensions indicate how multicultural education textbooks and teachers integrate multicultural content and help students to understand prejudice construction, authentic culture, social discrimination, and equity among ethnic groups, and thus develop positive racial attitudes.

Multicultural education is an educational approach that has the potential to effectively provide students with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to successfully function in a multicultural society. When students learn and practice skills for managing their differences and similarities with others, they gain advantages for engaging in meaningful and healthy relationships, a skill that will benefit them throughout their lives. Students who successfully learn to interact with diverse individuals benefit in their career, academic, and socio-emotional well-being. Even in communities in which students have little contact with diverse students, multicultural education is beneficial. Many students leave their communities to attend college or seek employment in other settings that may be more diverse than their home communities and require individuals to have broader perspectives and more appropriate social skills (Merlin, 2017).

Gollnick and Chinn (1990) recommend five goals for multicultural education. These goals also emphasize issues beyond the boundaries of ethnic or racial issues. They include: i) the promotion of strength and value of cultural diversity, ii) an emphasis on human rights and respect for those who are different from oneself, iii) the acceptance of alternative life choices for people, iv) the promotion of social justice and equality for all people, and v) an emphasis on equal distribution of power and income among groups. The goal of multicultural education is to provide equal educational opportunities and curricula that meet the needs of students. Additionally, it enables students to acknowledge the value of cultural diversity, respect the differences between ethnic groups, and cultivate harmonious relationship between ethnic groups (Huang, Cheng & Yang, 2017).

Huang (2015) indicated the importance of multicultural education should be based on ethnic equality. The multicultural education is basic and universal, covering the course of school reform and important to all students.

Multicultural education is a necessary ingredient of quality education, in actual practice, educators most

often perceive it either as an addendum prompted by some crisis or as a luxury. Multicultural education has not yet become a central part of the curriculum regularly offered to all students; instead, educators have relegated it primarily to social studies, language arts, and the fine arts and have generally targeted instruction for students of color (Gay, 2011).

Multicultural levels

In the literature of multiculturalism specified three levels for multiculturalism. The first level is "Difference", the second is "Diversity" and the third is "multicultural society" (UNESCO, 2013). Difference is the first level of multiculturalism. Actually, all people are different from each other, so basically multicultural society is in everywhere. With this default the multiculturalism is universal (Indeed in this level common is more than from differences). As I mentioned, second level of this concept is "Diversity". The diversity is high level from the "Difference". In diversity, "distinctions" are so obvious (Sadeghi, 2011).

For example, differences in the population of a city or a country. Finally, "Multiculturalism society" refer to the simultaneous presence of multi culture, Multilanguage, multiracial, multi – ethnic or multi nation in unified geographic boundary. Based on Previous evidences: Iran is a multicultural society. Because it has multi culture, Multilanguage, multiracial, and multi – ethnic. Therefore; it can be said Iran is a multicultural society, so it needs a "Multicultural Education System".

Requirements of Multicultural Education in Iran

Iran needs multicultural education system for other reasons. I have called these reasons: requirements. These requirements can be divided into two parts: 1) National requirements, 2) Transnational requirements. In the "National requirements" Iran has several obligations. In Iran's constitution we counter with several principles that emphasis recognition of religions and cultures, so from this perspective, we must pay attention to these requirements. Another important point is "Iran's special features". As you know, Iran's neighbors are experiences of problems. For example Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, even turkey. A high percentage of the population of these countries are Sunni. More importantly, the boundaries of Iran are Sunni. But central government is Shia. For this reason, this fact has always been sensitive to Iran. In the one hand, religious of Iran's frontiersmen is different in central government. On the other hand, Iran's neighbors are often at war. This issue has caused that Iran has always been in special conditions. Third reason is, to exist of transnational actors in the

Persian Gulf. Basically, the presence of trans-regional forces along the borders of countries was allergens. This is also true for Iran. Especially since Iranian border has special conditions, as I said. Finally and forth reason is, to exist in different group of cultures, religions, sects and race in Iran. All this causes show Iran has a special situation.

Challenges of multicultural education in Iran

There are several issues in the multicultural classroom. First of all, Low Academic Achievements are an obvious issue. Teaching and learning are not easy work, even if students and teachers are of the same societal, economic, and cultural background. Therefore, they may face some difficulties in the classroom when they deal with students and teachers who are from a different cultural background. This negatively affects the academic levels of students. Thus, teachers should be provided with professional development opportunities that assist them in learning how to assess, train, teach, and be motivated to use multicultural teaching. This study also suggests that teachers should be trained to use several approaches in the multicultural classroom before they start teaching. Because the education system of students' cultures are different from the culture of their new classroom, the academic achievement of students may be low or bad. This study also gives an example of some cultures that use and prefer indirect relations over directness, open expression, or frankness. For instance, a Chinese student, who was in multicultural classroom in a Western educational system, asked the teacher if he/she could please not ask him any questions in class. He was afraid of criticism and giving wrong answers in class because the direct questioning approach in education was unfamiliar in his culture. The teacher faced difficulties to teach and deal with this Chinese student since he did not have an effective and positive role model in his the education and learning process of his home culture and classroom. As a result, we can anticipate that the student will have low results in his academic achievement. There are significant variations between cultures in communication or interpersonal contacts of students in the multicultural classroom because they have a different style of nonverbal communication. These differences negatively influence international students' academic achievement. If teachers and students in the multicultural classroom have different nonverbal styles of nonverbal communication, then they cannot understand and express themselves directly and clearly to each other since they do not have the same; thus, the result is that students have low academic accomplishment. Also, students in the multicultural classroom are often learning content in a second language, and this will badly affect the students' achievement if they do not have language

proficiency. Second, Adjustment to A New Cultural Environment: The new cultural character of the classroom is one of the issues for international student in western education. East Asian students are reluctant to participate in activities or speaking in the multicultural classroom because they are learning in a new environment that is unfamiliar to them. As a result, teachers and students may have problems in communication, teaching, and learning because students do not adapt to the classroom's environment. Some activities in the multicultural classroom, such as group study, lectures, individual learning, or cooperative learning, which require interaction and communication, may not be familiar to all international students. Thus, a new, unfamiliar

environment is an issue for some students that badly affects the students' achievement because this educational environment differs culturally. Third, Problems with Self as Well as the New Culture: Trust problems with self as well as the new culture are issues in the intercultural classroom. An emotional relationship, especially confidence between teachers and their students in the intercultural classroom, is important in establishing trust between students and the teacher. The teaching material and approaches of teachers should be modified to recognize the students' cultures and to gain students' trust. Therefore, students will feel respected and safe with their teachers and classmates (Alsubaie, 2015).

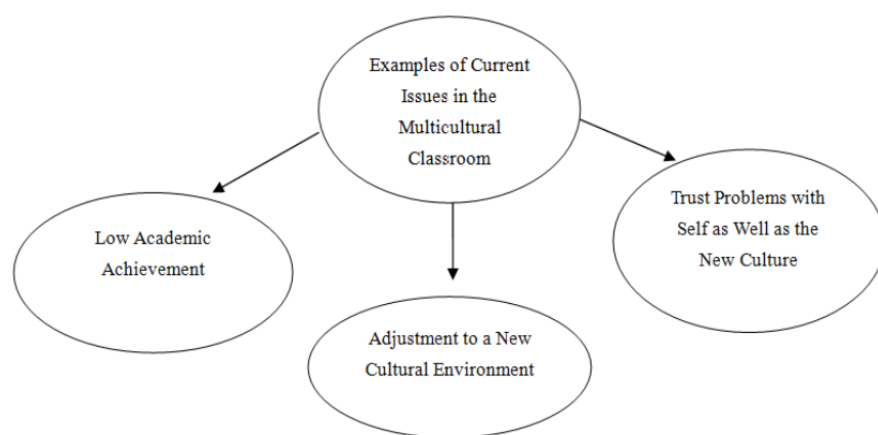


Figure-1: Example of current issues in the multicultural classroom (Alsubaie, 2015)

Basically, 1) Multiculturalism and multicultural education are a phobia for some of the policyholders in Iran. Because, this concept is not well understood. This is first challenge and I think it is a most important challenge. Iran's Constitution is Second challenges. Constitution of Iran, recognizes some of the religions. Therefore, multi-cultural circle is limited to some religions. 2) Knowledge challenge; I think we have lack of multicultural knowledge in Iran. 3) Curriculum designer; due to, educational system in Iran is centralized and text book play main role in this systems, curriculum designer can't change approaches. 4) Teacher resistance; any change is usually met with resistance. Most of the teachers' support of multicultural approaches, but some of them think that it is in contrast to the religious foundations. 5) School environment; also, schools in Iran have no multicultural spirit. For example, the schools are separated for boys and girls. 6) Teaching and evaluation; about teaching methods and evaluation, I should say, our teaching and evaluating methods aren't based on multicultural approach. At least, it gets little attention to it.

Solutions for multiculturalism in Iran

I think, it can be the various solutions proposed, but due to, solutions must be tailored to the challenges

and requirements. Accordingly, I've brought such solutions;

- Multicultural literacy development. Two decades ago, we have witnessed a good momentum about development of multicultural literacy, but it seem, this is inadequate. Recently, multicultural movement in Iran developed by writing books and articles, and implementation of theses and dissertations. Also lectures, conferences and panel holding, in the development of multicultural education approach have a significant impact.
- Multicultural (NGOs). It seems, established NGOs is related to multiculturalism, and has another solution. I've established a special interest group (SIG). This group works about Curriculum, culture and multiculturalism. Also, I'm seeking to establish another NGO. That group will work about multiculturalism and peace via holding of panels, art and published books.
- Strong inter-ethnic relationships. As I mentioned before, we have a variety of religions, ethnics and languages. One way to strengthen the multiculturalism is Strengthen

cross-cultural relationship. Research results show in Iran, Cultural relations between our ethnics is low. And they have a little information from each other. For this reason, linking them can facilitate multiculturalism approach.

- Restructuring in schools, teacher education and university (aims, contents and teachers). In this section, its necessary significant activity occurred. Curriculum is modified in favor of multiculturalism in all its dimensions.
- Finally, amend constitution, as I told you about Iran constitution in requirement section, it has many merits and also it is so progressive, but it has some problems. One of them is: does not recognize the new religions or new sects. In this reason, proposed constitution of Iran modified favor of multiculturalism.

Conclusion

Multicultural education aims to promote educational equity and enhance the academic achievement of pupils belonging to minority groups by affirming cultural pluralism (Kuppens, Ibrahim & Langer, 2018). The current paper showed that there are many religions in Iran. However, multicultural education has challenges in Iran. These challenges are the concepts of multiculturalism and multicultural education are not well understood. Other challenges are Iran's Constitution, Knowledge challenge, Curriculum designer, Teacher resistance, School environment and Teaching and evaluation.

Some Solutions for multiculturalism in Iran are Multicultural literacy development, Multicultural (NGOs), Strong inter-ethnic relationships, Restructuring in schools, teacher education and university (aims, contents and teachers) and amend constitution.

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