

# TOWARDS A MULTICULTURALLY COMPETENT TEACHER IN BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

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## **Abstract**

*The primary goal of this study is to focus on teachers' perception of their own multicultural competence. This study examines the perception of teachers of themselves in their competency of multicultural knowledge, awareness and practice. The study reflects teachers' level of multicultural competence as a desired ideal and its correlation with the existing level of teachers' competency. The study puts forward a research question: To what extent do teachers' perceive themselves to be multiculturally competent. Do teachers perceive multicultural competence as significant in fostering the ideals of a sustainable society? For this purpose the survey was designed to measure the characteristics of a multiculturally competent teacher by using 5 points scale. This article sets forth a variety of questions to re-direct process of revision and refinement of multicultural training in Latvia. Learning sensitivity towards other groups requires time and energy. This takes time to learn to observe, empathize, and appreciate other people's ways of doing things in order to become culturally competent. Multicultural people have a broader, richer and more accurate worldview.*

**Key words:** *multicultural competence, teacher education, cultural and religious diversity.*

## **Introduction**

Multicultural teacher education is relatively new in Latvia. The reality of a multicultural world requires including cultural diversity training in pre-service teacher education programs. Currently teacher training programs are oriented towards preparing teachers who are multicultural in their practice and in their perspective.

The article focuses on the need of developing teachers' multicultural competence. The key components for multicultural competence include the development of awareness, knowledge, and skills with respect to culturally diverse contexts (Pedersen, 1988). Awareness involves recognition of the differences; knowledge about the nature and uniqueness of cultural **groups**; and skill acquisition focused on the quality of interaction between those cultures.

## **Legislative basis: the significance of diversity in teacher training**

Contribution to the building of multicultural societies has been a challenge outlined in a number of UNESCO documents. It is reflected in UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2002) as a necessary condition for developing a sustainable future. The Declaration has set forward

recommendations to protect cultural and religious diversity. This document outlines the following objectives: 1) encouraging linguistic diversity; 2) promoting an awareness of the positive value of cultural diversity in teacher education and school curriculum; 3) making full use of culturally appropriate methods of communication and transmission of knowledge (p. 8). Culture is recognized as a significant heritage of values, knowledge and skills that can empower people to enrich their identities through interaction with other cultures. The World Commission on Culture and Development, in its report *Our Creative Diversity* stresses that cultures in all their diversity must play an essential role as agents of global development and coexistence. The other significant document the preamble 'The Earth Charter' outlines the number of principles which also emphasizes efforts of higher education in promoting a culture of tolerance and a value of cultural diversity among other important tasks. The document is a call for a change of the heart and mind. It is a call for developing 'a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility' (O' Sullivan, in Corcoran, Wals, 2004, p.179). On the basis of all the above mentioned documents UNESCO will pursue its efforts in advocating the crucial role of valuing diversity and culture in national and international developmental strategies. By channeling diversity towards constructive pluralism, teacher training institutions can promote the value of diversity. Recognition of diversity as the core of a democratic and dynamic society is a necessary condition for interaction between cultures and people thriving for a dialogue, debate, tolerance and mutual respect for each other. UNESCO documents delineate approach of responding positively to students' diversity and seeing individual differences not as a problem but as an opportunity for enriching learning.' As it is clearly defined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), '...education should promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and to further the activities of the United Nations' (art.26).

### Defining multicultural competence

Scientific literature points to the need of increasing the core competencies necessary for the individual to live in a multicultural world (Pope & Reynolds, 1997; Irvine, 1992; Gay, 2002; Gay, 2003; Banks, 1993; Diaz, 1992; Nieto, 2000). These scholars cover a wide range of concerns that are addressed in multicultural education. Multicultural competence should be seen in a wider framework. It should not be seen as adding components of cultures to the existing curriculum. Rather multicultural education should be seen as a philosophy, a way of looking at the world (Nieto, 2000, p. 313). Banks (1993) outlined even a wider goal 'to help students to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes to function within their own micro cultures, macro cultures, other micro cultures, and with the global community' (p. 25).

Sue et.al (1982) was the first who outlined the core of multicultural competence, which are the awareness, knowledge and skills. *Multicultural awareness* involves a belief that differences are valuable and that learning about others who are culturally different is necessary in teacher training; a willingness to change one's own values, assumptions and biases; a belief in value of one's own cultural heritage; an acceptance of other worldviews and willingness to acknowledge that we do not have all right answers (Pope & Reynolds, 1997). *Multicultural knowledge* means knowing one's own culture and other cultures; knowledge about how gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion and disability affect one's experience and knowledge about multiple identities and multiple oppressions. *Multicultural skills involve* ability to openly discuss cultural differences; capacity to emphasize and genially connect with individuals who are culturally different from themselves; ability to challenge the individuals, and to make sensitive interventions (Pope & Reynolds, 1997).

A great number of multicultural competence models are based on this theoretical framework. Several revisions and expansions of the Sue et al (1882) model took place over the last ten years (Sue, 2001; Diaz, 1992). Pope-Davis & Dings (1995) have identified four aspects of multicultural competence: multicultural awareness and beliefs, knowledge, skills and relationships. According to Pope-Reynolds (1997), 'multicultural competence is a necessary prerequisite' to effective and affirming pedagogical work (p.270). Sue et al. (1998) defines ten major characteristics of multiculturalism: a value of cultural pluralism, social justice, attitudes, knowledge, skills, comprehension of a social reality, a study of multiple cultures, respect towards other perspectives, willingness to work through conflicts, and a movement towards mutually shared goals. Nieto (2000) identifies four levels

of cultivating openness towards diversity that comprises a multicultural competence: 1) tolerance, which means recognizing cultural differences; 2) acceptance of differences; 3) respect; 4) affirmation, solidarity and critique (p. 357).

### **Practice on multicultural issues in the Faculty of Education and Management, Daugavpils University, Latvia**

Schools in Latvia are a reflection of a multifaceted society. Student population becomes more and more diverse. Teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching all students, regardless their difference.

Cushner, McClelland & Safford (2003) have identified twelve sources of cultural identity (race, ethnicity/nationality, social class, sex/gender, health, age, geographic region, sexuality, religion, social class, language and ability/disability) that influence teaching and learning. These twelve sources of cultural identity are responsible for the numerous ways in which students are unique and diverse. Teachers are faced with the challenge to teach all students regardless their difference. Among them are the students who are culturally and socially diverse, the students who have studied abroad for few years and returned back, the students from low-income families, as well as students with special needs. Therefore, it is an obligation of teacher education programs to prepare teachers to be competent to acknowledge and deal with the diversity.

The course on *Multicultural Education* at Daugavpils University conducted by the author of the article offers the course participant's new knowledge, thus offering them new lenses through which to view the world. One of the goals of education for a sustainable education is to enable a culturally competent person. This suggests the need for multicultural training. The course includes studies about the history and experience of diverse groups so that the students can understand how different historical experiences have shaped attitudes and perspectives towards various groups; gives space for developing appreciation of diversity, as well as engages students in reflective thinking and writing. Classroom discussions allow teachers to discover prejudices in their attitude towards certain groups. The purpose of the course is to show students a wider meaning of inclusive sustainable community that extends beyond including only people with special needs. The course allows teachers to broaden their frames of reference by encouraging them to build inclusive classroom community and to take into account students' differences, as well as to validate students' cultural identity in the classroom practices and instructional materials. The understanding of a concept of a classroom as an inclusive community during the coursework was broadened by an acknowledgement that all students have the potential to learn, regardless their cultural background, ability, or disability. The course on multicultural education aims at assisting teachers in becoming socially and politically conscious by critically examining their school curriculum and practices as well as working towards overcoming injustices.

Many teachers who enter the further teacher training programs are with limited experiences about diversity. As many teachers admitted, they have partial knowledge and experience of work with specific groups that are culturally different from their own. Through teacher training programs teachers have an opportunity to develop a greater understanding about diversity. As several studies (Brown, 2004; Garmon, 2004; Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 2003) suggest, the course on multicultural education has the potential to increase students' cultural awareness of cultural diversity and improve teachers' attitudes towards cultural diversity.

### **Teaching with a multicultural perspective in mind**

The author of the course on multicultural education has a clear goal of education a teacher who has a multicultural perspective in mind that will help to train education youth about multicultural issues. University should operate as a community that models sustainability itself. Students learn from everything around them, everyone with whom they interact and everything they do. Therefore, for the teacher training programs to prepare teachers for teaching with a multicultural perspective in mind means:

- helping students to develop a strong cultural identity, awareness of one's own roots, cultural heritage, one's role as a member of a larger Earth community;

- developing a sense of solidarity of those who are needy and less fortunate;
- fostering students to become critical thinkers as well as
- active participants in promoting the ideals of sustainable world.
- These tasks can be reached by:
  - Locating one's existence in a broader systems;
  - Exploring other ways of doing;
  - Sharing stories;
  - 'Defining a trajectory that connects what one is doing to an expanded identity' (Wenger, 1998, 185).
- This requires teachers' critical reflectivity on how their curriculum supports:
  - Participation of all students in the school and a wider community;
  - The use of school's cultural diversity as a resource,
  - Negotiated decision – making process,
  - Action towards bringing about a society that is socially just,
  - Cooperative learning
- Teachers' efforts in challenges the content that is monocultural and disrespectful to other cultures;
- Greater freedom for teachers in selecting materials;
- A flexible time-frame for pupils with diverse needs;
- Taking in account content relevant to children's lives and backgrounds
- By evaluating the context of what they are teaching and the textbook materials, teachers need to pay close attention:
  - If the content is culturally sensitive,
  - If it reflects an awareness of the diversity of cultures
  - If it contains inclusive language,
  - If the content reflects the experiences of people from a wide range of backgrounds,
  - If it reflects cultural biases,
  - If the content includes contributions of people from a range of cultural backgrounds.

This requires willingness, freedom, energy, and time to exposing oneself to new identities and relationships. This means recognizing diversity as a value.

Teaching with a multicultural perspective in mind means reminding oneself that *'each cultural expression of truth ... is a large piece of the complete puzzle of God and humanity, but no one piece alone gives us a complete picture. A more complete picture of the true, the good, and beautiful comes through when pieces are together in their proper interconnectedness. Yet the fullness of the mystery of God and of humanity will still lie beyond our human understanding ... In the puzzle all pieces are of equal importance. Only when they are joined together, the whole makes sense'* (Elizondo, 1997, 398).

The first step in creating a multiculturally competent teacher is to determine what skills teachers should possess to function effectively in order to contribute in sustaining a diverse community. Multiculturally competent teachers have knowledge, awareness, and skills to be able to interact respectfully with people of different cultures, viewpoints and backgrounds. To teach students to be culturally competent, teachers need to develop critical consciousness, that is 'an ability to step back from the world as we are accustomed to perceiving it and to see the ways our perception is constructed through linguistic codes, cultural signs, and embedded power' (Kincheloe, 1993, 109).

## Methodology of Research

Participants consisted of graduate students from one University and its branches located in four regions of the country. All participants were enrolled in introductory multicultural course (N = 142).

39 % of respondents' age ranged was from 36-63. Student ethnicity was as follows: Latvians (102), other (40). Education level of students is either Bachelor's degree or Secondary school's education. 83 of all the participants were from the most disadvantaged and culturally diverse areas in Latvia, namely Latgale, the other 59 of participants were representatives from pre-dominantly monocultural regions of Latvia. All participants were enrolled in in-service teaching programs in the Daugavpils University and its branches. They were asked to fill in questionnaire on voluntarily basis.

Afterwards, research finding were reported back to the respondents, as well as discussed.

Each participant was given instructions on how to complete the survey. Students completed the multicultural awareness-knowledge-skills survey. All the data for this survey was collected by the author. Items on the demographic indicators indicated participants' age, gender, and ethnicity. The participants of the research were asked to assess their own levels of multicultural competence. They used 5 point scale of ranks from 1 (low) to 5 (high) level to indicate both multicultural knowledge, skills, awareness they possess, and the significance of these indicators for themselves. Research participants answered eighteen survey questions. Participants were asked if they would like to take part in a study that is intended to investigate multicultural competencies. Verbal consent was obtained before the participants filled in a questionnaire.

For the statistical analysis of data the authors chose SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The statistical analysis of data was carried out by the following criteria: the authors used Chi-Square Tests with the purpose to measure correlation between two qualitative characteristics. Parametric criteria of T-Test were used to measure a certain characteristic in two independent samples. Mann-Whitney Test criteria was used to measure differences between two choices according the level of certain characteristic. Pearson Correlation Coefficient allowed evaluating a value of importance between two characteristics. Spearman's Correlation Coefficient was used to evaluate the significance of relatedness between two characteristics.

## Results of Research

The survey contained six statements in each of three thematic areas to be investigated: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and cultural skills. Six questions related to teachers' cultural heritage awareness and knowledge about their own cultural and religious traditions.

1. The first component of multicultural competence is knowledge. A multiculturally sensitive teacher needs some awareness of his/her values, assumptions and how it influences his/her attitude towards specific groups who are culturally different from their own. Research participants rated themselves highest on the **knowledge dimension**; they rated their attitude towards their own culture as the second highest dimension of a multicultural competence. They claimed to be competent about their culture and traditions. Teachers evaluated their knowledge about their tradition and culture quite high (mean = 4.22). They consider their culture to be of high value in their lives (mead = 4.06). Teachers seemed to be quite confident and knowledgeable about the traditions of their own culture and religion. Cultural awareness and cultural knowledge is increasingly important to teachers because these could enable them to increase their understanding about cultural differences within and across cultural groups. Culturally skilled teacher need to have knowledge about their own cultural heritage and how it affects their definitions and biases towards other traditions. Knowledge about the differences in students' values, life experiences within the same cultural group allows teachers to interpret students' behavior meaningfully and minimizes the stereotyping. This allows teachers to realize that each student has many social identities that are influenced by culture, religion, sexual orientation and a social background.

Teachers rated their ability to teach in state language (Latvian) very high. Teachers evaluated their knowledge and ability to work in a bilingual environment (Question N2) quite high as well. Latvian respondents (71%) claim that they do not feel the need to improve these skills, while the teachers of other cultures are not satisfied with the level of their skills of work in a bilingual environment and feel a strong need to improve this skill. 37%

of all the respondents claimed being competent to work in a bilingual environment.

Teachers evaluated their knowledge about the traditions of other cultures and traditions not very high, but at the same time they admitted the need to learn more about the culture and traditions of other nations. There is a strong correlation between the level of knowledge about other cultures and the need to learn more about diverse cultural and religious traditions.

2. The second component of a multicultural competence is an attitude towards the other cultures and religions. Questions 3, 10, 12, and 15 were about teachers' **attitude** towards the other cultures and religions. Teachers claim to be open to diversity of views, values, backgrounds and traditions in their schools. There were no major differences in the evaluation of an attitude towards diversity by Latvians and the representatives of other cultures and traditions. All participants claimed to be open to social, cultural and religious groups, but still rating their attitude towards other cultures relatively low. Teachers have difficulties with accepting diversity in practice.

There are some regional differences that can be traced in this study. In Latgale, the mostly multicultural area, there are less teachers who view diversity as a value (28.9%). In comparison to teachers who come from multicultural areas, the teachers (55.5%) who are from pre-dominantly monocultural regions value diversity quite high. They also elicit openness to social minority groups. They did not have encounter with the diversity in their practice much.

Teachers of all regions and cultural backgrounds tend not to trust representatives of other cultures and religions (mean symbol = 2.99). Teachers' knowledge about the other cultures and religions was also rated very low (mean = 2.88). This can be explained by teacher's experience of being grown up in a closed society. They were not exposed to diverse cultures and traditions; therefore they keep distance towards representatives of other cultures and religions. The experience of annexation by foreign countries made people quite resistant to the influence of foreign cultures and traditions. Teachers mainly have experience of working in culturally homogeneous groups.

3. The third component of a multicultural competence are **skills**. Attitudinal changes are sometimes easier than behavioral changes. Even after becoming multiculturally sensitive, teachers may realize that when they make choices they are fairly monocultural. As Sue (2001) argues, one must be willing to make interventions that challenges and radically alters one's assumptions about one's students.

*The skills dimension* was rated very low by all respondents of the survey. Majority of teachers are lacking skills of implementing strategies for developing inclusive classroom community (mean = 2.645). Questions 5 and 4 were regarded as vital in terms of multicultural skills. The aim of these questions was to explore to what extent teachers consider the importance of acknowledging cultural differences in their work with children. Responses suggested that there is lack of ability by teachers to use theoretical concepts in practice. Teachers admit their lack of skills how to implement theoretical knowledge in designing inclusive classroom community.

All three components of a multicultural competence towards one's own culture are rated much higher in pre-dominantly monocultural regions in comparison to multicultural areas in Latvia. Teachers in multicultural areas do not see the need to enhance knowledge about their own culture, traditions and religions.

The author has also explored the difference in attitude among teachers from different cultural backgrounds. Latvians pay much attention to increase their knowledge about their own culture and traditions, while Russians pay less attention in fostering and enriching their knowledge about their own culture and traditions.

The study revealed several correlations: correlation between the level of tolerance towards other cultures and religions and the need to raise the level of tolerance towards other cultures and traditions; correlation between teachers' respect towards the values of their own culture and the need to develop it;

The results appeared to indicate the following significant positive correlations about teachers'

self evaluation and perception of their multicultural competence:

1. Knowledge about one's own culture and a positive attitude towards values of one's own culture ( $r = 0.412$ ,  $p < 0.003$ );
2. Knowledge about one's own culture and skills to work in a multicultural environment ( $r = 0.324$ ,  $p < 0.003$ )
3. Positive attitude towards the values of one's own culture and positive attitude towards the social minorities ( $r = 0.389$ ,  $p < 0.003$ )

This makes to conclude that the better and richer is one's knowledge about one's culture, the more open is the person towards the other cultural groups and social minorities. Knowing one's culture and traditions is essential for developing trust and openness towards other traditions and identities.

Several correlations can be identified on the desired but not yet obtained level of a multicultural competence by teachers:

1. The level of tolerance toward other cultures and religious traditions and the ability to work in the multicultural environment ( $r = 0.279$ ;  $p < 0.003$ );
2. Respect towards the values of one's own culture and the respect towards the values of other cultures and religions ( $r = 0.277$ ,  $p < 0.003$ );
3. Tolerance towards other religions and cultures correlates with ability to build a dialogue with the representatives of other cultures, religions and social group ( $r = 0.349$ ;  $p < 0.003$ )

The validity of self-assessment of skills is open to debate. Respondents relied on their own assumptions about standards against which to judge their abilities. Some of them might underrate their skills as they understand how much there is to learn about other cultures and religions. As with any type of survey, responses may reflect teachers' desire to appear competent rather than otherwise.

This study has several limitations. Although the sample is large, it is still may not generalize to all teachers. Second, the present study is limited to self-reported data from the teachers. Third, the three-factor (knowledge, attitude, skills) framework of a multicultural competence may not adequately address all the facets within each of three constructs. Another limitation is related to the self-reported nature of the construct in which participants may have answered the questions based on their willingness to be perceived as culturally aware, culturally competent and culturally skilled teachers.

## Discussion

The course on multicultural education gives minimal attention to the reality of cultural diversity by supplementing an essentially monocultural curriculum with fragments of information related to various cultural groups in the society. This is a minimalist response. The attention to cultural diversity is not an important part of the teacher training curriculum, since it is separated from and made marginal to the core experiences of the program. But still this can be viewed as a powerful tool for challenging teachers' stereotypical and narrow notions about the world, and enlarging their horizons of building their classroom practice.

This seems necessary that prior to assessing teachers' multicultural competence, teacher education programs need to be examined in their totality to determine whether they are addressing the issue of diversity in an effective manner. The ideals formulated in the Earth Charter puts forward the aim of striving towards a greater diversity and promoting a more inclusive and sustainable community.

Further studies can be directed towards examining whether teacher training programs effectively prepare teachers to be competent in meeting the challenge of a pluralistic world of diversity. This is essential to equip teachers with knowledge, skills and experience necessary to teach successfully in diverse classroom settings.

## Conclusions

Ensuring a healthy education for a sustainable development this is absolutely necessary for teacher training programs to address the diversity.

Multicultural competence involves a sufficient shift in attitude, and the acquisition of a behavior consistent with successful interaction with a diverse population. The goals of multicultural competency are increased understanding and full inclusion of all people.

Multicultural competence is more than inclusion. This is a process of learning about and becoming allies with people from other cultures. It broadens one's understanding and ability to participate in bringing forwards a sustainable society. Multicultural competence is never a fully attained state, but continues to develop throughout teachers' lifetime (Pope, R. & Reynolds, A., 1997, 266).

Multicultural competence is not a destination. Cultural issues are constantly changing, and teachers are constantly developing new awareness, knowledge, and skills about multicultural issues, it is a long-term commitment to a process of change within an individual, institution and the community.

Teacher training programs should provide opportunities for teachers to explore their beliefs pertaining cultural diversity, to become conscious of their own cultural values and beliefs and how these effect their expectations towards students of different backgrounds. Teachers need to receive adequate training to be prepared to address the myriad multicultural concerns in our contemporary society.

By educating students about diversity of the world around them, the students will become more global. When teachers are ignorant about the differences in other groups, there is a greater probability of homophobia and conflicts. Teachers need to become role models, demonstrating fairness and teaching students that difference is normal.

The survey results suggest that teachers perceive themselves to be at least to some degree competent in all domains (knowledge, awareness) of multicultural competence. Two domains (knowledge and awareness) of multicultural competence turned out to be slightly higher than the third ( skills ) domain. Results partly supported the hypothesis, which predicted that teachers would present correlation between cultural skills, knowledge and beliefs when self-evaluating their levels of multicultural competence.

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