LOOKING THROUGH THE LENSES OF OTHERS: EXAMINING THE DIVERSE REFLECTIONS OF FOUR NEWLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Brian Vassallo
Mariam Albatool School, Malta Europe
brianvassallo@euroweb.net.mt

Abstract: Our increasingly globalised world around is presenting us with new challenges amongst which is the increasing heterogeneity of students in our classes. In Malta, teachers are approaching this phenomenon with a developing sense of understanding diversity and a genuine commitment to reach all students under their care. The author sought the experiences of four Newly Qualified Teachers in their first two years of teaching and examined their perceptions on multicultural education and the practices they applied in concomitance with academic literature. The social constructivist approach to the study revealed that teachers believed in the need for more training on Multicultural Education and on the ongoing communication with parents and students. They also insisted that teachers read academic literature to prepare themselves to embrace all students irrespective of background and embark on setting of a unit on Multicultural and Diversity Education within the Education Division in Malta.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalised and multicultural world we frequently have the opportunity to interact with others who offer a cultural heritage which is different from ours. Over the past twenty years, Malta has witnessed a steady and unprecedented rise in opportunities to interact cross-culturally due to a number of factors. Amongst which is migratory flows (both legal and irregular), mixed marriages, student exchanges and the successive enlargements of the European Union. These have brought peoples and cultures into continuous contact and have in a way, pushed Maltese society to undergo a flux of change for which educators have often complained as being too fast for them to absorb.

During 2012/2013, 4.3 per cent of total students enrolled in formal education were foreigners. This results in an increase of 0.6% over the previous year. The highest proportion of foreign students was noted in tertiary education (5.9%), while the largest increase (1.3%) occurred in post-secondary vocational institutions. The majority of foreign students were EU nationals (NSO, 2014).

Certain areas within the Maltese Islands typically tend to host higher proportions than this. A case in point is St Paul's Bay's Primary School in the northern part of the island in which more than 25% of its students are foreigners. Such numbers are bound to rise in the very near future as the Maltese population becomes more diverse.

It can therefore be safely said that the Maltese student population is becoming increasingly multicultural with emphasis on the education for diversity taking its toll in a number of initiatives by the Maltese Government in an attempt to address diversity challenges arising from the social interactions between Maltese and foreign students. The increasing diversity of students in Maltese classrooms can be termed to be a two pronged situation. On one side it presented itself as an opportunity for Maltese students to weave new relationships arising from cultural interactions while on the others it has presented new and unprecedented challenges for educators who are clearly striving to equity education for all students under their care.

Issues of race, gender, ethnicity, differing academic abilities, linguistic diversity, socioeconomic statuses, family structures and a multitude of other factors come into play when teachers attempt to plan their journey into the intricacies of cultural complexities – hence the necessity to engage in deep reflection to be able to embark all kids on board.   According to Congress and Lynne (1994), the variety of sociocultural groups is leading to feelings of insecurity, difficulty in social identity, sadness and feelings of alienation. The NAEYC (1996) further points out that children are struggling to adapt to multiple languages, uphold their traditions and foster attitudes which are concomitant with family culture.

Teachers note that every cultural group has different patterns Each sociocultural group has different patterns of behaviour, thinking, values, ideas, and symbols which are transmitted from generation to generation through culture (NCSS, 1992).

When these patterns are brought in close proximity with each other some difficulties in inter-group interaction might arise. Understanding and working upon such differences will serve as a springboard for both pre-service and in-service teachers to embark on culturally mediated processes aimed at proliferating the principles of multicultural education.

DEFINITIONS AND PRINCIPLES OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Banks (1995, p.3) eloquently states that "a major goal of multicultural education is to reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality". Hence Multicultural education is an equity philosophy geared towards helping students from different backgrounds to get along better together, to feel positive about themselves and others and feel enriched by each other's contribution to their immediate classroom environment.

Manning and Baruth (1996) focus on learners and their quest towards common democratic values the state that multicultural education

> is designed to teach learners to recognize, accept, and appreciate cultural, ethnic, social class, religious, and gender differences and to instill in learners during these crucial developmental years a sense of responsibility and a commitment to work toward the democratic ideals of justice, equality, and democracy (p. 3).

Baker (1994) further insists that understanding is crucial when studying diversity. Educators need to shed off stereotypes upon particular cultural groups so that they could better appreciate, embrace, trust and feel confident with the cultural diversity among them.

Gordon and Roberts (1991) adopted a more pragmatic stance in their understanding of Multicultural diversity in the classroom. They enacted a series of principles which are productive both for teachers and for students in their daily interaction in the classroom. The principles are as follows:

1. Content taught in the classroom should be inclusive of cultures and based on the latest body of academic research. Lessons need to be inclusive of the multicultural "weight" and also of divergent and opposing opinions.
2. Content taught in the classroom needs to be clearly set around a context of space, time and location which is conducive to the learning needs of the students
3. Multicultural perspectives need to be evident across all areas of the curriculum.
4. Content matter needs to be delivered as "socially constructed" rather than as an absolute truth, as there are different "truths" which need to be explored.
5. All students carry a bag of cultural wealth in the classrooms. Hence teaching of subjects needs to be scaffolded on the experience and knowledge which is already present in the classroom.
6. Different pedagogies should be enacted in the classroom based taking note of the different learning styles of the students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of paper is to study the understanding of Diversity and Multicultural Education as perceived by four Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) within their first two years of their teaching experience. The objective of the study is to delve in teachers' beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and skills involved in their everyday practice of the principles of diversity in their lesson preparation, during classroom duties and after school hours. This study aims to examine critical epistemological moments during teachers' day to day experiences with a focus on "How do Newly Qualified Teachers perceive multicultural education in their everyday practise?, How do they apply the principles of Multicultural Education? and What do they think is needed to encourage educational stakeholders to adhere to and implement these principles?"

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The study employs the social constructivist body of knowledge as the framework upon which findings and analysis are interpreted. Social constructivism (developed by Vygotski, 1978) is based on interpretation where knowledge is generated through involvement with content instead of imitation or repetition (Kroll & LaBoskey, 1996).

It affirms that knowledge therefore requires the individual to infuse past experiences, personal views and cultural background and construct an interpretation of it thus forming their own constructs as new knowledge

develops. Hence, researchers employing this approach are driven by a conscious effort to move from 'traditional, objectivist, didactic, memory-oriented transmission models' (Cannella & Reiff, 1994) to a more student-centred approach.

Also, social constructivism provided the researcher and participants an opportunity to provide 'multiple representations of reality' (Jonassen, 1994). Hence it represents the complexity of the world as seen by various subjects depending on their role as constructors of the said reality. Social constructivism also encourages thoughtful reflection on experience as seen through the lenses of participants.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

The Descriptive case study method was deemed to be most appropriate for the study. Descriptive case studies allow for information collected without changing the environment in which the study is being conducted. They allow provide opportunity to demonstrate associations or relationships between things in the environment in which research is taking place. A descriptive case study is useful to present basic and rich information in educational areas where little is known.

The interviewers are focused on each participant's perceptions and practical knowledge of diversity, including their personal beliefs, values, and knowledge regarding diversity stemming from their personal experiences in the school and the larger sociocultural context. The interviews were semi-structured in order to have conversation with participants exploring the research interests broadly. Each interview session lasted approximately one to one-and-one-half hours. The interviews were audiotaped in order to accurately record the language of the interviewees.

PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample consisting of four NQTs during the first two years of their teaching careers and working in primary education was used in the study. Maria, Christina, Bella and Ritianne* were selected on the basis of being well known strong "advocates" for multicultural and diversity education in their respective schools. They all claim that they wouldn't be able to live without teaching young kids. They also highlighted the importance of love and affection as part and parcel of the teaching process and also the importance of being able to bridge across cultures. They iterated that it is really difficult to get rid of prejudices which we might have somewhat inherited from our cultural upbringing. They also recognized the importance of respect when working with children and parents, and also recognized the need for more training in the aspects of teaching for diversity. They were especially keen in noting the recurrent and persistent need to develop multiple ways of reaching different students academically, personally and socially.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data Analysis is a process of inspecting, cleaning, transforming, and modelling data with the goal of discovering useful information, suggesting conclusions, and supporting decision-making (Wikipedia, 2015). Therefore Data Analysis attempts to make sense out of data and through deliberate processes such as consolidating, reducing, and interpreting, the researcher interprets meanings emerging during the analysis.

The four interviews were collected and transcribed. Using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative Data Analysis software, all data were analyzed looking for patterns and themes concomitant with literature on diversity and multicultural education.

Research Findings

Research Findings

This section aims to provide a deep understanding of Diversity and Multicultural Education as experienced by four NQTs in their first two years of teaching in the primary sector of Education in Malta. The themes which emerged from the discussion were 1) The need for courses with special focus on Multicultural and diversity education, 2) The importance of communicating with parents, teachers and students to understand the diverse needs of the students, 3) the importance of researching and reading on topics related to the education of students from different cultures, equity, gender issues, fairness, race and democratization, and 4) the set up of a unit made up of teachers, educators and students which serves as a consultative committee whenever concerns arise on diversity and multicultural education; and 5) the importance of field experiences in teacher preparation programs.

1) The need for courses with special focus on Multicultural and diversity education.

Bella strongly beliefs that the local authorities need to give more attention to diversity and multicultural education. She eloquently states that educators still think of diversity and multicultural education as an "additional burden" to the curriculum. She said that most teachers feel that diversity is more about "preparing

more and more to meet the diverse needs of pupils". This is certainly not in in line with the notion put forward by Banks that multicultural education is about 'reform (ing) the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality'. Bella insists that courses need to gear both teachers and parents to understand the true meaning of multicultural and diversity education. Bella's attitudes and perceptions on Multicultural education were mirrored by Christina who added that teaching for diversity poses serious challenges for educators as they need to further enhance their preparation but would mostly need to change their whole philosophy of teaching. Maria and Ritianne stressed the need for a more practical approach to the teaching for diversity. She simply feels that not enough is being done to help parents, administrators and teachers to help them prepare for diversity. She recounts that the training she has received consisted in dealing with the basic issues of identity, self respect, self-awareness, dealing with prejudices and racism which, in the way she views things, is not enough and is devoid of the true meaning of multicultural education.

2) The importance of communicating with parents, teachers and students to understand the diverse needs of the students.

Maria was in full agreement with Ritianne's assertions and stressed on the importance of providing a 'fair voice' to each and every student. She points out that for a classroom to be truly inclusive of all cultures care needs to be taken to establish safe communication patterns and trusting atmosphere among all stakeholders in education. Communicating with parents is an essential pre-requisite for cultural inclusivity to be fostered. According to Christina if students, parents and teachers feel safe only if they "gang only with those of similar cultures" how can the principles of multicultural and inclusive education be put onto practice. She said that in these first two years of teaching she had to research all about traditions, holidays and costumes. Bella iterated that she had to learn about Kwanza and the Diwali festival and the "red tape" she had to face to convince the school administration to celebrate the festivals in her classroom. Ultimately she has done so in a discrete manner. This means that she was able to deliver content in a 'socially constructed' (Gordon & Roberts, 1991) manner, portraying different rather than as an absolute realities of the same event.

3) the importance of researching and reading on topics related to the education of students from different cultures, equity, gender issues, fairness, race and democratization.

Maria insisted that the way we (as Maltese) look at democracy in itself needs to be redefined to include multiple perspectives. According to Maria it is not enough to work hard in schools. It is society at large which needs to change attitudes to include other cultures. On similar lines Bella claims that when she thinks about *Diversity and Multicultural education* the first thoughts which spring up are fairness and equity. Being a reflective practitioner, i.e. "actively taking deliberate time to think and reflect on the lessons practical and inherent implications on fairness and equality should be the hallmark of every practitioner in the classroom" (Bella's own words). This is concomitant Manning and Baruth (1996) stress on democratic values 'teach learners to recognize, accept, and appreciate cultural, ethnic, social class, religious, and gender differences and to instill in learners...a commitment to work toward the democratic ideals of justice, equality, and democracy' (p. 3).

Christina commented that she feels surprised that notwithstanding the fact that schools are nowadays more exposed to multiethnicity, such exposure is only narrowly viewed by teachers and is frequently governed by misconceptions and misattributions. She believes that such misattributions are the root cause for unfairness and racism in classrooms and schools.

4) the set up of a unit made up of teachers, educators and students which serves as a consultative committee whenever concerns arise on diversity and multicultural education arises.

Both Bella and Maria insist that not enough is being done to promote the principles of multicultural and diversity education. Also according to Christina teachers seem to be in an unwitting process to impose their own culture onto their students. This seems to suggest concordance with NAEYC (1996) with points out that children are struggling to adapt to multiple languages, uphold their traditions and foster attitudes which are concomitant with family culture. According to these three teachers there has to be a unit within the Educational Directorate in Malta which promotes the principles of multicultural and diversity education. Ritianne also adds such a unit would assist in building expertise and knowledge on diversity education and set benchmarks on teachers as to skills, knowledge and aptitudes necessary to foster a truly inclusive multicultural community in the classroom. It would assist in the understanding of the cultural values to which various ethnic groups adhere to. A unit set up for the purpose of multicultural inclusion would provide scholarship towards the understanding of cultures. Support of media such as podcasts and DVDs teachers would be able to scaffold knowledge and include in lessons planning and execution. Ritianne also insisted that the input of multiethnic parents in the

classroom should never be underestimated as parents possess a baggage of ethnic wealth which is essential to our understanding of multicultural education.

5) *The importance of field experiences in teacher preparation programs.*
All four NQTs stressed the importance of student teachers being given the opportunity to work with students of multicultural origin during the initial years of teacher preparation programs. They stressed that knowledge and awareness about multicultural education on its own is not sufficient but field practices are needed. They concur that real teaching opportunities are of paramount importance if a student teacher is to develop in depth awareness about diversity in the classroom. By being placed in the reality of teaching a multicultural class, they will have the opportunity to experiment different techniques derived from academic literature. Capella-Santana (2003) argues that field experiences have the power to transform teaching practices while Philips (2003) notes that such transformations require continuous reflections and not "one workshop formats" or "one time lectures" (p.181).

CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD
The convenience sample of four newly qualified teachers provided the advantage of indepth scholarship on the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and skills sets necessary for teachers to teach in a multicultural context. The disadvantage is that findings cannot be generalized as representative of the whole population of NQTs. The interpretation of results does not, in any way construe that efforts are not being sustained in assisting teachers to develop pedagogies consistent with the principles of multicultural education.

The Social Constructivist Philosophy allowed the researcher to engage in thoughtful reflection on the experiences as seen through the lenses of the participants. It is clear that today's classrooms are rich in cultural diversity and this is a factor which needs to be incorporate in the everyday planning of teachers and all stakeholders involved in the educational experiences of our students.

In order to fully embrace multicultural education certain subjects taught in our classrooms need to be looked upon from diverse perspectives. For example social studies needs to be revisited to include multiple perspectives. We are all aware that cultural and historical facts have their own twists and turns and there is no unique set of events which shapes behaviours and understanding. Thus students will be exposed to diverse perspectives liberating them from feelings of cultural superiority or inferiority.

When topics such as traditions, festivities and normative behaviours are discussed these should be introduced in comparative and open manner so that students can learn and appreciate similarities and differences among various cultural groups. By becoming knowledgable about particular ethnic groups, students will be able to create and interact into a climate of mutual sharing and a spirit of rich and peaceful co-existance.

Communication within the school environment needs to be enhanced through the use of symbols from the various ethnic groups present in the school. For example signposts around the school need to be printed in different languages – a clear indication of a sense of equality in language and expression. Students are more likely to engage in learning when they feel accepted and valued by their surrounding environment.

Group-work in the classroom should have the deliberate aim to include as many perspectives as possible whilst providing opportunities for students to establish positive interpersonal relations with all their class peers.
Teachers need to be trained to look beyond what is depicted in books and elicit from students the hidden cultural heritage which is present in the classroom. Such enrichment needs to be further enhanced through the involvement of parents, Senior Management Teams and the community at large. This sharing of cultural heritage may be pursued through a variety of means namely auditory, visual, kinaesthetic, experiential and through interaction with participants. Pedagogies need to be developed keeping the tenants of Multicultural education as the primary focus.

Malta is rich in its historical and cultural heritage. This should provide scope and opportunity for parents, especially those who do not come from the dominant culture, to be more participative in field trips which complement classroom activities insofar as they can contribute a diverse perspective to the experiences enjoyed by their children. Such field trips include but not limited to museums, outdoor playing areas, historical places, monumental sites etc.

Finally the set up of a unit within the education division in Malta needs to be set up with sole aim of supporting initiatives aimed at developing pedagogies which are inclusive of different cultures. Teachers need to read academic literature with emphasis on Multicultural Education in order to be able to expand their knowledge and

be able to transmit positive attitudes, extensively to acquire knowledge about ethnic diversity. Bella, Ritianne, Christina and Maria are excellent examples on whom to build diverse learning communities. With the help of students and their families, they managed to build a knowledge based community by collecting books, videos, newspapers, magazines, regalia, and cultural artefacts. This is helping students and their families to expand their knowledge on the different ethnic groups present in their classrooms, with positive impacts being observed in the whole school community and beyond.

* Not their real names

REFERENCES

Baker, G. C. (1994). Teaching children to respect diversity. *Childhood Education, 71*(1), 33-35

Banks, J. A. (1995). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions, and practice. In J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee Banks(Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 3-24). New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan.

Cannella, G. S., & Reiff, J. C. (1994). Individual constructivist teacher education: Teachers as empowered learners. *Teacher Education Quarterly 21*(3), 27-38. EJ 498 429

Capella-Santana, N. (2003). Voices of teacher candidates: Positive changes in multicultural attitudes and knowledge. *The Journal of Educational Research, 96*(3), 182-190.

Congress, E. P., & Lynne, M. (1994). Group work programs in public schools: Ethical dilemmas and cultural diversity. *Social Work in Education, 16*(2), 107-114.

Gordon, E., & Roberts, F. (1991). Report of social studies syllabus review and development committee. Albany, NY: The State Education Department and the University of the State of New York..

Jonassen, D. H. (1994). Objectivism versus constructivism: Do we need a new philosophical paradigm? *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 39(3), 5-14

Kroll, L. R. & LaBosky, V. K. (1996). Practicing what we preach: Constructivism in a teacher education program. *Action in teacher education,* 18(2), 63-72. EJ 536 947

Manning, M. L., & Baruth, L. G. (1996). *Multicultural education of children and adolescents.*Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (1996). NAEYC position statement: Responding to linguistic and cultural diversity—Recommendations for effective early childhood education. *Young Children,* 4-12.

National Council for the Social Studies. (1992). Curriculum guidelines for multicultural education. *Social Education*, 274-294.

National Statistics Office (2014), Student Enrolment 2012/2013, News Release, Available from file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Owner/Desktop/News2015_045.pdf on 25th September 2015.

Phillips, C. B. (2003). Preparing teachers to use their voices for change. In C. Copple (Ed.), *A world difference: Readings on teaching young children in a diverse society* (pp. 179-184). Washington, DC: National Association for Education of Young Children.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society*. London: Harvard University Press.

Office of Human Research Protections (2013). *Human Subject Research*. Retrieved from https://www.umass.edu/research/human-research-protection-office-hrpo on 5th September 2015.

Wikipedia (2015). *Data Analysis*, Retreived from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Data_analysis on 15th September 2015.