PREPARING TEACHERS FOR MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS:
WHAT STRATEGIES WILL ENGENDER SUCCESS?

Temisan A IGE
Department of Teacher Education,
University of Ibadan. Nigeria
<temige@yahoo.com>

Adedamola A KAREEM.
Department of Teacher Education,
University of Ibadan. Nigeria
<damkar2005@yahoo.com>

Abstract
Managing learners in a multicultural classroom is a challenge faced by many teachers in Nigeria today. The uncontrolled movement of people across and within national borders, coupled with the incessant activities of insurgents has led to the displacement of individuals, families and groups from their traditional communities. As a result of this, the educational system, especially at the primary and secondary levels has experienced an influx of learners of diverse cultures, languages and religion. Teachers have had to deal with the dynamics of operating in classrooms with culturally and linguistically diverse learners for which the traditional teacher education curricula have not prepared them. Thus, there is the need to ascertain the nature of challenges teachers are likely to face in multicultural classrooms as fallout of this unpreparedness. This paper examines this dilemma from three stand points: multicultural education as viewed from the Nigerian perspective; provisions for preparing teachers for multicultural classrooms as indicated in the teacher education curriculum; and proposed strategies that could be successful in equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills and competencies to manage learners and learning in multicultural classrooms.

Key words: Teacher preparation, Multicultural education, Multicultural classrooms, Language and culture.
Introduction

In recent times, many countries have experienced uncontrolled movement and relocation of people across and within their borders. This is in response to a quest for survival and a better life as a result of the global economic downturn and unemployment facing many nations, coupled with the frequent activities of insurgents and terrorists. Consequently, communities in many countries feature a coexistence of people of different tribes, cultural backgrounds, languages and religion.

Nigeria is not left out of this unplanned experience as a country which is by nature multi-ethnic, having about 250 ethnic groups each with its own language and cultural expressions. This diversity is reflected in the composition of learners in a typical Nigerian classroom and explains why the schools have always experienced challenges in providing instruction in English as a second language. With the increase in the activities of insurgents in recent years, and the displacement of large numbers of families with children of school age, this problem has been further compounded by the increased diversity of cultures represented by learners in a single classroom.

Since education is the bedrock of development in nation building, the need to cater for the education of these culturally diverse individuals within communities has brought to the limelight issues of multicultural education (ME) and more specifically, multicultural teacher education (MTE). This has highlighted the roles to be played by government, the educational system and teacher educators in addressing the challenges posed by multicultural classrooms. One way of approaching the challenge is by the total overhaul of the teacher education curriculum and the production of teachers equipped with the relevant knowledge, skills and professional dispositions to anchor multicultural education in the classroom.

Teachers are the only sets of people entrusted with guiding students’ learning in the regular classroom, therefore, they must be adequately prepared to succeed in the task of teaching learners of diverse backgrounds. However, it is not clear how well the traditional teacher education programmes have prepared them for this job. Multicultural education has not been very popular in the history of teacher education in Nigeria when compared with many other countries like the United States of America where many
researchers have worked on different areas of ME. (Jennings,(2008); Moss, (2008); Cochran-Smith, Trent, kea and Oh, (2008); and Herrera, Holmes and Kavimandan, (2012) ). However, there have been reports that what is actually implemented as multicultural education in most cases may fall short of expectations in literature and that the traditional teacher education curricula may not adequately prepare teachers for multicultural classrooms (Cochran-Smith, 2004 and Gorski, 2006). This is also believed to be the case in Nigeria.

Therefore, this paper will examine the concept of multicultural education and how it fits in the Nigerian setting. It will also look at the provisions in the teacher education curriculum for preparing teachers for multicultural education. Finally, it will propose strategies for helping teachers acquire knowledge, skills and the right dispositions to support learning in culturally diverse classrooms.

The Concept of Multicultural Education

Many ideas have been generated in describing what multicultural education embraces. Multicultural education is about changing the nature of teaching and learning in order to create suitable learning environments for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds (Lemmer, Meier & Van Wyk, 2006). Educating a mixture of individuals from different races, cultural, linguistic and religious affiliations, coexisting within the same location can be considered as multicultural education. This describes educating people with multiple ethnicity or culture. Multicultural Education (ME) describes education that takes into consideration the cultural diversity of people.

ME could also refer to any form of education or teaching that incorporates the histories, texts, values, beliefs and perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds. Abott (2014) described ME as an educational philosophy that focuses on celebrating cultural differences while also recognising the importance of challenging all forms of discrimination based on race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation etc. ME recognises the principle of educational equity for all students regardless of culture and strive to remove barriers to educational opportunities and success for students from different cultural backgrounds. In Bode (2009), ME was acknowledged to encompass theories and practices that strive to promote equitable
access and rigorous academic achievement for students from all diverse groups in order to work toward social change. Since the world is a culturally diverse globe, ME gives a great opportunity to everyone to be educated, in a socially relevant and educationally advantaged way.

Multicultural education was recorded to have begun in the United States of America with African-American communities. This was conceived when the need arose to consider how students who are not proficient in English Language may learn so that they do not fall behind academically or fail out of school due to language implementation. Gradually, as multiculturalism gained ground with increased relocation of people due to influx of legal and illegal emigrants from neighbouring and distant countries, classrooms became filled with learners of diverse cultural and language backgrounds.

Gorski (2006; 2009) in analysing a history of definitions and conceptions of multicultural education based on literature (Nieto, 2004; Banks, 2004; Grant and Slater, 2006) describes five “defining principles” of multicultural education which include:

1. ME as a political pathway attempts to provide social justice for students who are disenfranchised or marginalized.
2. While some classroom practices may be in line with the philosophy of multicultural education, issues of social justice cannot effectively be addressed in the classroom as it is an institutional matter to be resolved through school reforms.
3. ME holds the view that critical analysis of systems of power and privilege hold the key to comprehensive school reforms.
4. The riding goal of ME is the removal of educational inequities.
5. ME is appropriate for all students.

Gorski (2009), based on an examination of multicultural teacher education course syllabi used in the United States found that the courses were designed to prepare teachers with pragmatic skills and personal awareness but not to prepare them in accordance with key principles of multicultural education such as critical consciousness and a commitment to educational equity. They did not prepare teachers to create equitable learning environments.

Herrera, Holmes and Kavimandan (2012) noted that in spite of the increase in the number of culturally and linguistically diverse
students in classrooms in the United States, teacher demographics and the dynamics of classroom instruction has not changed much. Confirming this state, Feistritzer (2011) states that teachers entering teaching through traditional and alternative preparation programmes continue to remain relatively homogenous usually white and female while the makeup of student population with respect to ethnic, cultural and language backgrounds continue to change. Therefore, countries like the United States where multicultural education has been embraced and is being practiced still experience some disparity between the ideal and expected level of practice and what actually goes on in the classrooms.

In Nigeria, not much empirical research is available on multicultural education initiatives and how it is put into practice in schools. For a country which by nature is multi-ethnic, and where the average classroom is made up of culturally diverse students, teachers must practice some form of multicultural education if only by default. They must have a way of recognizing, acknowledging and negotiating between the different beliefs and interests of students in their care so as to maintain the integrity of classroom transactions.

The teacher preparation, which is done in teacher education programmes according to Okemakinde, Adewuyi and Alabi (2013) is the provision of professional education and specialized training within a period for the preparation of individuals who intend to develop and nurture the young ones into responsible and productive life. Therefore, the provision of viable training in basic skills which will enhance teachers' productivity, reduce systematic problems in the education sector and ensure effective service delivery is a paramount issue.

Nakpodia and Urien (2011) remarked that the preparation of teachers should be a policy issue with procedures designed to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, attitude, behaviors and skills required for effective performance in the classroom, school, local and wider community.

An examination of the traditional teacher education curricula at different levels (i.e colleges of education and universities) show that they do not seem to contain provisions to prepare teachers for teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse learner classrooms. Though there are courses on how students learn (i.e. psychology of education), the logistics of learning (philosophy of education), science of teaching (the pedagogy), subject content
areas, subject pedagogy, educational management, sociology of education etc, there are no courses in the curricula that explicitly describe the relationship between learners’ beliefs, culture and learning. Bearing in mind the submission of Bank (2004) that students’ learning and thinking are influenced by their cultural identity and heritage, teachers have to be adequately prepared to embrace approaches that consciously value and recognise cultural backgrounds of learners, and that promote equitable learning environments.

Teacher preparation for classroom practice is often divided into three stages. These include: the initial teacher training, the induction process and teacher continuous development. All these stages are important in the incorporation of multicultural education in teacher preparation. The next section will propose strategies that can be used within the different stages to support teachers in their professional development for teaching in multicultural classrooms.

**Strategies for Multicultural Teacher Education**

In order to ensure successful teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms, teachers have to be adequately exposed to viable experiences that will enable them acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions crucial to their assignment. This exposure could be achieved in the following ways:

1. **Incorporation of multicultural education curriculum into teacher education programmes.**
   
   This could be in two different ways –
   
   (i) Design and development of a robust curriculum for multicultural education to be offered as a specialised area in the teacher education programme. This would be at initial teacher training stage. The curriculum design would be as it is available with such programmes as Special Education or Adult Education. The curriculum will expose individual pre-service teacher under such training to courses in multicultural education. The curriculum would be made up of foundational knowledge in education related aspects (e.g. philosophy of education, psychology of education, sociology of education etc), skills in uncovering students’ beliefs and interests, working with students of different home backgrounds,
assessing students' learning, using methodology to support teaching and learning with students with different cultural background, content area which include knowledge and skills for teaching specific subjects in culturally diverse classrooms and professional practice carried out in multicultural classrooms.

At the end of the course, the trained pre-service teacher is awarded a certificate in multicultural education (i.e. B.Ed Multicultural Education).

(ii) Infusion or integration of multicultural education curriculum as part of the traditional teacher education programme.
In this case, pre-service teachers would be exposed to courses on multicultural education. This may be incorporated as part of the foundational knowledge in education in courses like sociology of education or teaching methodology. During this preparation, teachers would acquire pre-service training on multicultural education pedagogy. Future teachers would have been prepared against the use of 'one size fits all' approaches to teaching and assessing students. Therefore, the pre-service teachers are able to adopt more flexible inclusive ways of teaching and measuring that will give students of different cultural backgrounds more opportunities to learn. This is supported by Bate (2009) who advocated for the need for equity pedagogy which is concerned with modification of teaching styles to facilitate academic achievement of students of all cultural backgrounds. In this programme, apart from the fundamental knowledge in education, skills in assessing students, content areas would include knowledge and skills in managing multicultural classroom for future practice.

(iii) Teacher development or continuing professional development.
This involves an in-service process for practicing teachers. This approach is to sensitize or update the practicing teachers on multicultural education. The teachers would be taught on what multicultural education is and the strategies for coping and managing multicultural classroom, the best strategies to employ for teaching and learning process to ensure success. This could be in form of organised workshops or seminars, or distance learning programme for
practicing teachers. This approach will facilitate professional development in practicing teachers bearing in mind the submission of Adeyanju and Ajayi (2012) that distance learning programmes are for training, development and upgrading of teachers at all levels. Availability of such programmes on multicultural education for practice teachers would equip them with necessary skills on multicultural pedagogy.

2. Restructuring Professional Practice for Pre-service Teachers

During the professional (teaching) practice exercise, teachers will be exposed to the practice of critical/culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002). This will be initiated during micro-teaching sessions on campus and will be perfected when teachers go to the field on teaching practice. This period will involve exposure to knowledge about the dynamics of multicultural teaching and learning, including creating equitable learning environments, teacher reflections and ways of unearthing teachers’ philosophical beliefs and knowledge about multicultural and multilingual learners and how these can translate to changes in pedagogical skills. In its basic form, culturally responsive teaching can be defined as; “using the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them effectively” (Gay, 2002).

The teaching practice exercise will be made to include teaching in classrooms which are truly multicultural and provide authentic experience and getting trainee teachers involved and fully integrated in the community in which they teach.

3. Use of Biography-driven Instruction

This is actually a model of culturally-responsive pedagogy based on an understanding of the conditions that promote learning and second language acquisition and allows students to attain their potentials.

According to Herrera and Murry (2011), biography driven instruction (BDI) involves the teacher gaining a more holistic understanding of students in order to be in a position to fully respond to their cultural and linguistic assets and needs. The teacher can explore answers to questions that relate to the following areas:
• Sociocultural: what brings students life, laughter and love?
• Linguistic: In what ways do students use their first language and second language for comprehension, communication and expression?
• Cognitive: How do students know, think and apply?
• Academic: To what degree do students have access, engagement and hope? (Herrera, Holmes and Kavimandana, 2012.P.4)

It is believed that when teachers get answers to such questions, they can be pro-active in creating 'low risk' learning environments by planning how their instruction can be made to respond to the diversity of student biographies present in their classrooms.

**Conclusion**

Education is regarded as a process of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes to the learners and is a pre-requisite for quality manpower development, an indispensable tool in nation building. The importance of teachers in the educational system of any nation makes it mandatory that adequate provisions be made by government and higher institutions of learning to produce quality teachers who will enhance productivity, reduce systematic problems in the education sector and ensure effective service delivery in the labour market. One crucial aspect of teacher education relates to their ability to help students learn in culturally diverse classrooms typical of most communities in Nigeria today. Teachers can be exposed to viable curricula on multicultural education, be provided with authentic experiences both in faculties (during training) and professional practice by working in multicultural classrooms where they can practice culturally responsive pedagogy to enable them acquire knowledge, skills, professional dispositions and competencies to support the learning of students in multicultural classrooms. Alexander (2012) speaking on the need for integrating multicultural education in South Africa says that "...the enhancement of educational excellence amongst black learners in ex-model C schools cannot be fully realised without educational equity. Moreover, the provision of equal opportunities for all learners to develop their full potentials should be an
expectation all teachers have for all their learners” (Alexander, 2012, p.1934).

Therefore, teacher education should provide the platform where teachers develop their knowledge and skills to ensure their expectations of catering for the needs of each child and maximizing his/her performance can be actualised.

Recommendations

Coming from a background where limited research information is available on what teachers actually do in multicultural classrooms, teacher educators, researchers, teacher regulatory and licensing bodies (Teachers Registration Council (TRC)), faculties and professional organisations need to initiate and carry out studies on approaches to promote MTE and how this can be translated into teacher practices, preparedness of teachers to face multicultural classrooms, support mechanisms for teachers and provisions for continuous professional development.

The introduction of curricula and course offerings in multicultural education can be a viable strategy for its promotion, therefore, curriculum experts, and curriculum development agencies (Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council, (NERDC)) should be commissioned by government and teacher education institutions to design curricula, and curriculum materials, for multicultural education. Following on this, the government should embrace the incorporation of multicultural education into the teacher education programmes at all levels of teacher preparation. This would enable every teacher to teach in any multicultural classroom.

Regular training should be organized for in-service teachers to expose them to the practice of critical pedagogy or culturally responsive methodology required to function successfully in multicultural classrooms.

References


Herrera, S.G, Holmes, M. A, and Kavimandan, S. K (2012). Bringing theory to life: Strategies that make Culturally Responsive...
Preparing Teachers for...


