

Training in Learning Communities

UNIT 5



MULTICULTURALISM IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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UNIT 5

MULTICULTURALISM IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Cultural diversity is firmly in existence in twenty-first century society. However, current society brings with it centuries of racism and cultural conflict. This makes it difficult to both free those being discriminated against and to create a better society for everyone. It is essential to start cultivating the understanding and harmony between cultures that we wish to exist in the future in schools and institutions and in the day-to-day life of the classroom.

In this unit, overcoming the various forms of racism is examined, as is how fostering multicultural coexistence in Learning Communities can assist with this objective. In the first section, the evolution of racism is detailed and the theoretical and practical implications of current forms of racism for the classroom are addressed in relation to the wider field of education. In the second section, a communicative view of multicultural coexistence is proposed for cultivating equality in differences. In the final section, the link is drawn between cultural diversity and educational excellence.

5.1. Forms of racism in coexistence

Certain ethnic groups are commonly subject to negative stereotyping, prejudice and resulting anxiety in all areas of society including the education system. To give one example, the Roma population has experienced persecution such as the *prorrajmos* holocaust and forced sterilisation as well as inequalities in lawmaking since the fifteenth century and until very recently in some countries. The Muslim community is another of the most rejected and vulnerable groups subject to racist aggression in Europe.

According to some, mixing of cultures inevitably leads to conflict and aggression. However, the root problem does not lie in contact between different cultures, or indeed in their differences, but in approaches to coexistence which inadvertently support negative attitudes towards differences. Two particular signs of racism in society and day-to-day life in education centres are outlined below.

The ethnocentric perspective and modern racism

Modern racism, normally endemic in current society, is based upon the notion of superiority of one particular race or ethnic group over others. This sense of

superiority is, in turn, often created due to perceived biological or character differences, more than any political or sociological differences. According to this form of racism, it is often the culture currently in the majority in a given place (frequently Western cultures) who are considered inherently better able to achieve educational success. To this end, if, for example, a group in the minority such as Roma are less successful in education and have a lower social status, it is decided that it is either because they are lazy or less intelligent, and not because schools are conveying and promoting lower expectations for them. Ultimately, this means that minority groups have less power in education and society as a whole.

Modern racism is derived from an ethnocentric vision of culture by the majority of institutions in the Western world. Mainstream Western culture is regarded as the model which everyone should adhere to. Absenteeism or low educational output of certain groups are considered biologically inherent or character deficits. Also, the view of the majority group is that non-majority groups should imitate or absorb the characteristics of the dominant culture if they wish to achieve educational success. Immigrants, cultural minorities and non-traditional families must behave the same as and assume the culture of the hegemonic society, excluding or annulling their cultural features including religious symbols on display or language for communication along with their original values.

Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen highlighted in his work on identity and multiculturalism the fact that certain values are wrongly considered exclusive to the Western world. For example, the idea that democracy is something occidental ignores many examples of democratic development in other parts of the world. *'Considering the question like that - focusing on the idea of 'imposition'- implies the belief that democracy belongs to the West that in fact is a completely deceitful way to understand history and contemporary possibilities for democracy.'* (2006, p.82). Sen provides many examples of democratic institutions, deliberative practice and public reasoning as well as scientific developments and many other contributions to humanity in various parts of the world both in ancient civilisations and in the world today. Modern racism is not in the past. It survives in contemporary society in the form of neo-Nazi attacks on immigrants and cultural minorities.

The argument of biological superiority remains in force and is still present within intellectual circles and debates. In Herrnstein and Murray's book *The Bell Curve* (1994) the authors partially linked intelligence to inheritance factors. Upon its publication, however, a total of eighty-one authors and academics responded with counter-arguments to aspects of their work (Jacoby & Glauber, 1995).

The ethnocentric perspective continues to be applied in the pedagogic and didactic strategies of many education systems. In particular, correcting deficits of some ethnic or cultural groups is conducted through encouraging absorption of hegemonic values. The French model, known as 'assimilation', expresses this by emphasising the adoption of the French language and culture and developing a respect for republican values as opposed to those of other cultures. This model

has a major effect on attitudes towards cultural diversity, as it fails to consider the upholding of immigrant cultural systems or their values as a possibility for improvement. Social unrest which can be generated as a result was clearly shown in the riots in France in 2005.

The relativist perspective and postmodern racism

In contrast to modern racism and its related concepts of the superiority of some cultures or ethnic groups and homogenisation, a new perspective springs forth which considers difference as its core value and which upholds the elimination of any model or universal principle. When applied to cultures it means there are no superior or inferior cultures, they are simply different. Therefore, Western cultural constructs should not be considered or imposed as being the best; rather, each culture must maintain its own cultural construct.

This defence of difference implies an essential omission: omission of equality and of the equal right to be different. Anthropologist Judith Okely (1997) proposes an alternative perspective on illiteracy in Roma as follows: '*... illiteracy of Roma people, far from being an inevitable handicap, is in many aspects an element of freedom*' (p.78). Regrettably, however, Okely (1997) omits to mention the demands of every Roma association in the world to reduce illiteracy and the dropout rate of the Roma student body.

Postmodern racism turns questions like poverty into cultural features inherent to certain groups or people, that is, socioeconomic features are regarded as a consequence of ethnicity. The level of poverty in which many Roma groups in Europe live is in reality the result of long-term social inequality and a long history of discrimination. However, illiteracy, crime and poor living conditions are often considered 'cultural' signs of this group. By emphasising the differences here, certain social inequalities are justified, as it is decided that cultures are different and that the negative situations experienced are simply a sign of the group's identity.

Also, this approach considers cultures as intrinsically homogeneous and static. Cultural definitions and labels are generated as if everybody with the same religion, country of origin or culture shares the same traditions, ways of living, values and so on. This vision does not allow for the recognition of progress made by humanity as a result of all cultures being in contact with one another. Furthermore, it does not consider intercultural dialogue as viable or feasible.

By rejecting superiority racism and modern forms of cultural assimilation, postmodern racism generates misunderstanding and in some cases is used as an educational model in favour of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism. For instance, in spite of an evergrowing number of instructors defining themselves as anti-racists who are infuriated by arguments of racial inferiority (the ethnocentric perspective), they firmly support the creation of 'special steps' for students from different ethnic

groups by arguing that they are so different that they would not benefit from a standard education. Or, they propose that Roma children should not be made to learn the same as what non-Roma children do in other centres.

Alain Touraine (2000) maintains that *'racism of cultural difference plays the same role in our culture that racism of natural inferiority played in the culture of the industrial society'* (2000, p. 164). Post-modern racism, far more prevalent and currently standardised in society, is the full complement of modern and classic racism.

5.2. The communicative perspective and equality through differences

Just as with relativism, the communicative perspective considers cultures and ethnic groups as not being better than one another, but as being different. However, the communicative perspective stresses the need for equal rights among ethnic groups as well as among various social sectors and people. Its aim is to foster social transformation towards equality and freedom. From this perspective, difference is simply a part of equality and it affords everyone the same right to live in a different way.

The communicative approach tries to achieve an egalitarian position for every individual within every ethnic group. In the education field, the recognition of difference is important when managing cultural diversity at school and equality is key in providing everyone with the opportunity to acquire skills which could enable them to overcome current social barriers. Henceforth, difference is necessary for fostering the maintenance and development of both mainstream culture and identity and, likewise, equality is necessary to prevent discrimination and social exclusion (Flecha, 1999).

Therefore, the communicative approach opposes both modern and postmodern racism. Communities must have the opportunity to learn and experience how communication between cultures improves circumstances for all and how it is possible and profitable for coexistence in a shared territory. Students should have the opportunity to consider themselves, not as better or worse, but as different; not as uniform but as equals.

The communicative perspective seeks to discover equality through differences leading to educational practices which foster equal rights and opportunities for every culture and, at the same time, dialogue and understanding between cultures. This dialogue could also take place amongst religions, if the idea that secularism being contrary to religion is overcome, and religious options are guaranteed as a personal freedom. The school does not have to identify with any particular religion; neither does the communicative perspective involve the rejection of any religion in particular.

'Multicultural secularism does not deny diversity in the name of a uniform equality, but it is based on the principle of equality in difference. ... correlates

difference to equality as an expression of the fact that everybody has the right to live differently under equal opportunities. Practical differences and religious beliefs are considered equal, regardless of the social status or the power of the people having them (Flecha, 1999).

An example of respectful consideration of cultural identity

... debates of cultural identity were present at school ... Said dialogues profited from diversity in the classrooms; as in Harvard or Wisconsin, in most of them there was a student body belonging to various cultures and, spontaneously they used to speak about it in the class. On one occasion, in the Interactive Groups, students were working on the physical description of people and practised how to describe themselves. ... One of them said, 'I want to put in my description that I am Roma.' ... Another pupil said, 'So I am going to write that I am half Roma as my mother is Roma but my father isn't.' Janna is a Moroccan girl who was listening to the conversation; she said she was Moroccan and she wanted to self-describe like that. She was quiet, thinking and then she said, 'As a matter of fact I am Catalan as well, I have been in Catalonia for many years now, so I shall write that I am fully Moroccan and fully Catalan as that is who I am.' (Racionero, Ortega, García, & Flecha, 2012, p. 145)

Next, the idea of equality through differences and the communicative perspective is considered in relation to two particular situations: the debate about the *hijab* and gathering of female Roma students.

The example of the hijab

In spite of the great diversity which exists within the Muslim community, there are still many people who regard it as backwards, sexist, fanatical or 'too different' to enable peaceful coexistence. To this end, the use of the *hijab* in public spaces in certain areas, including at school, has been debated in depth (De Botton, Puigvert, & Taleb, 2004).

From an ethnocentric perspective it is assumed that Muslim women are forced to wear a veil and that wearing one is either explicitly or implicitly a sign of female submission. This assumption is incorrect. Many Muslim women make a personal decision to wear the *hijab*, just as there are many Muslim women who have the freedom to choose to lead the kind of life they want, with or without *hijab*. From a relativist position it is said that the obligations and expectations or freedoms of other cultures and religions should not be interfered with, even in the case of wearing a *hijab* if it is seen as gender-based abuse. This position, however fails to recognise Muslim women's movements such as RAWA which fight to increase the educational and sanitary rights and so on of women in Afghanistan or the feminist

association Insha Allah in Spain which denounced a book in which gender-based abuse occurs against women within Islam. There are women who are forced to wear the *hijab* but there are also women and girls who are not allowed to wear it. Ideas of both obligation and prohibition must be rejected because such mandates promote both the sense that women lack the capacity to decide for themselves (gender inequality) and that someone else must decide for them (ethnocentric perspective). Both sexist and feminist attitudes exist in every society and are not exclusive to any culture in particular. The use of a veil affects not only the women who wear it but also everyone else because it represents a wider feminist fight for everyone to have the right to have control over their own body. If education centres foster an equality through differences and multicultural secularism, it enables every female pupil and their mothers and relatives to decide how to dress without being rejected or valued less. Many Muslim female relatives of students actively take part in Learning Communities as volunteers in Interactive Groups, Tutorials Libraries, Family Education and Mixed Committees whether or not they wear a *hijab*. Such participation in Learning Communities, on top of the added learning opportunities and skills which are contributed, demonstrates to everyone inside and outside the centre that dialogue between different cultures is possible and rewarding.



Overcoming prejudices about Muslim women

'... in the course of the literacy campaign, Roma, Arabic and local mothers share the same table to learn to read and write and those with highest knowledge help out the ones that need more support, relationships based on racist prejudices are transformed and move on to solidarity relationships. The local native mother speaks to her child about Arabic women wearing a veil, transforming the image that the child had beforehand and in dialogues with the same mother, other relatives, at school or with street friends, their negative idea of the Muslim woman wearing a veil is also changed into a strong woman who is skilful, independent, eager to learn and involved in her activity. With this new image, the said child will look differently at their Moroccan schoolmates' mothers as well as their Muslim girl classmates.' (Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha, Racionero, 2008, p. 226)

Roma Female Student meetings for Education - Drom Kotar Mestipen Roma Women's Association

Prejudice and ignorance towards Roma people, particularly Roma women, has led to the assumption that they have no interest whatsoever in studying and also that Roma men do not allow it. However, the reality once again is totally different. Every Roma social movement states the importance of education in removing themselves from a position of exclusion and entrenched discrimination in order to live and protect their cultural identity as Roma people. Likewise, there are many associations of Roma women who also have the same goal (García, Silva, Yuset & Flecha, 2009; Sánchez, Yuste, de Botton, & Kostic, 2013).

Roma female student meetings in Catalonia (Spain) are some of the most successful activities of the Drom Kotar Mestipen Roma Women's Association. The meetings create a space for dialogue in which Roma girls and women share their training experience and support each other's progress at school.

So far, about twenty meetings have been conducted in various places by Roma women's groups or a local association. Where ten to fifteen girls participated in initial meetings, in recent years over three hundred girls and women have met together, coming from different villages and small towns in order to talk, to dream and to change their lives.

Particular highlights of the above practices are sessions in which girls and Roma women who are in education at secondary level, university or in vocational or adult education participate and describe their experiences and their hopes. Their voices come from their individual circumstances combined with their strong sense of identity as Roma women. Among them are married women with children, engaged women and single women working at companies, at home or who are self-employed and they convey their conviction that education leads to an even stronger Roma identity thereby reflecting the idea of equality through difference as previously mentioned.

Roma Female Student meetings for Education Drom Kotar Mestipen Roma Women's Association¹

Some testimonies of Roma women:

Hello, my name is Sulamita. I am 14 years old. I am the youngest at home. I am studying ESO second year at the institute ... in the San Cosme district. I would like to study ESO 4th year but I believe that my ESO level is not good enough.

The fact is that many Roma children have a lower academic level and I do not know why. Are we stupid? I think that all of us have the same rights, not to be discriminated for being part of a different culture.

I would love to go to university and have the best possible education. I believe this is very important to have access to the work market and feeling fulfilled as a woman. Being a Roma woman I think that conditions for me are not the same as those for a non-Roma girl...

This opportunity to see women of different ages is an example to be followed for us to progress, the youngest.

In Learning Communities, the participation of mothers, grandmothers and other models from different cultures encourages girls and their schoolmates, to improve in their learning and to use it to strengthen their options as well as their cultural, religious, linguistic and gender identities (Sánchez, Yuste, de Botton, & Kostic, 2013).

5.3. Diversity and excellence: positive action

Fostering cultural diversity in schools is not only an ethical question and one of human rights and it not only benefits those suffering greater discrimination, it is a question of educational quality too, of academic excellence. In this section this concept is detailed, at the same time referring to examples in positive action policies of top ranking universities in the world.

Martin Luther King, back in 1963, in his famous speech 'I have a dream' raised his voice for black people and their children encouraging them not to give up until injustice against black people had been replaced by an equal, fraternal reality in all areas of society.

¹ Information extracted from the Drom Kotar Mestipen Association web site: <http://www.drom-kotar.org/>

In Europe, the *2000/78/CE Directive on equality in the treatment of employment and occupation* (European Union Council, 2000b) established the principle of equal treatment of employed people and their training regardless of their religion or thoughts, disability, sexual orientation or age. That same year, the *2000/43/CE Directive on equal treatment irrelevant of racial or ethnic origin* (European Union Council, 2000a) provided a legal tool at community level for protecting people against discrimination in employment and training, education, social security, sanitary assistance and access to goods and services. Amongst other measures, this directive gives victims of discrimination the right to act on discrimination through legal or civil channels and achieve justice.

Nevertheless, inequality continues. It is clear that to reduce inequality between groups, for example between black and white children, Roma and non-Roma people and so on, current laws against discrimination are insufficient. Neither is it sufficient that discrimination is considered a crime. It is necessary to establish rules which actively foster diversity.

Positive actions are measures which serve to assist in ending discrimination or in preventing it in the first place. Positive actions also create afresh opportunities for groups who previously have been denied access. On the one hand, positive actions mean greater equality in access to opportunities and results and on the other hand a greater recognition of cultural diversity and its benefits.

The implementation of positive action policies by highly respected international universities are examined below in terms of their success in promoting access for minority and other vulnerable groups to university education and its lecture halls. Examples of such actions include the reservation of places and flexibility in the process of student selection.

Three reasons for implementing positive actions are as follows:

- a. *Compensation for those groups which have systematically been victims of institutional discrimination.*

Positive action starts from the recognition of historical inequalities that have been reproduced through generations making equal development difficult in different fields for the people affected. These inequalities mean improved access to university takes place very slowly so that the opportunity remains very distant for families and groups who had always hoped to become university graduates.

Examples of international positive action measures include those orientated towards Roma people in Romania, 'untouchables' in India, the Afro-Brazilian population in Brazil, or the Afro-American population in the United States. These measures involve a compensatory effort against a history of discrimination which is weighed towards vulnerable groups.

- b. *Achieving social and economic educational benefits so that the existing diversity in society is guaranteed in social institutions.*

The cultural diversity of society is not reflected in many social institutions such as schools, companies, banks, and public administration where the majority is white European. Positive action intends that the diversity of society is available in all spaces to increase social cohesion and equality between different cultures. This goal cannot be achieved if people do not go to university. Certain court cases connected to positive actions have highlighted the importance of cultural diversity in firms. The Grutter v. Bollinger case in Michigan (USA) 2003 is one example. When some white students complained to the university that they were harmed by their positive action policies towards other groups, the university asked for support from various companies such as General Motors and Fortune who experienced benefit from positive action policies. Essential skills and training required by companies include the ability to relate to and work with people of different cultures and people with different ideas and viewpoints so firms require their staff to reflect current society.

- c. *Achievement of long-term social benefits to ending current discrimination*

If a society is achieved in which teachers, company managers, attorneys and so on have varying cultural backgrounds, it will also be easier to reduce discrimination and inequality at school, in the world of work, in the justice system and in public health (Xu, Fields, Laine, Veloski, Barzansky & Martini, 1997). At the same time, it will contribute to greater social cohesion and help prevent future conflict.

Therefore specific reasons exist which explain the need to go beyond suppressing certain forms of discrimination or even penalising them and actively fostering vulnerable student groups accessing university. Some measures which have been implemented in universities such as Harvard or Wisconsin Madison include:

- **Cooperation with schools and high-schools** in districts with vulnerable populations in the form of having meetings to highlight every scholarship and opportunity for study at the university. Identification of potential students also takes place at these meetings and visits to the university campus are arranged and so on.
- **Comprehensive evaluation procedures** take into account factors outside traditional academic achievement and test results which can increase access to university for minority groups. Some factors for consideration include family history and ethnic diversity. As Gary Orfield, Civil Rights Project director at the University of California/Los Angeles says: *'The most select universities in the United States employ a great variety of guidelines to admit their students including extra-curricular activities, personal circumstances, family history and*

educational level, geographical location of the family, which language they use, athletic skills, recommendation letters and other factors to achieve a student body of different races, geographical origin as well as other types of diversity. Those responsible giving access at these universities know very well that average marks and academic files only measure certain types of merit and potential and that other wider criterion are, in many cases, equally valid as indicators of each student's potential to contribute to the university community.' (Orfield & Miller, 1998)

- **Percentage plan:** This measure means that instead of allotting a number of places in the student body to those from minority or vulnerable groups, a certain number of places are available to the best students from every public institution in any state. It ensures that some students from every school, even those situated in poor districts, can actually go to university.
- A very interesting initiative is the one promoted by the **Posse Foundation**. This foundation not only ensures that pupils on the urban outskirts, from minority groups and from a low socioeconomic background can go to university, but also that they do not to give up their studies. The initiative arose as a result of the doctorate of a female student who was told, 'I would have never given up had I been there with my posse.' A 'posse' is a close group of friends. Since then, the foundation has made graduating possible for thousands of poor black students from ghetto districts who stay with their posses at university and ultimately graduate. Once again, interactions and friendship strengthen the engine which powers meaningful learning and academic success.
- Some initiatives related to enhancing **teacher diversity** in higher education include the whole university community participating in the admission process and in the hiring of faculty and administrative staff.

If the best universities in the world consider diversity as a key factor in their excellence, why should diversity in education centres be regarded as a problem? The perspective of Learning Communities overcomes modern and postmodern racism and it stands up for the equality of differences, coexistence between cultures and school success for everyone. Besides this, it actively gives multiculturalism visibility and presence. For this reason, in addition to creating opportunities for students from cultural minorities to go to university by offering them the required education, the presence of different cultures and languages is actively fostered. Roma, Moroccan, Ecuadorian, Ukrainian, Japanese families and everyone from all countries participate together in volunteering. From this equality of differences all children learn that everybody has something valuable to contribute and that school and its world belongs to every culture and that dialogue and understanding are possible. Thus it is possible to achieve Martin Luther King's dream to have a society in which everybody coexists with the equal right to be different (Flecha, Gómez & Puigvert, 2003).

To find out more:

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