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The Significance of Intercultural Education in Fostering Peacebuilding

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Schools must ensure that students acquire the essential skills and knowledge necessary for effective participation in democratic and pluralistic communities characterised by cultural diversity. This includes the ability to understand, respect, and embrace differences based on race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, skin colour, language, economic status, gender, and skills. Using a narrative review, this paper seeks to investigate the importance of intercultural education in fostering social harmony and peace-building. The research suggests that in order to achieve the goals of intercultural and peace education, democratic societies must ensure that individuals from all backgrounds can fully exercise their rights and freedoms and have equal opportunities to actively and successfully participate in all activities. The ideas outlined in this study may enhance teachers' consciousness of the necessity and their ability to promote intercultural and peace education in their classrooms.

Keywords: intercultural education, peacebuilding, cultural diversity, harmony, classroom

Introduction

Changes in the world caused by globalization and population movements significantly impact education worldwide (Friedman, 2005). They have increased racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity in the U.S. and in schools around the world (Banks et al., 2007). In light of globalisation, economic competition, and the expanding digital world (Mahiri, 2005), as well as wars, ethnocentrism, intolerance, and other forms of conflict around the world, it appears vital to reconsider intercultural education.

Intercultural education aims to promote respect, peace, harmony, tolerance, and acceptance for individuals from diverse cultural origins while eliminating all forms of discrimination, xenophobia, racism, and segregation. Moreover, instead of merely conveying cultural know-

ledge, intercultural education strives to enhance cultural pluralism and foster acknowledgement of the inherent value of every person, irrespective of their ethnic background, physical appearance, or perspective on the world (Perotti, 1995). This educational approach promotes recognising and respecting each individual's inherent worth, cultivating harmony, cooperation, cultural cohesion, and peace. Therefore, the goals of intercultural education are:

- a) to create an environment conducive to pluralism in society by raising awareness of one's own cultural background and by making children aware of the existence of alternative behaviours and value systems;
- b) to encourage children to develop a sense of appreciation and understanding of different lifestyles in order to promote mutual respect among individuals;
- c) encourage a commitment to promoting equality by empowering children to make informed decisions and participate in actions that challenge discrimination and bias, and
- d) to recognise and value similarities and differences in values by providing all children with opportunities to express their own perspectives and share their cultural background and historical heritage (Gošović et al., 2012).

Intercultural education involves a wide range of individuals, such as students, teachers, adolescents, exchange students as well as other students from abroad, educational management, and policymakers, as it emphasizes the significance of the human being. It transcends geographical, racial, ethnic, religious, and national boundaries without requiring the assimilation of civilizations or the substitution of one culture for another. Further, it entails the ability to actively participate in diverse cognitive processes, which requires a change of mindset and advancement toward a higher stage or manifestation (Gošović et al., 2012). It is founded on the principle of attaining a fair, empathetic, and peaceful society in which prejudice, isolation, segregation, racial bias, and discrimination are eliminated.

Building a community of peace has always been of high importance. However, in the digital age, where positive or negative information spreads quickly within the public sphere, it is more important than ever to educate young people not to offend others and to respect all kinds of diversity. Hence, educational institutions have a crucial role in fostering inclusive communities where the dignity of all individuals, regardless of their differences, is upheld and acknowledged and where everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. Therefore, the study aims to explore the importance of peacebuilding through intercultural education using the method of narrative review. The ideas presented in this study may heighten teachers' awareness of the need to improve intercultural and peacebuilding education in their classrooms.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Intercultural Education

To promote harmony and peace, educational practices should strive for educational equality and fair treatment of all people, regardless of cultural differences. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, various international documents have been adopted to advocate for and require equality while condemning and preventing all types of intolerance, discrimination, segregation, xenophobia, sexism, and racism in education. Most of these documents were created by international organizations such as the United Nations, UNESCO, OSCE, and the Council of Europe. However, teachers usually need more knowledge or awareness of these topics, leading to situations where individuals from different backgrounds experience isolation and abuse in schools. Consequently, this might lead to many forms of bigotry and conflicts.

Intercultural education is the activity through which “people become aware of other ways of thinking, living or behaving and how they perceive their experiences with others” (Merino & Avello, 2014, p. 285). It prepares students for adequate communication, especially in conflict situations in which relationships do not develop automatically (Perotti, 1995). According to Piršl (2002), being interculturally educated means communicating with and listening to the “other”, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, religion, and philosophy of life, and educating oneself in the direction of accepting the “other” as a person and granting them the same dignity that we grant ourselves. Perotti (1995) pointed out that intercultural education is characterized by the formation of attitudes, skills, emotions, and behaviours necessary for interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It emphasizes the importance of quality communication and active listening in fostering understanding and mutual respect (Bećirović et al., 2019).

According to the Council of Europe, three key elements determine intercultural education: the role and responsibility of school, history and identity, and the religious or spiritual dimension of a multicultural society (Maksimović, 2005). Banks (1999) argues that multicultural education comprises at least three factors: an idea or concept, an educated reform movement, and a process. Multicultural education incorporates the idea that all students should have equal opportunities to learn and succeed regardless of their gender, skin colour, social class, religion, ethnicity, race, or any other cultural specificity (Bećirović, 2023). Furthermore, multicultural education is also a reform movement, as it seeks to transform schools and other educational institutions so that all students from all backgrounds, races, and cultural groups have an equal chance to succeed (Gošović et al., 2012). It involves far-reaching changes in the school and educational environment and is not limited to changes in the curriculum (Perotti, 1995). Multicultural education is a process whose goal will never be fully achieved because equality in education, freedom, and fairness are ideals that people constantly strive for but can never fully realise (Banks, 1999).

Bennet’s (1993) model of intercultural sensitivity significantly contributes to the theory of intercultural education. He proposed a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity that outlines the different stages that individuals and societies go through when they encounter

challenges in interacting with different cultures. The model suggests that individuals may be distinguished based on their ability to recognise and accept cultural differences. The progression towards a more refined understanding and treatment of cultural differences involves a transition from a stage of denial of the existence of differences, characterized by extreme ethnocentrism, to a stage of recognition and acceptance of cultural differences, called ethno-relativism. Bennett (1993) identifies three primary phases of ethnocentrism: denial, defence, and minimisation. Three phases of ethnorelativism are acceptance, adaptation, and integration, each containing multiple intermediate stages of development. Bennett (1993) warns that many institutions and organisations mistakenly view minimisation as the ultimate goal in the progression of intercultural sensitivity, intending to foster a global community in which individuals universally accept identical values and possess a unique foundation of understanding (Mrše et al., 2007). However, it is problematic that the ideas of universal values are usually based on their own value system.

Bennett's (1993) model of intercultural sensitivity is complemented by Bank's (1999) dimensions of multicultural education, which significantly contribute to the theory of intercultural education. These dimensions provide teachers with guidelines on school reforms to effectively implement multicultural education. By incorporating these dimensions, teachers can promote social harmony and peace. These dimensions include: a) the integration of content that involves the extension of subject matter through examples from different cultures used by the teacher, b) the process of knowledge construction, in which teachers should help students understand, explore, and determine how cultural assumptions, perspectives, and biases affect the way knowledge is constructed, c) the reduction of prejudice through this dimension, which focuses on the characteristics of students' racist attitudes and how they can be changed through teaching methods and materials, d) a pedagogy of equity that requires the adaption of teaching methods that will enable academic success for students of different ethnicities, cultures, genders, and social classes; e) the reconsideration of activities such as grouping and labelling, participation in sports, and student-teacher interactions in order to create a school culture that empowers students of all ethnicities and genders (Banks, 1999).

Intercultural Identity and Competencies in Peace Promotion

Establishing appropriate communication and collaboration with culturally diverse individuals and groups is essential to not only establish harmony and peace but also to be productive and effective in the increasingly interconnected world. Therefore, developing intercultural competencies is crucial for enhancing intercultural effectiveness, which can lead to peace-building as well as more active, productive, and efficient engagement in various activities. Intercultural competence is the ability to analyse, understand, and adapt to cultural differences. Johnson et al. (2006) defined intercultural competence as “an individual’s effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes in order to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad” (p. 530). Thus, young people need to be trained to participate actively and effectively in increasingly

diverse societies in the 21st century, with educational systems playing an essential role (Polz & Bećirović, 2022). This process involves examining and understanding one's own cultural identity and gaining knowledge about people from various cultural origins (Gošović et al., 2012).

Education is crucial in promoting self-awareness and a genuine sense of identity, which can result in acknowledging, respecting, and embracing cultural variety (Perotti, 1995). Intercultural education can only be successful when individuals or groups have the full freedom to affirm their cultural identities (Perotti, 1995).

Furthermore, in order to establish and develop positive and effective interpersonal relationships between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, it is necessary to develop intercultural identities in students, which is reflected in: a) the acceptance of existing and new cultural elements; b) increasing the breadth and depth of vision; c) greater self-understanding, self-acceptance and self-confidence; d) increased openness and flexibility; and e) increased creativity that enables facing of new challenges (Kim, 1991).

Research findings strongly indicate that educational practices play a pivotal role in reducing stereotypes and enhancing intercultural sensitivity, fostering knowledge about different cultures and the ability to communicate effectively with people from diverse backgrounds (King et al., 2013). Student interactions are the foundation of intercultural education, as students are able to recognize and identify both the similarities and differences between people when interacting with others (Piršl, 2002). Further, social interactions shape both individual and group identities, and they gradually transform over time. Perotti (1995) argues that restricting young people to a single identity will have serious negative consequences. In addition, when working with students, teachers should keep in mind that young people often try to create identities as others see them (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2003). However, they sometimes create opposing identities to resist an inferior status created by others and find alternative solutions to improve their position (Carter, 2005). These facts should be taken into account, especially when dealing with students of cultural minorities. People of cultural minorities need to be educated and empowered to be active and effective citizens in society without alienating them from their own culture, language, etc. (Wong Fillmore, 2005).

According to Reilly (n.d.) the following skills are required for peacebuilding:

- communication skills of active listening and assertive speaking, expressing feelings (giving feedback without blaming);
- cooperative problem-solving, including methods such as brainstorming and consensus building; nonviolent resistance;
- cultural awareness and empathy; handling conflict through negotiation, mediation and facilitation; assertiveness and refusal skills;
- empathy; cooperation and teamwork; advocacy skills;
- internal control improvement skills;

- self-awareness, self-esteem and confidence-building skills; and
- emotional and stress management skills.

Although these competencies are important for peace development and contribute to the promotion of peace, from the perspective of youth and education systems, the following competencies of teachers are essential for the promotion of intercultural competencies and peace development:

- the ability to adapt and encourage intercultural attitudes, skills and understanding of different cultures;
- the ability to encourage education for democratic coexistence;
- the ability to promote universal human rights regardless of differences such as religion, race, gender and nation; the ability to foster solidarity with others and those who are different;
- the ability to encourage dialogue with members of other cultures, ethnicities, religions and beliefs, and
- the ability to encourage viewing diversity as an asset rather than a problem.

Thus, there is a need to encourage the development of such competencies through education, as collaboration with people from different cultures has become necessary (Deardorff, 2004).

How to Enhance Intercultural and Peace Education

Interculturalism is based on the idea of a better and more humane society and a future in which racism, intolerance, and domination of man over man will be eliminated (Gošović et al., 2012). However, intercultural education cannot and must not remain an abstract fact; rather, it should arise from the social context of a particular society (Perotti, 1995). Moreover, it would be a mistake to believe that intercultural and peace education should be limited to teaching content or understood as a primary means of developing intercultural sensitivity and competencies and enhancing peace education. In that case, many teachers whose teaching fields and subjects are not social sciences and humanities would have the right to say that other teachers must develop intercultural competencies and sensitivity and improve the understanding of those who are culturally different. Therefore, more than learning about different cultures is needed to encourage acceptance, understanding, and peacebuilding. Additionally, intercultural education and peacebuilding cannot only be based on supporting or fostering an understanding of cultural differences; rather, they must actively explore ways to assist the development of diverse cultures (Bećirović & Brdarević-Čeljo, 2018).

An intercultural approach is a methodology that can incorporate various disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, history, politics, and culture (Gošović et al.,

2012), to develop a culture of peace and respect for culturally diverse people. In primary and secondary education, there is no need for a specific course dedicated to intercultural studies. Instead, an intercultural approach can be provided through various school subjects and topics.

The cultural worlds that both young and older people must become acquainted with are not immutable entities, but living organisms equipped with the potential to adapt and continuously renew themselves (Perotti, 1995). Intercultural education will not be successful if students only sit at their desks and listen to the lecturers. Rather, it is necessary to organise various forms of effective communication and cooperation (Batelaan & Coomans, 1999). Adequate work with culturally diverse students in pairs and groups can significantly contribute to the development of intercultural sensitivity and the promotion of intercultural understanding and harmony. Furthermore, relationship education cannot be completely put into effect in a confined classroom context between students and instructors (Sinanovic & Bećirović, 2016). Moreover, schools can have a more significant influence on developing intercultural competencies and promoting peace if they collaborate with a wide range of external partners. Thus, ensuring adequate cooperation with various partners and stakeholders such as parents, governmental institutions, youth associations, organisations and movements in joint projects and developing intercultural sensitivity and competencies is necessary. Therefore, appropriate communication and cooperation are crucial for the development of intercultural competencies and peacebuilding.

Intercultural education, in addition to accepting, respecting and promoting cultural differences, must enable young people to act in moments when human rights are threatened and enable them to fight against all forms of discrimination, racism, segregation, xenophobia, and isolation (Bećirović, 2012). The reference that helps to relate to people who are culturally different and that unambiguously recall everyone being equal before the law is: "without discrimination based on sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or another opinion, national or social origin, membership of a national minority, property, birth or other status" (Article 14 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Council of Europe, 1950).

Finally, prejudices, racism, segregation, sexism and discrimination against culturally diverse individuals, which lead to bigotry and conflicts, will always exist to some extent, regardless of the effort investment. When unfair treatment towards one group is eliminated, it appears in relation to another or in a similar or new form. Therefore, the goals of intercultural education can only be achieved partially. It is necessary to continuously work to increase equality, respect, and acceptance of others and those who are culturally different. This is especially crucial in the contemporary digital era as students dedicate a significant amount of time to online activities, including engaging in social networks and various platforms where various sorts of disrespect and abuse of culturally diverse individuals frequently occur. Hence, it is imperative to consistently focus on cultivating intercultural sensitivity and competencies in students and to promote and enhance peacebuilding competencies in both face-to-face and online environments.

Conclusion

International institutions prioritise education pertaining to human rights, equitable access to education and success, as well as cultural diversity and peacebuilding. To promote harmony and peace, educational practices should strive for educational equity and fair treatment of all people, regardless of cultural differences. Many international documents have been adopted to advocate for and require equality while condemning and preventing all types of intolerance, discrimination, segregation, xenophobia, sexism, and racism in education. Given the instances of persons from diverse backgrounds facing isolation and abuse in schools, teachers must possess a greater understanding and awareness of these issues to deal with them effectively. Otherwise, such situations may lead to many forms of bigotry and conflicts.

Intercultural education is characterised by cultivating the attitudes, skills, emotions and behaviours necessary to interact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds appropriately. It emphasises the importance of quality communication and active listening in fostering understanding, mutual respect and harmony. It prepares students for appropriate communication, especially in conflict situations in which relationships do not develop automatically.

Intercultural education enables students to form adequate and effective relationships with culturally diverse people and broaden their horizons. Enhancing intercultural understanding, attitudes, sensitivities, skills, competencies, and knowledge is crucial for harmony and peacebuilding. Further, to achieve genuine intercultural education and promote peace, it is essential to cultivate empathy and collaboration actively.

Intercultural competencies are critical in today's globalised society since they are key prerequisites for social harmony, successful communication, and collaboration. As communication through modern technology is widespread, people constantly experience an intercultural environment, and thus, acquiring intercultural competencies is vital for effective interactions and successful collaboration. Teachers should perform various activities in order to develop intercultural and peacebuilding competencies among students. Offering intercultural content, organising pair and group work, and establishing collaboration with various stakeholders and partners are some strategies that may enhance intercultural and peacebuilding competencies.

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