

Multicultural Education in Transition Society: The Challenge of Restoring or Collapsing Cultural Barriers of Students

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Abstract: The topic of the paper carries a symbolic of the contemporary communication trends between people of different countries, ethnicities and cultures. Its concept is to emphasize the challenges multicultural education of students faces today. The purpose of the paper is to theoretically review the cultural mosaic and dynamics of relationships between students of different cultural background. Through a theoretical analysis we will unfold some of the difficulties which continuously follow the practice of multicultural education, with a special emphasis on: 1. Setting, namely, resetting cultural barriers between students, and 2. Describing possibilities that contribute to eliminate the same, in order to improve the fragile interethnic, respectively intercultural, relationships. We refer to data of many theoretic studies subject of analysis of some of the causes which produce dilemmas and contradiction in the relation theory and implementation of multiculturalism. We conclude by discussing key findings and identifying issues for further research to create a functional, open and democratic educational society.

Key words: multiculturalism, Setting or resetting and collapse of cultural barriers

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I. INTRODUCTION

Important aspects of the challenges faced by the modern world (societies, cultures and states) are related to building up sound communication relations between people. At the time of sophisticated information technology and scientific discoveries, the relativism of administrative borders between states and continents occurs spontaneously. In the meantime, societies become aware of the need to design future projects through qualitative interpersonal, respectively intercultural contacts.

The tendency of mixing cultures in the modern world was not at worrying by societies before the 20th century. At that time the mentality of social, cultural and ethnic categorization was dominating – the hegemonic concept according to which, regardless of community origin, the national, state culture was important. All this rigid assimilating mentality is summed up in the words of British author R. Kipling, according to which: "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet". Fortunately, the reality nowadays is different: East and West, North and South, meet at any time (Bauman, 1999).

Expanding cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity throughout the world, especially after the end of the Second World War, revealed a new basic orientation necessary for normal functioning of civilization. The rights of ethnic and cultural groups, as an important part of the collective identity encountered support of many philosophers and educators from the beginning of the 19th century. The democratic culture now represented the stamp of democratic politics. Such circumstances followed re-conceptualizing of multicultural diversity as a response to the concerns of ethnic, racial and cultural groups that felt marginalized within their national states (Banks, 2004).

From global to the regional plan: Cultural pluralism in Macedonia

The approach towards a reality with a variety of cultures around the world is challenging societies of a very high level of democracy, especially after the 19th century, a finding that does not apply to those with fragile democracies. In many Balkan countries, and not only, which were under the domination of the communist system, the cultural diversity of the population has always been neglected. Unfortunately, in many countries (of which some are member states and some others applicants for the European Union), national, ethnic and religious contradictions and lack of tolerance are still a source of constant threats and conflicts in the relation majority-minority.

The Republic of Macedonia is a typical example of multiethnic states, where citizens of different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds live together. Along with the intentions of joining the European Union, the country needs to meet certain characteristic standards of every member state of the European Union. As most important are those of economic development, rule of law, and improvement of interethnic relations. In

this regard, the mutual recognition among the various cultures, especially Macedonian and Albanian, represents the fundamental condition of intercultural dialogue and building a state based on the notion of civic, ethnic, cultural and religious rights and freedoms.

Alongside with efforts to overcome many socio-economic and political challenges within this country, obstacles that lead to the aggravation of interethnic relations emerge from time to time. Recently, such challenges concern the opinion and are subject to debates in media and other circles, are related to issues which affect the Albanian culture: the biased encyclopedia, the issue of textbooks where there are insults of the Albanian history and many other technical and scientific mistakes which are considered as provocations on ethnic basis and also the formalization of the Albanian language.

In the context of the global economic crisis and the transition difficulties that this country is going through, as well as its claim to integrate into European and international structures, it is important to mobilize the society towards European standards. In accordance with such definitions, cooperation among young people of ethnic groups becomes a relevant state priority in building a pluralist democracy society. In this regard, educating students on values and concepts of respecting the cultural specifics of other ethnic groups represents an important premise of interethnic dialogue and cooperation.

The challenged multicultural education

Scientists quite often present confusing statements on the treatment of the multiculturalism concept. Many times the concept of culture is identified with national, ethnic or religious affiliation. This way, the notion of human culture is simplified, for which Bauman (1999), rightfully warns that that culture cannot be identified with ethnic identity or it be counted as its fundamental determinant. Because of this confusion, in many meetings where multicultural dialogue is debated and promoted, a number of participants such as politicians, professionals, educators, activists of civic organizations, etc., mistakenly equate cultural components of ethnicity, race or religion with the notion of culture.

Similarly, even in the field of education, various interpretations for this notion are noticed. A contribution to clarify this notion is the definition that the American psychologist Banks argues (Banks, 1993). According to him, multicultural education encompasses all school policies and practices not only for students of various ethnic, racial or religious origin, but also for persons of different genders and those with development disabilities (for example, children with special needs). That is, "multicultural education is an idea which states that all students regardless of the group they belong to, such as gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion, etc., all should use educational equality in education (p.116).

The multicultural education affects all phases of the effective classes (Ramsey, 1987). Through the multicultural curricula the students learn about themselves and the others. In this way they analyze the beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors which are characteristic for certain cultures (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Gutmann, 2004). The members of these cultures need to have greater self-confidence and simultaneously develop evaluation and understanding of the other cultures (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1990; Kryzanowski, & Stewin, 1985). The instructions for multicultural understanding can assist in raising the academic expectations of the pupils from the minorities and to contribute for decreasing the negative stereotypes. It is assumed that in order for the multicultural programs to be efficient, it is necessary for them to incorporate the social, historic and political contexts (Nieto, 1997). Hence, it is logical to expect that they will meet the following conditions:

To teach the children to recognize, accept and appreciate the cultural differences; and

To "imprint" in the pupils, during their education, the sense of responsibility and commitment for the work in the direction of the democratic ideals, justice, equality, and democracy (Manning & Baruth, 1996, p.3).

In the teaching practice, when the teacher calls to the cultural values appropriate for the pupils, i.e. their cultural identity, the participation in the classes increases evidently and the degree of the achievements increases as well (Tharp, according to Slavin, 2006). These achievements are an essential indicator of the intellectual education and competence, as well as the most important prerequisite for the individual and educational prosperity of the person. The assessment of the success of the students in the study program usually focuses on the academic achievements, but in many educational institutions, their achievements and attitudes are also assessed (Banks, 1995). In other words, the assessment of the academic achievements includes all the means which are used in the schools, to formally measure the performances of the pupils.

Setting or resetting the cultural barriers

Setting communication barriers between young people (and citizens) of different cultures in Balkan states and beyond, as a strategy to assimilate minorities, has a long institutional history. As for illustration, with the establishment of the Yugoslav Federation after World War II, a new social and economic environment was created. Its tendency was to depreciate the cultural barriers among the ethnicities in its composition, which was more of a façade behind which the creation of a new identity called Yugoslav concealed. The years to follow led to the Federation breakup because of ethnic discrimination disguised for a long time. Besides other republics

Macedonia became independent as well but the situation related to national rights deteriorated again. The 2001 conflict was the peak of Albanian national frustration. The Ohrid Agreement ceased, not to say, suspended the war in the function of restoring interethnic communication. But discontents sustained for years after the agreement was adopted even after almost two decades.

On the other hand, the reflections of ethnic-cultural antagonisms are evident even within the educational environment. The students' cultural background reflects their ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, and experience in groups and subgroups. Based on this variety of factors, mutual relations among students of different ethnic backgrounds are influenced by the already existing concepts embodied in the brain associated with members of other cultural groups. If the family and other agents of socialization (the media and peers) have adopted stereotyped schemes on accepting those who are different from oneself, young people will experience communication barriers with them. Logically, the communication will become even more difficult as their views related to the peers of other ethnicities are beset with prejudices. Due to non-favorable concepts for outgroup members their behavior will be intolerant and discriminatory. Nevertheless, verbal and physical conflicts, hate speech, and national antipathies among young people, often underpinned by the media, will deepen the gap between young people of different cultural backgrounds.

Respecting the religious rituals, weddings and clothing of different ethnic groups in one country is not sufficient for members of a community to not feel ignored. The claim that this way of showing respect for cultural diversity is just a deceitfulness that constantly produces mistrust between communities (Banks, 2004). This practice will further strengthen cultural barriers between young people and citizens in a society. What the interethnic relations lacks is the equal inclusion of ethnicities in economic, political and social issues. This is the only way to provide some kind of restoring of the trust on institutions and the majority communities by the ones considered as outgroups.

The collapse of cultural barriers

Our expectations, values, pre-concepts and prejudice result in different conceptions of different individuals on the same reality and people within it (Myers, 1999). However, they considerably reflect the cultural affiliation, traditions, rites, religion of individuals. How we think of ourselves depends on what group we affiliate to. Self-awareness on ourselves is a conglomerate of the personal ego and the social identity. We build out identity by categorizing the others and by comparing to them, always leaning towards the "ours" – the ingroup. The ingroup is used as a source of pride and self-evaluation (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1987). During the evaluation of ourselves and others, individuals go through some degrees of cultural identity development. Banks (2001), proposes a typology consisting of 6 degrees of this process in total, while the educators have the opportunity to facilitate the students' transition from one degree to the other. For example, the individuals that should have reached the third degree called "Cultural Identity Clarification", where they are certain about their own cultural identity, move on the fourth degree "Biculturalism" where they are willing to successfully participate in two cultures.

From all of the above, it is obvious how important is the educational intervention in the plan of cultural cooperation between them for a future without xenophobia. Such interventions should necessarily get institutional support: a legislation that will promote mutual cultural respect among students, but also nurture social skills for self-control and self-critical thinking (Vaughn, L., MacDonald, 2010). The more they are trained on self-critical and thinking openness alternatives; the learners will be able to interpret the reality even from other people's perspectives not only their own.

In function of successful intercultural communication, there is a need for students, in addition to typical school knowledge, to acquire knowledge, skills and commitment abilities necessary to change the world - to make it more rightful and democratic. The major human relations problems are not caused by illiterate people, but those of different cultural, racial, religious, and national backgrounds, incapable to solve many of the problems humankind faces with, such as poverty, racism, sexism and war. Therefore it is necessary that, in addition to school knowledge, students are empowered with skills and competencies to identify weaknesses of theories and concepts they are served (Banks, 1996), as well as to perceive the knowledge from other cultural and ethnic perspectives. They can use these competencies to change the world in the name of the cause for justice and equality between people. When students are taught how to criticize injustices in the world, they should be helped to formulate opportunities for actions that will change the world and make it more democratic. Emphasizing criticizing in absence of hope (for action), can make the students feel disappointed and passive (Freire, according to Banks, 2004).

Another way of depreciating cultural barriers of student population would be choosing textbooks and instructional materials that show all ethnic groups in equally positive and non-stereotypical roles (Garcia, 1993). Avoid communicating bias, but discuss racial or ethnic relations with empathy (Stephan & Finlay, 1999) and openly, rather than trying to pretend there are no differences (Polite & Saenger, 2003). Avoid stereotyping and emphasize the diversity of individuals, not groups (Aboud & Fenwicz, 1999; Levy, 1999).

In line with the new world trends, educators and policy makers will have to redesign existing education programs so that students understand how interdependent communities are to each other around the world. As a result, they need multiculturalism knowledge, attitudes and skills to successfully adapt to racial, ethnic and linguistic - cultural diversity.

II. CONCLUSION

The young people cultural diversity adequately addressed by state institutions is undisputedly in function of increasing the quality of inter-ethnic communication. Institutional negligence to sincerely support cultural pluralism of citizens, and especially students, emphasizing only specific performances and materials further enhance cultural differences, is more likely to undermine the harmony among communities.

In function of collapsing cultural barriers among students is the independent scientific analysis of the curricula, i.e. their coverage with subjects from the cultural pluralism of the pupils. The legal textbooks used by the pupils are a good source to promote the theory of multicultural education. In that direction, when designing the textbooks, the equal representation of the various cultures will contribute for their members not to feel marginalized in society, to be confident in themselves, and more motivated for engaging in the academic and social activities in the school and beyond. Likewise, well-managed student training strategies on developing critical thinking skills and perceptions from the others' perspective as well as social communication skills play a great role in adequate intercultural education. This will result in building bridges of cooperation and mutual cultural, ethnic and religious dialogue as a prerequisite for an educational and economic prosperity of a society.

Recommendations for social actions

In line with the basic ideas of multicultural education, many activities organized by different institutions and organizations would serve as well, such as: educational campaigns through TV (radio) advertisements and shows; forums with citizens (especially in rural areas) and distribution of humane educational messages through billboards (in cities), etc. We would recommend that topics of these activities reflect constructive alternatives related to fostering interethnic dialogue among young people and conflict resolution mechanisms.

Recommendations on future research studies

The topic discussed in this paper is certainly only a part of the cultural mosaic. We consider that many further research studies on this rather subtle field of society are necessary, aiming at identifying convergent orientations of different ethnic groups. Therefore, we share the belief that more importance should be given to detecting appropriate strategies in function of consolidating and advancing the position of young people, regardless of their ethnic, religious or cultural affiliation. Issues related to fostering the dialogue among youngsters, enabling them to monitor the behavior and increase of interethnic tolerance, are some of the guiding points in drafting future research projects.

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