DEALING WITH MULTICULTURALISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN DIVERS SOCIAL SCIENCE CLASSROOMS: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF INTERMEDIATE PHASE STUDENT TEACHERS

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Abstract

This qualitative study reflects the perceptions and experiences of intermediate phase student teachers in dealing with multiculturalism and social justice in diverse classrooms. The content of Social Science as a subject in the intermediate phase, respond to many societal challenges currently associated with issues such as urban and rural settlement, pandemics, climate change, poverty, racism, etc. -these contents as portrayed in some subject themes, fulfils a role in enhancing social cohesion and tolerance for one another. In an age in which diversity, multiculturalism and social justice are increasingly prominent features of higher education and society, researchers are tirelessly exploring numerous ways to meet the educational needs of diverse populations. Social Science as a subject in the intermediate schooling phase of South Africa deals with the interrelationship of humans and their environment and can thus play an integral role to meet the needs of diverse populations. Through a qualitative research methodology, data was gathered from Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions with three groups of five teacher education students from the same race, in their final year, specializing in Social Science teaching. The results of the study indicate that student teachers find the teaching of Social Science in a multicultural classroom very challenging, irrespective of their race, culture, or socio-background. The study therefore recommends regular exposure to diverse learners through mandatory teaching practice at multicultural schools, appropriate training and development throughout the students' teacher training with supported policies and integration of social justice into the curriculum content.

Keywords: Classrooms, diversity, experiences, intermediate phase, multiculturalism, perceptions, social science, social justice, student teachers.

1. Introduction

Social justice generally embraces values, such as the equal worth of all citizens and their equal right to meet their basic needs. Kea, Campbell-Whatley and Richards, (2006) aver that in the context of democratic education, teacher competencies such as sociocultural consciousness, adopting responsible teaching strategies, and having an affirming attitude towards learning from culturally diverse backgrounds, should form part of teacher education students' professional development. Most advocates of social justice education note that preparing teachers to teach in such learning environments and challenging oppression is difficult work, facing a multitude of barriers (Pace, 2014). As such, democratic education requires teacher education students to lead and teach for social justice and combat oppressive practices, while creating an equal and dignified classroom environment. This study investigates how student teachers deal with multiculturalism and social justice in divers Social Science classrooms and discusses their view and experiences with the aim to provide possible recommendations on how to deal with multiculturalism and social justice in the modern South African Social Science classroom.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social Science as a subject in the intermediate phase

In attempting to define Social Science, it would be incorrect for us to omit one of the earliest definitions of the Social Sciences that has paved the way for numerous definitions that were to follow in subsequent years. This definition is credited to Edgar Wesley, a renowned scholar and advocate for the Social Sciences, sometimes referred to as "the father of social studies" who developed what some scholars have called the most enduring definition of all time (Evans, 2004). Social Science is defined as a

science simplified for pedagogical purposes. It is this definition that has led to Social Science being defined in terms of content, as shown in the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) in the USA charter, that social studies are used to include history, economics, sociology, civics, geography, and all modifications of the subjects whose content, as well as aim is social (Mhlaili, 2010).

The intermediate phase of the South Africa Social Science curriculum as covered in the National Curriculum Statement, illustrates different themes that can, in some instances, provide elements of controversy, depending on the perspective from which it is facilitated. The study of Social Science can be emotive and controversial where there is actual or perceived unfairness to people by another individual or group in the past (The History Association, 2015). Invariably such issues are underpinned in these Social Science topics, because these themes deal with factors such as race, gender, class, politics, ethics, culture, language and economics in other words, issues of moral complexity. Polarisation will, therefore, in light of the above, come about when historical events and the related evidence elicit disagreement, arouse anger, raise emotions and cause bias to arise.

2.2. Social science and multiculturalism

The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in South Africa is built on the principles of providing all learners with knowledge, skills and values. Similar to teaching for multiculturalism, teaching Social Science involves teaching about and for multicultural perspectives and viewpoints; establishing respect for cultural diversity; and working towards identifying and transforming areas of injustice that inhibit the goals of democracy (Castro, 2013).

2.3. Social science and social justice

Some people see social justice as an outgrowth of multicultural education which gives respect to the way multicultural education has embraced a theoretical power analysis. But social justice can also be defined in ways that are distinct from multicultural education, as various writers address the idea of social justice as it relates to teaching and learning (Gray, 2017; North, 2006; Russo, 2004). Some of these works attempt to marginalise or reject social justice concerns, either because of a sceptical postmodernist denial of the tenability and desirability of universal principles or because of an uncritical approach to conceptualising answers to difficult problems (Cochran-Smith, 2010). However, there are those scholars who are committed to shining a light on the darkness of inequalities that manifest in education.

3. Conceptual framework

The conceptual, theoretical and philosophical foundation of university transformation discourse is often led by the Social Sciences and presented as a template for other fields, such as pure science and engineering, as well as other professional fields which include accounting, health, economics and management sciences. This has caused tension and the perception of imposition, instead of co-creation and co-determination of the terms of transformation. Social Science is more advanced in critical theory and has dedicated more time and effort to developing tools for analysing the weaknesses of our education systems. There is an urgent need to affirm the principle of co-creation and a reciprocal dialogue among these disciplines to advance the transformation of content and pedagogy (Midford, James & Hutchinson, 2018).

4. Methodology

As a fragment of a broader part of research, this qualitative study reflects on the perceptions and experiences of student teachers on how they deal with multiculturalism and social justice in divers Social Science intermediate phase classrooms. Student teachers to think more deeply about the learners' beliefs, values, and identities in relation to what is being learned and how these influences teaching and learning.

The study was conducted at a university in the central region of South Africa, where the subject Social Science as a specialization in the intermediate phase is offered for teacher training. The University has a diverse student population that caters for students from different cultures and socio-backgrounds. The diversity of the students was of interest to me and since it assisted me. For the purpose of this study, the sampling method that I used was a mixture of purpose and stratified sampling. In stratified sampling, all the people in the sampling frame are divided into 'strata' (groups or categories). With each stratum, a simple random sample or systematic sample was selected. We decided on the purposive sampling, 20 participants were selected, and further sampled using stratified sampling, to divide the group into race groups.

5. Data analysis

The conceptual framework shaped my data analysis. It assisted me to develop concepts and themes and test them with participants through analysing and interacting with the collected data, while also transcribing and coding the texts. The conceptual framework assisted me in understanding and explaining how the different practices of Social Science teachers have played significant roles in perceptions of South African learners in Social Science. It assisted me to interpret how racial, ethnic, socio-economic and cultural identities of South African learners have intertwined and interacted with their perspectives on Social Science.

6. Findings

In this study, the student teachers interpreted their Social Science teaching and learning experiences in various ways. Several major themes emerged from my data analysis.

Theme 1: Multicultural school teaching experience and taking up a multicultural teaching post

A description of what the participants identified as their experience of teaching in a multicultural classroom and if they would take up a multicultural teaching post.

- **Relate well to learners because I grew up amongst diverse groups**

Participant FGDC1 C2 indicated that it was easy to adapt to a multicultural classroom because he related to all learners as he grew up amongst diverse groups. FGDC2 C9 also found it similarly not so challenging to relate to learners in a multicultural classroom, and this will make it easier to accept a post at a multicultural school. Trust is a major issue in most intercultural classrooms. A study by the South African Council for Educators (2017), found that an emotional relationship, especially confidence between educators and their learners in the intercultural classroom, is important in establishing trust between learners and their educators (SACE, 2017). Participant FGDC2 C8 expressed similar sentiments and articulated the following: *"Yes. It was a good experience because I learnt a lot about other cultures, beliefs and customs during teaching practice. I will for sure take a post at a multicultural school."*

- **Comfortable amongst your own**

Participant FGDC2 C10 and FGDA A1 expressed their desire to rather teach in surroundings that they are more familiar with, meaning to teach learners from their own race, culture and socio-background. Similar sentiments were echoed by FGDC2 C7 in the verbatim response below: *"No, I did my teaching practice in the township because I had a choice of school to go to. I felt more comfortable among people I can relate to and understand. I will not take a post at a multicultural school if I have a choice, because I feel comfortable amongst a more familiar space and among more familiar people."*

The responses from the teacher education participants are similar to the opinion of Housee (2008) who states that a teacher's racial identity is an important factor in emotional exchanges. Black teachers are sometimes judged for their 'loyalties and sensibilities' with the black community, while white teachers are questioned for their understanding and sympathy with race/racism issues.

Theme 2: Understanding different cultures and how to deal with them

Participant FGDA A1 indicated that a lack of understanding of other cultures and customs could be a challenge for pre-service teachers in multicultural school settings. FGDA A2 and A3 agreed and indicated that a better understanding of the learners could contribute to successful teaching and learning in a multicultural classroom. In relation to challenges faced in multicultural schools FGDC1 C3 made the following comment: *"I think we might have a challenge understanding all our learners, because we are not really exposed to multicultural schools during teaching practice."*

The literature in chapter three emphasised the importance of a good understanding of different cultures in multicultural school settings. The findings of this study provide clear evidence that most of the teacher education participants lacked knowledge about other cultures and consequently, made them susceptible to attack by people from those cultures.

- **Lack of training to deal with diverse groups**

FGDB B1 emphasised that a lack of training to deal with diverse groups could be a challenge for pre-service teachers. The sentiments were also shared by FGDC1 C4, who in turn, indicated that because of the reality of facing multicultural schools, pre-service teachers should deal with this during training. Teaching is a profession that revolves continuously as knowledge and technology changes and require that teachers upskill themselves frequently, thus the opportunity for professional development is critical (Landsman & Lewis, 2011). In relation to the latter statement, teacher education participant FGDA A3 agreed by asserting the following: *"I think it is not easy to manage diverse groups, because we are not trained to deal with diversity, or the training is not adequate."*

I share the above-mentioned sentiment, that teachers in the multicultural classroom should be provided with knowledge about several cultures of their learners, their experiences, communication styles, and learning approaches that are harmonious for all learners in the multicultural classroom (Multicultural education & curriculum, 2012).

- **Code-changing not possible in multicultural schools**

FGDC2 C9 made a very interesting observation that a challenge some teachers will encounter will be not to be able to code-change during a lesson, to try to explain certain areas of content that learners find difficult to grasp. The participant indicated that some teachers use code-change to try to explain things in class and because the class has learners who do not understand a particular language, this will not be possible. Teacher education participants FGDC1 C4, FGDC2 C6 and FGDC2 C7 agreed with the sentiment and added that in many instances a teacher prefers to explain some issues in a different language but are unable to do so, due to the diversity in the classroom. If teachers and learners in the multicultural classroom have different verbal styles of communication, then they cannot understand and express themselves directly and clearly to one another; thus, the result is that students have low academic accomplishment (Multicultural education & curriculum, 2012). Learners' achievements and progression in multicultural schools may also be negatively affected if they are taught in their second or third language and they lack proficiency in that particular language (Alsubaie, 2015).

Theme 3: Social Science and the teacher's beliefs and socio-background

A description of what the participants views on the teaching topics or issues that go against their beliefs, and customs of what they have been taught during their upbringing.

- **Healthy debate in Social Science classroom**

The teacher education participants FGDA A1, FGDB B1, FGDB B4, FGDC1 C1, FGDC1 C3 and FGDC1 C4 indicated that to teach content that you not comfortable to teach would develop the teacher further and facilitate healthy debates that such topics generate; this could be valuable in the nation-building process of our country. Barton and Levstick, (2011) advise that teachers should empower their learners by providing them with skills to debate issues, providing discussion techniques and teach learners to respect and accept disagreement. With reference to the above-mentioned matter, teacher education participant FGDC2 C7 articulated the following in support of debate in the Social Science classroom: *"Yes, I will teach any topic; I must just do proper research and try to give as many perspectives as possible, thus allowing discussion in the classroom without creating animosity among the different learners in my classroom."*

Comparable to the arguments of the teacher education participants, I am in support of healthy debate in the Social Science classroom. The literature mentioned in chapter 2 and 3 supports the notion and belief that the character of both the learners and the teachers is built in such an environment.

7. Discussion

This study explores the perceptions and experiences of student teachers in dealing with multiculturalism and social justice in divers Social Science intermediate phase classrooms. The findings indicate that Social Science is difficult to teach in a school with learners from different cultures, races and social backgrounds. Makoelle (2014) explains why participants would find it difficult, by indicating that despite all the significant policy pronouncements by the South African Department of Education, there has been silence on the inherent racial and ethnic divide which perpetuates exclusive stereotypes and conceptions about those viewed as racially and ethnically different.

In general, student teachers find it uncomfortable teaching Social Science; most of them feel that more exposure and advanced further training would benefit and equip them with the required skills, knowledge and values, to teach without fear or prejudice. Participants were also of the opinion that exposure to the teaching and learning of different societies, cultures and communities, would benefit student teachers in developing their skills on how to interact with learners different from them. Kallaway (2009) expresses concerns by indicating that part of the problem is that nobody has trained the trainer; it is simply expected that if someone who has been a good student teacher, will become a good teacher and will therefore be aware of the skills needed to in a multicultural school.

Fair treatment of all learners, irrespective of their race, culture, ethnicity, socio-economic background and physical appearance. The findings revealed that most participants from the black and coloured races felt very strongly about this and viewed the current state of affairs as shockingly neglected by Higher Education institutions, particularly in South Africa. The findings further indicated that white participants felt that efforts were being made to address these matters. It can thus be argued that participants would welcome a stronger emphasis on social impartiality, as part of their preparation to become teachers.

8. Recommendations

This study made several recommendations to South African Social Science student on how to deal with multiculturalism and social justice in the modern Social Science intermediate phase classroom.

Inclusion of social justice and multiculturalism in the curriculum of intermediate phase Social Science

Institutions of higher learning are frequently revising their programmes ensure that the curriculum is relevant to a changing world; therefore, a curriculum that addresses the challenges of society would be beneficial to all stakeholders. The establishment of partnerships between stakeholders who have an interest in education, i.e., the state, parents, learners, teachers and other members of the community, in the vicinity of a school is critical. The recommendation to include social justice and multiculturalism in the training programme of Social Science should be regarded as relevant and is therefore suggested. If it has been done already, the recommendation would be to advocate that it be listed as priority.

Interaction with societies of different socio-economic groups.

The inhabitants of many South African public-school classrooms are from different spheres of life and learners are also from different socio-economic groups. A considerate approach to the learners is critical for the success of teaching and learning; therefore, teachers should have a broad knowledge, understanding and empathy towards all learners, irrespective of their situations. Based on this assertion, this study recommends that regular engagement with communities of different socio-economic groups in both official and on social levels, would be prudent.

9. Conclusion

This study enriches the current literature on student teachers' perceptions of Social Science teaching and learning in South African Multicultural classrooms, adding to the limited research in this area. My study therefore strongly suggests regular acquaintance to diverse learners through obligatory teaching practice at multicultural schools, appropriate training and development throughout the students' teacher training with supported policies and integration of social justice into the curriculum content.

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