THE INTERSECT OF CULTURE AND EDUCATION: PROBING THE VIEWS OF TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS AT A MULTICULTURAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract- The Constitution of South Africa envisions a socially just society. However, realising this requires an education context that amongst other things, celebrates and promotes cultural diversity. Widely known as the rainbow nation, South Africa houses a multi-cultural population. This aspect poses particular challenges to education, which is not only required to provide a multi-cultural educational context conducive to effective teaching and learning, but also to promote quality education, equal opportunities and social justice. However, indications are that Teacher Education institutions in South Africa appear to be less effective in responding to these educational objectives. We argue that part of the reason for this seemingly ineffectiveness, is the inability of Teacher Education students to understand, acknowledge and validate the intricacies that exist between culture and education. As such, they hamper efforts to realise social justice through education. In this paper, we explore issues confined to the intersection of culture and education of third- and fourth-year education students at a multicultural university in South Africa. A quantitative research approach was adopted amongst a group of 266 Teacher Education students to gain knowledge of individuals' views of the commonalities of culture and education. Findings revealed that Teacher Education students have a limited understanding of the issues prevalent at the intersect of culture and education, thisin spite of the efforts both this university, as well as the education authorities attempt. The paper concludes with suggestions for promoting an awareness amongst Teacher Education students about the issues which intersect culture and education, and the possible educational implications thereof. Commonalities may give Teacher Education students a new way of generating conversations with learners or ways to begin connecting subject contents to learners' scholastic interests, classroom experiences and holistic development.

Key words- Culture, South Africa, Education, Social justice, Teacher Education Students

I. INTRODUCTION

South African education has the task and responsibility of promoting democracy and develop in learners the dispositions of democratic citizens. This according to the White Paper on Education and Training [1] which suggests that education "can help citizens to build a nation free of race, gender and every other form of discrimination". This responsibility stems from the violent and divisive past that South Africa (SA) emerged from after 1994. During this time the SA society was deeply divided along cultural lines. This division resulted in various forms of injustices and discrimination. No more was this injustices and discrimination experienced than in education where the education provisioning of the majority of South Africa citizens was fundamentally determined by their cultural orientation.

The transition to a new government and the subsequent realisation of new social dispensation brought forward the need to acknowledge and promote the rights of all South Africa citizens and to rid the country of various forms of discrimination and injustices – especially as far as culture is concerned. This according to the South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996 [2] who is founded on the "values of human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms".
In line with this foundational principles of the SA Constitution, the SA education system "embodies and promotes the collective moral perspective of its citizens, that is the code of values by which the society wishes to live and consents to be judged" [1]. The SA education therefore embraces and is supposed to promote and advance the collective and agreed upon value system of the SA society. This value system is supposed to serve as "the glue that holds the people together" [3]. More so, the SA education also has the responsibility to promote a sensitivity, an appreciation and a validation of diversity in all its forms but also cultural diversity. It is our contention that this can only be done if the teachers embrace diversity and the responsibility realising social justice through education places on them.
In this paper we explore the potential of teacher education students to promote a sensitivity and an appreciation for cultural diversity and so respond to social justice imperatives in education. This we do against the background of their understanding of the intersect between culture and education and the concomitant impact on social justice. In realising this objective, we first explore notions of culture, thereafter we locate the concept culture within education after which we draw on social justice.

II. POSITIONING CULTURE IN SA EDUCATION

As a social construct, consisting out of socially established structures of meaning the concept culture is difficult to define and definitions of what it entails,

exist [4]. Culture has been described as features that are shared and bind people together into a community (Shah, 2004. More so, not only is culture defined as the learned norms, values, beliefs, behaviours, and ways of knowing and codes that people use in response to their social environments (Howard, 2010), but it also informs and is intrinsically linked to our 'identity' [5]. Culture and education is inseparably connected. This is because schools are cultural institutions established in response to a cultural need. This is confirmed by Banks and Banks [6] for whom everything in education relates to culture. The intersection between culture and education is also accentuated by Hollins [7], Savage, Hindle, Meyer and Sleeter [8] and Bazron, Osher and Fleischman [9] who variously refer to the importance of culture for education and effective learning. Similarly, Ramasamy, Ling, & Ting also claims that ignoring culture in human social interactions adversely affects communication, interactions, and knowledge construction. This link is emphasised by Lee, Cosby and de Baca who not only describes culture as the lens through which we look at the world and the context within which we operate and make sense of the world, but also as influencing how we process learning, solve problems, and teach.

An understanding of the intersect between culture and education also requires a sensitivity of the problematic nature of these two concepts. In this regard it appears that both culture and the process of education is open for abuse and misuse and that it promotes social injustices. Cultural hegemony and cultural racism are some of the ways in which culture is misused for discrimination and in social injustice. Cultural hegemony is the domination of a culturally diverse society, by the ruling class who manipulate the culture of that society; their beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values so that the ruling-class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm. In addition, cultural racism is the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one race's cultural heritage over that of another [10]. In a similar vein education, as a societal institution, also holds the potential to promote social injustices. This according to Banks & Banks, [6]; Sleeter& Grant, [11]; Nieto, [12] who hold the view that schools play a major role in reproducing structures of inequality and oppression. The possibility that both culture and education could potentially contribute towards social injustices and discrimination requires an investigation into student teachers understanding of the intersect of education and culture, especially since the education system is supposed to "benefit the country as a whole and all its people" [2] future of SA and its societal order is dependent on the education system.

It is against this backdrop that SA adopted multicultural education (ME) as a guiding principle of education. Banks and Banks [6] defines ME as an educational reform movement whose major goal is to restructure curricula and educational institutions so that students from diverse social classes, racial, and ethnic groups, as well as both gender groups, will experience equal educational opportunities. As a result, ME requires a sensitivity for and a validation of the cultural diversity in both our schools and classes as well as in the SA society.

The adoption of ME gives effect to social justice imperatives of equality and non-discrimination [2], the right to language and culture [2]; the right to cultural, religious and linguistic communities [2] and various other Constitutional rights aimed at establishing a democratic society. In this regard education policies such as the National Education Policy Act, Act 27 0f 1996; the *White Paper on Education and Training*; the *South African Schools Act*, Act 84 of 1996, and various other education legislation and policies also echoes the letter and sentiments of the SA Constitution regarding the place and value of culture in society and in education. Moreover, South African education is not only committed to "redress past injustices in educational provision" [1] but also to advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, [and] protect and advance our diverse cultures … [1]. With these pronouncements, education legislation and policies not only recognise but also create a platform in which cultural diversity is respected in and promoted through education.

In this regard, SA educators have a particular responsibility to realise the aims and objectives of both the SA Constitution and the various education legislation and policies, especially as it relates to the realisation of social justice and the promotion of cultural diversity through education. It is our contention that SA teachers can only do that if they have a firm understanding of the intersection of education and culture.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This empirical investigation was conducted to ascertain individuals' views of the intersection between culture and education.

3.1 Selection of participants

Participants consisted of multi-cultural group of teacher education students. Out of the Five hundred and forty-nine (549) students are registered for this module, a sample of 266 students were selected using convenience sampling. These students are representative of the various phases offered in this Faculty – that is Pre-school, Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase, Senior Phase and Further Education and Training.

Table 1. Self-developed questionnaire

	ITEMS	SD %	D %	A %	SA %	Mean
1	There is a strong link between culture and education.	2.6	1.9	50	43.2	3.37
2	I can effectively teach all my learners without having knowledge of their cultural values, practices and beliefs	24.1	24.4	32.0	13.5	2.37
3	I am convinced that being cultural responsive will advance the academic success of minority cultural groups in a particular school	3.8	15.0	53.4	21.1	2.98
4	I have the skills and knowledge to effectively teach culturally diverse groups.	1.1	3.8	45.1	45.9	3.09
5	I don't believe teaching in culturally diverse schools requires different approaches to teaching and learning	23.3	22.9	30.8	15.8	2.42
6	In SA, gaps in the success rates amongst learners from different cultural groups cannot be attributed to their incompatibility with the school's dominant culture.	6	37.6	44	7.1	2.55
7	Cultural issues in schools just cause problems.	14.7	35.3	35.3	12	2.46
8	Learners from culturally diverse backgrounds must adapt their culture to that of the dominant culture of the school.	23.3	33.1	27.8	10.9	2.28
9	I am convinced that a colour-blind approach in schools is detrimental to the academic success of learners of minority groups.	12.8	30.1	32.3	18.8	2.61
10	All teaching and learning strategies are suitable for all learners, irrespective of their cultural orientation.	12	28.9	33	20.7	2.66
11	Culture is political.	31.6	39.1	13.5	11.7	2.05
12	I think it is safe for schools to focus and emphasise only the visible culture.	25.9	23.7	33.2	15.2	2.37
13	Learners who do not fit into the existing culture of a school should enrol at a school where their cultural needs can be met.	23.3	27.1	34.6	10.9	2.35

3.2 Research instruments

We used a structured self-developed questionnaire to gain knowledge of individuals' views of the intersect between culture and education. Students were asked to indicate the preference for each item dealing with a specific aspect as follows: 1- strongly disagree (SD); 2- disagree (D); 3- agree (A) and 4- strongly disagree (SA). Responses were given on a 4-point Likert scale, with 2 as the point of neutrality. A value above 2 suggests a positive perception of the intersection between culture and education, while a value of below 2 suggests a negative perception. Data analysis was done through the LP SERVE -PROGRAMME from the Unit for Mathematical and Statistical Services at the University of The Free State. Ethical issues that we adhered to during this research includes confidentiality, confidentiality, informed consent, and privacy. Since issues of validity and reliability are intrinsic to any quantitative research, these aspects were particularly considered in the way we structured the questionnaire, we analysed the data and we report our findings.

IV. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The data analysis displays some positive perceptions about the intersection between culture and education. This is discerned from the data which suggests that 93.2% of the participants confirms that culture and education intersect. It could therefore be expected from these teacher education students to validate cultural diversity within their schools and classrooms and to mitigate those factors, dispositions and/or social constructs that might negatively impact on the academic success of *all* their students. More so, awareness of this intersection also places on student teachers the responsibility to critically evaluate their teaching practices and to align it with the social justice needs of their students.

Their validation of the intersection between culture and education is accentuated by the fact that 74.5% of the students indicated that cultural responsiveness – or the ability to respond to learners' cultural needs in education - will positively impact on the academic success of minority cultural groups within a particular

school. Being cultural responsive is an acknowledgement that culture and education intersect – as such it challenges perceptions that there is not a reciprocal relationship between culture and education. More so it also challenges perceptions that a differences in learner achievement between different cultural groups within a multicultural school context is normal and that it should be accepted. To demystify this notion Gay [13] opines that if teachers align their teaching practices to the cultural orientations and needs of their diverse students, the academic achievement of these students is guaranteed to improve. In a similar vein, Sleeter and Grant [11] also argue that the validation of student's cultural identities and valuing of the cultural knowledge students bring with them to school have the potential to make a difference.

A contradiction is discerned in the responses participants gave to the following statements: "I can effectively teach all my learners without having knowledge of their cultural values, practices and beliefs" and "I have the skills and knowledge to effectively teach culturally diverse groups". Whereas 91% of the respondents responded very positively about their ability to create a conducive teaching and learning environment for *all* cultural groups, 48.5%of respondents doubt in their ability to create a conducive teaching and learning environment for all their students without them having relevant knowledge of the cultural values, practices and beliefs of their learners. So although they feel theyhave the knowledge, skills and values to effectively teach in culturally diverse school settings, they simultaneously display uncertainty as to whether they will be able to do it. The teachers used in this research were exposed to multi-cultural education. Alexander [14] maintains that students who are exposed to multicultural education programmes are more inclined to be responsive to social justice issues and therefore appear to be better prepared for teaching in culturally diverse school settings. Kea [15] also argues that exposure to multicultural education result in teachers being less likely to develop culturally deficit perspectives of their learner. On the other hand, the low percentage of respondents (45.5%) who doubt in their ability to create a conducive teaching and learning environment for all their students without them having relevant knowledge of the cultural values, practices and beliefs of their learners, suggests that students might not have an understanding of the significance and don't realise the impact, value and meaning of cultural values, practices and beliefs in creating a conducive teaching and learning environment. Hence, Phutsong [16] suggest that a crucial need exists to prepare teachers with cultural knowledge and competencies so as to create learning opportunities for all students. In line with this, Rychly and Graves [17] calls on teachers to improve their knowledge of the cultural practices of learners, especially those from minority cultures. Such knowledge is important because cultural responsiveness is more than just a way of teaching, or a simple set of practices embedded within curriculum lessons and units. Rather it embodies a professional, political, cultural, ethical and ideological disposition that supersedes mundane teaching acts [18].

In line with the above, 46.6% of the respondents also indicated that teaching in culturally diverse schools do not require different approaches to teaching and learning. This responses of teacher students suggests that no need exist for them to alter or adapt mainstream teaching practices, which could favour dominant culture. This responses also suggest an inclination towards colour-blindness and assimilationist tendencies on the part of student teachers. Both colour-blindness and cultural assimilation is indicative of a disregard for cultural diversity and social justice. To avert these in multi-cultural schools it is important to develop the knowledge, dispositions and skills to effectively implement and assess a culturally responsive pedagogy [19]. In addition, not only should culturally relevant knowledge and dispositions be developed but Richards, Brown and Forde [20] maintains that it will be futile and a disconnect with school is likely, if the tools of instruction (books, teaching methods and activities) are incompatible with, or worse marginalise, the students' cultural experiences. In a similar vein Howard [18] ascribe the achievement gap between students of colour (representing a subordinate culture) and their White counterparts as a result of the lack of "a comprehensive and informed set of knowledge and skills that many practitioners fail to possess". Teachers teaching in a multi-cultural educational context or teachers preparing citizens for a culturally diverse country can therefore not be content with or adopt a "one size fits all" [16].

It is therefore not surprising to find that merely 51.1% of student teachers ascribed the achievement gap between learners from different cultural backgrounds to their incompatibility with the dominant culture of the educational setting. Their response suggests student teachers feel that differences in academic achievement amongst learners from various cultural groups should be attributed to factors other than the relationship between culture and education.

In addition, the majority of participants (56.4%) also expects from learners from minority culturally groups to adapt their cultural orientations to that of the culture of the educational institution. These responses appear to support cultural assimilation. Assimilation involves a process in which power relations determine that a subordinate group subjects themselves to and is accommodated by a more powerful group [22]. Assimilation therefore expects from students from minority cultures to adapt to and adopt the existing (dominant) culture of the school. This approach

assumes that the dominant or majority culture is superior to the marginalised culture, and as such it takes on a form of cultural racism [23]. In essence, racism strives on the negative-attitude view of prejudice, it has as a necessary premise the superiority of one's own race and it rationalises institutional and cultural practices that formalise the hierarchical domination of one group over another [10].

In line with this only 51.1% of the participating student teachers recorded a response in which they indicated that a colour-blind approach in education is detrimental to the academic success of students of marginalised cultures. Teachers adopting a colour-blind approach argues that all they see in front of them are "children" and that as a teacher to them, "colour" is irrelevant. They therefore also claim that they are able to teach any student irrespective of cultural background or race. However, according to Meier and Hartell [24] this attitude is rather indicative of deep seated prejudice against students from racial groups other than their own. In addition, despite it being perceived as a far response towards diversity and difference, especially as it relates to children and their well-being- colour-blindness in essence ignores the realities of social inequality [25].

Furthermore, 47.3% of student teachers surveyed in this study is of the opinion that in education, cultural issues just cause problems. Although not convincingly, these responses confirm some of the above findings which allude to student teachers not having a clear understanding of the intersect between culture and education. Avery, Sullivan and Ou [26] testifies to this as they indicate that some teachers do not engage students with questions on culture in education because they see the acknowledgement of cultural differences as counterproductive. Teachers who appears to disregard the relationship between appear unsympathetic towards issues of equity and equality in education.

The above also explains the more than half of the student teacher participants (53.7%) who felt that all teaching and learning strategies are suitable for all students, irrespective of cultural orientation. More so it also accentuates the lack of understanding amongst student teachers of the intersect between culture and education. Learning styles are related to culture and are influenced by cultural orientation, especially as it relates to culture and teaching and learning styles. Goduka [21] posits that learning styles are a component of cultural behavioural styles, the habits, the values, predispositions, and preferences that develop during a child's cultural socialisation. However, our contention is that teaching styles are also culturally determined and informed. The non-compatibility between teaching and learning styles may further promote social injustices as teachers might underestimate the intellectual potential of learners from minority cultural groups and mislabel and mistreat them as slow individuals who are not motivated or interested in learning [27].

Student teachers limited understanding of the intersect between culture and education is further demonstrated in their responses, as 70.7% of them indicated that culture is a non-political concept. We already alluded to the socially constructed nature of the concept culture. Nieto [29] also maintains that culture is created and socially constructed. Grant and Sachs[28] regards culture as "highly political in its representation and reinforcement of structures of power". More so, it is also "deeply entangled with economic and political privilege" [29]. As a result, culture is in essence shaped by power and privilege to the extent that those in power regards themselves as having the right and the privilege to determine what ought to be regarded as culture and what not.

Responses where less than half of the participants (48.6%) indicated that it is safe for schools to focus on and emphasise only the visible cultures of students, is therefore not in the interest of social justice or the intersect of culture and education. These responses suggest that respondents favour an educational approach to cultural diversity and culture in education that focuses on and celebrates only the external aspects of culture. McVee [30] opines that externalised, objectified versions of culture (visible and invisible) are the norm in educational settings. Therefore, overemphasising the visible culture by celebrating particular cultural aspects such as food, clothes, crafts, and the literature of dominant groups in the curriculum could potentially create perceptions that education settings are sufficiently transformed, whilst in actuality promoting inequity and inequality. Nieto [29] is also adamant that culture cannot be reduced to holidays, food or dances. Rather culture is "the ever changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class and religion" [28]. This definition demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of culture.

A further 50.4% of the student teacher's surveyed in this study recorded a positive response in favour of students who do not fit into the existing culture of an institution to enrol at institutions where their cultural needs could be met. These responses in essence, suggests that student teacher's support culturally segregated educational settings, and an educational dispensation that caters for and promotes cultural segregation. Segregation refers to a deliberate policy of separate development [23].

CONCLUSION

Trainers of Teacher Education students should promote an awareness amongst students about the

issues which intersect culture and education, and the possible educational implications thereof. Commonalities may give Teacher Education students a new way of generating conversations withtheir prospective learners or provide them with tools to link subject contents to their learners' scholastic interests, classroom experiences and holistic development.

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