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Assessment of Pre-service English Language Teachers' Knowledge of Multicultural Education in South Africa

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Abstract

Implementation of multiculturalism in South African schools is based on the misconception that all teachers are capable of teaching and interacting with learners from diverse languages and cultures. Fundamentally, multicultural education was initiated as a response to the discriminatory apartheid education which provided education based on four race groups: Whites, Coloureds, Indians, and Blacks. The classroom composition in most schools is likely to consist of learners from different cultures who speak different languages. This article evaluated pre-service teachers' knowledge base on how to successfully implement multicultural education. A qualitative research method, in the form of a questionnaire, was used to collect data from the participants. The findings revealed that pre-service teachers are not fully prepared to implement multicultural education whereas they are expected to implement it when they start working.

Keywords: multiculturalism; pre-service teachers; apartheid; cultural and linguistic diversity; indigenous languages

Introduction

The notion of providing multicultural education in South Africa is very significant as it focuses on transforming all schools to accommodate ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity.

To achieve the vision of multicultural education as spelled out in the preamble of the South African Constitution, schools should serve as primary channels through which this vision could be achieved (Brown and Shumba 2011). Since 1994, learners from different ethnic and cultural groups have been free to attend any school irrespective of their colour or race. To show recognition for the previously oppressed and marginalised languages, the constitution elevated nine African languages to be used together with English and Afrikaans as official languages (Edwards & Magwaru, 2011). The decision to elevate the nine African languages has a great impact as the majority of students who speak indigenous languages hardly speak English outside class (Posel, Hunter & Rudwick, 2022). As a result, they are unable to acquire English language proficiency which is regarded as a linguistic capital that enables students to have access to higher education, job security, international business, etc. (Islam & Ramalingam, 2024). The decision to make eleven languages official was an important platform to enhance multiculturalism but had serious implications for the curriculum. After the dawn of democracy in 1994, the Department of Education implemented Outcomes Based Education (Curriculum, 2005) which was later deemed inappropriate after a few years because it failed to address the expected outcomes (Modiba & van Rensburg 2009). Curriculum 2005 was replaced by the Revised National Curriculum Statement which aimed to implement multicultural education and harmony among learners from different cultures by stringently selected curriculum subjects and topics.

Implementing effective multicultural education is a laborious process that cannot be achieved overnight. In the South African context, multicultural education is a philosophical concept that came as a response to the racist apartheid education (Naidoo 1996) which provided its separate education to four separate groups: Whites, Coloureds, Indians, and Blacks. To transform the situation, schools, teachers, teaching, and learning materials needed to be structured so as to be uniform for all learners. Le Roux (2000) avers that teachers should undergo a paradigm shift from the previous monocultural context to be prepared to implement multicultural education, effectively. Some teachers have misconceptions that having learners from diverse cultures in class means that they are implementing multicultural education. It is important, thus to prepare pre-service teachers to implement multicultural education and to retrain those who are already in the field.

South Africa is not the only country that is battling with implementing multicultural education effectively. For example, the United States of America (USA) has been struggling to transform its schools for students to develop skills and knowledge that prioritize cultural

diversity (Banks 2001). The main difference is that most learners in South Africa are Blacks whereas in the USA they are Whites. Badrun, et al. (2024) maintain that multiculturalism “highlights the importance of acknowledging and valuing diversity as a means of achieving social integration and prosperity.” A truly multicultural education can be implemented when all learners are treated fairly and are also allowed to practice their culture without fear of being ridiculed. Sleeter (2001) reviewed more than eighty studies on multicultural education and argued that, although several studies have been published in this field, there is little progress in structuring programs for teacher education. In Georgia, Tabatadze (2015) proposed that all institutions of teacher education have to amend their teacher training programs to include multicultural education. Tsui and Tollefson (2007) however, maintain that the dominance of English as the medium of instruction results in the loss of culture and knowledge of other languages. Multilingual education, therefore, can be effectively implemented if learners are taught different languages at any particular school; English, however, is the only language used in most schools in South Africa. The dominant role of English in most countries overshadows the important role of indigenous languages and cultures.

A multicultural education may liberate learners who are afraid of demonstrating their culture within a school setting due to fear that their culture is regarded as being inferior. Multiculturalism focuses on creating equal opportunities and harmonious relationships for learners from diverse cultures. Mahoney and Schamber (2004) argue that fundamental steps that can help learners understand other cultures are to explore the constructs of different cultures and refine our communication to accommodate other cultures. Thus, le Roux (2002) advises teachers who were trained during the apartheid era, where the focus was on monocultural contexts, to undergo a paradigm shift and adjust to the current form of implementing multicultural education. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders in the schools to evaluate whether all teachers conform to South Africa’s Department of Education’s policies on providing multicultural education.

Literature Review

Evolution of Multicultural Education in South Africa

The pronouncement made in the current South African Constitution emphasizes the issue of promoting multilingual and multicultural education. Since 1994, when the first democratic election took place, most schools have opened their doors to learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Vanderyar 2003). That became the first step towards implementing

multicultural education and healing the wounds created by the National Party's racist policies when they took over the government in 1948. Mentz and van der Walt (2007) surveyed teachers in the Western Cape Province and found that teachers were not adequately prepared to provide multicultural education in schools as they were aware of the challenges posed by multicultural education

From 1948 to 1994, learners received different types of education based on the colour of their skin than on their abilities. The racist policy had devastating effects on the entire country and several attempts have been made to address the challenge, but none have been successful. The catastrophic event that erupted on 16th June 1976 compelled the Nationalist Party government to review its policies on language and culture. This resulted in different ethnic groups being given an opportunity to use their home languages with English as the main medium of instruction in most schools and tertiary institutions.

In 1976, Afrikaans began to lose its grip as the main language promoted by the racist apartheid government. Webb (1999) outlines numerous factors that should be considered when implementing policies on multilingual and multicultural education to avoid a situation where English becomes the main language to be used in all spheres of life. The research by Mutekwa and Sedibe (2015, 1084) found that the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) "has helped to partly solve the language question, which once sparked controversy leading to the Soweto uprisings". The language issue is very significant as a language enables learners to express themselves fluently and competently, thus allowing learners to use their home languages as a means to promote multicultural education can have exponential benefits.

Multicultural education should provide the same opportunities for all learners from different cultures and encourage them to participate actively in class. Vygotsky (1978) outlined that the learners' culture and language should be taken into consideration when planning how multicultural education should be practiced. Language is a tool that enables learners to communicate well and freely about their culture. Christine (1995) emphasises that multicultural education prioritises teaching and learning that promote democratic values and is open to all learners no matter of race or colour. Language and culture are the main pillars of a democratic state which makes citizens realise that they are part of the nation and they can play a significant role. Campbell (2004) comments that multilingual education can be effectively implemented in democratic countries where all citizens have respect for all languages and cultures that are recognized by the constitution of that country.

Despite all the efforts to promote multicultural education, some schools have not changed their traditional beliefs of promoting Western culture while suppressing African cultures represented by learners in those schools. Lemmer, Meier, and van Wyk (2006) highlight that multicultural education should focus on creating an appropriate learning environment for all learners from different cultures and languages. They further emphasised that multicultural education, in South Africa, sought to improve the current learning and teaching environment which still had traces of the apartheid influence. Brown and Shumba (2011) explain that multicultural education is a broad concept that cannot be limited to acknowledging cultural differences but includes contrasting cultural perspectives within a family or community. It is important to rethink educational contingencies in post-apartheid South Africa and evaluate progress made in terms of race, class, gender, and language dominance (Soudien 2004). This is aimed at helping teachers realise the importance of implementing multicultural education and to help the Department of Basic Education evaluate if there is any progress.

More than thirty years since the first democratic elections, there are still numerous challenges that have derailed the effective implementation of multicultural education. Most multicultural schools adopted a passive approach to implementing policies on integration (Machaisa & Mulaudzi 2019). Furthermore, very few teachers are eager to implement multicultural education as they regard themselves as responsible only for a particular subject matter. Nieto (1996) points out that all teachers are responsible for the implementation of multicultural education and the whole school must be structured in a manner that promotes multicultural education. School leadership, in consultation with all stakeholders, has the responsibility to plan programs that encourage students to interact with one another. Alexander (2016) believes that relevant in-service and staff development training initiatives are essential to address issues that hamper the effective implementation of multicultural education in South Africa. As multiculturalism is a philosophy, any curriculum proposed for multicultural education is expected to provide a conducive environment that encourages all learners to accommodate cultural diversity. Teachers are the main partners since they can influence learners to accommodate cultural diversity, such as learning other languages which are the characteristics of a multicultural and multilingual country.

The role of teachers in promoting multicultural education

Teachers have the main responsibility of crafting the future of learners as they spend ample time with them at school. They should constantly strive to learn other cultures to encourage

learners from dominant cultures to accommodate those from minority ones. Teachers need to critically understand the meaning of the word ‘culture’ to incorporate the diverse cultural backgrounds of learners when preparing and presenting lessons (Watkins, Lean, Noble, & Dunn, 2013). Viljoen (1998) argues that there is mounting pressure for school principals and teachers to find new approaches to deal with learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Teachers are change agents who ensure that the Department of Basic Education policies are implemented in all schools. Brown and Shumba (2011, 542) aver that “teachers need to develop the transformative quality and skills” that can enable them to bring harmony to the class. Teachers’ beliefs play a significant role in influencing learners as well as creating the educational climate for learning and teaching (Vollmer 2000). Pre-service teachers need to understand the role culture plays in the classroom to use inclusive teaching practices (Aragona-Young and Sawyer 2018). Thus, teachers need to be careful of their actions, utterances, and non-verbal body language which can have an impact on the lives of the learners.

A major challenge that hinders the effective process of implementing multicultural education is that South Africa does not have adequately trained teachers who are capable of teaching culturally diverse learners. Some of the teachers who are currently employed were trained during the apartheid era and they find it difficult to teach culturally diverse students. Le Roux (2000, 26) maintains that teachers trained to promote “the former model of mono culturalism” usually adopt tried and tested methods that were useful in the past with the hope that learners will acquire multicultural education spontaneously. Marais and Meier (2009) discovered that student teachers lack sufficient knowledge and insight on how to implement multicultural education effectively. The current teacher education programs at universities need to be evaluated to ascertain whether they empower student teachers to provide multicultural education as envisaged in the constitution.

Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, and Crawford (2005) suggest that pre-service teachers should be empowered to be culturally responsive when they start working to accord learners with different cultures space to practice their cultures without any prejudice. Magogwe and Ketsitlile (2015) concur by indicating that pre-service teachers in Botswana are aware that they are expected to promote multicultural education, but they are not pedagogically equipped to promote it in class. The situation in Botswana is similar to that of South Africa where pre-service teachers have insufficient pedagogical knowledge. Pre-service teachers are expected to implement new policies and change the current climate when most teachers have very limited knowledge of how an effective multicultural education can be implemented. Teacher educators

at universities and colleges should have extensive knowledge of multicultural education to inculcate student teachers before they complete their studies (Hahl & Löfström, 2015). Pre-service teachers, therefore, should have a thorough knowledge of multicultural education before they begin their careers. They should be familiar with the fundamental ideology in multicultural education, which is to create a system that can accommodate learners from different languages and cultural backgrounds.

How pre-service teachers are groomed is important in changing their attitudes and views about multiculturalism so that they become effective change agents in the workplace (Capella-Santana, 2003). Campbell and Brummett (2007) suggest that there should be an effective relationship between the pre-service teacher and the university to empower pre-service teachers. The main troubling factor in promoting multicultural education is that English continues to dominate as the language of access and African languages are undermined as lacking in certain aspects (Meier & Hartell, 2009). Fundamentally, knowledge about a particular culture can be skilfully transmitted through the use of the learners' native languages. As the trend of using English as the medium of instruction continues, some guiding principles should be devised to ensure that African languages are also used to promote learners' culture.

All institutions responsible for training teachers are expected to prepare teachers to be culturally responsive when they start teaching. Appropriate, culture-sensitive teaching only occurs when teachers employ the characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse learners as conduits for imparting knowledge (Gay 2002). Teachers are expected to strike a balance between the mastery of content knowledge and pedagogical skills utilized in class to help culturally-diverse students improve their achievements. Nieto (2017) proposes the idea of reconceptualising multicultural education to take into account critical issues that are not included in the current multicultural discourse.

The ability to know what is taught in multicultural education, how the curriculum is taught, and how the learning environment is structured as well as rethinking how the goals and the visions exemplify multicultural education are pertinent issues to be evaluated. Gorski (2016) urges researchers and practitioners to rethink about the role of culture and propose a new commitment to achieve equity in conversation and practices concerning educational justice. Teachers in Spain experience difficulties in managing multicultural classes where learners are expected to adapt as teachers lack professional knowledge based on multicultural education (Coronel and Gomez-Hurtado, 2015). Whereas Zaier and Maina (2022) propose that pre-

service teachers must compile students' profiles as a means to understand their cultural background. Heineke, et al. (2019) elaborate on how one American university developed educators' expertise to empower them to teach English learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Teachers play a significant role in reducing the gap between ethnic groups and promoting cultural tolerance among learners. They always try to create a window through which learners see the outside world and acknowledge that each culture is unique and very important. Vandeyar (2010) encourages teachers to view diversity in schools as an asset that can help them accommodate all learners. Multicultural teachers go beyond what they are expected to do and create a fertile ground to guide learners to accept one another. The notion of multicultural education, however, remains a controversial one since it differs in how it is implemented in different countries. There is also a misconception that English is the language of upward mobility, hence acquiring proficiency in the English language and culture opens doors to a better future. It is the teacher's role to enlighten learners that indigenous African languages also have a meaningful role to play when promoting cultural diversity.

Methodology

The current study was conducted among final-year pre-service teachers in a South African university who were starting their teaching practice. Teaching practices are conducted during the second semester of the final year of the Bachelor of Education degree and all pre-service teachers are expected to go and teach at different schools and gain experience. Teaching practice helps pre-service teacher accumulate valuable experience that they could use when they begin their careers.

Data collection and analysis

A qualitative method was used to collect data using a questionnaire that was distributed to all 48 pre-service English teachers at a South African university. The questionnaire comprised 20 open-ended questions to enable participants to freely give their opinions. All participants were Blacks speaking different indigenous African languages (TshiVenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, IsiSwati, Isizulu, and Isi Ndebele). The questionnaire was distributed in June, which is a month before they start their teaching practice sessions in July. The participants were given a week to

complete the questionnaire and return it to the researcher in class. A total of 46 questionnaires were returned and only two pre-service teachers who were absent due to commitments on the day the copies were collected, failed to return them. Thus, data were collected from 46 participants and then analysed to deduce whether pre-service English teachers are fully prepared to implement multicultural education when they assume duty and to evaluate if they fully understand the importance of multicultural education.

Results and Discussion

The data collected through the questionnaires were analysed and the results were discussed using a thematic content approach. Participants raised different concerns and their frustration about insufficient preparation for multicultural education. They pointed out that thorough planning is necessary to create a conducive situation where all learners from diverse backgrounds can receive equal opportunities and learn to accept one another. Four themes emerged during the analysis and data were therefore sorted under these themes.

Pre-service English teachers are not effectively trained to implement multicultural education

The university course content seems to continue to focus on the previous curriculum because very little has been done to prepare university staff on how to prepare pre-service teachers. The course outline mainly promotes English culture as English is taken as the medium of instruction and reputable publishing companies supporting pre-service training are originally from countries where English is the native language. Marais and Meier (2008) aver that there is a serious need to revise teacher training programs at universities and colleges to focus on providing multicultural education. Additionally, the Department of Higher Education can devise monitoring tools that can be applied in all tertiary institutions.

The data, therefore revealed that pre-service teachers were not thoroughly trained on how to implement multicultural education effectively. Even, educators who are already working have little or no practical knowledge on how to implement multicultural education. In an empirical study conducted in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, it was found that teachers are not adequately trained to teach multicultural students (Mentz & van der Walt 2007). The participants in this study also indicated that they are not well trained to provide multicultural education. One of the participants indicated that “*there is a very limited time wherein our lecturers prepare us on how to teach multicultural classes which will be a serious problem when we start working.*” Meier and Hartell (2009) highlight the fact that teachers who are not well trained in multicultural education are unable to promote language and cultural

development to learners who speak languages that teachers hardly understand. They tend to undermine the cultures of the students who speak other languages and promote the English language and culture. Institutions of higher learning in South Africa, therefore, are expected to provide comprehensive training to pre-service teachers as an empowerment strategy. They need to understand that, although English is used as the medium of teaching and learning, there must be other means to promote African languages as proclaimed in the constitution.

Pre-service English teachers lack understanding of policies and practices on multicultural education

The course content that is presented to pre-service teachers at universities fails to provide sufficient knowledge of the policies and practices that pre-service teachers are expected to implement. The South African Schools Act (Act 37 of 1997) outlines that learners are at liberty to attend any public school whereas very little effort is made to ensure that teachers are capable of handling multicultural learners. Some participants have the idea that once learners from different cultural backgrounds attend the same classes it is a sign of promoting multicultural education. One of the participants remarked:

Our lecturers always make reference to multicultural policies without trying to critically analyse them with us. Although we try to read the policies there are instances where we fail to understand their implication and sometimes we fail to understand or to interpret them.

The recruitment of pre-service teachers in South Africa is a grey area that has numerous challenges. Some students register for teaching because of frustration that they did not qualify to register for their preferred courses. They hardly acquaint themselves with the policies and proper practices which are expected from teachers. Implementing multicultural education is a demanding process that requires dedicated teachers who are also competent to deal with learners from diverse cultures (Chisholm 1994). Culturally sensitive teachers are eager to learn different languages and cultures as well as familiarise themselves with policies relevant to multicultural education. Pre-service teachers, therefore, need to be taught about the policies and practices relevant to multicultural education and their implications.

Preservice English teachers lack strategies that can promote ethnic pluralism in schools

Ethnic pluralism refers to a diverse society where different races, cultures, religions, and ethnic groups coexist harmoniously in one state. To achieve functional multicultural education, pre-service teachers are expected to have basic knowledge about the eleven official languages and cultures as well as those not included in the constitution. Additionally, the influx of immigrants from different parts of Africa and other countries further compounds the challenge with which teachers are faced. This is in line with du Plessis and Mestry's (2009) findings that teachers encounter numerous challenges but ensure that all learners from diverse backgrounds are taught without any hindrance. They are expected to design teaching strategies that influence learners to share their cultural experiences, moral values, and knowledge in class and outside.

In most cases, pre-service teachers were never trained on how to promote pluralism in schools or how to handle classes with learners from diverse cultures. One participant argued that:

The current teacher education system is doing very little to prepare us on how to teach learners from different language groups and cultures. It creates challenges when you find yourself employed in a school where learners speak different languages and have different cultures.

Nieto (1996) avers that multiculturalism should help us think about total school reform and not just focus on one aspect. It is the responsibility of every teacher at school to ensure that learners are guided to accommodate one another. Pre-service teachers, however, do not have adequate skills to help them promote ethnic pluralism among learners. They are compelled to learn how to handle students from diverse backgrounds without help from experienced teachers. Krummel (2013) advises that pre-service teachers need developmental professional support to help them adjust to teaching culturally diverse classes and learn about all the cultures represented in the classroom. It is their role to educate learners from dominant languages and cultures to appreciate and accommodate those from minority languages and cultures. Moreover, well-trained multicultural teachers constantly need to show appreciation, compassion, and acceptance of students from minority cultural groups.

Textbooks prescribed mainly address English culture rather than other cultures

Although several efforts to encourage Black entrepreneurs to start publishing companies were made still the major publishing companies relevant for pre-service students are either from Britain or the United States of America. The main responsibility of these companies is to

promote English language and culture and there is relatively little about African culture in their products. In some cases, the authors of textbooks compare English and African cultures and put more emphasis on English culture and values. One participant indicated that: “We are expected to use textbooks in class when teaching but these textbooks do not have adequate information on multiculturalism as they mainly promote English language and culture.” It is the responsibility of the Department of Basic Education to evaluate if the curriculum is relevant and if the information contained in the prescribed textbooks is adequate to promote multicultural education. The panel responsible for evaluating prescribed books has the responsibility to choose textbooks that promote cultural diversity and disqualify those that promote one culture. To ensure that African languages are considered as vital as English, the government must make it a point that these languages are used in legislative, executive, and judiciary domains (Desai, 2001). As language and culture are intertwined, it is paramount for the ruling government to implement all binding legislations related to multiculturalism that are endorsed in the statute books.

The trend indicates that reputable book publishing companies have their roots in Britain and the United States of America, and they are not eager to write about multiculturalism. Most of the events and festivals contained in textbooks display Western culture, and very little is done to link it with South African culture. The Department of Basic Education has taken a stance, although a passive one, in insisting that textbooks are expected to display different cultures before they can be recommended for use by learners. One participant pointed out that “*the Department of Basic Education must pass legislation that compels all publishing companies to focus on promoting different cultures rather than promoting one culture.*” It must always be remembered that language serves as a social, cultural, and political artifact that the community deems a valuable resource.

The four themes highlight that pre-service English teachers have insufficient knowledge of how to promote multicultural education. It is therefore incumbent on South African tertiary institutions to review their education curricula to focus consciously on multicultural education. The current hegemonic position of English has penetrated every facet of life, but African languages must be given space to promote multicultural education and to restore the pride of black South Africans.

Conclusion

To date, implementing effective multicultural education in South Africa is a serious challenge as policy documents outline the notion of multicultural education without providing clear prescriptions on how it should be implemented. Therefore, this paper attempted to formulate a theoretical framework for strategies that can be adopted to enhance the speedy implementation of an effective multicultural education. It is the responsibility of universities to empower pre-service teachers to be psychologically and professionally prepared to handle multicultural students because the current demographic arrangement in the country is comprised of learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, South African universities are the most suitable educational institutions where multicultural education can be effectively implemented as they admit students from diverse cultural backgrounds who can help the government to effectively implement multiculturalism.

The findings corroborate those of Hahl and Löfström (2015) who point out that teachers can play a pivotal role in promoting multicultural education if they critically and honestly reflect when they are imparting knowledge. For instance, well-trained multicultural teachers need to make critical evaluations of the situation where they work and provide students with strategies on how to appreciate each other's culture. Teachers serve as the custodians of knowledge at school, and they have the opportunity to help learners acknowledge that having different cultures does not entail that one culture is inferior to the other (Le Roux 2000). The content presented to learners has a serious impact on shaping their future and determining their level of achievement. A well-structured multicultural curriculum must be developed and made available to all schools to ensure that all teachers provide a uniform type of education.

It should be noted that each culture is unique and very important in shaping the rainbow nation as well as helping students appreciate their differences. Thorough planning is necessary to ensure that all learners from diverse cultural, racial, and language groups receive the same educational opportunities that can enable them to perform maximally. The situation in South Africa is made complex by the dominance of the English language and culture which has permeated all facets of life. It is a fallacy, therefore, to believe that multicultural education is being implemented whereas indigenous culture in some schools is practiced once a year in what is described as 'culture day'.

Lastly, the Department of Education should ensure that universities have programs on how pre-service teachers should be trained to handle multilingual and multicultural classes. The current situation at tertiary institutions is inadequate to prepare teachers to be fully equipped to

handle students from diverse cultures. Further research on multicultural education is still essential to help transform the youth of our country to accommodate one another. Also, we need to provide all learners with equal opportunities to excel in different spheres of education without gender discrimination. Effective implementation could help the next generation to have appropriate morals and cultural values which can transform our country and eventually eradicate all traces of apartheid.

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