



Education and language

Addressing Discrimination through Intercultural Education

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Abstract:

The increasing prominence of heterogeneous societies has resulted in educational institutions directing renewed emphasis on diversity in the composition of learning spaces and the use of instructional approaches that strengthen inclusivity. This article explores the issue of discrimination in the heterogeneous classroom and discusses how an incident of discrimination in a learning environment can be addressed and the role of intercultural education and competence for educators.

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Introduction:

One of the major consequences of globalization and large-scale migration and resettlement is the creation of heterogeneous or diverse societies that advance the coexistence of people of different races, cultures, languages, socioeconomic statuses, gender identities, religious convictions, and mental and physical capabilities (Markic & Abels, 2014; Santana, 2017). Given this global reality, it is not surprising that educational institutions, which are microcosms of the societies in which they exist, are directing renewed emphasis on heterogeneity in the composition of educational spaces and the application of pedagogical approaches that bolster inclusivity in heterogeneous learning environments (Forghani-Arani et al., 2019; Gabaldón-Estevan, 2020). This emphasis on heterogeneity is imperative in promoting the need for learners of diverse backgrounds, experiences, abilities, and pursuits to learn how to coexist and work together in resolving societal problems and advancing societal goals (Abduramanova, 2021; Schwab & Arthur-Kelly, 2022). Failure on the part of education practitioners and policymakers to acknowledge diversity in the classroom and provide opportunities for learners to understand and appreciate diversity can

potentially lead to discrimination (Cook et al., 2023). In this article, attention will be directed to exploring the issue of discrimination within the context of a heterogeneous learning environment. Specifically, this article will discuss how an incident of discrimination in the school setting can be handled and the role of intercultural education and competence for teachers in the classroom.

Discrimination at School: The Guyana Context:

Guyana has been described as one of the most diverse nations in the world and is often referred to as the land of six races with over ten ethnic groups residing in the country (Daly, 1975; Carpen, 2020). For a greater portion of its recent history, Guyana has been plagued with race issues with the two largest ethnic groups (Indians and Africans) being in discord over politics, and this has often resulted in severe riots and protests, particularly during government elections (U.S. Department of State, 2017; Menke & Richardson, 2023). In view of the tenuous race relations in Guyana, it is easy to recognize occurrences of racial discrimination in schools, particularly among students, and to a lesser extent, between teachers and students. The most common forms of

racial discrimination in schools include verbal abuse, stereotyping, harassment, violence, and exclusion from work and play. While there have been concerted efforts by the Guyanese government to improve race relations in the country, it is imperative that increased attempts be made to eliminate or mitigate the perpetuation of racial discrimination in academic institutions responsible for producing citizens capable of contributing to nation-building. This sentiment was recently expressed by a former Member of Parliament, Mr. Ravi Dev, who stated that the education system must confront racial discrimination and encourage multiculturalism as an important consideration for racial harmony (iNews Guyana, 2020).

Addressing Discrimination in School:

Discrimination in schools can adversely affect knowledge acquisition and academic achievement, as well as the social, psychological, and intellectual development of learners (Brown, 2015; Gruman et al., 2017). The responsibility of addressing and possibly preventing or even eliminating discrimination in educational spaces requires a holistic approach, one that involves all key educational stakeholders, including policymakers, curriculum developers, school administrators, education practitioners, learners, and parents.

In an instance where an individual uses ethnic epithets or ethnic slurs in an encounter with another student in the classroom, the teacher needs to take immediate steps to address the issue. Based on the guidelines provided by Tormey (2006), the immediate steps would include the teacher intervening with a gentle but explicit reminder that the use of insulting insinuations or assertions about another ethnic group is inappropriate and unacceptable behavior and a breach of established classroom rules which require all students to be respectful to one another and not exhibit behaviors that are intended to hurt other people. Tormey (2006) also explained the need for the teacher to use the incident as a teachable moment by initiating a discussion on how discriminating behaviors or prejudiced

beliefs affect others and reinforcing the concept of treating others in the way we would like to be treated. Tormey (2006) concluded with the advice that the teacher offers support to the person who was the target of discrimination and provides the necessary resources and emotional support to help the individual overcome the experience.

In a more severe occurrence of discrimination that results in violence against another person, the approach to handling the situation would be different, especially when one considers the legal obligation of schools to provide a safe (nonviolent) environment for learners and the legal ramifications of the offense itself. A number of scholars, including Rutar (2014) and Ermenc (2016), have suggested key measures that should be implemented to address unlawful acts of discrimination. To begin with, the teacher is obligated to investigate the reported incident and acquire details about the discriminatory act by interrogating the persons involved and those who witnessed the incident. The outcome of the investigation needs to be recorded along with any physical evidence (such as weapons or pictures of injuries) to substantiate the allegations of discrimination, and the appropriate school authorities (such as the head teacher or counselor) need to be notified of the discriminatory act so that they can conduct further investigation and take appropriate disciplinary actions according to the established protocol for handling violent acts of discrimination. Along with disciplinary actions, school officials may also consider implementing awareness programs or intervention sessions aimed at involving students, teachers, and parents to prevent future occurrences of discrimination. Finally, the school is required to provide support to the victim of discrimination, offering counseling and other resources that would allow the individual to surmount the experience. Follow-up checks also need to be made to ensure that the affected student feels safe and that no other incident of discrimination has been perpetrated against the student or any other.

While the procedures discussed thus far are important as immediate responses to acts of racial discrimination in schools, these procedures are

essentially reactive to existing situations. However, it is also imperative to adopt proactive measures that would inhibit incidences of discrimination from occurring. A critical first step is the creation of anti-racist policies shared with the education community, including educators, officials, parents, and students so that they are cognizant of the school’s zero-tolerance policy against discrimination and understand their responsibilities in fostering a safe environment for all learners (Jones, 2020; Barbieri & Ferede, 2020). Another important consideration is the formation of an inclusive school climate and culture through representation of the diverse ethnic histories and experiences in the curricula, teaching and learning resources, and events and activities organized by the school (Ermenc, 2016; Gonser, 2021). Also essential is training teachers to help them build their racial literacy, develop their cultural responsiveness and strengthen their knowledge and capabilities in dealing with racially discriminatory behaviors (Jones, 2020).

Intercultural Education:

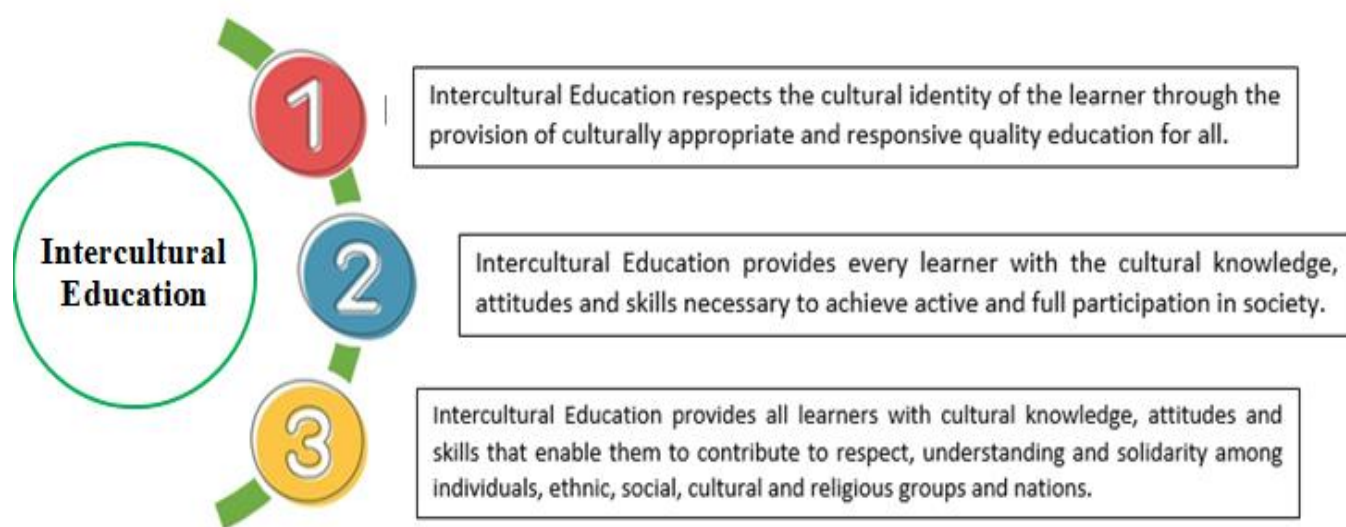
In a rapidly changing social landscape where people of different cultural identities, political ideologies, and economic standing exist, dissension and discrimination are very real possibilities (Cook et al., 2023). An important question one is compelled to consider is how can society ensure peaceful coexistence in the presence of prevailing differences. Equally important is the question of how society

can inspire community building and positive social changes in the presence of diversity. The answer to

these questions is intercultural education. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2006), the creation of sustainable and tolerant societies is possible through educational programs designed not only to enable a better understanding of cultural differences and foster appreciation of diverse cultures but also to encourage meaningful discourse on and engagement in the cultural experiences and realities of other people. This is precisely the purpose of intercultural education which UNESCO (2006) defines as “the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect” (p. 17). Therefore, the demonstration of intercultural sensitivity and competence is revealed in one’s ability “to interact effectively with people of cultures other than one’s own” (Byram, 2000, p. 297 as cited in Cook et al., 2023) and to acquire empathy – the capacity to view the world through the lens of others and to be open to perspectives that may not be aligned with one’s own, but which are nonetheless valuable and worthy of consideration (Lanham & Voskuil, 2022).

In order to actualize the potential of intercultural education, it is imperative that educators employ instructional approaches that are guided by the following intercultural education principles outlined by UNESCO (2006).

Figure 1: Principles to Guide International Action on Intercultural Education



Note. Adapted from UNESCO guidelines on intercultural education, by UNESCO, 2006, p. 32. Copyright 2006 by UNESCO.

The Role of Intercultural Education in School:

The central role of intercultural education is to create a learning environment that is inclusive and equitable to all students at various levels of their academic journey (UNESCO, 2006). Encapsulated in this general function of intercultural education are several key expectations in both the teaching and learning processes.

For educators, intercultural education enables the improvement of cultural competence by presenting the opportunity for teachers to acquire and develop the requisite experiences and capabilities to work effectively with learners from different cultural upbringings (Jones, 2020). This level of competence will encompass not only an understanding of the influence of culture and cultural identity on knowledge acquisition and learning outcomes but also the conscientious application of pedagogical approaches (such as collaboration and project-based learning) that will encourage cultural appreciation and mitigate cultural conflicts (Chiriac & Panciuc, 2015). It will also entail the deliberate employment of teaching strategies (such as group discussions and peer teaching) that will encourage the sharing of experiences and perspectives of all diverse groups of learners and the discovery and celebration of the uniqueness as well as the commonalities among different cultures (Loreman, 2017).

For learners, intercultural education facilitates the development of cultural awareness, one that enables learners to be conscious of their own cultural values and those of other ethnicities (Armstrong, 2020). This awareness also promotes cultural sensitivity and social justice by highlighting the biases, misconceptions, and stereotypes that are likely to influence how learners react to and treat individuals whose cultural experiences are different from their own (Liu et al., 2023). Through cultural awareness in the form of meaningful discourse on diverse perspectives and active engagements in diverse experiences, learners are more likely to be respectful and appreciative, or at the very least, tolerant of all cultures (Hymel & Katz, 2019;

Lanham & Voskuil, 2022). Consequently, the likelihood of discrimination would be significantly reduced, and the probability of valuing and celebrating cultural differences would be significantly heightened.

Ultimately, exposure to intercultural education will prepare learners to function not merely as local citizens of their own country but as global citizens, capable of working effectively and productively in diverse multicultural contexts (Echcharfy, 2022). But how do learners become exposed to intercultural education? Is intercultural education simply inserted into the regular curriculum? According to UNESCO (2006), for intercultural education to fulfill its role, it cannot be merely inserted into the regular curriculum. It needs to permeate the entire learning environment and every dimension of the learning process, including teacher education and training, curriculum development, methods of instruction, learning resources, and learning activities. In essence, it will require the development and implementation of inclusive curricula that buttress learning about the histories and cultures of all ethnic groups in society as well as enable the recognition and empowerment of these groups (Ermenc, 2016).

The Impact of Intercultural Education in School:

The conscious decision by an increasing number of educators to promote the intercultural education agenda has engendered favorable outcomes which are reported in the expanding body of research on intercultural education. In exploring the benefits of exposing learners to different cultural knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, Wells et al. (2016) noted the findings of studies that identified several key benefits, including enhanced learning outcomes, enriched intercultural understanding, better preparation for employment, and greater engagement in political issues. Similar findings were discussed by Ayscue et al. (2017) who explained that learners guided through intercultural education demonstrated improvement in their academic achievement and intergroup relations both of which are important considerations for fostering productive civic

engagements and cultivating greater social cohesion.

Conclusion:

It can be concluded that intercultural education is a practical response to dealing with discriminatory practices and advancing racial equity in schools. However, this response should be an inclusive process with continuous discourse among key stakeholders in education to ensure that prevailing practices are consistent with the evolving nature of society.

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