

Editorial – Special Issue

Cultural Encounters in Multi-cultured Societies: Towards multicultural education?

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Pluralist societies are constituted of multiple groups that differ from each other in their ethnic, race, gender, culture and social class composition. In this context, various commentators have referred to 'multiculturalism' and approached it from several angles, attributing various meanings and definitions to the term. Some refer to the demographic multi-cultured or pluralist aspect (Lev Ari and Laron, 2014). Other researchers (Sarup 1986; Zolberg 1996) address structural power relations within and between cultural groups, while others tackle issues of economic distribution and cultural affirmation. However, the concept of 'multiculturalism' has a more common meaning which is ideological, namely, the acknowledgment of the existing differences between subgroups in a given society, and which formally address and accept them as legitimate (Ben-Rafael 2008; Body 1996). Most contemporary societies are multicultural to one extent or another and are populated by different socio-cultural groups. This led to the development of the concept of multiculturalism in Western societies and the importance assigned to cultural specificity and cultural groups (Ben-Rafael and Peres 2005).

A corollary of the multicultural realities that define contemporary societies is the introduction of multicultural education as a permanent feature of many mainstream curricula. Multicultural education is an approach that attempts to address the issues growing out of pluriculturalism in society via the education system (Stone Hanley, 1999). Multicultural education, by definition, facilitates an intergroup dialogue of dignity, openness to the 'other', and self-recognition (Banks and McGee Banks, 2001).

Social interaction between the ingroup (our group) and the outgroup (the 'others') is based on the premise that our ingroup possesses superior characteristics that the other lacks. We attribute greater value to our group than to the external group (Macionis, 1997). Hence, the 'other' is a category in civil society, with the dominant group deciding which individuals cannot belong to it due to their otherness. In societies marked by a distinct majority and minority, minority groups develop cultural compatibility strategies. Yet the minority group does not unilaterally determine this compatibility process. Rather, it is also determined by the goal of the encounter as established by the majority (Eshel, Kurman, Zehavi, and Sbeit, 2007). Research has shown that experiencing many intercultural encounters has a positive influence on reducing prejudice and debunking stereotypes. This influence, however, is more significant among the majority group than among minority groups (Pettigrew and Tropp 2000).

One of the potential positive outcomes of intercultural encounters is intercultural competence. This competence is defined as a long-lasting change on the level of knowledge (awareness), attitudes (emotions) and skills (behavior) that facilitates positive social interactions with members of other cultural groups. These encounters must include critical learning components that expose the structural reasons for the current reality and that also must find expression in personal and social experiences with people from different cultures (Otten 2003).

This special issue sets out to unravel some of the contestations, pedagogical inroads and limitations as well as alternative visions triggered by critiques of multicultural education in multi-cultured Societies.

Maya Khemlani David et al in their paper *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Giving Compliments and Making Requests through Literary Texts: Pedagogical Ramifications* emphasise the importance of developing a better understanding of how other cultures function. In this paper the researchers show how the context can help one to determine the meaning through the understanding of the situation and the discourse pattern created. Here we see a distinction between direct and indirect discourse patterns. Understanding such nuances in language is crucial to minimise miscommunication and conflict.

This paper makes use of texts from different cultures to make readers aware of the differences in certain speech acts albeit in English. Twelve (12) commonly used literary pieces, eight from Malaysia and four from the Philippines, were randomly collected and analysed. The paper analyses the texts by highlighting what is acceptable or unacceptable among interlocutors in two speech acts of compliments and requests.

Maya et al. posit that language and culture are inextricably connected. Readers must, therefore, become aware of the cultural and sociolinguistic differences underlying the communicative behaviour of non-native users of English. The study urges for a broader repertoire of speech acts since it is believed that it makes readers aware of their own cultural wealth. The comparative approach presented in this paper between native and non-native responses to native speakers and non-native speakers who used a range of the more frequently used speech acts like greetings, requests and directives showed a greater sensitisation of the readers to the culture-specific differences in language behaviour which, in turn, give a larger repertoire of speech styles which can be used as appropriate by the interlocutor. Such knowledge and awareness of cultural variation in speech will make readers communicatively more competent.

Rita Sever proposes a conceptual framework for Higher Education Institutions in their attempt at meeting a changing reality where cultural diversity is becoming a constant reality. The paper critically discusses the complexity of multicultural Education conceptual basis and presents an integrated typology for a multicultural Education programme. In her paper, *Preparing for a Future of Diversity: A Conceptual Framework for Planning and Evaluating Multicultural Education at Colleges*, Sever presents a typology of diversity-management strategies which differentiates amongst three different types of assimilation approaches and two 'philosophical' meanings of multiculturalism, namely approaches that conceive diversity in terms of potentials.

The above typologies help situate a proposed three-tiered tool for benchmarking, introducing and designing Multicultural Education within a Higher Education institution which is aspiring to develop into a multicultural campus.

Efrat Tzadik's paper drawing from a larger anthropological research study introduces Cohen's concept of the social 'bubbles' to talk about the phenomenon of integration of social groups, in particular that formed by Israeli women in Belgium. The paper *Between Bubbles and Enclaves* focuses on how Jewish women integrated in the Belgian society while preserving their social, cultural, ethnic and national identity. This research aims to develop a framework through which one can explain the social structures formed by migrants in general.

The final paper *Promoting Multiculturalism through a Decolonising Process* by Ruwaida Abu Rass attempts to define the term multiculturalism within multicultural policies in the US, Australia and Canada. This paper discusses the obstacles posed by colonisation and neoliberalism in fostering multicultural education as experienced in contemporary society. The paper posits that empowerment can only be achieved through a decolonisation process, by adopting a critical pedagogy approach and developing global education.

We hope that this issue will serve as a channel for reflection on this important social reality that at times we find ourselves being alienated from, while failing to see alternatives due to our anxiety and fears (Bauman, 2015) caused by a deep-seated process of estrangement of the 'other' to make sense of our place in society. We hope that this issue will challenge our thoughts in dealing with the 'other' in multi-cultured societies. Thus, rather than exclude various ethnic groups by erecting strong boundaries to isolate them, we seek to incorporate them within a society that thrives in diversity by initiating cross-cultural encounters and promoting multicultural education as means for constructing inter-cultural competence.

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