

# Multicultural Education and the Holistic Transformation of School System

## მულტიკულტურული განათლება და სასკოლო სისტემის ჰოლისტური გარდაქმნა

*Davit Malazonia and Nino Chiabrishvili*

*დავით მაღაზონია და ნინო ჭიაბრიშვილი*

*Ilia State University, Georgia*

*ილიას სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, საქართველო*

---

**Résumé :** Du point de vue des objectifs de l'éducation multiculturelle, l'école est considérée comme un système social complexe qui se compose de parties et de variables liées entre elles. La transformation de l'école visant la possibilité pour tous de recevoir une éducation, est compliquée puisqu'elle sous-entend la modification de tous les composants fonctionnels de l'école et non pas d'un seul composant pris à part, ce qui touche toute la structure éducative de l'école. Dans le processus de la réformation de l'école, l'erreur essentielle que l'on observe est liée au fait que l'accent est souvent mis sur la modification d'un composant, aussi important soit-il. L'éducation multiculturelle contemporaine exige une transformation totale, holistique du système scolaire. Tous les agents/toutes les variables du système prennent part à ce processus. Ces agents créent des contextes déterminés de l'enseignement/apprentissage. Pour que l'éducation multiculturelle soit réussie, il est important de prendre en considération ces contextes – apprenant, parent, enseignant, école, société –, et de construire le processus d'enseignement/apprentissage de façon à ce qu'il reflète le rapport entre les systèmes et qu'il prenne en considération le contexte immédiat aussi bien que le contexte éloigné, ainsi que l'influence réciproque à l'intérieur de ces mêmes systèmes.

**Mots-clés:** éducation multiculturelle; processus d'enseignement/apprentissage; transformation holistique; système scolaire

**Abstract:** From the point of view of the goals of multicultural education, school is considered a complex social system, which consists of interrelated components and variables. School transformation to ensure equal educational opportunities is quite difficult to achieve, because it involves all of the major functional components of the school. This means a fundamental change of the entire educational structure. The major shortfall of school reform process is due to the fact that we usually focus on only one component of the change. Modern multicultural education requires holistic transformation in the school system. In the process all agents/variables of the system are involved. These agents form the contexts for teaching and learning. It is important for successful multicultural education that these contexts - student, parent, teacher, school, society - be taken into account and that the teaching-learning process be constructed from nearest contexts (student) to furthest contexts (society) with bi-directional influences within and between the systems.

**Keywords:** multicultural education; teaching-learning process; holistic transformation; school system



From the perspective of multicultural education and the objectives it pursues, a school is seen as a complex social system, which consists of interrelated parts and variables. Therefore, any school transformation with the purpose of providing equal opportunities to knowledge acquisition is complicated since it implies changing all basic functional school components. That means radical changes of the whole educational structure. As practice shows, the fundamental error in the process of school reformation is related to the fact that there is emphasis on changing only one important component and, as a rule, is the formalized academic programs. Though it is important, without parallel reform of the other components of the school system, it is impossible to obtain the desired result of improving the quality of multicultural education.

This paper aims to review the relation of all important components of the school system and the necessity to change them as well as propose recommendations to effectively achieve this reform. We will start by discussing the school system, taking in consideration its primary objectives and, at the same time, its agent – the student and will address other important agents such as the teacher and the parent.

## Self-concept of student

Every student comes to class with a set of behavioral properties and peculiarities that makes him or her unique and which has an impact on his or her academic

achievements. «Behavior shaping occurs on the basis of group norms... The group equips individual with the behavior models, which are necessary for adaptation<sup>1</sup>». In pursuit of a sense of belonging, students identify themselves with some groups. Duane E. Campbell proposes that students of all ages want to belong to a group, since a group is the source of motivation<sup>2</sup>.

Students may identify themselves with specific groups according to race, social class or religion. These are the categories of social construction of culture; they guarantee the sense of cultural identity. Teachers can use the information about cultural identity of students to promote academic progress and may create a teaching environment, which will recognize the cultural contribution of students.

The set of individuals' views about themselves is named self-concept or self-image<sup>3</sup>. Agents of socialization – peer groups, media, parents, teachers – all have an impact on the formation of positive or negative self-concept. Positive self-concept promotes academic progress, while unfavorable self-concept «may become the one of the toughest hurdles on the way of teaching<sup>4</sup>». These obstacles require a careful and solicitous attitude from teachers to diverse social and academic necessities.

Both the self-concept and the sense of cultural identity are developed in students step by step. «Acceptance and change of cultural identity takes place throughout the whole life according to political, economic, education and social experience<sup>5</sup>». Knowledge of self-concept and cultural identity creates the basis of how students identify themselves as they are seen by others. That is why it is important that teachers consider students as cultural beings, recognize their diversity and cultural identity. This will

---

<sup>1</sup> James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, eds., *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., New York, Wiley, 2005, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Duane E. Campbell, *Choosing democracy: A practical guide to multicultural education*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ, Merrill, 2004, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Christine I. Bennett, *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 2003, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Gollnick, Donna M. and Chinn, Philip C., *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ, Merrill, 2002, p. 14.

create a school environment based on tolerance and acceptance of students' difference.

## School setting

Obviously, recognizing the influence of cultural identity on teaching-learning and on the relationship with others is difficult for students. Teachers must know the importance that the impact of cultural identity has on students' achievement. They must also know that their individual teaching methods, style of relationships with students and visions of identity also have an impact on students' academic progress and social development. According to Beverly Daniel Tatum, «identity concept is complicated, since it is formed by the unity of different factors (individual features, family dynamics, historical memory and experience, social and political contexts)<sup>1</sup>».

Cultural identity of the students is built on the basis of their relationship experience with 12 variables, determined by Kenneth Cushner, Averil McClelland and Philip Safford. These variables are ethnicity/nationality, social class, sex/gender, health, age, geographical region, sexual orientation, religion, social status, language, ability/disability and race. This experience determines cultural identity of students and students learn those identities through socialization agents acting within the culture<sup>2</sup>. Thus, teachers must know that these cultural identities determine personal attributes of students.

## Multicultural teacher

Teachers can help students: (1) to feel comfortable with themselves while having their own cultural identity and (2) to use a multicultural teaching approach that includes diversity in the classroom. «Multicultural education must assist students in teaching and learning their own changeable identity<sup>3</sup>». In the perspective of multicultural education, teachers can assist students by being culturally sensitive— «with the use of cultural knowledge, available

---

<sup>1</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum, «*Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?*» and other conversations about race, New York, Basic Books, 2003 [1997], p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Duane E. Campbell, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

experience, via the knowledge of operating style of ethnically different students that will make the study more relevant and effective for them<sup>1</sup>».

Culturally sensitive teaching starts with teachers becoming familiarized with students at personal level, building the instruction based on students' interest, as much as possible, trying to recognize their talents and using these talents as a teaching tool<sup>2</sup>. This approach makes classroom student-oriented and promotes academic progress. Relevant teaching from the viewpoint of culture is based on three main principles: (1) «students must experience academic progress», (2) «students must develop and/or preserve cultural competences» and (3) «students must develop critical thinking, with the use of which they will struggle against social injustice<sup>3</sup>». This means that teachers must promote students' achievement by creating an environment, in which their culture and diversity will be treated with respect. Teachers will be able to do this when they spend time on students' education instead of on their control.

What should teachers know?

- Students need to feel and experience belonging, esteem and recognition every day.
- Students' culture is valuable and their cultural identity must be reinforced by teaching.
- High expectations from every student are the first step on the way of their success.

## Differences and similarities

We cannot teach each student in a similar fashion. Their culture and background has an impact on their learning and interaction with teachers and peers. They have different needs, abilities and experience that should be taken into account when creating educational programs. They differ in physical

---

<sup>1</sup> Geneva Gay, *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*, New York, Teachers College Press, 2000, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Christine I. Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

and intellectual abilities, gender, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, language, religion, class, geography and age. Students conduct themselves in a different way in the school and with adults taking into account cultural factors and experience of relation with society. Specific behaviors of teachers in relationships with students are also predetermined by their own cultural background.

Multicultural education is a notion that recognizes the role of diversity in the life of students and of their family and promotes equal rights and social justice when acquiring education. Equal rights guarantees that students have equal access to educational resources, regardless of the group to which they belong. Social equality gives teachers an opportunity to render more assistance to students having specific needs. Teachers have certain responsibilities regarding class administration in order to create favorable conditions for students' teaching/learning. In order to accomplish this, teachers need the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to work effectively with students. Below are several fundamental provisions of multicultural education:

- cultural diversity has force and is valuable;
- the school must be a model of human rights protection and respect the cultural difference;
- great significance must be attached to social justice and equality in the process of drawing up a plan and teaching;
- school must promote the attitudes and values, which are necessary for taking part in a democratic society;
- teachers are a key figure, which care for development of knowledge, skills and attitudes in students, which are necessary for their formation as fully valued citizens;
- teachers who work with families and communities are able to create such environment, which will assist multiculturalism, equality and social justice.

## **Intercultural competences of teacher**

Modern teachers should have some competences (knowledge+skills+attitudes) in multicultural education. The basic aspects of multicultural competences of teachers are represented as follows:

- understanding of the role of language and culture in the teaching-learning process. Teachers must know how to change their strategies and approaches to make language understandable and their teaching relevant, easily understandable and interesting;
- consideration of content from many points of view, that includes paying attention to personal and cultural norms of the students and of their family background;
- acquiring information on different cultures and communities and involvement of students' background, culture and community resources into teaching process;
- verbal and non-verbal communication, which implies demonstration of respect regarding the cultural background and the different perceptions that students bring in the class environment;
- integration of culturally relevant content and its formation on student's experience;
- assistance to student in developing skills of different social and cultural view that will promote understanding of local or global issues and create new approaches to problem solving among peers;
- development of teaching theory, human, cultural diversity and knowledge of individual differences and their impact on teaching-learning;
- analysis of their own preliminary attitudes and access to the resources, which will deepen their knowledge on the differences of teaching style according to cultural, ethnic and gender aspects in order to achieve more relevant expectations from teaching-study;
- cooperation with students and their families for the establishment of common expectations and permanent communication in order to promote the students' development and achievements.

When working with students who are from a different ethnic, racial, language or religious group, it is especially important that teachers develop positive attitude toward diversity and difference. Students easily recognize teachers who respect their culture and come to trust them.

It is desirable for pre-service teachers to work out a habit of reflection on their own practice and to keep a close eye on the multicultural competencies listed above. From the very first day of teaching, teachers must think about their efficiency – do they really help students to learn different subjects, develop necessary skills and attitudes? Effective teachers will change their teaching strategies when students are unable to study, since the existence of so-called underachievers is unacceptable for them. Resting on students' experience and culture, they can make a specific discipline more relevant for them. Self-reflection is a critical skill for the improvement of teaching and learning.

Teacher education programs at Ilia State University, in Tbilisi, Georgia, demand from students that they keep portfolios in which their reflection can be seen clearly. Videotape recording of conducted lessons gives an opportunity to critically assess subject knowledge, interaction with students and class administration methods. Critical self-assessment may also be extended on multicultural competencies. It is possible to use the experience of periodical attendance at other colleagues' lessons in order to gain opportunity to assess multicultural competences of one other. Objective assessment has positive effect on development desirable behavior and attitudes.

### **Teaching-learning variation**

Students' variables – race, ethnic origin, socio-economic status, academic skills, language and social-emotional characteristics – are permanently changing. For example, students whose parents work in order to cover monthly expenses are forced to care for themselves after school. Those experiencing lack of control from parents or from other adults sometimes display less responsibility towards their own education. Teachers are therefore obliged to take this social factor into account and to take effective measures in order to rise their responsibility and to overcome their academic failure.

Teachers must also teach students, who don't know or who have a low level of knowledge of the state language. They need to have special training on how to communicate effectively with parents, who also do not know the state language. For instance, we discovered such a practice in the school of Qvemo Qartli, Rustavi, a region of Georgia (when teachers send parents a

two-page notification, with the text on the first page written in Georgian, and the second page in the native language .

Special problems arise when issues concern values such as «faith and understanding of national culture». These topics have to be presented in a way that will not incur any inner conflict. Teachers must demonstrate humanity, they should be ready to face differences of opinions and treat with respect the teaching material where cultural and historical events are represented in different ways.

If the content of the school curricula and school education (teaching-learning) is in full compliance with the principles and tasks of multicultural education, students naturally assimilate, share and accept different points of view without any coercion. In this case, critical attitude towards different points of view and perceptions is not transmitted in an unacceptable form, which might be abusive to others. That is the objective of multicultural education, attainment of which is quite difficult but necessary.

From the perspective of multicultural education, teaching the history of Georgia without consideration of experience and prospects of ethnic groups means biased teaching of Georgian history. History, literature and culture of ethnic residents in Georgia are closely related to each other. Taking into account these aspects, teaching should be aimed at developing positive attitude towards diversity and a sense of civic equality and tolerance among students.

## **Social involvement**

Social involvement is an important concept of modern multicultural education and means that any activity of teachers will highlight them in society.

Studies<sup>1</sup> shows that the number of teachers, who are active both in school and in local society, has increased. These teachers are more informed about the everyday life of their students and they use this information for effective

---

<sup>1</sup> Shalva Tabatadze and Natia Gorgadze, *Intercultural Education Research in Primary Grades of Georgia*, Research Report, Tbilisi, 2013; Shalva Tabatadze, «Teachers' approaches to multicultural education in Georgian classrooms», *Journal for Multicultural Education*, Vol. 9, 2015, p. 248-262.

teaching and for interaction with the parents. Teachers establish relationships with social organizations or agencies and try to find the ways of their active involvement in school life.

## Parents' involvement

More than 80% of the parents surveyed in the framework of the project *Intercultural Education: Problems, their Analysis and Development Perspectives in Georgia*<sup>1</sup> consider that because of outdated teaching-learning methods and strategies students manifest only a small part of their knowledge and abilities in school.

Lack of financial support for schools, excessive amount of students in classrooms and absence of discipline are identified by parents as the basic problem. Most of them emphasize the necessity of uncompromising attitude to criminal events in the school and also draw attention on the harmful influence of drugs and alcohol. Only a few parents (11.6%) think that ethnic issues and formation of tolerant environment must be emphasized.

Parents also responded to the issues, such as achievements in tests and in computer technologies. Some believe there is no need to emphasize tests and to spend so much time on them, while others are of different opinion and think that the number of testings is insufficient. The parents' opinions are also divided when it comes to using computer for homework and class activities.

To some parents, standardized learning and textbooks offered by the school are quite acceptable. Others think that it is incorrect to propose resources reflecting only one perspective and that it is necessary to offer as much alternate sources as possible. In all cases, teachers must show that they understand the different perceptions and attitudes of students.

Unfortunately, only a small portion of the parents hold the opinion that they themselves have great impact on the results their children achieve in the school. When asked what they considered an improvement of the school

---

<sup>1</sup> Research funded by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation was conducted in Tbilisi (capital of Georgia), Samtskhe-Javakheti, Qvemo Kartli and Guria regions in 2015 and was aimed to determine students' intercultural competences.

and, respectively, of teaching, most of them name the increase of the number of qualified teachers but they do not mention the importance of their own personal development and acquisition of some teaching skills.

### **Learn from mistakes: selfconsciousness and self-recognition**

The main characteristic that good teachers should have is the skill of self-cognition. Future teachers are taught the history of education, legal rights of students and teachers, how to plan a lesson and conduct it, etc. But the most important is the ability of self-cognition, knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses, the ability to understand and care for students with diverse cultural background.

Teachers' self-consciousness and self-recognition are very important factors, which assist students in knowing themselves better. The ability of self-critical analysis is the precondition to know oneself. Classroom is a place of battle of ideas, expression of contradictory opinions and discussions about the world. People with different knowledge, skills and attitudes, developed on the basis of their own cultural identity participate in these "battles". Teachers must understand and respect not only their own values and convictions, but must also take into account the influence of factors that are experienced by students and their parents.

The best culturally sensitive teachers also make mistakes, but in contrast with others, they have the desire and the aspiration to learn from their mistakes. When teachers are able to cope with their instinct for preservation when a mistake is made, they are on the way to become good teachers, capable of teaching *any* child.

In conclusion one may say that modern multicultural education requires entire holistic transformation of the school system. Every agent/variable takes part in this process. These agents themselves create certain contexts of teaching and learning. To be successful, multicultural education must take into account the contexts of the students, the parents, the teachers, the school and the society and build the process of teaching-learning from the nearest to furthest context with reflection of mutual influence between and inside of systems.

## References

- Banks, James A. and McGee Banks, Cherry A., eds., *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., New York, Wiley, 2005.
- Bennett, Christine I., *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 2003.
- Campbell, Duane E., *Choosing democracy: A practical guide to multicultural education*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ, Merrill, 2004.
- Cushner, Kenneth, McClelland, Averil and Safford, Philip, *Human diversity in education: An integrative approach*, 3rd ed., Boston, McGraw-Hill, 2000.
- Gay, Geneva, *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*, New York, Teachers College Press, 2000.
- Gollnick, Donna M. and Chinn, Philip C., *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ, Merrill, 2002, p. 24-35.
- Grant, Carl A. and Gillette, Maureen, *Learning to Teach Everyone's Children. Equity, empowerment and education that is multicultural*. Belmont, CA, Thompson Wadsworth, 2006.
- Tabatadze, Sh., «Teachers' approaches to multicultural education in Georgian classrooms», *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 9 (4), 2015, p. 248-262.
- Tabatadze, Sh. and Gorgadze N., *Intercultural Education Research in Primary Grades of Georgia*, Research Report, Tbilisi, 2013.
- Tatum, Beverly Daniel, «*Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?*» and other conversations about race, New York, Basic Books, 2003 [1997].