

AN ANALYSIS OF THE DEGREE OF ATTENTION GIVEN TO MULTI-CULTURAL LESSON PLANNING AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN IRAN'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: CURRICULUM PLANNING EXPERTS' VIEWPOINTS

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ABSTRACT

Multi-cultural curriculum is an effective mechanism in empowering people and groups in terms of knowledge, attitude and skill for peaceful coexistence in a multi-cultural society. In this regard, the aim of the current study is analyzing the degree of attention paid to multi-cultural lesson planning and curriculum development in Iran's educational system. To this aim, a sample composed of 70 faculty members was selected from among those professors who were involved in the field of lesson planning and curriculum development in different universities all over Iran. To move in line with the research objectives, a questionnaire was developed by the researcher and its validity and reliability were attested. Research findings reveal that though several theoretical studies and attempts have been implemented in recent years (mostly in the form of articles and theses), little change, if any, has been effectuated in practice. As a result, very scant and unsatisfactory heed seems to have been given to multi-cultural lesson planning and curriculum development in our educational system. After all, it is really essential to develop such programs in order to make students familiar with life skills in Iran's pluralistic and multi-cultural context.

Keywords: *Curriculum, Education, Multicultural Education*

INTRODUCTION

James Banks who is the father of Multi-cultural education defines the term as: “a comprehensive concept used for explaining a wide range of educations, programs and school materials that is designed for helping children in various cultural groups to enable them to benefit educational equality” (Banks and Banks, 2010; Zaldana, 2010). Multi-cultural education is a mechanism that is intended to create intercultural interaction, understanding and exchange, so that people with different cultures can have peaceful coexistence with minimal tension. In fact, multi-cultural education gives out a comprehensive framework for students' ethnic, racial and cultural heterogeneity and difference, thereby providing equal and high-quality education for all students. According to Gonzalez *et al.*, (2005), multi-cultural education as a reform movement is harbinger of change in education for preventing educational inequality and valuing cultural differences.

It can be concluded that though multi-cultural education is one of the most important issues in the realm of education, it is among the highly neglected areas in our country. This approach – which is based on some principles such as understanding, inspiring respect and tolerance of differences and cultural varieties (Bic, 2010), recognizing the prevalent domestic and universal cultural varieties (Sleeter and Grant, 2006), creating positive attitude toward cultural, ethnic and civilization features and reducing prejudice and discrimination (Brown, 2013), reinforcing school culture and its structures with the aim of creating educational equality for everyone (Nethsinghe, 2012), satisfying the needs of minority groups and helping them get rid of identity dilemma, reflecting ethnic, racial, environmental and religious variety in curriculum, including variety in using various teaching methods, educational materials and evaluation techniques –is intended to enhance human skills for living in a multicultural community via creating changes in educational system toward preventing educational inequalities and valuing cultural differences.

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Multicultural education gets greater importance in the context of Iran which looks like a rainbow composed of a wide variety of cultures. Indeed, Iranian community contains an amalgam of diverse races, ethnicities and cultures and its demographic and geographic composition comprises various cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. In order to have peaceful coexistence, these various ethnic and cultural groups should avoid prejudice and ethnocentric behaviors and move toward respecting cultures. Thus, they should recognize the similarities and differences between themselves and others and try to develop intercultural and inter-ethnic relations. In this regard, the role of education and training is so vital in cultural communication of plural and multi-cultural societies such as Iran. Then, it can be stated that in the absence of the key role played by (formal and informal) multicultural education, in general, and curricula, teachers, etc., in particular, it would prove quite difficult and almost impossible to train individuals for multi-cultural citizenship. Thus, the need for people's familiarity with philosophical foundations of multi-cultural education and consequences of disregarding it in current circumstances are among the basic priorities of educational systems in each society, and especially in those countries which are characterized by significant cultural diversity (Banks and Banks, 2010). In effect, the main principle in multi-cultural education is sensitizing the individuals as to the inherent diversity existing in the universe (Irvine, 2012).

On the other hand, research findings by a number of scholars including (Hakimzadeh *et al.*, 2007; Araghiye *et al.*, 2011; Fayaz and Imani, 2010), reveal that Iran's curriculum is not compliant with the principles of multi-cultural education and there exist major problems in this respect. This mismatch might be partly due to lack of awareness of the purpose of such an approach. Indeed, multi-cultural curriculum, which is defined as a culturally responsive type of curriculum, is associated with some features such as interdisciplinary and child-oriented ness, is in close touch with students' needs (Mousseau, 2006), calls for messages such as cooperation and collaboration, peaceful coexistence, justice, etc., is intended to realize ethnic identity and power without supremacy, and is after helping students achieve national identity and required skills for full participation in social affairs. In other words, multi-cultural education rests upon understanding the role of race, ethnicity and culture in the construction of scientific and social knowledge and appreciating the manner in which students can learn and fairly spread their relationship with others. The main focus of multi-cultural curriculum is providing educational equity and readdressing the neglected students in the educational system. In this regard (Sadeghi, 2012), is of the view that the main goal of multi-cultural curriculum is creating consensus, solidarity and unity rather than dissociation and secession. Despite the popular belief, multi-cultural curriculum isn't after producing "anarchy", "compassionate regard to ethnicities and cultures", "cultural imperialism" or "standardization of cultures"; rather it seeks peaceful coexistence of cultures and individuals and tries to promote peace and friendship among them. Scholars believe that multi-cultural knowledge should act as the cornerstone of teaching and learning attempts in various layers, including curriculum, educational policies, and interaction between teachers, students and parents. Based on the available body of research, it can be claimed that adopting multi-cultural education and applying it in school curricula will have positive effects on learners. This approach will improve students' social and cognitive growth (Asgariyan, 2006; Sleeter and Grant, 2006), further their active involvement in educational process (Nieto and Bode, 2008), bestow them cultural pride and ethnic identity (OgoOkoye, 2011), make them more sociable (Asgariyan, 2006), act as a rich source of learning (Araghiye and Fathivajargah, 2012; Sadeghi, 2012), and most importantly of all, it will bring them academic improvement and success (OgoOkoye, 2011).

With the above discussion in mind, it can be stated that attending to the position of multi-cultural education in one of its most important destinations, i.e. curricula, is of an extremely vital role. Thus, in the current study, the researcher is after finding the extent to which principles of multi-cultural education are reflected in the content of course books in Iran's formal educational system? In so doing, the viewpoints of experts (university staff members in the field of curriculum development) are going to be sought.

Literature Review

Though no specific studies seem to have been carried out on the reflection of multi-cultural education in the content of textbooks in various academic levels and almost no attempts have been targeted toward the

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establishment of multi-cultural curriculum in Iran, this novel approach to education has recently been given due heed as one of the new policy making priorities on the part of scientific and international assemblies such as UNESCO and international headquarters of educational system in developed countries. Furthermore, multicultural education has now turned to a tool for preparing people for living under inevitable cultural circumstances and has been converted to a relatively new field for scientific explorations. In line with this line of argumentation, in a study entitled "The analysis of the content of textbooks in junior high schools according to issues and topics of today's world in the field of curriculum development," (Hakimzadeh *et al.*, 2007) concluded that the content of textbooks pays a lot of attention to Iranian rituals, customs, dialects and culture as well as the participation of all humans from all around the world in the process of knowledge production, yet cant heed has been given to studying other cultures and strengthening the spirit of tolerance and acceptance while faced with diverse thoughts and views.

In another research, (Fayaz and Imanighoshchi, 2010) analyzed the components of national identity in high school social sciences and history textbooks in the fields of humanities, natural sciences and mathematics, and came to the conclusion that ethnicity and components of culture didn't receive sufficient coverage in the course books under investigation. Indeed, ethnicity and components of culture were characterized by the lowest frequencies (Araghiye *et al.*, 2011). Study, on the other hand, probed the position of ethnicity in explicit curricula of high schools in Iran's educational system in the field of literature and humanities. The findings of their research indicate a sort of reluctance ward dealing with ethnic issues, an implicit emphasis on ethnic conflicts, as well as negligence of ethnicity and ethnic issues in textbooks. Furthermore, based on the findings of this research, the status of ethnicity in textbooks is more of an Oxymoron and, as they contend, this condition causes the teachers and students to be faced with a lot of conflicting and challenging information.

Moreover, in their investigation entitled "the application of a multi-cultural approach in teaching chemistry and the nature of science in non-technical majors in bachelor's program", (Goff *et al.*, 2012), made an attempt to design, implement and evaluate a new curriculum for teaching chemistry. This curriculum enabled students to create a range of theories in different cultures while investigating central chemical phenomena in all civilizations. In fact, this research was a method of merging chemistry, history and science, research and multi-cultural education. The findings indicated that this kind of curriculum acted successfully in involving students in learning chemistry as well as the nature of scientific concepts.

Phoon *et al.*, (2013) in a study titled "revealing pre-school teachers' attitudes and perceptions in multi-cultural education of pre-school children in Malaysia" probed the perception of 854 pre-school teachers regarding the importance of multi-cultural education, particularly in pre-school program, and analyzed their opinion about other pre-school teachers' understanding of multi-cultural education. Findings pointed out that pre-school teachers' understanding of multi-cultural education in Malaysia was very restricted. Though most of them verified the importance of multi-cultural education in pre-school program, it was not clear to what extent they appreciated the concept. Even though most pre-school teachers were of the view that other pre-school teachers had positive attitudes toward multi-cultural education, a significantly high percentage of pre-school teachers had unfavorable or conditional outlook toward the issue. Thus, the researchers in this study believed that more attention is to be paid to teachers' endorsement of the need for further development, as well as deeper and more critical understanding of multi-cultural education.

Likewise, the findings of (Cha and Ham's, 2014) probe, entitled "the institutionalization of multi-cultural education as a global policy agenda", revealed that countries with stronger bonds with global civil society enjoyed a significantly higher probability of including national policies and curriculum standards for multi-cultural education. (Krummel, 2013), looked into the models of multi-cultural education for pre-service teacher training. The study was aimed at analyzing pre-service teachers' beliefs, strategies and attitudes toward teaching culturally different students during professional knowledge acquisition in an educational program. Making use of phenomenological qualitative approach and running qualitative analysis of data, Krummel concluded that though attention to principles of multi-cultural education had partly impacted teachers' knowledge and aware ness, it had had no significant effect on teachers' competence in practice and in meeting students' diverse needs. This study helps with a deeper

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understanding of what constitutes multi-cultural education and points to some essential measures for the preparation of pre-service teachers in this respect. Therefore, Krummel underscores the role of further training services and the need for reappraisal of such services, as well as holding practical teaching workshops for culturally different students, and providing them with different kinds of feedback in an attempt to upgrade the quality of such services.

It must be noted that curricula are among the key factors in configuring an educational system, in that they reflect the ideological, cultural, religious and political policies of a nation in public, governmental and national domains, as well as in religious, linguistic and racial domains.

Therefore, curricula can play a determining role in reinforcing and consolidating the multi-cultural identity in tandem with intensifying the national identity. Having in mind this prominent role played by curricula and considering the findings of previous research referred to above, the current study is intended to analyze the degree of attention paid to multi-cultural lesson planning and curriculum development in Iran's educational system. In so doing, lesson planning experts' views will be sought.

Through running such an analysis, it is hoped that the required insights are going to be inspired and suggestions are going to be provided for textbook developers in different grade levels in Iran's educational system with the final aim of including the principles of multicultural education in the content of school course books.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methods

Based on the objectives of the current research which is aimed at analyzing the degree of attention paid to multi-cultural lesson planning and curriculum development in Iran's educational system, it can be categorized as an applied research in which the researcher runs a field study approach.

The population of the study out of which the sample was chosen was composed of faculty members in the field of curriculum planning in different universities across Iran. Running convenience sampling based on the availability concerns, a sample of 70 participants was selected. To gather data, a researcher-made questionnaire was administered.

Due to the fact that no relevant research studies, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, were available, the components of multi-cultural education had to be identified with a lot of care via studying the relevant theoretical concepts and notions (and by attending to the frequency of their occurrence) and through applying the key terms and phrases employed by authors and researchers in the field. Eventually, the researcher managed to devise a questionnaire by benefiting from the valuable viewpoints voiced by experts in this domain.

To check for the reliability of the questionnaire, it was piloted with 5 professors. Running Cronbach's alpha, the reliability of the researcher's devised questionnaire, which was designed on a Likert type scale, was found to equal 0.79.

Furthermore, in an attempt aimed at validation of the questionnaire, its content validity was ensured through seeking expert view. In so doing, the questionnaire was distributed among a group of experienced, senior and esteemed professors in the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

In this section, cogent answers are sought for each of the study research questions. To evaluate experts' views, single variable t-test as well as the criteria employed by (Bazargan *et al.*, 2007) were exerted. Based on such criteria, mean scores of 1 to 2.33 indicate low attention, 2.34 to 3.67 indicate medium attention and 3.67 to 5 indicate high attention rate. The relevant descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	S.D	Skewness	Elongation
1	1.84	0.21	0.38	0.34
2	1.93	0.15	0.99	0.65
3	1.92	0.29	0.03	0.50
4	2.37	0.95	0.52	0.37
5	2.42	0.89	0.91	0.30
6	1.84	0.21	-0.31	0.71
7	1.75	0.35	-0.26	0.20
8	2.49	1.10	-0.37	0.32
9	1.90	0.19	-0.25	0.81
10	2.41	1.24	0.18	0.16

Note: variable nams= 1: Ethnic values, 2: Mutual respect, 3: Anti- discrimination training, 4: Ethnic diversity reflection, 5: Accepting difference, 6: Resource distribution, 7: Diversity of methods, 8: Unity, 9: Interaction, 10: Emphasizing spiritual greatness.

According to Table1, modulus of skewness and elongation for all variables is lower than 1, which indicates the normal distribution of variables. In Table 2, single variable t-test results and analysis of each of the components are reported.

Table 2: Single variable t-test results for analyzing the degree of attention given to multi-cultural education components from experts' viewpoints

Variables	Mean difference	t	d.f	p	Attention rate
1	-1.16	-45.33	69	0.001	Low
2	-1.06	-59.12	69	0.001	Low
3	-1.07	-30.35	69	0.001	Low
4	-0.63	-5.56	69	0.001	medium
5	-0.57	-5.34	69	0.001	medium
6	-1.16	-44.71	69	0.001	Low
7	-1.24	-29.19	69	0.001	Low
8	-0.50	-3.82	69	0.001	medium
9	-1.09	-83.47	69	0.001	Low
10	-0.58	-3.59	69	0.001	medium

Note: variable nams= 1: Ethnic values, 2: Mutual respect, 3: Anti- discrimination training, 4: Ethnic diversity reflection, 5: Accepting difference, 6: Resource distribution, 7: Diversity of methods, 8: Unity, 9: Interaction, 10: Emphasizing spiritual greatness.

In Table 2, t-statistics relevant to components of multi-cultural education are reported. As is seen, t-statistics concerning the components of recognition, maintenance and development of history, art, culture, customs and traditions, norms and ethnic values; inspiring mutual respect between/among all people regardless of their diverse attributes and features; anti-discrimination and anti-segregationist education; equal distribution of educational opportunities for all individuals with different religions, social statuses and cultures; diversity in using teaching methods, teaching material and environment as well as evaluation system; global interaction and communication among different cultures and using their scientific and cultural breakthroughs for the progress of science and civilization equal -45.33, -59.12, -

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30.35, -44.71, -29.19, and -83.47, respectively, all being negative, yet significant, at 0.001 level of significance. Moreover, the analysis of the mean scores obtained for these components (reported in Table1) indicates that very scant attention is being paid to these criteria.

On the other hand, t-statistics relevant to the components of ethnic, environmental, religious and linguistic diversity; acceptance of difference and pluralism (peaceful coexistence); unity of nations, convergence of religions and interaction between/among the followers of different religions and different ethnic groups in the country and worldwide; emphasis on the spiritual greatness of all men and the humane value and respect of all individuals equaled -5.56, 5.34, 3.82, and 3.95, respectively, all being negative, yet significant, at 0.001 level of significance. The analysis of mean scores gained for these components is indicative of the fact that attention toward these criteria is moderate and insufficient.

Discussion and Conclusion

Multi-cultural curriculum is a highly efficacious mechanism in empowering people and groups in terms of knowledge, attitudes and skills required for peaceful coexistence in a multi-cultural society. In this regard, the current research was aimed at analyzing the degree of attention paid to multi-cultural lesson planning and curriculum development in diarchic stages of Iran's educational system with insights from curriculum planning experts. As research findings help reveal, the amount of heed given to this fundamental concept in course curricula is insufficient and unsatisfactory. In other words, despite the manifold privileges these curricula create for the learners, the establishment of such approaches in Iran's educational system has not yet been granted the status it deserves. This piece of finding is consistent with the findings of previous studies such as those carried out by (Asgariyan *et al.*, 2011; Sadeghi, 2015) all referring to the insufficient efforts in curricula dealing with multi-cultural education and the prevalence of eye-catching shortcomings in this respect.

In effect, we can dare say that our educational system suffers from lack of a systematic and strategic curriculum, which can pay due respect to the status of ethnic and cultural identity. Lack of attention to such issues might be regarded as a vivid sign of the prevalence of a futile curriculum in the country's educational system, which can, in turn, exert very deep-seating influences on students' attitudes and value system. It seems that one of the main factors giving rise to this inattention might be lack of suitable educational models for application of theoretical findings in practice. In addition, paucity of experts familiar with multi-cultural notions in our country, prevalence of centralized educational system, fear of thwarting national identity, and a plethora of other factors are likely to have given rise to such inattention. Dealing with their major concern that attention to ethnic cultures, rejecting racism and other forms of discrimination and welcoming pluralism deteriorates national culture and identity, informed scholars are of the view that emergence of common aspects of social life among various societies doesn't cause cultural identity loss; rather increased familiarity and unity among them is said to enrich their cultural identity and guarantee democracy and demographic principles of social justice. Thus, one of the most important factors that should be considered in the content of textbooks is attending to ethnicities and cultures in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic communities like Iran and attempting to provide a desirable curriculum, accordingly.

Indeed, reaching "unity" as one of the major ideals in a context replete with "plurality", like what is observed in Iranians' social life components, necessitates a different outlook toward curriculum planning. What make this issue more noteworthy than ever before are two major phenomena: first, increased awareness of social groups of the differences existing between them and others; and second, increasing concentration of enemies of unity on the social consequences of such an awareness of cultural differences. In Iran, this issue, which is accompanied by specific conditions of population change (particularly youth population), political competitions (especially for elections), and seeking social identity, is of utmost significance. Therefore, it seems one of the best ways to deal with challenges of today's developing world is resorting to multi-cultural curriculum. In such a situation, multi-cultural curriculum can play a key role in enhancing and solidifying native cultures and consolidating national culture by way of emphasizing minority groups' cultural features. Neglecting these issues is likely to exert a direct impact on learners' thoughts, and, as a result, alienate them from their own culture and lead them toward being molded in a

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foreign culture. As some experts in the field contend, those who are alienated from their own cultural traditions will face problems in terms of identity (Sleeter and Grant, 2006).

On the other hand, neglecting cultural diversity in curriculum planning in multi-cultural societies is regarded as a phenomenon which is far from reality and full of drawbacks. In this regard, Iran's society with its wide-ranging variety in terms of climatic, ethnic and racial perspectives has placed politicians and curriculum planners in very specific circumstances. This has, in turn, given way to the need for further study, analysis and appropriate measures for obtaining social convergence and cohesion. Thus, inattention toward the ubiquity of this diversity, which is tantamount to neglecting the prevalent social facts, is not at all recommendable. In other words, it can be stated that Iran's current status with its abundant multi-cultural features is in dire need of a kind of policy making and curriculum planning that recognizes this diversity and plurality and tries to set the foundations for putting such issues in the foreground of attention. It is obvious that setting the scene in this regard requires preparing the needed cultural and educational prerequisites and fundamentals via implementing a proper educational system and curriculum. As a matter of fact, anticipating the appropriate mechanism for creating close bonds, mutual understanding and interaction among cultures, with the aim of providing peaceful coexistence and removing social misunderstandings is an inevitable requirement in today's life.

In this regard, one of the fundamental responsibilities of the educational system in multi-cultural societies is planning culturally-sensitive curricula, those which are responsive to multi-cultural features. This is because neglecting other cultures might lead to a great many unexpected social problems and challenges. According to the above-mentioned issues, it is suggested that an in-depth analysis be run on the content of curricula in different grade levels and a realistic outlook be developed regarding the reflection of principles of such an approach in different curricula, so that an appropriate curricular model may be offered for scholars, teachers, textbook developers and curriculum planners in this domain. By way of doing so, it is hoped that via implementing such a model in practice, more room is going to be provided for putting the principles of multi-cultural education in the foreground of attention.

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