

Overcoming Learner Diversity: A Teacher Education Perspective in South Africa

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ABSTRACT Apartheid laws of 1949-1953 divided the South African society into racial ethnic groups. These racial ethnic groups were separated from one another in order for rulers to rule a divided society. These laws isolated different races and ethnic groups. In terms of the education sector, the Bantu Education Act did serious damage to Black societies. Laws of segregation divided South African population or societies according to race, religion, culture and ethnic background. After 1994, the democratic government, in its power, unified the divided society through pieces of legislation. The divided society was unified by pieces of legislation which were passed in parliament. Indeed, these pieces of legislation were passed to unify South African society, though in reality, South Africa, as a country, is still divided. Every ethnic group perceives itself as superior than other ethnic groups. However, through this current division, there is intermingling of different races and ethnic groups in schools. Learners/students and teachers come from different cultural backgrounds and meet in schools. The question arises how teachers cope with learners who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. This concept paper discusses how teachers can cope in a multicultural class.

INTRODUCTION

Sayed and Kanjee (2013) state that the most salient feature of education system prior 1994 was its fragmentation and inequality. The population of South Africa was spread according to its race and ethnic background Africans (Blacks), Whites, Indians, and Coloureds. This division resulted in nineteen racially and ethnically divided education departments. Historically, there were four independent homelands (states) for Blacks, which were Republic of Transkei, Republic of Bophuthatswana, Republic of Venda and Republic of Ciskei. The Republics of Transkei and Ciskei, respectively, were inhabited by Xhosa speaking people. The Republic of Venda was inhabited by Venda speaking people; whereas the Republic of Bophuthatswana was reserved for Tswana speaking people. Besides independent homelands (states), there were other homeland territories which were not republics. Those were Gazankulu for Tsongas, Lebowa for Pedis (Northern Sotho), Kwa-Ndebele for Ndebeles, Ka-Ngwane for Swatis, Qwa-qwa for Southern Sothos; Kwa-Zulu for Zulus.

The republics and homeland territories were regulated for occupation by the Blacks. Even if the Blacks were separated from one another as per their cultural and ethnicity background, there

were other Blacks who were living within areas designated for White South Africans. In African History (2013) the following Acts were promulgated to separate all African (Black) ethnic groups, Whites, Indians and Coloureds from one another:

Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act of 1949

The Prohibition of mixed marriage Act prohibited marriages between White people and people of other races. Between 1946 and the enactment of this law, only 75 Mixed marriages had been recorded, compared to some 28,000 White marriages.

Immorality Amendment Act of 1950

This Act prohibited adultery, attempted adultery or related immoral acts (extra-marital sex) between White and Black people.

Population Registration Act of 1950

This Act led to the creation of a national register in which every person's race was recorded. A Race Classification Board took the final decision on what a person's race was in disputed cases.

Group Areas Act of 1950

The Group Areas Act forced physical separation between races by creating different residential areas for different races.

Bantu Building Workers Act of 1951

This Act allowed Black people to be trained as artisans in the building trade. Such training was previously reserved for Whites only, but Blacks had to work within an area designated for Blacks. This act also made it a criminal offence for a Black person to perform any skilled work in urban areas except in those sections designated for Black occupation.

Separate Representative of Voters Act of 1951

Together with the 1956 amendment, this act led to the removal of Coloureds from the common voters' roll.

Bantu Authorities Act of 1951

This act provided for the establishment of black homelands and regional authorities and, with the aim of creating greater self-government in the homelands, abolished the Native Representative Council.

Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act of 1951

This act gave the Minister of Native Affairs the power to remove Blacks from public or privately owned land and to establishment resettlement camps to house these displaced people.

Natives Law Amendment Act of 1951

This act narrowed the definition of the category of Blacks who had the right of permanent residence in towns. Section 10 limited this to those who had been born in a town and had lived there continuously for not less than 15 years, those who had been employed there continuously for at least 15 years, or those who had worked continuously for the same employer for at least 10 years.

Natives (Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents) Act of 1952

Commonly known as the Pass Laws, this ironically named act forced Black people to carry

identification with them at *all* times. A pass included a photograph, details of place of origin, employment record, tax payments, and encounters with the police. It was a criminal offence to be unable to produce a pass when required to do so by the police. No Black person could leave a rural area for an urban one without a permit from the local authorities. On arrival in an urban area, a permit to seek work had to be obtained within 72 hours.

Native Labor (Settlements of Disputes) Act of 1953

This act prohibited strike action by Blacks.

Bantu Education Act of 1953

This act established the Black Education Department in the Department of Native Affairs which would compile a curriculum that suited the "nature and requirements of the Black people". The author of the legislation, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd (then Minister of Native Affairs, later Prime Minister), stated that its aim was to prevent Africans from receiving an education that would lead them to aspire to positions they would otherwise not be allowed to hold in society. Instead, Africans were to receive an education designed to provide them with skills to serve their own people in the homelands or to work in laboring jobs under Whites.

Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953

This act forced segregation in all public amenities, public buildings, and public transport with the aim of eliminating contact between Whites and other races. "Europeans Only" and "Non-Europeans Only" signs were put up, and the act stated that facilities provided for different races need not be equal.

All these Acts discussed above maximized diversity of South African society. Since education was offered according race and ethnicity, there was inequality. Diversity is discussed in greater detail below:

Diversity

Diversity is a Latin term *diversus* which means more than one of a different kind. Diversity applies to ethnicity, race, religion, socio-

economic, viewpoints, gender, geographic origin, aptitude, appearance and sexual orientation. In this discussion, diversity will be defined as race, ethnicity, culture, language, socio-economic status/class and religion (Ramsey and Williams 2003).

Terry and Irving (2010) define diversity as a fundamental aspect of our world and a defining characteristic of the field of special education. For culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, issues of diversity, difference, and disability can be quite complex and challenging for classroom teachers. Specific terms such as race, ethnicity, culture, language and socio-economic status common in discussions of diversity require explanation.

Race

Terry and Irving (2010) define race as a term that attempts to categorize human beings into distinct groups according to phenotypes or physical traits (for example, skin color, eye shape). According to Fernandez (2014), race has no biological or natural basis and that the “race” related physical variations found in humans have no real significance except for the social/cultural importance put on them by people. Race is a cultural term that is used to describe what a person’s ancestry is, and that unfortunately brings with it many misconceptions and erroneous biological connotations. The popular tendency to attribute a general inferiority or superiority to a particular race, based on these biological differences, fails to notice that these differences in humans are not only genetic but are also influenced by environment factors.

Further Fernandez (2014), states that those features considered significant for the survival of the species, such as the genetic capacity for intellectual development, have not been found, nor known to occur more frequently in one population than in any other. Despite people’s apparent differences, which are only skin deep, all humans around the world are biologically quite similar. “The concept of race is a social and cultural construction. Race simply cannot be tested or proven scientifically.”

Ramsey and Williams (2003) state that race is popularly used to refer to biological and genetic traits that distinguish one among populations that have originated from different region. It is known that there is more intra-race than

inter-race genetic variability, and that there is no valid biological basis for distinguishing racial groups. However, in the United States (US), racial distinctions continue to be socially constructed and widely believed. Despite the lack of any scientific evidence of biological differences, the content and significance of racial categories continue to be defined by social, economic, and political forces. Racial categories, in turn, influence the social status and life prospects of families and children, those who are racially privileged, and those who are targets of discrimination.

Ethnicity

Ramsey and Williams (2003) and Collier (2014) refer ethnicity to primarily sociological or anthropological characteristics, such as customs, religious practices, and language usage of a group of people with a shared ancestry or origin. Ethnicity, as a basis for identity, is a social rather than a physiological phenomenon. Ethnic groups remain identifiable within the larger cultural environment for a variety of reasons such as their ‘recent’ arrival, discrimination practiced by the larger society, by their own choice, or any combination of these. In addition to sharing common cultural roots, members of ethnic groups often have similar physical characteristics and occupy the same socio-economic status. Ethnicity, like race, implies a degree of social isolation from the mainstream ethnic group.

In addition to how Ramsey and Williams (2003) define ethnicity, Hoopes and Pusch (1979) define ethnicity (group) as a group of people identified by racial, national or cultural characteristics. Ethnic group membership is normally determined by birth. Most commonly, ethnic groups are seen as interdependent sub-units of larger cultural or political entities. The term ‘ethnic group’ is often applied to groups which have a minority status in the larger society. Terry and Irving (2010) state that ethnicity includes numerous tribal groups whose lifestyles vary extensively.

Culture

Culture has been defined in the above section, but only as part of diversity, Myer et al. (2007) state that culture is a highly complex human phenomenon, and in many respects, a mis-

understood concept. Culture is often associated with material goods and artifacts or with visual aspects such as food and dress. It is also defined in terms of a particular group's art, music and literature. Lemmer and Squelch as (quoted by Myer et al. 2007) further define culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society. They further define culture as a distinctive way of life. However, it is evident that culture has many faces, some highly visible (explicit), others hidden from view (implicit). Explicit culture is easily recognizable in aspects such as food, dress and language. Implicit elements are discreet and hidden, and these may be attitude, values and beliefs.

Hoopes and Pusch (1979) and Naidoo (2007) define culture as the sum total of ways of living. This includes values, beliefs, esthetic standards, linguistic expression, and patterns of thinking, behavioral norms, food, dress, rituals, song, dance, games and styles of communication which a group of people has developed to assure its survival in a particular physical and human environment. Culture, and the people who are part of it, interact, so that culture is not static. Culture is the response of a group of human beings to the valid and particular needs of its members. Virtually every person has been socialized by a virtue of culture, and in many cases, by more than one. Cultures may be defined by many factors such as national origin, gender, religion, occupation, geographic region, sexual orientation, generation, abilities or disabilities, and leisure activities (Ramsey and Williams 2003).

Language

Language is the systematic, structured verbal, and, in most cases, written code used for communication among a group of people. Language and culture are determining factors in the way people think, the way they communicate and the way they behave (Hoopes and Pusch (1979). Baruth and Manning (as quoted by Myer et al. 2007) indicate that language and communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, may constitute the most important aspects of an individual's culture and characterize the general culture, its values, and its ways of looking and thinking. There are many ways in which a group may

express its identity; language is a common one and is particularly conspicuous, has deep psychological roots and can act as a vehicle for culture on many levels. The relation between language and culture is intimate and complex. Many children come to school with some values, beliefs and behavioral characteristics/patterns which differ from those of other children and from those expected in school.

Gollnick and Chinn (2006) further elaborate and state that language is the means by which people communicate. It makes people's behavior human. It can incite anger, elicit love, inspire bravery, and arouse fear. It binds groups of people together. Language and dialect serve as a focal point for cultural identity. People who share the same language or dialect often share the same common feelings, beliefs, and behaviors. It provides a common bond for individuals with the same linguistic heritage.

Socio-economic/Class Status

Hoopes and Pusch (1979) and Whyatt-Nicole et al. (2010) define socio-economic status as a class which is a stratum of people, within a society, who share basic economic, political or cultural characteristics such as wealth. Class membership may provide access to power and privilege or other benefits within a social, economic or political structure.

According to Gollnick and Chinn (2006) the US Bureau of the Census measures the economic condition individuals with a criterion called socio-economic status (SES). It serves a composite of the economic status of the family or unrelated individuals on the basis of occupation, educational attainment, and income. Related to these three factors are wealth and power which also help determine an individual's socio-economic status, but are more difficult to measure through census data. Many teachers place their students at specific SES levels on the basis of similar observations. Gollnick and Chinn (2006) observe the following:

Income

Income is the amount of money earned in wages or salaries throughout the year. Income sets limits on the general lifestyle of a family, as well as on their general welfare. It controls the consumption patterns of a family-the number

and quality of material positions, housing, consumer goods, luxuries, savings and diet.

Wealth

Although the difference in income among families is great, an examination of income alone does not indicate the vast differences in the way families live. Wealth ensures some economic security for its holders even though the amount of security depends on the amount of wealth accumulated. It also enhances the power and prestige of those who possess it. Great wealth accrues power, provides an income that allows luxury, and creates values and lifestyles that are very different from most of remainder of the population.

Occupation

Income, for most of people, is determined by their occupation. In addition to income provision, a person's occupation is an activity that is considered important. Occupational prestige is often determined by the requirements for the job and by the characteristics of the job. The requirements for an occupation with prestige usually include more education and training.

Education

The best predictor of occupational prestige is the amount of education one acquires. Financial compensation is usually greater for occupations that require more years of education. Education is one of the main ways families pass on class to their children. One's class position determines, in greater part, the material conditions that affect one's lifestyle and the types of job one seeks. Thus educational level is a strong determinant of the future occupation and income of a family's children.

Power

Individuals and families who are at the upper SES levels exert more power than those at any other level. These individuals are more likely to sit on boards that determine state and local policies, on boards of colleges and universities, and on boards of corporations. They determine who receives benefits and rewards in governmental, occupational, and community affairs.

Religion

Religion includes belief in spirits, supernatural forces, gods and cults, witchcraft, sorcery, sacrifices, rituals, taboos, veneration of ancestors, and ceremonies of rites of passage such as naming ceremonies, initiation rites, and customs associated deaths and burials (Calderisi 2006).

Diversity in the Classroom: Solution to Teacher Education in South Africa

Sleeter and Grant (2007) are of the opinion that classrooms are diverse. Students differ from one another in numerous ways, including academic achievement, learning ability, gender, ethnic and racial background, and family background. What do teachers make out of these differences? Particularly, today where schools are pressured to raise student achievement scores, how can teachers work constructively with differences in their classrooms? Sleeter and Grant (2007) proceed to say that teachers are responsible for helping students to achieve; many teachers also see themselves as responsible for helping students to fit into the mainstream of. Sleeter and Grant (2007) believe that students who do not really fit in because of cultural background, language, learning style, or learning ability require teaching strategies that remediate deficiencies or build bridges between the student and the school.

Sleeter et al. (2002) state that in the US, similarly to South Africa, educators today face an overwhelming challenge to prepare learners from diverse cultural backgrounds to live in a rapidly changing society and world. It is not only ethnic and racial diversity that is challenging schools in the past few years. Immigrants from Zimbabwe, Somalia, Ethiopia and Pakistan have settled in South Africa. These immigrants have added to the diversity in South Africa. Diversity also brings different religions, and these religious differences raise a number of challenges for teachers. Some of these challenges are national holidays that must be considered, along with religious codes related to the curriculum, appropriate interactions of boys and girls, dress in physical education classes, and discipline.

Gollnick and Chinn (2006) further argue that teachers most often find that students have individual differences, even though they may appear to be from the same cultural group. These

differences extend far beyond intellectual and physical abilities. Students also bring to class different historical backgrounds, religious beliefs, and day to day living patterns. These experiences guide the way students behave within the school culture. If the teacher fails to understand the contextual cultural factors, in addition to the intellectual and physical factors that affect student learning and behavior, it might be impossible for the student to learn.

In the country that champions equal rights and opportunities for an individual to improve his/her conditions, teachers should be concerned with helping all students achieve academically, socially and politically. Though it is not possible to teach all students in the classroom equally because they are not the same (they have different needs, skills, and experience), when developing teaching programs, these differences should be acknowledged. Each student is also different because of physical and mental abilities, gender, ethnicity, race, language, religion, class and age. In addition, students behave differently in school and toward authority because of cultural factors and their relationship to the dominant society. Sometimes teachers behave in a certain way towards students because of their own cultural experiences within the power structure of the country (Gollnick and Chinn 2002).

Gollnick and Chinn (2002) add that when teachers are given the responsibilities of a classroom, they need the knowledge and skills for working effectively in a diverse society. An educational concept that addresses cultural diversity and equality in schools is known as 'multicultural education'. This concept is based on the following fundamental beliefs and assumptions: cultural differences have strength and value; schools should be models for the expression of human rights and respect for cultural rights; social justice and equality for all people should be of paramount importance in the design and delivery of curricula; attitudes and values necessary for the continuation of a democratic society can be promoted in schools; schooling can provide the knowledge, dispositions, and skills for the distribution of power and income among diverse group; educators working with families and communities can create an environment that is supportive of multiculturalism.

Students, in most classrooms, are sometimes of heterogeneous composition in terms of ethnicity, gender, religion, and academic ability. Too often, a teacher assigns academic expectations to students on the basis of their membership to class, race, ethnic, and gender groups. Students not classified as middle class are often viewed as academically inferior. Most of these students are greatly harmed by such classifications. Equality, in the achievement of students, can be increased by raising the caliber of both instructional content and instructional discourse in general and remedial courses, but some teachers and students from affluent families refer to poor students as disadvantaged, socially deprived, low socio-economic, culturally deprived, and culturally deficient (Gollnick and Chinn 2002; Sleeter and Grant 2007).

Ultimately, it should be understood that multicultural education is a popular term used by educators to describe education policies and practices that recognize, accept, and affirm human differences and similarities related to gender, race, disability, class, and sexuality (Sleeter and Grant 2007).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The issue of learners' 'diversity is a matter of concern. If no proactive measures are taken, diversity of learners will continue to be a challenge in the classroom. This conceptual paper encourages teachers to be concerned regarding helping all students to achieve academically and socially. For teachers to work effectively with heterogeneous student populations found in schools, teachers must understand and feel comfortable with their own (teachers) cultural backgrounds. Teachers need to understand the cultural settings in which the school is located to develop instructional strategies. In addition, teachers must help their students to become aware of cultural differences and inequalities in the nation and in the world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers are given the responsibilities of a classroom; they need the knowledge and skills that will equip them towards working effectively in a diverse society. Pre-service teacher training should include multicultural education as a module or course. This module, amongst all the mod-

ules that are offered, will assist student teachers to understand how to handle and teach students from different cultural backgrounds. Those who are already in the field should get crash courses during continuous teacher development meetings.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, in its preamble, states that people of South Africa believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, whether united in their diversity. All teachers, and anybody who is involved in education, should regard this statement as a unifying one. Teachers should consider their colleagues and all students as equals, united in their diversity.

Students have individual differences, even though they may appear to be from the same cultural group. These differences extend far beyond intellectual and physical abilities. Within this dichotomy of differences, students also bring to class different historical backgrounds, religious beliefs, and day to day living patterns. These experiences guide the way students behave within the school culture. Teachers should understand this and have the ability to handle students in their classrooms.

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