

**TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF MULTICULTURALISM FOR POSITIVE  
LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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**Abstract**

*The aim of this study is explore the teachers' understanding of their students' social background, their ethnic diversity and cultural knowledge for providing positive learning impact in their multicultural classrooms. Multicultural education is a philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity as acknowledged in various Human Rights adopted by the United Nations. This study affirms the need to prepare students for their responsibilities in an interdependent world. The data was collected by taking unstructured interviews of the teachers. The primary findings shows interesting facts that if teachers are made aware of cultural diversities they tend to take care of the feelings of various diverse needs of the students present in their class . Though teachers are majorly not aware of various their teaching techniques, interaction, communication and authentic activities but were open to adapt and enhance their teaching strategies if they were provided to opportunity to learn to handle diversity in the classrooms. However the study concludes that in practical situation though the multi-cultural classroom provides an opportunity for students from different cultures to bring their enormous range of experiences, knowledge, perspectives and insights to the learning – if the process is enabled but it is not always easy to do.*



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Multiculturalism can be defined as, “A philosophical position and movement that deems that the gender, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of a pluralistic society should be reflected in all of the institutionalized structures of educational institutions, including the staff, the norms, and values, the curriculum, and the student body” (Banks & Banks, 1997, p. 435). Multicultural education is a concept that is made up of four different components: content integration (the knowledge construction process), prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure

The role of multicultural education not only educates children about the experiences and histories of students of color but it also encourages students to recognize the social injustices that racial and ethnic minorities face (De La Torre, 1996; Simonson, 1995; Bigelow, 1999). Sleeter & Grant, 1987 believed that multicultural education empowers students to change the social inequalities that exist within society. The role of teachers is more than to teach children the basic reading, writing, and comprehension skills. Teachers should realized that they have the power to reap help and enhance child to accomplish his educational performance. Teachers also should understand that they have the responsibility to use children’s cultures and experiences as vehicles for learning and enhancing their personalities in order to build respect for themselves and respect for others. Many studies on multiculturalism have concluded that teachers who value multiculturalism empower students to develop love and respect themselves, love, respect and compassion for others, and become motivated to change social injustice.

### **Research design**

Qualitative data was collected via ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews of the total of ten teachers of government schools and private schools of lucknow city. The selection of teachers was purposive and it was tried to select few teachers who were themselves from different diversified culture. The following research question was the driver for the overall study:

How do teachers perceive and respond to cultural differences in multicultural classrooms?

### **Data collection**

Teachers in the study were interviewed individually on one occasion for a period of 25–30 minutes, face to face, using semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. Prolonged, in-depth conversation provided rich data.. The semi-structured nature of questions also allowed the interviewer to modify questions as she went along. Field notes were written up over the duration of the study; these described and reflected upon lessons observed.

The questions asked were what multiculturalism meant to the teachers?, How have they have been able to built up their knowledge/perceptions of cultural diversity in society? What are the sources of these perceptions? How do they feel about the culturally diverse children in their classroom? What do they thought on n the ‘issues’ they encounter teaching in a multicultural classroom? And how and with what pedagogy the multicultural students learn best?

### **Findings.**

The teachers have varied views on cultural diversity and they feel it as a challenge in their classes. They believed that they could be benefit if they are made more oriented by pursuing small courses on social, economical, historical, religious issues as many times due to the non exposures of the issues they tend to form preset perceptions and knowingly and unknowingly they start to address the issues of multiculturalism in preset fashion. They agreed that they need to understand the dynamic nature of various cultures in order to understand the learners from various cultural backgrounds. The demand of refinement of skills to teach and reflect is present and they believed that the teacher training courses should refine the need of embedding the issues like understanding personal identity, social and moral values, cultural knowledge in the curriculum so that they get oriented towards multiculturalism even before they start their jobs .This will definitely help to increase the understanding of their culturally diverse classrooms and they will hence forth not react but respond intelligently to its needs.

The need of providing support by government and private education providers was also realized. Teachers in this present study were making the best of limited resources but on many occasions this proved to be inadequate and stressful for both teachers and children.. Opportunities for better informed practitioners to engage in dialogue with students and their families about teacher and learner expectations need to be formally established. One way to achieve this might be through learning journals where students, teachers and parents record their questions, impressions and anxieties with the aid of a translator. Alternatively, regular face-to-face meetings between the three parties may be effective.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that there are instances in which children from culturally diverse backgrounds were dealt by the well-intentioned teachers, who were from diverse background themselves in some cases, to integrate the children into the dominant culture in order that they might succeed. Though they had were doing their best efforts and have good intentions, cultural diversity was celebrated in a perfunctory manner. Comments from teachers revealed their lack of

confidence and knowledge in this area. It is a paramount and vital thing to build the inclusive culture in the school and it is only possible if the teachers are well oriented, well informed and are reading and feels confident to question their own personal believes and collective reactions of the issues of cultural diversity they deal in their classrooms and witness in their schools and the society.. Increased multicultural sensitivity and awareness on the part teachers could facilitate confidence and a more symmetrical dialogue between families and educators. India has a culturally diverse population and intercultural competence is not a luxury but a necessity.

It is not only the action and responses of the teachers that is needed to increase the inclusivity but the primary accountability lies with the policy makers which are represented by the management of the school, government and policymakers. More dialogue, and an increased government or school response to the resourcing of schools, could lead to a greater connection between teachers and the children of culturally diverse families and hence the society in larger domain. This is the only way to foster wider perspectives and context-appropriate practices. As Kofi Annan said, ‘Diversity is not only the basis for the dialogue among civilizations, but also the reality that makes dialogue necessary’ (Annan, 2000).

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