Alica Petrasová

University of Prešov in Prešov, Slovak Republic

Teaching with a Multicultural Perspective

Introduction

The right to an education is one of the universal human rights, embedded in numerous international legal norms and provisions. It is not merely a formal principle granting an unspecified possibility to be educated applicable to everyone without any limitation. The term encompasses a very particular idea, which explains the meaning of a full effectuation of the right to education, while also creating an obligation for countries, which, by signing the relevant international treaties and conventions, have decided to respect and promote this right.

In 1948, with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which grants the right to education in Article 26, the content of the above mentioned term began to be really formed, and inevitably included the context of quality, non-discrimination and inclusion. Pursuant to the Declaration: "*Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups*"[1].

---

[1] Article 26 (2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Content of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was later directly reflected in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), as well as in other international treaties on the protection of human rights. International conventions on human rights protection represent binding legal norms from the point of view of international law. Their legal standing in relation to Slovak national laws is, inter alia, expressed in Article 7 (5) of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic.

It is gratifying that the government highlights the need for an improvement in the quality of citizens' lives in the area of increasing their level of education. In order for positive changes to take place in our society, it is necessary to increase the quality of education for all – regardless of their nationality or social background. We cannot move on without:

- starting to provide conditions supporting coeducation and reintegration;
- collective-focused education that better contributes to the development of individuals, with regard to content and process, and respecting their individual differences;
- considering the fact that, when preparing school activities for students, it is not only the subject matter but also the actual way of knowledge mediation that plays an equal role in the development of mental functions in individuals and their relationship to reality;
- creating the kind of teaching environment which enhances individual thinking and assists in the formation of personal philosophy/perception of the world, as well as mutual discussion, exchange of opinions and beliefs.

What is multicultural education?

Multicultural education, however, is a term that has been used in different ways to define different kinds of educational strategies and approaches. The most frequently used approach is characterized by the addition of ethnic heroes and holidays into the curriculum. The mainstream curriculum remains unchanged in terms of its basic structure and goals. The problem with this approach is that students do not obtain a global view of the role of ethnic and cultural groups. It tends to trivialize those concepts and issues related to the victimization and oppression of ethnic groups and their struggles against racism and for power. It can reinforce stereotypes and misconceptions.

Banks (1997, p. 3-31) has divided teacher's approaches to facing multiculturality into five differing categories, which can, of course, also overlap in a single teacher's actions:

1. Teaching the exceptional and culturally different.
2. The human relations approach.
3. Single-group studies.
4. The multicultural education approach.
5. Education that is multicultural and socially reconstructive.

The first approach argues that there is a corpus of knowledge that everyone should learn, and deviations from that content should be only temporary. In order for exceptions to be able to reach the common core, a lot of attention is paid to instructional procedures, in addition to making use of the student's learning styles.

The basic belief in the second approach is that a major purpose of the school is to help students learn to live harmoniously in a world that is becoming smaller. The human relations approach helps to foster positive feelings among all students, encourages group identity among students of various cultures, and tries to reduce stereotypes, prejudices, and biases. The approach of teaching the exceptional and the culturally different usually emphasizes the need to help students to acquire cognitive skills and knowledge in the traditional curriculum, while the human relations approach concentrates on attitudes and feelings people have about themselves and others, and aims at a more comprehensive curriculum change.

The single-group studies approach usually concentrates on an aspect or a group that has been neglected in society, and aims at raising the status of and respect for that group. This approach involves introducing new elements into the traditional curriculum, making significant changes in what is normally taught, and providing a detailed study on specific groups and a critical examination of their deprivation.

According to Banks (1997), the multicultural education approach advocates a total school reform to make schools reflect cultural diversity.

It aims to give equal attention to a variety of cultural groups, whether they are represented at school or not. The curriculum includes perspective, experience, and contributions from people of colour, people on low incomes, women, and people with special needs. Its goal is to show the whole spectrum of life in order to reduce prejudices towards and discrimination of oppressed groups, and to support equal opportunities for all.

Education that is multicultural and socially reconstructive extends the previous approach in that special attention is paid to students' social awareness, and particularly to analytical and critical thinking and social skills in shaping their circumstances and the society around them – and their destiny. That is why democracy must be practiced at school, and Banks (1997) emphasizes that in order to understand democracy students must live in it. Students should have the opportunity to make decisions on important issues and problems, and to take action to solve them, in order to later reform society towards greater equity.

A challenge facing multicultural education is terminology. There are several terms that are congruous and incongruous to multiculturalism. They include: cross-cultural, cultural awareness, cultural diversity, cultural pluralism, cultural sensitivity, diversity, globalization, intercultural, transcultural, international, pluralism, multiethnic and the list goes on. To confuse the issue further, multiculturalism is used in a variety of contexts. Multiculturalism can be an idea, concept, educational reform movement or a process for institution change. For the purposes of this paper, multiculturalism is defined as an educational reform movement that is designed to infuse nontraditional perspectives for student development.

Changing the paradigm of teaching and learning

It seems that, in both specialist and public discussion, the idea prevails that the quality of student education is predominantly connected to the material conditions that are provided. On the basis of a genuine reflection of the needs and goals regarding all students, it is necessary to consider a systemic transformation of educational institutions. The degree

to which goals are attained implies achieving quality, and these are clearly defined in the form of curricular documents approved by the State Education Programme (2008), which are considered to be generally valid norms for all students of a given age and level of education. In my opinion, the search for possibilities to enforce justness in education also lies in consistent planning, and the designing of the education process from both the content and process viewpoints.

The task of present-day education is to get schools into motion and to achieve that they must systematically, and on their own initiative, increase the quality of their work. The way in which the school proclaims its mission and essential philosophy, its idea of long-tem development and the determination of goals in accordance with its mission is a suggestion of quality in itself. The increase in quality is predominantly in the hands of teachers; it arises from their pedagogic cognition, behaviour and actions, from their "personality". An environment saturated with information requires a school leadership who are responsible for their own decisions, and that their immediate subordinates possess a developed level of analytical thinking and relevant competence. This is what makes them able to evaluate appropriately alternative possibilities and viewpoints, as well as convincingly argued opinions which are directed towards searching for particular activities and techniques in order to develop all students efficiently (Petrasová, 2011).

In the old paradigm of teaching, the teacher's knowledge is transferred to passive learners. The absolute, necessary, and sufficient requirement for teachers in this context is a complete mastery of the content. The classic classroom is the teacher lecturing and students listening. The students are silent, passive, and in competition with each other. The new paradigm of teaching is based on the theory and research that have clear applications to instruction. In the new paradigm of teaching, knowledge is actively constructed, discovered, transformed, and extended by students. The teacher's efforts are aimed at developing students' competencies and talents; education is a personal transaction among students and between teacher and students as they work together (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, 1998).

Table 1. Comparisons of old and new paradigms of teaching

Factor	Old paradigm of teaching	New paradigm of teaching
Knowledge	Transferred from teacher to students	Jointly constructed by students and teacher
Students	Passive vessel to be filled by teacher's knowledge	Active constructor, discoverer, transformer of own knowledge
Teacher purpose	Classify and sort students	Develop students' competencies and talents
Relationships	Impersonal relationships among students and between teacher and students	Personal transactions among students and between teacher and students
Context	Competitive/individualistic	Cooperative learning in classroom and cooperative teams among teachers
Assumption	Any expert can teach	Teaching is complex and requires considerable training

Thus, it is also socio-cultural mediation which has a significant impact on a child's education. If a child's learning at school depends on interactions originating in the area of his development, it is vital to pay significant attention to those interactions invoked by the teacher, or, possibly, other students. The student, under the teacher's leadership, gains new knowledge on concepts and the relations between them; he forms his own attitudes towards the subject matter. If it stands to reason that to form the content is the student's tasks, it should then be possible to teach him to do so in as an efficient way as possible.

The traditional school posts the results that are expected in education in front of the student; it, however, rarely focuses on the process that leads to such results. Nevertheless, the student needs, for his future life, to learn how to think, process information and how to study. The teacher should apply such methods and techniques which show the student how to study, take responsibility for his own studying, and how to, later on, study without the teacher's direct assistance. For the student, it is important to constantly realise whether and how he understands new information and how it relates to what he already knows. He must return to

what he is not sure about and try to understand with the assistance of the teacher, or other students. If he is not guided to deal with what he does not understand, it will inevitably prevent him from the comprehension of certain information.

Learning is an act of change; it gives rise to something different to the previous state. One of the goals of education is to ensure that students learn to verbally express the ideas and information they have come across, as students remember best what is most clear to them when using their own semantic framework, i.e. when they express it in their own words. Comprehension is permanent providing that information is put in a meaningful contextual framework, created by the active transformation of comprehension into one's own vocabulary.

Another important factor is that when students exchange ideas, they expand their vocabulary and various schemes of understanding are presented. In this way, students realise that the thought scheme they have formed need not be final, and that the opinions of others can also be included in one's reasoning. They learn to tolerate differences and are able to argue.

The role of cooperative teaching and learning in creating an inclusive and interactive classroom

Cooperative teaching is a concept of education which makes it possible to include students in joined-up thinking, common formation of thought and shared cognitive activity. Cooperation means team work on a common product, a shared project, a common task. The student's individual variability that is present in the solving of tasks allows for several viewpoints on the same problem, which opens the need for dialogue, argumentation, and reasoning. This type of education contributes to an increase of such characteristic qualities in students as the ability to cooperate, a sense of solidarity, a sense of tolerance, etc. It suppresses an excessive application of competitiveness in education and an emphasis on rivalry at the expense of cooperation.

Cooperative education is one of the means applied in the creation of an environment that is suitable for thinking. Vygotsky (1978) explains that intellectual development is the product of internal as well as external (i.e. social) processes. He points out that a higher level of thinking develops from relationships, i.e. dialogue between people. He highlights that individuals form and discuss ideas together; therefore, the thoughts that come into existence in this way exceed the efforts of an individual. People together, as well as individually, express various viewpoints, their agreement or disagreement, they point out differences, they look for solutions and consider various alternatives.

Constructivists who favor Vygotsky's theory suggest that social interaction is important for learning because higher mental functions such as reasoning, comprehension, and critical thinking originate in social interactions and are then internalized by individuals. Children can accomplish mental tasks with social support before they can do them alone. Thus cooperative learning provides the social support and scaffolding that students need in order to make progress in their learning (Woolfolk, 2001, p. 44).

Slavin (2000, p. 256) refers to Vygotsky's theories when he speaks about constructivist theories of learning: "*Modern constructivist thought draws most heavily on Vygotsky's theories, which have been used to support classroom instructional methods that emphasize cooperative learning, project-based learning, and discovery. Four key principles derived from Vygotsky's ideas have played an important role. Two of them are very important for cooperative learning. First is his emphasis on the social nature of learning. Children learn, he proposed, through joint interactions with adults and more capable peers. On cooperative projects children are exposed to their peers' thinking process; this method not only makes the learning outcome available to all students, but also makes other students' thinking processes available to all. Vygotsky noted that successful problem solvers talk themselves through difficult problems. In cooperative groups, children can hear this inner speech out loud and can learn how successful problem solvers are thinking through their approaches. The second key concept is the idea that children learn best the concepts that are in their zone of proximal development. When*

children are working together, each child is likely to have a peer performing on a given task at a slightly higher cognitive level, exactly within the child's zone of proximal development."

One of the most innovative widely prescribed strategies to manage and build upon the strength of the increasing diversity found in classrooms is the use of cooperative learning techniques. Cooperative learning involves small teams of students of varying academic achievement levels employing a variety of learning activities that promote academic success for each team member. Research on the effects of cooperative learning has consistently found that the use of such methods improves academic achievement as well as intergroup relations (Kasíková, 2009).

According to Johnson, Johnson, Holubec (1998), cooperative efforts have three major positive results**:**

1. Greater efforts to achieve, including all students attaining greater achievements, long-term retention, intrinsic motivation, more time spent on tasks, development of higher-order reasoning and critical thinking.
2. More positive relationships among students, including an "esprit--de-corps", caring and committed relationships, personal and academic social support, valuing of diversity, and cohesion.
3. Greater psychological health, "general psychological adjustment, ego-strength, social development, social competencies, self-esteem, self-identity, and ability to cope with adversity and stress".

In many cases, cooperative learning provides students with an opportunity to be grouped not only heterogeneously by academic performance, but also by race, gender, and language proficiency. When using cooperative learning methods, students are asked to work in heterogeneous groups to solve problems and complete tasks. The intent of cooperative work groups is to enhance the academic achievement of students by providing them with increased opportunity for discussion, for learning from each other, and for encouraging each other to excel.

Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative situations, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all other group members. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning.

The terms "group learning" and "cooperative learning" are often used as if they mean the same thing. In fact, group work means several students working together, and working together doesn't necessarily involve cooperation. "*Cooperative learning is an arrangement in which students work in mixed ability groups and are rewarded on the basis of the success of the group*" (Woolfolk, 2001, p. 340).

Siltala (2010) discusses five criteria that define true cooperative learning groups:

1. Positive interdependence (students must fully participate and exert all their efforts within their group; each group member has a task/role/responsibility, and therefore must believe that they are responsible for their learning and that of their group).

2. Face-to-Face Promotive Interaction (each member promotes each other's success; students explain to one another what they have or are learning and assist one another with understanding and completion of assignments).

3. Individual and Group Accountability (each student must demonstrate that they have mastered the content being studied; each student is accountable for their learning and work, which therefore eliminates social loafing").

4. Social Skills (social skills that must be taught in order for successful cooperative learning to occur; skills include effective communication, interpersonal and group skills: leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication and conflict-management).

5. Group Processing (every so often groups must assess their effectiveness and decide how it can be improved).

The theory of cooperative learning has identified three types of groups: formal, informal, and base groups:

– The length of formal cooperative learning groups range from one class period to several weeks. The teacher can structure any academic assignment or course requirement for formal cooperative learning. Formal cooperative learning groups ensure that students are actively involved in the intellectual work of organizing material, explaining it, summarizing it, and integrating it into existing conceptual structures. They are at the heart of using cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, 1998).

– Informal cooperative learning groups are ad-hoc groups that may last from a few minutes to a whole class period. The teacher uses them during direct teaching (lectures, demonstrations) to focus student attention on the material to be learned, establish a mood that is conducive to learning, help to set expectations about the material, what the lesson will cover, ensure that students are cognitively processing the material being taught, and provide closure to an instructional session.

– Cooperative base groups are "long-term" (lasting for at least a year) heterogeneous groups with stable membership whose primary purpose is for members to give each other support, help, encouragement, and assistance that each needs to progress academically. Base groups provide students with long-term, committed relationships (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, 1998).

Key elements of cooperative learning include: recognition of the value of learning, shared governance, group accountability, and student-generated construction of knowledge. All these elements permit a more open and even discussion of issues from a variety of perspectives and cultures rather than a learning setting that is dominated by the course teacher who may represent only one cultural perspective, and often that of the dominant culture in society.

Conclusion

Teachers are expected to constantly improve their performance, as it is they who are responsible for presenting education with innovation. The efforts to implement foreign approaches, however, showed that pedagogues find it difficult to give up familiar conceptions. It takes considerable time for them to accept that the importance of forming higher thinking processes does not lie in the constant "snowballing" of information about the world around us but in transforming the relationship of an individual towards reality. It is only in school where information is considered a value in itself; in everyday life, facts are useful and meaningful because they help us to understand and perceive the world around us and, in this way, they prepare us for life in society.

One of the main outcomes that school education achieves is that students become individuals who are able to contribute to the solution of problems in society and create values. Therefore, society should, through the means of school as a social institution, reinforce the level of this responsibility. School must not pretend to be a "lame duck", creating the illusion of pursuing reform. On the contrary, it should accept the proposed challenges and, in a sensitive way, contribute to changes associated with school reform. This contribution focuses on the possibilities of fulfilling the request of Multicultural Education (State Educational Programme, 2008): "... *in order for education activities to be aimed at the functioning of school and school education as fair systems where everybody has an equal chance to develop their potential.*"

Bibliography:

Banks J. A., *Multicultural Education: Characteristics and Goals*, Boston 1997.

Johnson D., Johnson R., Holubec E., *Cooperation in the classroom*, Boston 1998.

Kasíková H., *Učíme (se) spolupráci spoluprací*, Kladno 2009.

Petrasová A., *The content and Process of Education*, in: *Answers to Questions on (de) Segregation of Roma Students in Slovak Education System*, Bratislava 2011.

Siltala R., *Innovativity and cooperative learning in business life and teaching*, Turku 2010.

Slavin R., *Educational Psychology: theory and practice*, Boston 2000.

Vygotskij L. S., *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*, Cambridge 1978.

Woolfolk A., *Educational psychology*, Boston 2001.

Zákon č. 245/2008 Z. z. o výchove a vzdelávaní a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov, <http://www.minedu.sk/data/USERDATA/Legislativa/Zakony/2008 _245.pdf.>

Abstract:

One of the most innovative and widely prescribed strategies to manage and build upon the strength of the increasing diversity found in the classroom is the use of cooperative learning techniques. Because cooperative learning groups encourage positive social interaction among students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, they have great potential to facilitate the building of cross-ethnic friendships and to reduce racial stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice. When students work cooperatively, they have the opportunity to judge each other on each other's merits rather than stereotypes.

Keywords: multicultural education, cooperative teaching and learning, constructivist theories of learning

Information about the author:
Alica Petrasová Assoc. Prof, Ph.D
University of Education in Prešov
Faculty of Education
ul. 17 novembra 15, 080 16 Prešov, Slovak Republic

Alica Petrasová is professionally affiliated with the Faculty of Education of Prešov University in Prešov. She has been involved for many years in the introduction and empirical verifcation of innovation strategies in school practice. She has lectured in Slovakia and abroad, mainly in the feld of the development of critical thinking through reading and writing activities and the implementation of multicultural education in pedagogical practice. As a coordinator in national and international research projects (e.g. PHARE, Comenius 2. 1, VEGA) she has been involved in experimental verification of education methods and forms, preparation of the content of specialization and innovation studies, and an expert on methodological manuals for school teachers and assistant teachers, as well as in the creation of syllabuses and study materials.

Contact:

University of Education in Prešov

Faculty of Education

ul. 17 novembra 15, 080 16 Prešov, Slovak Republic

phone: 00421904936711

e-mail: alica.petrasova@unipo.sk