

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN DIFFERENT CULTURES AND SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

Since Independence, most educational programmes as well as Education Commissions in India have discussed the education within the context of its multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-religious society. Our Constitution also takes into account the fact that we, being multicultural and multi-ethnic nation, must learn to live with such a fact and all our efforts must be directed to promote education so that it could be fruitful to all. Harmoniously living together in Indian society and in any nation of the world has its foundation in the informal, nonformal, and formal education of all the children and youth living anywhere. This is also one of the important responsibilities teachers and school administrators, parents, families as well as the community. The role of a teacher is especially of immense value and highly strategic. It is therefore, of utmost significance that teachers' colleges must develop programmes which help future teachers grow significantly in the right direction and equip them mentally to make them highly professionals so that they adequately help their students develop properly, especially belonging to different cultures and ethnic groups. In fact, the nature of our national composition demands a multicultural preparation of teachers. Although its importance has been recognized, not much thought has been given to what kind of preparation teachers should hear.

Introduction

Teachers are an integral part of a society. Their existence might have not been there earlier in the modern and formal sense of the term, but there were people who imparted knowledge and skills for different activities of livelihood such as hunting, fishing and even for domestication of plants and animals. It is said that teacher knows the way, goes the way and shows the way. The role of teachers has been mentioned in ancient scriptures too. One can not think of Ramayana without Vashishtha as the teacher of Ram and his brothers, Dronacharya was an integral entity of Mahabharata; he trained both the Pandavas as well as Kauravas. Education was however, not available to all; Guru Dronacharya did not admit the legendary Eklavya who became a self taught person though he took inspiration from the image of the Guru. The basic formulation about the relationship between teacher and the students is, "Acharya poorva roopam, anteyvasyeh uttar roopam, vidya sandhih, parvachanambhyam sandhanam." (Teacher is the first form while the person sitting besides him is the second form, quest for knowledge brings them together and his lectures/ sermons are the medium of transferring knowledge to the student). Development of skill is a natural trait which is guided by the parents even in the animal Kingdom. A child learns from her/his

environment. She/he encounters the parents first and mother nurtures the cognitive abilities of the child and becomes her/his immediate teacher. She guides her/him to talk and walk and the child learns many things in the constant companionship of the mother rather than in the formal class room with a formal time-table. Every child comes from diverse backgrounds with diverse experiences. The formal teacher comes at a much later stage of the development of the child. Most countries in the world are multi-cultural and multi-ethnic in the composition of their population. The diverse people live together, learn together and share the experiences together. Migration of people from one region to the other or from one country to the other under different circumstances develops multicultural and multi-ethnic groupings. Historically, the villages which have prospered have become towns. The latter, provided better economic opportunities, social amenities and facilities and attracted people to cluster in such locations. Thus, the urban areas in the world in general and in India in particular, provide very good examples of such diverse situations in which people of different ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural dispensations cluster together with their diverse needs of education and training. The children's perceptions emanate from the parameters of their

experiences which they acquire from their cultural niche. They communicate in the language acquired from their immediate environment which has enriched their experiences. The needs of the children of specific groups may be different and that explains the existence of schools with different emphases to cater the need of these groups. The cultural and ethnic diversity should be celebrated rather than ignored. Any attempt for homogenization becomes counter productive and can become a cause of conflict.

National Diversity.

Our nation is not a melting pot where human diversity fuses into a uniform India. On the contrary, ours is a diverse society having different colors, ways of living, varied religious backgrounds and therefore fused into medley forms a variegated whole called the Indian culture. Within the nation each component of culture retains its uniqueness while adding variety to the composition of the whole. This multicultural condition unambiguously pervades our schools too. More than half of our youths helped by schools in urban settings with population between ten lack to five lack belong to the families who live in utmost poverty, or have multi learning handicaps on account of their different cultural backgrounds, parents' lack of education and means to give proper education to their children. Furthermore, at national level the minority school-age population is likely to increase more than 10 per cent approximately year as the population growth figures show. India, with 1,220,200,000 (1.22 billion) people in 2012 is the second most populous country in the world. More than 50% of India's current population is below the age of 25 and over 65% below the age of 35. India has also the largest illiterate population in the world. India has only 2.4% of the world's land area while it supports more than 15% of the world's population. Almost 70% of the people live in more than 550,000 villages and the remaining in more than 200 towns and cities. In the last one thousand years of its history, India has been invaded from Iranian plateau, Central Asia, Arabia, Afghanistan and British including other Western countries. It has certainly created a cultural diversities that cannot be done away with easily though Indian has absorbed various influences to a considerable extent. In fact religion, cast and language have been major determinants of social and political organization in India today. The government has recognized 18 languages as official languages though Hindi is the most widely spoken language in the country.

Though 83% of the population consists of Hindus, India is the home to more than 120 million Muslims-one of the world's largest Muslim population. Its population also includes Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists and Parsis. Within these broad categories there is a large number of thousand of castes and sub-castes, whose relative status varies from one region to the other and despite economic modernization and laws that prohibit discrimination against the lower end of the class structure, the system remains an important source of social identification for most people in the country.

Diversity of Teachers.

The scenario in most government schools in various states of the country is quite different as students from all walks of life get entry into them. Most students come from poor families and a very small number come from moderately educated families whose guardians have government jobs and they cannot afford their children's education in private. Some states, like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharastra, Gujrat and partially Utter Pradesh, are more likely to such scenarios. The diversity certainly creates lot of problems to students as teachers find it difficult to bridge the cultural and ethnic gap that exists on account of their family backgrounds. This primarily happens as teachers are never trained to deal with students belonging to different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, they are unable to promote them academically, mentally or emotionally and always complain about the poor background of students in to be the reason for slow learning and lack of interest and education. Thus, despite the growing cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in most classrooms, teacher educators continue training future educators in the decades old pedagogy, hoping that their graduates will teach in schools with highly motivational levels. Deplorably, most pre-service teachers lack the knowledge, skills, and experience that build the requisite professional awareness and assurance for working with minority children. Though most pre-service teachers generally believe in their ability to implement core teaching skills, many express reservations about their capability to teach students belonging to a different culture from their own. This insecurity surely contributes to their aversion to teaching in culturally diverse schools and prevents them from becoming cultural brokers and cultural translators. The ultimate challenge for teacher educators is to prepare teachers who can meaningfully connect with their students in an ethnically and culturally complex world.

Unfortunately most teachers colleges presently are hardly prepared to train teachers in that direction. On the contrary the current scenario is far from reality, and teachers' colleges are hardly perceptive of students' diversities created on account of their cultural and ethnic background. Let us have a quick look at the existing teachers' institutions briefly.

The Need for a Liberal Arts Education. Teacher preparation requires the breadth of a liberal arts education in the broadest sense of the term.

From this perspective, a good liberal arts education is both liberal as well as liberating. It is liberal in so far as it is progressive, impartial, and comprehensive; it is liberating in that it emancipates us from restrictive, ethnocentric thinking. Herein lies value for multicultural teacher preparation. Though undergraduate liberal arts education should be comprehensive, it cannot possibly be all-inclusive considering the constraints of time and the enormity of the task. The purpose of a good liberal arts education is not an exhaustive study of every human group or field of endeavor, but, rather, an extensive and a general framework from which the future teacher, as a continually developing professional, can continue to grow personally and professionally. Through integration of multicultural themes, the liberal arts lay the foundation for cultural competency and cross-cultural awareness. They furnish inter-cultural knowledge, wear away ethnocentric viewpoints, highlight human oneness, and confirm diversity. Within a multicultural liberal arts framework, pre-service teachers acquire the following: Broad knowledge of the contributions to Indian history of so many people who have helped building our nation, especially before and after independence, providing information that how they struggled hard to make this nation in spite of the fact that they belonged to different ethnic and religious groups and hailed from varied cultural backgrounds. Knowing how diverse people built, shaped, defended, and helped our nation increases respect for and valuing of our national diversity. Besides, bringing into the classroom a multicultural and multiethnic outlook, that supports diversity, teachers must have the information so that they can share it with their students. Insight into human and cultural diversity through a preliminary course on diversity. A diversity course is likely to develop intercultural, interethnic, and interracial indebtedness and understanding through the exploration of social, cultural, ethnic, gender and linguistic similarities and differences. The emphasis on communication and interpersonal relationships

within the Indian society may build a foundation for classroom and parentteacher interaction. It may encourage students to explore their own cultural and ethnic inheritance as a means to understanding how culture influences the way they see themselves and others. In addition, it could cultivate understanding of diversity as a valuable human resource, so feels Ines Marquez Chisholm.

Multicultural Education May Deliver the Following:

Ines Marquez Chisholm holds that following rationale and philosophy of multicultural education may clearly clarify its nature, premises and aims. Since knowledge precedes understanding, pre-service teachers need to expand upon their knowledge acquired through the liberal arts and focus on its classroom implications. A general course in multicultural education may provide an opportunity for further reflection, self-awareness and development of a personal philosophy.

An introductory multicultural education course may become the backbone for an integrated multicultural teacher education programme.

It frames learning, thinking and behavior within a cultural context and invites future teachers to become aware of their own cultural viewpoint. In short, an initial course in multicultural education encourages the life-long process of developing the necessary cultural competency for bridging the gap between the majority culture and students' true culture.

An introductory course may help in exploring the multiple interpretations and definitions of multicultural education.

It may lead the future teachers to discriminate the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and goals innate in each perspective. By providing a global view of multi-cultural education, future teachers can clarify their own perspective of multicultural education.

It may provide proper opportunities for reflection on how culture and gender shape our behavior, beliefs, expectations, values, identity and personal biases.

An understanding of our own cultural heritage and world view promotes better understanding and acceptance of other cultural groups. Cultural self-understanding evolves in an introductory multicultural education course through repeated intercultural experiences, reflection on personal feelings and exploration of one's own values and

beliefs. It also gives exposure to a variety of ideas, beliefs, and cultural perspectives.

Knowledge about family roles and values as they influence learning is imperative.

When a family involves in and supports education of the child, it may accelerate academic success. Within-family learning modes, parental expectations, and family roles influence how children learn, what they attend to, how they behave and what they expect from teachers. When future teachers possess knowledge of cultural and individual differences in learning styles and how to accommodate these differences in teaching they would do much better to help their clientele.

Methodology courses related to such differences may expand one's knowledge and offer practical applications.

It would result in greater professional confidence and may increase willingness to teach children from diverse backgrounds.

School authorities must identify cultural bias in teaching materials towards age, gender, ethnic groups, language, and physical and mental handicaps. Lack of awareness in the selection and use of textbooks, pictures, videos, software, tests, and other materials may lead to diminish minority students' opportunities for academic success.

Through multicultural education, pre-service teachers may differentiate the secret messages, misrepresentations, omissions, and misinformation that are sometimes present in educational resources. I would like to add here that **teaching of Indian and Western philosophies to pre-service teachers should be more pragmatic** rather than providing them only with information from the examination point of view. Though Indian and Western philosophies are taught to our future teachers during their course, it is almost a farce since pre-service teachers are taught only those aspects of the philosophies that do not have much bearing on them. It would be more important to make the pre-service teachers aware of certain multi-cultural or multiethnic aspects of philosophy so that they have a lasting impact on them. For example, a few chosen incidents from the lives of Mahaveera, Buddha, Shankracharya, Socrates or Christ could have tremendous impact on the students' characters rather than preparing them simply for examination. In this context, I quote a simple incident chosen from 'The Teachings of Buddha.' Once when

Ananda, Buddha's most close disciple, was passing by a well in a village, he asked a young outcast woman, named Pakati, for water to drink. Pakati said, "O monk, I am too humbly born to give you water to drink. Do not ask any service of me lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am of low caste." Listening to her Ananda replied: "I ask not for caste but for water;" and the woman's heart leaped joyfully and she gave Ananda water to drink." There are many more wonderful incidents of this kind that have occurred in the lives of all the great philosophers or religious leaders of the world.

Narrating such incidents could influence the characters of pre-service teachers and can help them transcend from their narrow outlook, making them more flexible in their attitudes to accept and understand their students who belong to different cultures or come from different ethnic families. Conclusion.

As teacher educators, we must prepare all teachers to provide quality education for all students. Teachers lacking multicultural education are ineffectually prepared for the reality of a pluralistic society and tend to have low expectations of minority children. Therefore, their roles are affected. Teacher educators must ask themselves to what extent their teacher preparation facilitates increased cultural self-awareness, develops admiration for diversity, increases cultural competency and prepares future teachers to work effectively with a variety of students. If education programmes achieve these goals to some extent, they certainly prepare culturally competent teachers. Pre-service multicultural education is a necessity of not only for our times but for all times. It is not a matter of individual preference, curricular attachment or educational impulse. It is also not merely an add-on course after providing for the necessary knowledge and skills. Multicultural education is not simply an ethnic problem. It is everyone's issue, for teaching is mostly a multicultural experience. Even if students in a class do not come from a different ethnic background, they will still be different culturally to some extent as they hail from varied kinds of homes especially in India. As a nation, we cannot afford to neglect any segment of our population; therefore, multicultural and multi-ethnic educational programmes must be developed in educational institutions if we want our nation to stay one and united into a single whole. Providing adequate multicultural environment to pupil-teachers through curriculum, giving them direct exposure through field trips and mixing the

pupil teachers with varied kind of population belonging to different sort of cultures should be of high priority during the training period. Without such experiences our future teachers cannot perform their roles successfully.

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