

# PRACTICING MULTICULTURALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOMS: TEACHERS' AWARENESS ABOUT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

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**Abstract :** The issue of multicultural education is of paramount importance in the twenty-first century (Banks & Banks, 2001). Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students. For the present study survey was employed and data were collected from 45 in-service teachers to understand their perceptions and awareness of multiculturalism, using Self-assessment checklist and Multicultural Quiz addressing various issues related to multiculturalism viz. Differences in cultures, Classroom activities, Classroom interactions, Teaching-learning strategies supporting multiculturalism and Behavior - Mannerism – Dining etiquettes across the cultures.

This piece of research thus attempted to find out the perceptions of in-service teachers teaching in multicultural classrooms with respect to multiculturalism and multicultural education. It is observed that the teachers participated in the study are aware about the classroom practices but comparatively are less aware about various behavioral aspects and mannerisms across globe and similarly dining etiquettes across the varied cultures.

**Key Terms - Multiculturalism, Multicultural education, In-service teachers' perception, Awareness.**

## I INTRODUCTION

The issue of multicultural education is of paramount importance in the twenty-first century (Banks & Banks, 2001). The tremendous diversity of cultural, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic groups in education today calls for multicultural education programs that reflect understanding and respect for differences. These students are increasingly diverse in terms of race, culture, and socioeconomic background, as well as personal knowledge and experience (Edward & Kuhlman, 2007). Teachers' awareness about challenges, basic concept, approaches, curriculum reform, multicultural pedagogy related to multiculturalism plays a key role in implementing the multicultural education successfully.

Most importantly, students need to be given the opportunity to socialize and learn in an open, tolerant and supportive environment where high standards are set and expected for all. Much of the writings on Indian history, culture and politics are marked by multicultural concern in terms of religion, language, community, caste and tribe, has survived as a state in conditions of underdevelopment, mass poverty, illiteracy and extreme regional disparities (Bhattacharyya H., 2003)

## UNDERSTANDING MULTICULTURALISM

Multiculturalism refers to the "sharing of many cultures." Multicultural society is a society in which a diversity of cultures exists. In a multicultural society these diverse cultures are recognized, accepted, respected and celebrated. Multicultural education gives students opportunities to build understanding and communication skills across cultures.

Multicultural education is based on the principle of educational equity for all students, regardless of their culture. Multicultural education describes a system of instruction that attempts to foster cultural pluralism and acknowledges the differences between races and cultures. It addresses the educational needs of a society that contains more than one set of traditions that is a mixture of many cultures.

Dimensions of Multicultural Education (Banks, 2002) involve various dimensions as – content integration, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction and empowering school cultures. These dimensions mainly emphasize on making teachers and students aware about multiculturalism and practices in successfully implementing multicultural education in

classroom. There are various approaches to multiculturalism as discussed in the following fig.1 gives clear understanding of the concept with respect to different perspectives.

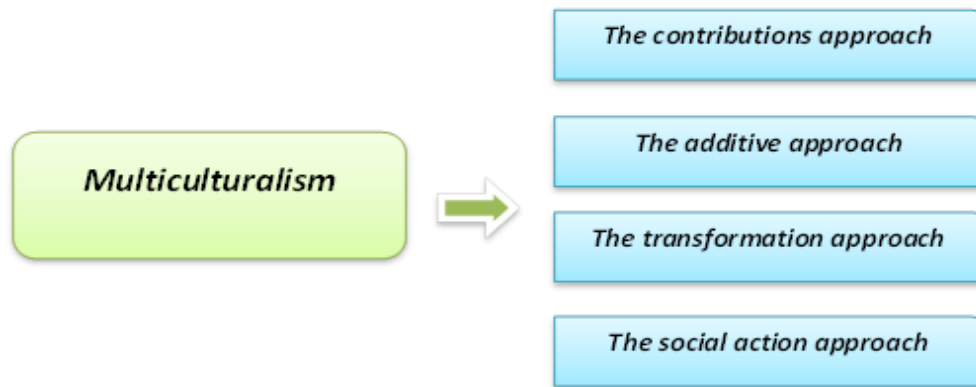


Fig 1: Approaches in Multicultural Education (Banks, 1999)

The Contributions approach is incorporated by selecting books and activities that celebrate holidays, heroes, and special events from various cultures. In the Additive approach content, concepts, themes, and perspectives are added to the curriculum without changing its basic structure. The Transformation approach actually changes the structure of the curriculum and encourages students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic perspectives while in the Social action approach students are not only instructed to understand and question social issues, but to also do something about important about it.

Multicultural education aims to improve the learning and success of all students, particularly students from cultural groups that have been suffering from lower educational achievement and attainment. The goals of multicultural education include:-

- Creating a safe, accepting and successful learning environment for all
- Increasing awareness of global issues
- Strengthening cultural consciousness
- Allowing children to explore varying cultures
- Strengthening intercultural awareness
- Teaching students that there are multiple historical perspectives
- Creating opportunities to understand when people have different customs and traditions
- Being open and non-judgemental
- Learning to accept differences and similarities among people
- Encouraging critical thinking
- Preventing prejudice and discrimination
- Encouraging cooperative social skills

According to the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME), multicultural education has following advantages -

- Helps students develop positive self-image.
- Offers students an equitable educational opportunity.
- Allows multiple perspectives and ways of thinking.
- Combats stereotypes and prejudicial behaviour.
- Teaches students to critique society in the interest of social justice.

Various theories explain the concept of multiculturalism emphasizing the cultural diversity and role of education to build multicultural classroom that will cater the needs of diverse students. Various theories are studied related to the study to establish sound foundation for the research. These are presented in the following fig. 2

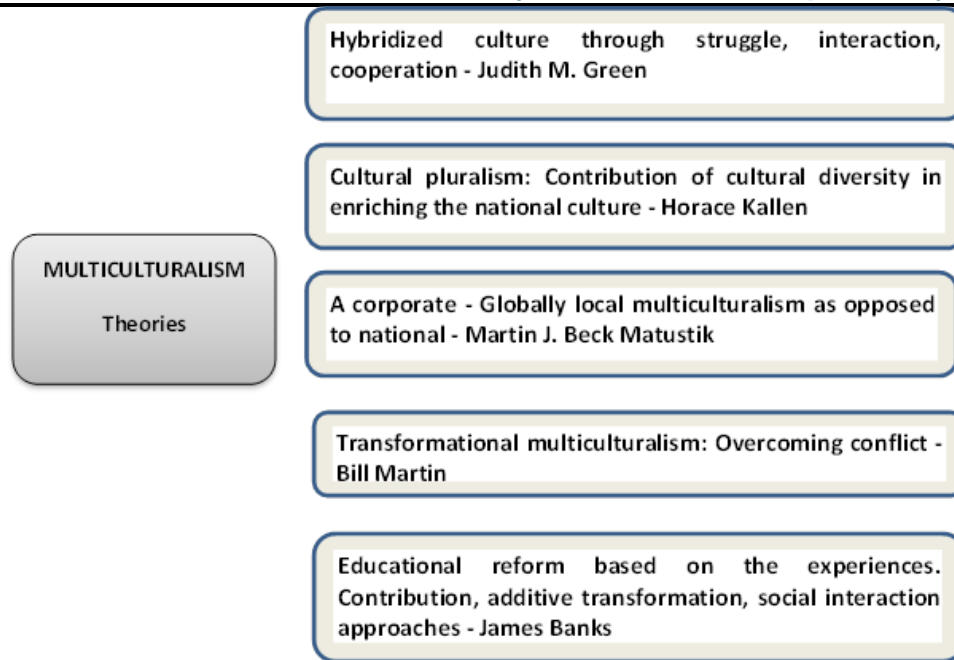


Fig 2: Theoretical framework for Multicultural Education

## MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION – ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Multicultural education focuses on how students learn and think and are deeply influenced by their cultural identity and heritage, it believes to teach culturally diverse students effectively with respect to various educational approaches that value and recognize their cultural backgrounds.

Schools should make sure multicultural perspectives are incorporated into all aspects of school life by:

- promoting diversity as a positive learning experience
- incorporating multicultural perspectives across all learning domains
- incorporating multicultural, anti-racism, and human rights perspectives in school policies and practices
- enhancing teachers' and students' intercultural understanding and cross-cultural communication skills
- ensuring that all school policies, including three year strategic and annual plans, codes of conduct, dress codes and discipline policies reflect the diverse nature of the school community.
- removing barriers to educational opportunities and success for students from different cultural backgrounds.

Instructionally, multicultural education may entail the use of texts, materials, references, and historical examples and illustrations that are understandable to students from different cultural backgrounds or that reflect their particular cultural experience.

### *Role of teachers in multicultural education –*

Multicultural education promotes teachers' understanding of cultural conditioning and learning preferences of different ethnic groups. It is expected that the teachers may modify or eliminate educational policies, programs, materials, lessons, and instructional practices that are either discriminatory toward or insufficiently inclusive of diverse cultural perspectives.

Culturally responsive teachers realize not only the importance of academic achievement, but also the maintaining of cultural identity and heritage. Singh (1996) defined the culturally competent person as one who has knowledge and skills that enable him or her to appreciate, value, and celebrate similarities and differences within, between, and among culturally diverse groups of people.

Because of the newness of the concept of multicultural education in many schools and paucity of related literature, it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to design a program aimed at meeting the needs of students across different cultures. An important part of the teacher's role is to bring issues on racial differences and tensions to the classroom and discuss them professionally with the students. It is teacher's responsibility to become a resource person to collect, compile, and use community resources to enrich students' experiences and lives. It is important for the teacher to be a positive role model for the students by using appropriate language and behavior (Paul, K.K. 1985).

## NEED OF THE STUDY

Bruch et al. (2004) state that “a major challenge for multicultural education as a field is the gap between theory and practice”. According to Lynn Zimmerman, the context in which teachers are trained provides them with a particular perspective in the conception, planning and implementation of multicultural education. Multicultural education is such a complex concept that its usefulness and validity for teachers must be examined from the perspective of those who are implementing the curriculum.

The responses by these teachers about their perceptions of multicultural education support the assessment of researchers (Milner et al., 2003; Bruch et al, 2004) that there is a gap between theory and practice which reflects a disconnect between how multicultural education is viewed by in-service teachers and multicultural education specialists

According to Keith Wilson, the effects of a positive multicultural climate may manifest in a number of ways as - diminished pockets of segregation among student body, less racial tension in the schools, increased ethnic minority retention and classroom performance and inclusion of a multicultural curriculum. Bennett (1995) stated that the multicultural education must have, the characteristics to achieve its purposes for students, teachers, parents, and administrators of the school system in terms of - a learning environment that supports positive interracial contact, a multicultural curriculum, positive teacher expectations, administrative support.

Multicultural education in the multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural country like India will successful only if the education system can provide an opportunity for students of different races, castes, creeds and regions to interact and cooperate with each other. The participants in the present study are the teachers teaching to the various professional courses and dealing with the international students from 28 different countries in face to face mode of teaching-learning. This requires them to understand and practice multicultural education for effective curriculum transaction and effective learning. This demands to understand the awareness in service teachers about multiculturalism and multicultural education.

## II RESEARCH DESIGN

### Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this descriptive study was to examine teachers' awareness toward the concept of multiculturalism and multicultural education. This is a preliminary study and may be the findings will provide initial information for further in-depth research in the future.

### Research questions:

- Are the teachers aware of multiculturalism?
- What are their perceptions regarding cultural differences and multicultural classroom strategies?

### Operational definitions:

**In-service teachers:** are the in-service teachers (having teaching experience of more than 5 years) teaching in professional courses at Symbiosis International University, Pune.

**Awareness of teachers:** Knowledge or perception of teachers on the issues- Differences in cultures, Classroom activities, Classroom interactions, Teaching-learning strategies supporting multiculturalism and Behavior - Mannerism – Dining etiquettes across the cultures based on the responses given on the self-assessment checklist for multiculturalism and multicultural quiz.

### Research methodology:

#### Method of Research:

Present research is descriptive research. Researchers employed Survey method as this research has status paradigm as it collected perceptions from the In-teachers about multiculturalism.

#### Sample:

45 In-service teachers having teaching experience of more than 5 years teaching in professional courses at Symbiosis International University, Pune.

#### Data collection tool:

Self-assessment checklist for multiculturalism and Multicultural Quiz

## III ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The data were analyzed under the following heads based on the data collection -

### Part A: Analysis of data obtained from Self-assessment checklist

The data collected through Self-assessment checklist consisted of statements representing the various issues based on practicing multiculturalism by teachers, on the dichotomous responses (Yes/No).

#### Observation:

**Table 1**  
**Practicing multicultural education**

S.N.	Issue based on practicing multiculturalism	Yes	No
1	Use of bulletin boards to understand differences in culture	91%	9%
2	Classroom arrangement to encourage multiculturalism	91%	9%
3	Group work encouraging gender equality and multiculturalism	100%	-
4	Multiculturalism through books	73%	17%
5	Providing information during teaching- learning	100%	-
6	Positive approach towards multiculturalism through discussions	100%	-
7	Meeting people of different cultures through academic trips	36%	64%
8	Inviting different cultural groups to interact with students	64%	36%
9	Encouraging parents to get involved in classroom activities	18%	72%
10	Correlating global culture through teaching	91%	9%

#### Interpretation:

It was observed that all the teachers encourage gender equality and multiculturalism through group work, provide information during teaching- learning about multiculturalism and promote positive approach towards multiculturalism through discussions.

- Most of the teachers make use of bulletin boards to make students understand differences in cultures, arrange classroom to support multiculturalism and correlate global culture through teaching.
- Many of the teachers make students aware of multiculturalism through books and encourage parent's involvement in classroom activities.
- Very few teachers practice multiculturalism through academic trips and invite different cultural groups to interact with students.

#### Part B: Analysis of data obtained from Multicultural Quiz – Behavioural aspects and mannerism

#### Observation:

**Table 2**  
**Behavioral aspects and mannerism about multiculturalism**

Questions related to behavioral aspects and mannerism across the globe	Responses of teachers			Correct Answer
	True	False	No response	
Question 1	83%	17%	-	T
Question 2	28%	72%	-	F
Question 3	89%	11%	-	T
Question 4	44%	39%	27%	F
Question 5	50%	50%	-	F
Question 6	77%	17%	6%	T
Question 7	61%	28%	11%	T
Question 8	11%	89%	-	F
Question 9	33%	61%	6%	F
Question 10	83%	17%	-	T
Question 11	44%	44%	12%	T
Question 12	28%	60%	12%	F
Question 13	44%	50%	12%	T
Question 14	12%	82%	6%	F
Question 15	77%	17%	6%	T

**Interpretation:**

From the above observation table it can be revealed that many (60-80%) of the teachers answered correctly most of the questions (73%) except few (27%). Thus it can be interpreted that many of the teachers are aware about the behavioural aspects and mannerism with respect to multiculturalism.

**Part C: Analysis of data obtained from Multicultural Quiz – Dining etiquettes across the cultures****Observation:**

**Table 3**  
**Dining etiquettes across the cultures**

Questions related to dining etiquettes across cultures	Correct Answer	Correct response
Question 1	B	79%
Question 2	B	74%
Question 3	A	58%
Question 4	A	68%
Question 5	B	58%
Question 6	B	63%
Question 7	B	58%
Question 8	A	58%
Question 9	C	58%
Question 10	C	53%

**Interpretation:**

From the above observation it is interpreted that in few questions (30%) teachers many of the teachers (65-80%) gave correct answers while in many of the questions (70%) were not answered correctly. Thus it can be said that teachers are not fully aware of dining etiquettes across the cultures.

**IV MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

Thus data analysis yielded major findings as follows –

- All the teachers encourage gender equality and multiculturalism through group work, provide information during teaching- learning about multiculturalism and promote positive approach towards multiculturalism through discussions.
- Most of the teachers make use of bulletin boards to make students understand differences in cultures, arrange classroom to support multiculturalism and correlate global culture through teaching.
- Many of the teachers make students aware of multiculturalism through books and encourage parent's involvement in classroom activities.
- Very few teachers practice multiculturalism through academic trips and invite different cultural groups to interact with students.
- Many of the teachers are aware about the behavioural aspects and mannerism with respect to multiculturalism.
- Teachers are not fully aware of dining etiquettes across the cultures.

**V CONCLUSION**

The present paper focused on the finding awareness of in-service teachers of higher education professional courses teaching to international students from various countries across the globe. The issues of concern are multiculturalism and multicultural education. The current study concluded that teachers are aware about practicing multiculturalism in their classrooms through discussions, group work, bulletin boards, books, classroom arrangement, but are lacking in certain strategies like academic trips or taking help of varied cultural groups to interact amongst the students to encourage multiculturalism. They are moderately aware of behavioural aspects and mannerism with respect to multiculturalism and are not fully aware of dining etiquettes across the cultures. The study demands further exploration to understand and explain the existing phenomena and eventually to find a solution with large sample.

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