CHALLENGES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN A CULTURALLY DIVERSE SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Mirlinda VEJSELI, Refije REXHEPI, Zana REÇI

Abstract

In a culturally diverse society, education holds a critical role in fostering harmony, tolerance, and social integration. North Macedonia, characterized by its rich ethnic and cultural diversity, faces multiple challenges in ensuring equal educational opportunities for all communities. This study examines the role of education in fostering a sustainable and inclusive society in North Macedonia, with a focus on factors that influence equal access, cultural representation, and the development of both national and cultural identity.

The study identifies several core challenges within North Macedonia's education system, including language barriers, a lack of inclusive curricula, the stigmatization of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and inadequate teacher training for managing culturally diverse classrooms. A particular emphasis is placed on the challenge of preserving the cultural and linguistic identity of smaller ethnic groups while promoting common values that strengthen coexistence and collaboration among citizens.

Findings highlight that intercultural education is essential for creating a society where all citizens feel equal and represented. Key recommendations include developing a more inclusive curriculum, offering intercultural training for teachers, and fostering parental engagement across all ethnic groups to enhance educational quality in culturally diverse settings.

Keywords: culture, diversity, society, intercultural education.

Introduction

Global developments, as well as the need to adapt to social diversity, are often not accompanied by the appropriate dynamics from state policies and institutions which change more slowly and rely on more fixed concepts of society. This discrepancy often creates a lack of genuine policies addressing citizens' needs. Therefore, it is essential that the principles and the image of society are reflected in institutions in order to advance and cultivate cultural diversity within a society. Culture, as a universal category, creates the opportunity to understand social life intertwined with cultural acts. In every culture, we can find a wide range of human activities, such as family relations, social status, property rights, taboos, myths, division of labor, rituals, and more. The forms in which these activities manifest, as universal cultural elements, carry the characteristics of the culture of the social environment. Culture is a product of human creation; it educates humanity, and humanity defines culture. Culture is the core of education, which creates an interdependence between humanity, culture, and education (Osmani, 2020).

In a culturally diverse society, education plays a crucial role in promoting cultural understanding and peaceful coexistence. However, language barriers and ethnic differences often contribute to social divisions and may result in ethnic tensions.

This study examines the challenges and importance of education in creating a more inclusive and diverse society. According to Banks (James A. Banks, 1999), there are five dimensions of multicultural education in schools that form the basis for successful interethnic integration. These are:

- Content integration,
- The knowledge construction process,
- Prejudice Reduction,

- An empowering school culture and
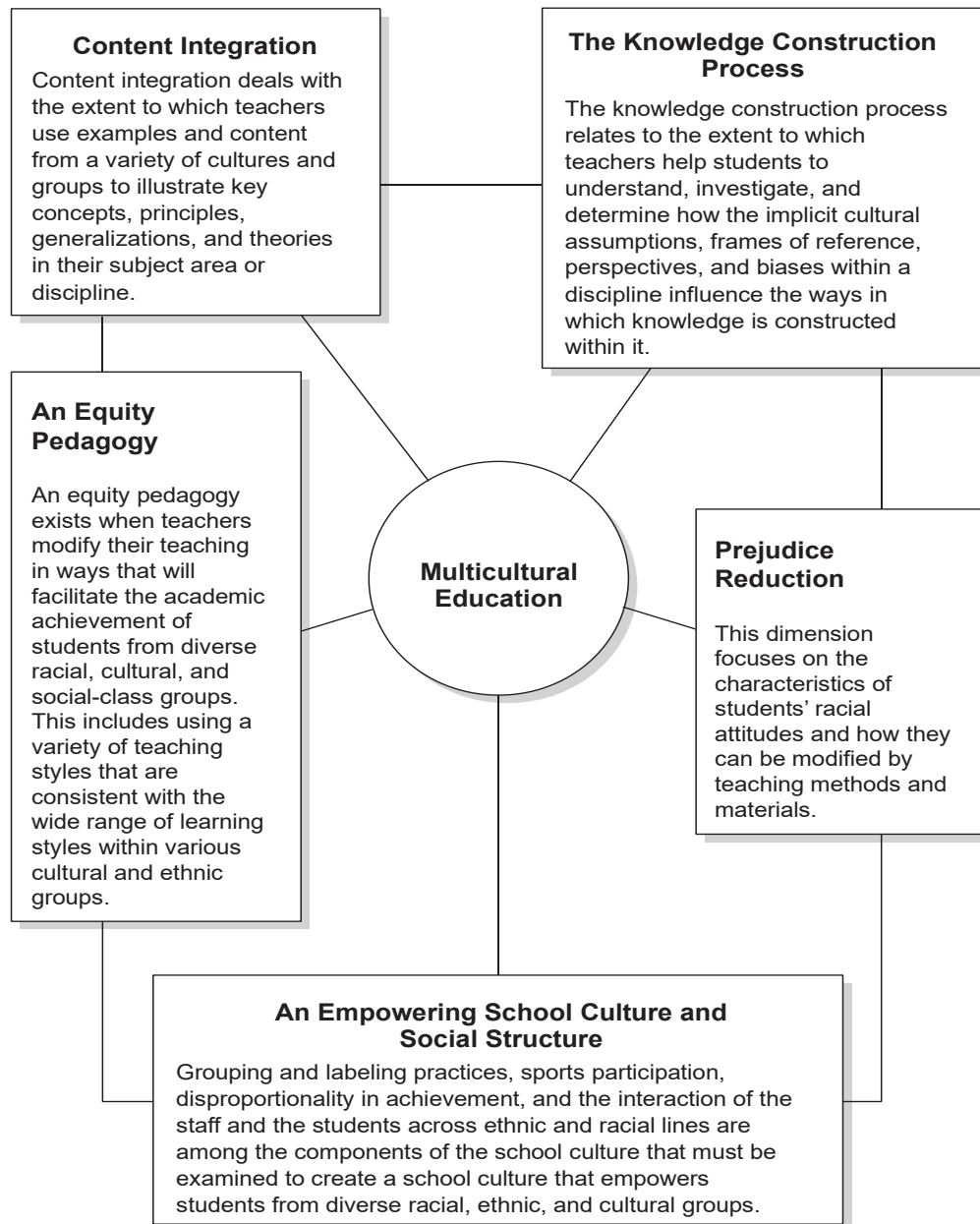- Conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Atanasoska, 2015, p. 59).

Content Integration
Content integration deals with the extent to which teachers use examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline.

The Knowledge Construction Process
The knowledge construction process relates to the extent to which teachers help students to understand, investigate, and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed within it.

An Equity Pedagogy
An equity pedagogy exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, and social-class groups. This includes using a variety of teaching styles that are consistent with the wide range of learning styles within various cultural and ethnic groups.

Multicultural Education

Prejudice Reduction
This dimension focuses on the characteristics of students' racial attitudes and how they can be modified by teaching methods and materials.

An Empowering School Culture and Social Structure
Grouping and labeling practices, sports participation, disproportionality in achievement, and the interaction of the staff and the students across ethnic and racial lines are among the components of the school culture that must be examined to create a school culture that empowers students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.

Figure 1. The Dimensions of Multicultural Education (Banks, 2006)

Challenges and Importance of Education in a Culturally Diverse Society

Languages of Instruction

Education represents one of the primary elements that can advance the way we think and interpret the world around us. Therefore, reforms in education and the development of an educational system prepared for change are crucial for building an intercultural society (Pollozhani, 2020).

Angela Davis, in her book Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement (Davis A. Y., 2016), highlights the transformative role of

education in challenging prejudices, stereotypes, systemic injustices, and social inequalities, focusing particularly on the importance of education for marginalized groups. She reflects this by stating, "if we want to create schools that nourish the intellectual imagination of younger generations, then we have to dismantle the structures and ideologies of racism, and we need to start right now." (Davis A., 2014). This statement underscores her belief in the transformative power of education to address social injustices and promote cultural inclusion.

A key characteristic of the educational system in North Macedonia is ethnic and linguistic division. In many schools, students are separated into different classes primarily based on language, which is usually Macedonian or Albanian. According to a study conducted by the Ministry of Education in 2021, about 74% of Albanian students attend schools where Macedonian is not the primary language of instruction; similarly, the same trend is observed among Macedonian students. The Ministry of Education has reported that only a very small percentage of students from the Macedonian community choose to attend education in the Albanian language, mostly due to specific circumstances, such as mixed schools in predominantly Albanian areas.

Educational programs and curriculums

Interculturalism emerges as a need to understand the culture of 'the other,' which, by avoiding prejudices, stereotypes, and barriers, enables meaningful engagement with different cultures in a multicultural society.

The Republic of North Macedonia is a country of diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious cultures, where contact with different cultures is part of everyday life. In such intercultural environments, all relevant factors must act competently to avoid feelings of intolerance, dismissiveness, and prejudice. Today, there should not only be a focus on building a multicultural society, but also on building an intercultural society in which different groups can communicate with each other and work on common goals. North Macedonia continues to remain a society with a high degree of cultural disconnection because the strengthening of Macedonian ethnocentrism simply does not accept the differences and recognition of the cultures of other ethnicities. Although North Macedonia is a multicultural society, it is without cultural cohesion. Education could be a reference point for the beginning of overcoming prejudice and cultural hatred in this country. According to Sinani, A. (Sinani, 2011, p. 267-274), "one of the ways to achieve the goals of a society that accepts and recognizes cultural differences is to build intercultural concepts and curricula in the educational process, because learning about rights, equality and human freedom, learning about culture, the values of the culture of others, and learning about the appreciation of differences as a general value of civilization, prepares the student for a world where every individual is valuable, free and able to participate in the development of a free and sustainable society. Intercultural learning encourages students to develop basic skills for understanding human diversity and responsibilities for appropriate action. This enables students to promote the value of community in school and respect for others.

The role of school in intercultural education

School plays an important role in the acquisition of knowledge, the development of skills and abilities of students, and at the same time, it is a good basis for their inclusion in social life.
School, in addition to its distinguished educational role, also performs the function of academic, cultural, and social education. As a meeting place of national and global culture, it must create conditions that will enable the acquisition of cultural habits and the establishment of dialogue between different cultures. The Republic of North Macedonia, as a country where different

communities live, must cultivate educational models of understanding, coexistence, and joint intercultural action. Separate schools or differing shifts designed to avoid contact between students who speak different languages only deepen prejudices and stereotypes, hindering the development of mutual understanding, relationships, and tolerance between communities. Such a monocultural action makes a multicultural society unstable. Therefore, the affirmation of understanding and acceptance between members of different cultures is becoming an inherent requirement in modern democratic societies. Students must build bridges for members of different cultures and be capable of cultural adaptation, where they will promote the values, knowledge, and customs of all cultures in contact. School is the place where students establish contacts, communicate with their peers, and the place where different views and values are carried out and adopted. Many researchers consider the educational environment as a third educator (Osmani, 2020, p. 79).

Teachers as mediators between different cultures

The role of teachers in the educational process is very important in building a cohesive society and mediating between two, three, or more cultures, in clarifying and explaining the differences between them without any prejudice. The teacher is a suitable figure for the encounter between cultures, who, through rich teaching content, interprets and promotes the intellectual and moral development of students. Being a teacher is not only about educating students to adopt general societal rules of behavior but also about encouraging them to critically reflect on the values that shape society (Chantal, 2009, p. 66-67). Freire, in his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed, emphasizes the role of the educator in developing "critical consciousness" that helps students to know the world and social structures in a critical and non-prejudicial way (Freire, 2024), which is necessary for students to form real and critical attitudes in multicultural environments towards each other. Leading educational institutions, through various projects, should train and prepare teachers in a multicultural society such as North Macedonia has. Professional training is one of the most effective ways for schools to respond quickly to differences in society by offering content that promotes the professional and moral development of teachers. The education and preparation of teachers for intercultural education should be carried out based on a well-conceived and officially approved educational policy, and not by implementing isolating measures. The program for intercultural education of teachers should integrate the characteristics of all communities in the country. The Republic of North Macedonia, as a multiethnic and multicultural state, should enable young people to become familiar with the quality and advantages of life in a multicultural society. The three factors of intercultural communication competence that teachers should have: skills, which are reflected in the presentation of an event from another culture, knowledge about how a social group functions, and attitudes that consist of the acceptance of other cultures (Byram, 1997, p. 25). In a society with a pronounced cultural diversity, such as the case of North Macedonia, the role of educational institutions and in particular of the teacher is to encourage respect, cooperation, and understanding between students from different cultures. They should help in the understanding and appreciation of cultural differences and promote dialogue and mutual recognition in order to create a common environment for learning and development. A society should be built with genuine cultural values, and it should see diversity as an asset and a bridge of communication and interaction.

Conclusion

In a multicultural society like North Macedonia, education is a fundamental field that plays a key role in promoting social cohesion, inclusion, and understanding among ethnic groups. The state must ensure resources and support for schools that provide education, promoting cultural diversity as a bridge between ethnic communities. This includes training teachers and developing educational materials, with the primary goal being respect for identity and the promotion of diversity as an excellent opportunity for a sustainable and integrated society. Only through continuous commitment to dialogue, respect, and awareness of cultural diversity can North Macedonia overcome its historical challenges and build a shared future for its citizens, where education serves as the pillar that unites all elements of society.

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