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DOI: 10.14746/bhw.2017.36.5

The Multicultural School. Analysis of challenges and opportunities based on examples from Vasa Övningsskola

*Human diversity makes tolerance more than a virtue:
it makes it a requirement for survival*
Rene Dubos

Abstract. The Multicultural School Analysis of challenges and opportunities based on examples from Vasa Övningsskola

The aim of this article is to present a discussion on the phenomenon of multicultural schools in Finland. The author will present both challenges and opportunities of multiculturalism based on examples from Vasa Övningsskola. The article will present a brief history of multicultural schools in the world and explain the roots of multicultural education. The purpose of this article is to explore new ideas and solutions for multicultural schools based on the best educational system in the world.

Keywords: multicultural school, history of education, finnish educational system, educational equality

The first thing before talking about the impact of multicultural schools on society should be a brief history of them. We need to look wider than just the school perspective. It all started with an educational movement carried by excluded ethnic groups around the world. The strongest impact on society was probably in the United States, because of Afro-American actions. According to Paul C. Gorski (1999) *The historical roots of multicultural education lie in the civil rights movements of various historically oppressed groups*. During the late 1960s, various public and private schools started to appear around the world, especially in countries that progressed more rapidly than others. While in some countries it happened in the late 1960s (United States of America), in some it occurred right after the political changes in 1989 (Poland). Academic studies initiated by George Washington Williams, Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. DuBois and Charles H. Wes-

ley aimed at changing the negative stereotypes about African Americans and other ethnic minorities by presenting to the public accurate descriptions of the customs and traditions of those groups. One of the main demands of those minorities was to have their cultural identity and heritage recognized and included in the national curriculum of schools. From that place, the idea of multicultural schools became closer and closer to reality. At the beginning, there were not many of them, either in the United States or Europe. There was not much support or knowledge about school structure, or new methods to be able to connect children from different backgrounds. Then, James A. Banks came to the rescue, publishing *Dimensions of Multicultural Education* which contained concepts for multicultural education. His book was widely used by schools which were looking for guidelines to create programs and projects open to immigrants. According to this publication, schools ought to take into consideration five dimensions: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equality pedagogy and an empowering school culture and social structure (James A. Banks, 1973). At this point, the aim of these schools was to help marginalized groups such as African Americans, refugees, LGBT and people with disabilities to be a part of “educational equality.” The idea was to teach better using the same curriculum as in other schools, but laying the emphasis on equality. However, multiculturalism is not only about fairness, but also about national and gender identity, which are still connected with group identity. In that case, the best place for that would be school. The process which we call socialization has made huge progress in global history.

To understand fully the multicultural school concept in the way it is bonded with educational equality, which from a critical perspective focuses on challenging the idea of various individuals having a deficit (as lacking something, or needing to be fixed) or as being inferior. Multicultural education is about fostering and forming equitable and socially just communities (Ramsey & Williams, 2003). Multicultural education uses the transformation of self and school as ... metaphor[s] and point[s] of departure for the transformation of society. When it comes to the definition of cultural diversity, we can say that it is *nothing more than this subtle, complex, more or less vast, and more or less fathomable difference that characterizes cultures, whether we examine them individually, in relation to others, in space, or in time* (Baer, 2004). All these definitions give us a framework of what multicultural education and cultural diversity are. The last aspect which might be a foothold in future research would be the attitudes of school staff, which plays a superior role.

Certainly, the aim of a multicultural education is that teachers will be more culturally-aware of what they might say/do/ask of children from different countries, to be much more empathetic, have the ability to read social cues and understand the concept of diversity and its themes. That functions differently in every country, since some of them more rapidly approved the heterogeneous shape of society. The best example of an open-minded and multicultural country would be Finland. This article will present formal education in the diversified and multicultural Finnish context. And here, the main questions become: what actually are the challenges and opportunities of a multicultural school in the twenty-first century? What is the impact of these schools on Finnish society? To

be able to answer these questions, one should begin by taking a closer look at the present situation and relevant literature.

Finland, as one of the Nordic countries with a long-established culture and language, is one of the most intriguing parts of Europe to be studied by academics. Some people have called it “the country of many faces” or “the country of saunas, sisu and Sibelius” or even “the country of a thousand lakes”. We also shouldn’t forget about Santa Claus, Nokia, Mannerheim, Karita Matila, which are all parts of Finnish society, past and present. The Finnish education system is now known worldwide for its excellent results in most international rankings (Sahlberg, 2011). The phenomenon of Finnish schools is so popular that they have even observed a kind of “educational tourism” in the country, where teachers, researchers and parents come from around the world to learn about this “educational miracle”. However, very few specialists who have been here have examined the state of multicultural education, even though Finland is increasingly becoming a more and more attractive country for immigrants (Talib et al., 2009). Its diversity soon becomes visible to the eyes and ears, no matter in which part of this country you are. In Finland there are two official languages, Finnish (mostly in every part of the country) and Swedish (the Southern part of the country – Åbo/Turku and Helsinki, on the west coast and partly Oulu – a city in the north) and one autonomous monolingual Swedish area, Åland. This means that in the same country two different languages and cultures live alongside one another without any problems. According to Kristina Bejar (1997), Finland can be described as stable and secure developed country grounded in democracy, with respect for human and minority rights. Finland also could, and should play a role in the construction of a new security order, especially by offering practical examples of how minority rights may be protected. The Finnish experience has been a very positive one, as minorities find their interests well served and the state has not had to devote extensive economic or other resources to solving minority conflicts. Also, the minorities in Finland are few: the Swedish-speaking population, the Sami, Romany Gypsies, Jews, Old Russians and Tartars. Approximately four point six million people out of a total population which is about five million claim Finnish as their first language. The stereotype that this is a nation of introverts and is suspicious of strangers (Dahlgren, 2001) no longer prevails. They see themselves as hospitable, open-minded and trusting. Apart from these minorities, Finland is one of the most homogenous countries in Europe (Bejar, 1997). All of this in total presents this Nordic country as internally consistent, which means that there is enough space for multicultural schools. As the previous data shows, Finland is very diverse by itself and still ready for present-day multiculturalism. According to the Finnish Immigration Service (2015) first residence permits were given to 6,036 families, 5,869 students, 5,436 workers and 1,034 quota refugees. In total that is 20,709 people who were accepted by the country and society. Although there are no figures for multicultural schools and the amount of pupils from other countries, we can assume that they are present in almost in every school and class.

The examples of multicultural practice are based on personal observation completed in a Teaching Training School for Swedish speaking Finns; Vasa Övningskola. It is a Primary and Secondary school ruled by a Swedish speaking university in Finland, Åbo

Akademi based in Åbo (fin.Turku). The main aim of this institution is to teach future teachers through practice under the watchful eye of lecturers and researchers. There are only a few schools like that in this Nordic country, as the University specializes in teacher training. The School was founded in 1684 and since that time it has been educating students from around the world in the teaching profession. From observations conducted as a classroom assistant in a primary unit at Övningsskola, approximately 40% of pupils aged 5 to 12 are of other nationalities than Finnish. Some of them are located in an English department, where they can learn in English (apart from mother tongue lessons in Swedish) or in a general class taught only in Swedish. Usually, years are mixed, so there are 1-2, 3-4 and 5-6 grades according to the rule in the Finnish education system of learning from others who are older and usually better. Teachers claim that it is a natural way of learning, as the better students help the ones with problems. However, in a supportive country such as Finland, we might still find problems (or should we call them challenges?) directly connected with multicultural backgrounds and the Finnish reality.

Challenges and their solutions (A case study from Övningsskola)

In this part there are few issues which every multicultural school has to face to be able to function properly. The most important thing is to develop a multicultural policy, which should be based on the national curriculum. There are mostly list of establishments for teachers and parents which are to help foreign children learn and develop at school as successfully as possible. According to the Finnish curriculum, there should be an individual development programme, suitable learning conditions and a responsible yet supportive approach. Usually, the policy is very individual and based on teachers' experience. In Vasa Övningsskola, according to school staff: *There is a place for every child from any background or educational need. We will do our best to help them adapt to Finnish reality.* That is why every teacher in Finland should have good command of English, so as to communicate with the children in the case of teaching a class with English as a second language. The English Department at the school is a "life buoy" for those unfamiliar with Swedish or Finnish. That helps very efficiently during the first stage of adaptation to the new culture and school environment, as well as helping pupils to interact with other pupils who speak English fluently. Teachers also organize language exchanges, which apart from the benefits to the learning process, helps the children to bond with each other. The actual form is called *Tandem language learning* and is thriving in Finland. The communication process is stable and adequate at the beginning of adaptation. The next challenge is to create a strategy for teaching the national language (in the case of this school, mainly Swedish, with Finnish as a second official language). The assimilation of this language is evenly distributed throughout the course and it is strongly supported by additional activities such as reading easy books, watching cartoons and listening to stories about Finnish culture and history. Gebhard (2006) states that, *(Regular ESL teachers) are usually very devoted and caring, work long hours, are often quite*

talented at teaching. But, most say it is worth it! These people experience the hopes and dreams, the struggles and successes of individuals and complete families. The relationship often goes well beyond simply teaching English, since the students often invite the teachers into their lives and expect the teachers and tutors to reciprocate. Often, the bond between a teacher and a learner helps them to learn English faster and control the difference between students. In case all these actions are not enough, school should provide (and usually does) a class assistant who speaks the child's mother tongue. But that is very rare in the case of Övningsskola. as most teachers claimed that English skills are getting better and better every year and children are communicating well without using their first language. Furthermore, another big challenge, and the most serious one, is to carry out a solid psychological diagnosis with a teenager who does not speak either the national language or English fluently. According to Kernaghan (2015), *Teachers reported difficulty in being able to discern between the language barrier and a potential learning problem or special educational need for newcomer pupils. This was problematic in terms of being able to communicate with newcomer pupils to understand their needs, assess their progress and ensuring that they could access the Curriculum.* On top of this, classroom assistants, bilingual teaching assistants and educational psychologists should be present in every school where there is a multicultural pupil. Their presence might be important to resolve development diagnosis misunderstandings, or trouble with understanding because of the language block. This also applies to gifted students, who are truly talented but for whom conversation in a foreign language is difficult at first. The educational challenges presented above are those most commonly noticed and mentioned by teachers as issues caused by multiculturalism.

Opportunities (A case study from Övningsskola)

Apart from being focused on social and cultural obstacles, let us move to opportunities which can truly change a whole school's way of functioning. What presents the greatest value for kids and teachers is the precious opportunity to observe and experience different customs and get to know each others' national traditions better. The finest example from Vasa is a Culture Day, which is organized by exchange students and teachers together with the children once per semester. The aim of this is to help better understand the world's diversity and also to draw pupils' attention to other pupils' origins. Celebrating different cultures and organizing multicultural events and workshops are further wonderful responses to help the newcomers' parents and children socialize with school staff and other parents. This is important in terms of the willingness to continue and support the work, as well as for tolerance and mutual understanding. Sharing positive ideas with other similar schools also encourages them to organize similar events in their local communities. This kind of action is very much connected with the "Meet the World" project which is a part of Environmental studies (school subject from grade 1 to 6). The intention is to have a closer look at particular parts of the globe. The teacher divides a class into

pairs, giving them a country to “meet”. They have a month to collect all the material, photos and objects linked with their choice. A common way to present information is by creating an album with the “book creator” application. When all the projects are ready, the children present them in front of the class, sharing the gathered information with others. According to Ford and Harris (2012) this kind of pupils’ cooperation, *includes opportunities for students to work together, to learn from each other, and to rely on each other*. During geography, music, physical education or science class, newcomers can become specialists and give their peers more detailed information. Presenting a national song in the school choir, talking about geography, *et cetera* is a great opportunity to see where they are from and where their country is located, or maybe even how far away it is. All of these things develop the children’s sense of respect, cultural awareness and understanding. All of the above supports the idea of the Finnish educational system, which is meant to be fit for everyone, because school should be like your home: supportive, open-minded and charitable, no matter what problems you have. This way children develop their value systems, internalize openmindedness and understanding of diversity. This way of raising children has a strong impact on society, which seems to be keener on accepting the situation of immigrants.

Summary

In conclusion, there is an unknown number of multicultural schools in the world. In some countries there are more than in others, but that does not mean that they do not exist worldwide. As James Banks said: “Multicultural education is an idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school.” The substantive conclusion is that multicultural schools can change the world. They are able to reduce racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation and religious prejudices. This discipline, from a methodological perspective, *Is determined by the principles of freedom, democracy and human rights*. That is why all children around the world should have access to an identical education no matter their language, orientation, social class, religious, gender, ethnic or racial background. This school and many others exist just because the Finnish educational system and society are supportive, open-minded and trusting of human variety. There is a saying that if you know the answer, the problem is not difficult anymore. This school has found a way to take advantage of multiculturalism, so the challenges are not that tough any longer. As teachers, we need to remember that, *children will become knowledgeable citizens of the world, by not only learning from their own cultures, but also from the cultures of others in ways that will help them to be critical, reflective thinkers and doers*.

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