

Multicultural Education and Classroom Diversity: Difference or Sameness?

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Abstract

With the current increasingly diverse societies, it becomes crucial for teacher educators to provide all kinds of learners with sufficient knowledge and skills to respond to the diversity appropriately and sensitively. Teachers need to be well-prepared to look for the right approach and methods in teaching and dealing with diverse learners. This paper seeks to draw out what we know and what we do not know about the underlying effects caused by multicultural education and diversity in a classroom including the differences in genders, social classes, economic classes, races, cultures, religions, beliefs, and ability. Suggestions, guidance as well as practical teaching implications on how to interact and cope with these diversities in a classroom are to be provided to assist any interested teacher educators in seeking the right balance between sameness and diversity among learners. The author expects that this paper will contribute to the benefits of education and shed light on how to prepare teacher educators and other stakeholders to become more effective in teaching diverse learners for effective academic outcomes and achievement in education in all levels.

Keywords: multicultural education, classroom diversity, learner differences

1. Introduction

“I am different; I am unique; I am different today from yesterday and will be different tomorrow.” (Mitchell, 2017)

All human beings simply share a variety of features in common. We share some of the markers; however, it is unlikely that we share them all with other people on this planet. Each person is specific to him/herself and has a unique set of markers

comprising his/her identity. In other words we are unique creatures. Some differences among human beings are permanent such as genes, a gender, a race, and so on whereas others can be changed like our religion, socio-economic status, culture, etc. Hence, it is essential for us to have the skills to make our own choices wisely as well as know how to adopt and adapt for any changes for our well-being.

At present, in our society and of course, in most of the world, we are witnessing intense changes in all social institutions that govern five basic areas of social need including economics, politics, religion, family, and our focus of this paper, education (Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 2009). According to these authors, several factors appear to have an influence on education changes and these are due to:

- changing in demographics of the school-age population;
- increasing diversity of language among schoolchildren;
- increasing concern about gender differences in schools; and
- increasing cultural diversities between teachers and students as well as among students.

With increasingly diverse societies nowadays, education apparently comes into play by providing children sufficient knowledge and skills to respond appropriately and sensitively to this diversity (Mitchell, 2017). As a teacher educator, we need to be well-prepared and become effective in teaching and dealing with diverse learners. Due to unavoidable and undeniable differences among the learners especially in a classroom, it becomes a teacher's commitment to seek the right approach and methods as well as to make the choices whether to accentuate, eliminate or tolerate them.

Teaching multicultural education is often exhausting work (Dolby, 2012). Diversity in a classroom with the students from diverse cultures and backgrounds can create intolerance, conflict, fear, challenge or even vulnerability. There may be discrimination against or persecution to those who are different. According to the author's sixteen-year teaching experience, it is normally difficult to reach the students with a right message of equality and social justice particularly in a multicultural classroom. Doubts and questions always arise and these make teachers wonder how to inspire and empower the students to effectively recognize and intervene in social injustices as well as to appropriately be able to adjust their role in any social change.

By addressing the issues with multicultural education and diversity in a classroom, teachers must understand who their students are, the world they live in, and the experience they have had. Ideally, teachers have a lot to do to create

peaceful classroom atmosphere and equitable class societies which are based on tolerance and mutual respect.

In these regards, this paper seeks to draw out what we know and what we do not know about the underlying effects caused by multicultural education and diversity in a classroom including the differences in genders, social classes, economic classes, races, cultures, religions and beliefs, and ability. In addition, suggestions, guidance as well as practical teaching implications on how to interact and cope with these diversities in a classroom are to be provided. The author hopes that this paper can contribute to the benefits of education and shed light on how to prepare and advise teacher educators and other stakeholders to become more effective in teaching diverse learners. The following issues to be discussed in this paper can be relevant to teachers' success and subsequently that of the students' on the whole.

2. Discussion of Content

Attention to learners' diversities has had a long history in the world society. In Thailand, for instance, the focus on education has begun for the common schools which were intended to offer students of different social class backgrounds. In some periods of the past, however, the focus was prone to only a common culture; in other words, a dominant Thai culture.

Due to globalization and more communication with the world, during these few decades, the field known as multicultural education has emerged in Thailand. Thai educators and every stakeholder have moved their attention to a variety of perspectives on its theory including the definition, perspectives, and goals of multicultural education in the country. The term 'multicultural education' hence refers to any educational reforming process that is carried out to assure all students' experience of educational equality, learning achievement, social mobility as well as well-being.

According to Cushner, McClelland and Safford (2009), some crucial questions have emerged in response to the increasing trend and acceptance of multicultural education. The following questions are linked to the ability of all stakeholders in providing effective educational opportunity and success to all students.

- Is multicultural education for everyone or only for the students in any minority groups?
- Should multicultural education focus on the individual student, on the student as a member of a group, or on both?
- Are multicultural teaching practices and pedagogy good for everyone?

- Is multicultural education centered on domestic issues of diversity or should it be a central idea with more global understanding of difference?

Regarding the author's perspective, all these above questions are important. With the interdependent nature of the world we are living in today, it is essential for a teacher to teach the students to belong to one group or another. At some points in their lives, they must learn how to understand, collaborate, and work well with the people who are different from them. Simply to say, what the students learn locally apparently has some implications for their global action. The focus of the education in this century; therefore, is not only dealing with the issues of differences in society but also how the students learn from others around the world.

The following sections of this paper are to discuss the samenesses and differences in education, multicultural classrooms, how these affect the students' achievement in schools, how a teacher deals with these issues in classrooms as well as his/her act of teaching in those classrooms with multicultural diversity.

2.1 Samenesses and Differences in Education

As mentioned previously, human beings have and share some features in common and at the same time they possess some specific differences, diversities or unique attributes. These diversities can either enrich their lives or elicit fear and challenges. Likewise, the diversity in education often cause intolerance, discrimination, and conflict as well as vulnerabilities in students. Occasionally, differences in education fascinate us either in a positive way or a negative one. Students and even teachers have suffered from serious consequences of disconformity to dominant discourses and alienation in schools.

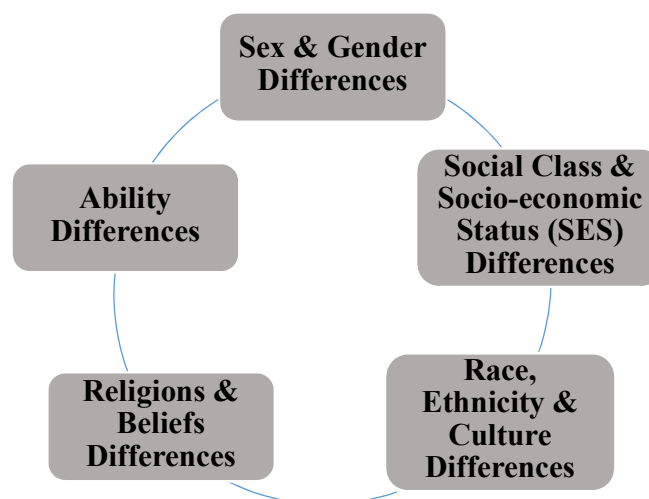


Figure 1 Differences in Education

2.1.1 Sex and gender differences in education

Sex and gender have always received attention in discussions of student attainment (Ward, 2008). The terms of sex and genders have been used interchangeably to identify all human beings. Bartlett and Burton (2012) define sex as our biological make-up including male or female. According to them, these are the differences in chromosomes, hormones, and physical sexual characteristics such as organs, body hair, and so on. Gender refers to the social construction of masculine and feminine. It is related to what males and females are expected to be like in terms of behavior, appearance, attitudes, beliefs, and personalities, and so on.

The issues of sexuality in schools and how gender identities are negotiated and created have been examined by Smith (2011). Conformity among the students for fear of being seen different plays a significant factor within schools. Despite their differences in several aspects, males and females tend to be more alike than they are distinct on most, but not all, psychological variables. Below are the similarities and the differences in psychological variables of both genders (Mitchell, 2017).

Gender similarities – communication, social and personality variable, well-being
Gender differences – motor performance, aggression (higher in boys)/
agreeableness (higher in girls)

Nowadays, women are more educated than men in a growing number of countries. Nevertheless, females currently still have less access to education than males in some developing countries. The followings are the summary of gender differences in education (Ahearn, 2017; Bartlett & Burton, 2012; Mitchell, 2017; Ivanovska, 2015).

- Gender differences in mathematics and related skills are small and quite complex.
- Gender differences in verbal ability favor girls, but are small and quite complex.
- Females are not attracted to computer science.
- Males are stronger; females are physically more flexible e.g. body fat.
- Women are more likely to be obese than men, but more boys than girls are obese in some countries.
- Gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors are small and diminishing. (Men are more liberal sexual than women.)
- There are major gender differences in mental health. (women – depression, anxiety, somatic complaints; men – antisocial personality disorder)
- Males drink more alcohol and smoke more than females.
- Boys and girls express aggression in different ways.

- More boys than girls have disabilities.
- Students who are LGBT are more likely to be bullied at school and to attempt suicide and experience significant depressive symptoms.
- Boys mature more slowly than girls.
- Boys are more influenced by peers on their approaches to education.

2.1.2 Social class and socio-economic status (SES) differences in education

The terms social class and socio-economic status are often used interchangeably but they are different concepts (Mitchell, 2017). Accordingly, the first refers to a person's relatively stable socio-cultural background where as the latter refers to his or her current social and economic situation which tends to be more changeable over time. It is also involved a family's economic and social position in relation to others, based on income, education and occupation.

In a school situation, the index of economic, social and cultural status is used to measure students' socio-economic background. However, a teacher or any staffs involved must respect and take the students' human right into consideration particularly with the students from low-SES background. Below is the summary by Mitchell (2017) regarding the effects of social class and socio-economic status (SES) differences in education.

- A negative impact on students' development is caused by poverty.
- Poorly educated people limit economies' capacity to produce, grow and innovate.
- Failure to improve the students' performance from low-income families has an economic and social cost as a whole.
- Any failure in schools to improve the students' socio-economic status creates limitation in social cohesion and mobility, and imposes additional costs on public budgets to deal with the consequences; in other words, higher spending on public health and social support.
- Improving equity in education and reducing school failure should be a high priority in all education policy agenda.

2.1.3 Race, ethnicity and culture differences in education

As we know, the world is inhabited by people with different races. With increasing fast communication and more contact in every part of the world, racial backgrounds become less meaningful to more people since currently we do all activities together without being aware of the ethnicity differences among us.

However, it is still undeniable that the problem of the color line has still extended into this century in the certain parts of the world.

Due to the attention to indigenous people, minority nations, refugees, temporary/ permanent guests, it is crucial for all stakeholders to take into account how education effectively responds to racial, ethnic and cultural differences and how these differences have an impact on educational achievement.

Here is a summary on how racial, ethnic and cultural differences in education have an impact on students' education and learning achievement (Bartlett & Burton, 2012; Mitchell, 2017).

- Most of the time, the students from ethnic minority group tend to have lower school achievement than the majority ethnic groups – this is related to low SES, requiring consideration of cultural factors related to ethnicity.
- Ethnicity of the students is associated with their socio-economic status and gender. The distinct identity leads to discrimination, particular stereotypes or prejudices; these have an influence on their achievement and attainment in schools.
- Many students from ethnic minorities prefer attending the schools where they constitute a majority. In other words, they assume that the teachers and school with racial differences can create some negative impact on their academic potential and learning achievement.
- In some countries, ethnic minorities' histories such as discrimination, persecution, slavery, colonialism, civil wars, and economic privations play a role in determining educational outcomes. These are considered as significant repercussions for the sense of identity and educational aspirations.

2.1.4 Religions and beliefs differences in education

In general, people in every society subscribe to some forms of religion or belief system. Without any universally recognized definition, religion includes some transcendental beliefs in or service to divine, nontheistic / atheistic beliefs, supernatural belief. These are shared by the members in a society with visible proofs of commitment, practical rules of behavior and morality as well as supernatural forces that can be induced to intervene in the people's worldly life.

Each country varies in the degree of religious diversity and this diversity affects people's education, career, relationship and lifestyle. Individuals have a qualified right to pursue their religions and beliefs and obviously all nations have spelled out

the right of the individuals in this matter such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, and so on.

In education, there is potential tension between the rights of parents and their children in realm of their religious freedom. As a matter of fact, student's religious beliefs have some impact on their education, learning achievement, and also their well-being at schools in some countries or some certain school contexts. Religion in education includes some certain forms and attributes which have direct and indirect impact on the students in general. These issues will be explained in the later part of the paper.

2.1.5 Ability differences in education

One of the most dominant and controversial issues confronting educators around the world today is how best to educate children with different abilities (Mitchell, 2017). This issue requires very careful and systematic analysis on the true meaning of ability differences, how the differences in abilities affect the students' achievement, and how education accommodates to students with different abilities effectively.

According to Mitchell (2017), there are three main types of ability differences – health and physical ability; cognitive and intellectual development (remembering, reasoning, problem-solving, information processing, application of the abilities to achieve major developmental tasks); and personality. All of these play an important role in students' classroom behavior, relationship with others, and more importantly their academic achievement.

However, in the 21st century education, the issue on learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities such as autistic spectrum disorder, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder come into play. The aim on this issue should be to respect and enhance the human rights of the students with disabilities since on the whole; the disabled students are likely to have lower level of academic achievement than the normal ones.

Since each country and culture possesses different perspectives and attitudes towards disability, people and students with disabilities are prone to be disadvantaged when it comes to education and employment. In some countries, these people have higher risk of growing up in poverty; less likely to achieve adult goals in employment, less economic independence, fewer opportunities of personal autonomy, fewer chances for owning independent housing or living independently of their parents and so on.

Up to this part, all five categories of differences in education have been elaborated. In the following section, the practical implications in response to each difference in education are to be given for teachers, educators, or any personnel who are involved in education to utilize for the better outcomes in education as a whole.

2.2 Practical implications in response to differences in education

As mentioned in the previous parts, the differences in education appear to have both positive and negative influences and impacts on students' academic achievement, attitudes, perceptions, and their well-being at schools. It is essential for teacher educators to understand and come up with methods and approaches to deal with these differences effectively. In this section; therefore, the practical implications in response to each difference in education are to be stated as follows.

2.2.1 How should education respond to gender differences?

In the author's opinion, teacher educators must take account of the nature of sex and gender differences and the factors that contribute to them. Mitchell (2017) has classified three broad categories of practical implications for this type of differences.

- Society and system-level

In this regard, teacher educators should recognize that there are some overlaps in genders. Not all boys are considered as underachievers nor are all girls considered as better learners. In addition, all students in different genders must have equal rights in access to education.

- School level strategies

Teachers should monitor students' progress from their behavior, performance, attendance, not from their genders. Also, the teachers should try to avoid under-identifying girls with some certain special needs and work with parents to deal appropriately for effective solutions and outcomes.

- Classroom level strategies

It is essential for all teachers to make classrooms safe and inclusive for both genders by avoiding gender stereotypes in teaching, curriculum materials and classroom atmosphere.

2.2.2 How should education accommodate any SES differences?

The following strategies are shown to be effective in improving the educational outcomes of low-SES students.

- The attention is to funding models, reducing poverty, attracting and retaining high quality teachers, full service schools, social promotion policies, etc. implemented by the role of the government.
- All schools should fully take responsibility of utilizing the resources to deliver an equitable education to all of its students.
- Effective school leadership; engaging families in education; taking into account of the interaction of SES with ethnicity and gender; developing a supportive school culture; providing additional support for at-risk students; implement ICT access policies are all needed in implementing an accommodation of SES differences (Mitchell, 2017).
- It is crucial to consider the suitability of the curriculum, assessment and evaluation practices, the quality of teaching, equal access to the curriculum, setting high but realistic expectations as well as employing evidence-based teaching strategies in classrooms.

2.2.3 How should education respond to racial, ethnic and cultural differences?

The educational implications of the ethnic differences involve sufficient interactions among family, school and societal factors. Teachers should understand the history and contemporary situations of ethnic minorities. Below are some practical implication for teachers and other stakeholders in response to racial, ethnic and cultural differences.

- All individuals have an equal right to have their cultural identity protected through education.
- Human rights and freedoms of the students should be respected in any school contexts.
- All students have the rights to choose their own identities and cultural values.
- Teachers should try to eliminate or reduce prejudice and conflict regarding the differences in identity, race and ethnicity.

2.2.4 What form should religion in education take?

Apparently, each country or school context has different way to deal with differences of religion in education. The establishment of faith in schools can be with out without government support and any religious instruction can be performed either inside or outside school. This involves different levels of compulsory or voluntary participation and the parents and students' choices to opt in or opt out. Religious education can be in a range from teaching about different

religions with/without critical appraisal, to embedding religion in the curriculum with a broader consideration of moral education.

Evans (2008) outlines six broad conceptualizations of religious education as follows:

- Strict secularism – no discussion of religion at all in the classroom
- Incidental/ religious education – religion is taught about only to the extent that it is necessary to understand other subjects.
- Plural religious education – students learn about the basic practices, beliefs, ritual, etc. of a variety of religions (philosophies/ beliefs of a non-religious nature).
- Sectarian religious instruction – students are broken up into groups and given instruction in their religion. An alternative class is also given to the students who do not wish to have religious instruction.
- Unitary religious education – the class deals either exclusively or predominantly with a single religion.
- Religious or ideological instruction – only one class in religion available with religious instruction in the dominant religion and participation in religious rituals.

2.2.5 How should education accommodate students with different abilities?

A number of methods for teacher educators to accommodate to the students with different abilities (Mitchell, 2017). These are states as follows:

- The schools should recognize the benefits of accommodating to children with disabilities and ensure that children with disabilities receive equal education.
 - Engage parents in their children's education to develop early and effective prevention and intervention programs at schools and post-school programs.
 - Ensure that all students with disabilities and the ones who need special education have appropriate access the general curriculum
 - Teacher should protect the rights of the students with disabilities at times of disasters and conflicts.
 - Ensure that the built environment at school is conducive to learning.
- Individualized support for students can be provided when it is necessary.

3. Conclusion

From all mentioned in the previous parts, it is evident that most countries are becoming increasingly diverse. This trend reflect a number of factors including the globalization impact, the consequences of climate change, better socio-economic condition, changes in people's beliefs and cultural values as well as their choices of identity, and so on. All these diversities lead to conflict, prejudice, and discrimination to the students, teachers, and everyone who is involved in education in all levels.

Schools, teachers, educators have more responsibility and challenges in seeking the right balance between sameness and diversity among learners. Education systems should respect the human rights of all students. Perceptions of diversity can be perceived differently in different contexts and at different times. Therefore, a design for learning should provide fair opportunities for all kinds of learners, in other words, individualization or personalization should be recommended to satisfy the uniqueness of individual learners for effective academic outcomes and achievement in education in all levels.

Biography of the Author

The author is presently the Director of Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction degree program at Rangsit University. Formerly she had been a lecturer at Rangsit University's English Language Institute for 10 years and has received outstanding teacher awards in 2005, and 2007 to 2015. She worked for Thailand TESOL (Organization of English Teacher in Thailand) from 2010 to 2014. She carried out postgraduate research and published a Doctoral dissertation on Motivation in teaching and learning ESL. The author's research interest includes Curriculum Design and Instruction, Technology in Education, TESOL, and ESP.

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