

Professorial Views of the Use of Diversity Experiences to Develop Students' Critical Thinking Skills in the Pakistani College Context

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Abstract

This study explored the interplay of diversity experiences and critical thinking of Pakistani college students and determined how the classroom experience supported and exposed students to diversity and critical thinking. The researcher conducted teachers' interviews to gather data in a college in Pakistan. Teachers were asked to respond to a series of questions about the influence of diversity experiences on student critical thinking, and some potential challenges teachers face in promoting diversity experiences and subsequent critical thinking skills of Pakistani students. Findings of this study indicated that Pakistani professors felt diversity experiences influenced student dispositions to think critically. Also, the teachers indicated potential challenges in promoting diversity experiences such as a lack of structural diversity in the college and non-alignment of prescribed curriculum with diversity experiences. The implications for the use of diversity experiences to promote critical thinking skills of the college students are considered.

Introduction

There is a plethora of research available on effects of diversity experiences on the range of student educational outcomes such as critical thinking skills, student deep learning, and effective teaching (Chang, 1999; Hurado, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Tahir, 2015). Colleges and universities advertise critical thinking as a particularly salient student educational outcome (Loes, et al., 2012). According to Loes (2009), the development of critical thinking is especially important because students in the 21st century are expected to change careers numerous times after graduating and they will be required to be problem solvers who are able to quickly adapt to a new situation.

Gurin et al. (2002) highlight that exposure to diversity experiences would develop student complex forms of thought as they encounter new or novel situations that challenge current and comfortable modes of thinking. The researchers point out that these experiences could be given in classroom settings, and can also occur in other contexts when students confront others who are different. These confrontations would challenge students to think or act in new ways. These scholars also suggest that without experiences

with diversity, students run the risk of making commitments to ideas, groups, or careers without exploring options. Thus, diversity experiences help college challenge students to develop a meaningful philosophy of life and shape their identities from an expanded set of choices that encourage them to make more deliberate commitments to their identities in a view of their role in the society (Astin, 1993; Laird, 2005).

Loes (2009) documents that given the effects of significant and persistent racial segregation, the U.S. colleges and universities provide a unique opportunity for students to interact with diverse people and ideas. However, the body of research that focuses on the potential influence of diversity experiences on the development of the capacity to think critically is small (Loes, Pascarella, & Umbach, 2012). In addition, the research conducted on diversity experiences is Eurocentric. There is a lack of serious research on diversity experiences of students to promote critical thinking skills in Pakistan. This current study takes a step in this direction given Hoodbhoy's observation that Pakistan's education system discourages questioning and stresses obedience.

Pakistan's educational system, shaped by deeply conservative social and cultural values, discourages questioning and stresses obedience. Progress demands that ultimately the dead hand of tradition be cast aside... in seeking change of values, it will be important.... Critical thought allows individuals to make a revolutionary difference and to invent the future. Else, they will merely repeat the dysfunction of the past (Hoodbhoy, 2009:592).

Student exposure to diversity experiences develops their critical thinking skills and offers greater significance in the conventional context of Pakistan.

The purpose of this study is to examine the interplay of diversity experiences and critical thinking in Pakistani college students, and how these diversity experiences affect the development of critical thinking in Pakistani college students. Finally, this study will suggest the implications for organizations, and provide recommendations that key stakeholders can use to improve diversity experiences for college students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thinking

Critical thinking is comprised of a set of skills that include the ability to identify issues and assumptions, recognize important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence or authority, and deduce conclusions (Furedy & Furedy, 1985). The development of students' critical thinking has been considered as a major pedagogical goal among college and university faculty (McCrae, 2011). A national survey of employers and policy makers revealed a consensus that the disposition as well as the ability to think critically should be a fundamental outcome of higher education (Jones et al., 1995). Critical thinking focuses on a set of skills and attitudes that enable a listener or reader to apply rational criteria to the reasoning of a speaker and writer. Providing learners with frequent opportunities for the practice of evaluation of skills and the examination of attitudes allows them to experiment with critical thought (Brown & Freeman, 2000). Similarly, acknowledgement and comfort with genuine differences in perspectives are elements of critical thinking (Solvang, 2004).

Students will be more likely to engage in effortful and complex modes of thought when they engage new and novel situations that challenge their current and comfortable mode of thinking. According to Pascarella et al. (2014) this often can happen in classroom settings but can also occur in other contexts when students encounter others who are unfamiliar to them, when these encounters challenge students to think and act in new ways, when people and relationships change and produce unpredictability, and when students encounter others who hold different expectations, viewpoints and experiences than they hold.

Diversity

Diversity refers to dissimilarities in traits, qualities, characteristics, beliefs, values, and mannerisms present in self and others. It is displayed through predetermined factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, national origin and sexual orientation. It is also displayed through changeable features such as citizenship, worldviews, language, schooling, religious beliefs, marital, parental, socioeconomic status, and work experiences (Sheets, 2009). Diversity enriches the nation because it provides alternative ways to view the world and solve societal problems (Banks, 2006). Also, diversity enlarges the pool of cultural resources, while at the same time engendering misunderstandings and resentment (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). To effectively work with diversity, differences must be viewed as assets to explore, understand, and incorporate into all aspects of the workplace (Guerra, 2012).

According to Sheets (2009), students should be encouraged to become aware of diversity. They should also examine their prejudices, so that they can

accept differences in themselves and others. Sheets finds that there is the natural connectedness of culture and cognition as factors of diversity in a teaching learning process. Drawing on research that speaks to the social aspects of cognitive development, scholars point out that students will be more likely to engage in effortful and complex modes of thoughts when they encounter new and novel situations that challenge current and comfort modes of thinking (Pascarella & Umbach, 2012).

Research documents that diversity experiences are associated with gains in critical thinking (e.g., Chang, 1999; Hurtado, 2001). Hurtado (2001) gathered data from over 4,200 students in 309 four-year institutions. Students who studied with someone from a different racial/ethnic background, enrolled in an ethnic studies course, or enrolled in a women's studies course all exhibited gains in critical thinking. According to Chang, cultural diversity is inevitable in the US educational systems. It will be far more enlightening if the policy agenda that is spreading internationally accommodates diversity in educational values and practices (Chang, 1999). Because invisible aspects of culture are often misunderstood and can result in deficit thinking, it is critical to highlight and understand their influence for inequitable practices, policies, and procedures to be revealed, addressed and transformed (Guerra, 2012).

Diversity Experiences

The notion of diversity experiences can be interpreted in many ways. The main focus of this research paper is on the diversity experiences for college students. Pascarella (2006) argued that researchers need to investigate the increasing diversity of the American higher education population by exploring interaction effects of diversity experiences and critical thinking. Pascarella stated that recent demographic changes in student populations may not have the same impact for all students.

Gurin (1999) provided a useful framework for understanding concepts related to diversity experiences. She described diversity experiences as a manifestation of structural, classroom, and informal interactional diversity. Structural diversity is essentially the composition of racial/ethnic minorities on campus and does not consider interactions among groups; rather, it simply reflects the numbers of racial and ethnic minorities. Classroom diversity is an incorporation of information about diverse groups into the curriculum and reflects the extent to which students reported that they had been exposed to diversity issues in their classes. Informal interactional diversity refers to opportunities for students with diverse backgrounds to interact with one another in a variety of settings on campus. Using Cooperative Institutional Research Program data, he found that diversity experiences have positive effects on self-reported increases in knowledge and skill. On the other hand, Hurtado et al. (1998) argued that structural diversity is the most important of the three dimensions of diversity experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study explored the use of diversity experiences to promote critical thinking skills of the college students and uncovered the potential challenges in promoting diversity experiences in Pakistani college classrooms. The researcher selected a college which has been operating since 1952 in the Pakistan public sector. Five professors were interviewed. Permission was requested from each professor to participate in the research process and anonymity was guaranteed. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes and was audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Subjects were also guaranteed confidentiality regarding the tape recording of their comments during the interview.

The internal validity of a qualitative study is the extent to which the design and data gathered allow the researcher to draw conclusions about relationships within the data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Interview questions in this study were designed to obtain rich, thick, and descriptive qualitative data regarding the research topic so that clear connections between the questions and responses could be drawn. A trained qualitative researcher reviewed the research notes and affirmed the patterns and discrepancies within the commentary that had been identified. Data analysis was conducted by coding using categories based on the research questions as the guiding framework to identify patterns, and by the clustering of codes to discover emerging themes.

Research Question

The study was guided by the following research question:

How do college teachers describe the influence of diversity experiences on the development of critical thinking skills of students, and what are the potential challenges in promoting diversity experiences in Pakistani college classrooms?

FINDINGS

Diversity Experiences and Critical Thinking

Overall, professors reported students' exposure to diversity experiences in the classroom directly affect their critical thinking skills, ability to learn, and their overall academic performance. There was a pattern in their responses when the teachers elaborated that these diversity experiences contributed to their student self-growth and helped them make informed choices in their future.

According to a teacher:

college year is a suitable time to develop students' thinking skills. When young people enter college, they have a unique life opportunity to explore diverse ideas, world views, and different persons. (Interview transcript, T1)

Teachers responded that through engagement with diversity students learn about perspectives, experiences, and ways of living differently than their own and those they have previously encountered. They pointed out that this engagement makes them more knowledgeable. The students learn how to show commitment, develop a mature attitude, and become socially responsible. A teacher elaborated:

I think by involving them in diverse experiences, we, as teachers, enable our students to concentrate and push themselves further when there are people of other backgrounds and how to work with them. This promotes creativity, as well as better education, as those with differing viewpoints can collaborate to create solutions (Interview transcript, T3).

The teachers pointed out that without diversity experiences, students run the risk of growing a fixed mindset. They concluded that without diversity experience, students would never do out of box thinking.

Overall, it was evident that these professors believed in the importance of diversity experiences in developing thinking skills among the college students in Pakistan.

Range/Exposure of Diversity Experiences to Pakistani College Students

Teachers were asked to comment on strategies they utilized for promoting diversity in the classroom. There was a pattern in teacher responses when they discussed that the traditional assessment system left little room for student involvement in diversity experiences. All of them indicated that education in Pakistan mostly encouraged cramming without comprehension, and discouraged constructive critical inquiry and productive reasoning. They further commented that students would be exposed to critical thinking if the current academic context provided them a range of diversity experiences. These professors stated that they attempted to expose their students to diversity experiences to some extent. For instance, most of the teachers responded that they encouraged their students to share different views and perspectives on a topic.

A teacher stated:

When I involve students in a discussion that challenges their previous assumption, they listen to my argument and seek clarification. They argue for their point of view in the class. I let them defend their thoughts with logic and reason. For instance, their intense feelings of hatred for a neighboring country were hard for me to resist. However, I used stories about the Holocaust and the wars in countries to illustrate the senselessness of hatred and intolerance. (Interview transcript, T5)

A teacher pointed out that he manipulated the curriculum topics to give students a diverse exposure. "I ask students to make an expanded set of choices and

encourage them to make more deliberate commitments to their identities in a view of their role in society." When probed how did this impact critical thinking skills? Three teachers responded that they could engage students in meaningful interactions while in college. Teachers reported improvement in active thinking, self-confidence, and academic skills of students. Secondly, they indicated that their institute had a coeducation structure where the presence of male and female students from different backgrounds created a culture of competence, creativity, and compassion and better prepared students to take on real-life challenges. Thirdly, their institute involved students in diversity courses such as "women harassment at workplace."

They believed these experiences helped students develop their critical thinking skills by expanding their worldviews through analytical and problem-solving skills. The teachers explained that the student exposure to diversity experiences increased their awareness of social issues and concern for improving society. All the teachers agreed that by engaging students in diversity workshops they could reduce student gender bias, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

A teacher reported:

I think these diversity experiences not only develop student critical thinking skills but also improve classroom environments. Students feel that differences and diversity are to be considered for mutual respect and understanding. (Interview transcript, T4)

Challenges in Promoting Diversity Experiences

All the teachers reported several challenges to promote diversity experiences to develop critical thinking skills of college students in Pakistan. Teachers explained how it was difficult for them to provide a unique opportunity for students to interact with diverse people and ideas. A teacher pointed out that one challenge to promote diversity experience and critical thinking occurred due to the prevalent culture.

Because of the cultural stereotypes, students don't find it comfortable to argue with their teachers in the classroom. The traditional interpretation of teacher-student relation, suggests that teacher is a spiritual father. Parents categorically dictate to their children that a teacher is like their spiritual father, therefore, they are morally obliged to submit their will before teachers, and refrain from any such act which socially amounts to impertinence... As a teacher I try to shake off their belief system but at times it becomes very tough (Interview transcript, T4).

The second factor was a lack of structural diversity in Pakistani educational institutions. A teacher commented:

I think that diversity is promoted when students are placed in a multicultural environment....When there

are racial/ethnic minorities on campus... When there are students from different countries. In the case of Pakistan, there is the homogeneous community. (Interview transcript, T3)

There was a pattern in teachers' responses when they described that the country's apparent religious homogeneity led policy makers to design curricula that gave little room for the growth of diversity and thinking skills among college students.

designing a curriculum that does not promote diversity experiences....and guided by the belief that such design would lead to a national unity. In this context, the role of the teacher becomes very important. He must expose the students to themes of respect and restraint, religious equality and interfaith or inter-sectarian harmony. (Interview transcript, T2).

When asked how did teachers deal with a lack of structural diversity in Pakistani educational institutions, a teacher responded:

The narration of the golden epoch of Islamic history is my favorite one in the classroom. The students love to listen to stories of the Ottoman Empire. This was a time of much balancing of difference, learning from the exchange, an acknowledgment of the good things that can be born of encountering something other than exact copies of ourselves. (Interview transcript, T1).

The teachers explained that they worked to improve the classroom atmosphere and to celebrate and acknowledge all students. They stated that they arranged activities that encouraged students to communicate and collaborate. Overall teachers commented that the bureaucratic hurdles and stresses to complete a prescribed course outline in a given time frame were significant hurdles in promoting diversity experiences that develop critical thinking skills among the students.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored how Pakistani professors viewed and approached the interplay between diversity experiences and the development of critical thinking in college students and investigated how the class room experience supported and exposed students to diversity and critical thinking. Teachers were asked to respond to a series of questions about the influence of diversity experiences on student critical thinking skills, the types of diversity experiences and some potential challenges in promoting diversity experiences and critical thinking skills of Pakistani students. Given the evidence from higher education in the US research on critical thinking and diversity (Gurin et al., 2002; Laird, 2005; Pascarella, et al., 2014), diversity experiences seem to influence student dispositions to think critically and this study confirms how diversity experiences in Pakistani college enhances critical thinking skills in this context as well.

Professors' commentary provides solid pieces of evidence for the benefit of diversity experiences. According to Gurin et al. (2002) diversity enables students to perceive differences both within groups and between groups and is the primary reason why significant numbers of students of various groups are needed in the classroom. This study also supports the notion that the attitude and disposition that students bring to diversity experiences may function as a catalyst or barrier to continued development both affective and cognitive (Laird, 2005).

Gurin et al. point out that a diverse student body is clearly a resource and a necessary condition for engagement with diverse peers that permit higher education to achieve its goals. Therefore, higher education practitioners and administrators should endeavor to make diversity a key focus of the curriculum as this emphasis will likely lead to the development of critical thinking in college students well after college graduation.

During the interviews with Pakistani college teachers, the major finding was teachers' frustration with the existing curriculum. According to them the curriculum gives little room for the growth of diversity experience and critical thinking skills of the college students. This finding is aligned with research findings of Pascarella et al. (2012) who indicated the need to work on curriculum for promoting diversity and critical thinking in the classroom.

For instance, Solvang (2004) noted that curriculum that promotes diverse experiences requires both critical thinking skills and the engagement with diversity. He asserted that most first year college students had not yet developed these skills. Solvang explored ways of teaching and applying critical thinking within the context of an introductory religion course. He found that first year college students could learn the content of a discipline and function in a pluralistic world if the curriculum offered them the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills within multiple perspectives.

According to Astin (1993), curricular diversity experiences bring opportunities to confront racial and multicultural issues with widespread benefits to student cognitive and affective development. Astin pointed out issues of race, culture, and ethnicity represent promising curricular subject matter for confronting some of the dilemmas that many contemporary students seem to be avoiding. In Pakistan, curriculum developers should incorporate diverse topics in the syllabi for college students so that curriculum promotes student diversity experiences.

In this study, professors' responses indicate a lack of structural diversity in Pakistani educational institutions. Gurin (1999) provided a useful framework for understanding the interrelationship between diversity experiences and critical thinking and pointed out the significance of structural diversity. In this context, it is also important to note that diversity experiences do not take place in isolation on college campuses and the role that campus racial/ethnic climates play in influencing individual diversity experiences.

Hurtado et al. (1998) concluded that the most important dimension of diversity experiences is structural diversity. They pointed out that an appropriate racial climate and increasing structural diversity on college campuses is the first requirement to enhance the educational value of diversity experiences. This finding is aligned with Gurin et al. (2002) as these scholars also suggest that college and universities should provide a supportive environment in which disequilibrium and experimentation can occur by increasing interaction among diverse peers and help faculty and students manage conflict when individuals share different points of view. The presence of racially diverse peers is also a necessary condition for realizing an educational benefit of college diversity (Bowman, 2010). In this context, policy makers and administrators in Pakistan should consider structural diversity as necessary criterion for improving the campus climate for diversity as a dearth of structural diversity may preclude meaningful diversity experiences on campus.

Colleges and universities should conduct staff development programs so that everybody on campus becomes familiar with research on good practices for building a diverse climate on college campuses. Hurtado et al. (1998) suggested that flexibility in admission practices and financial aid policies can contribute to cultivate such an environment in the US context.

If critical thinking as educational objective is desired (Brown & Freeman, 2000), college administrators and faculty should be more serious and purposeful in building the structure for engagement in diversity experiences. This current study in Pakistan indicates that diversity experiences have important implications for the development of critical thinking in college students. Thus, an institutional policy based on programmatic efforts to weave exposure to diverse individuals, ideas, and perspectives into students' lives may serve to enhance the intellectual mission of a college (Pascarella et al., 2012). Administrators and educators should arrange curricula and structural activities so that college students can experience diversity. They can start by pointing out the importance of student heterogeneity in terms of color, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Similarly, interactional activities such as workshops, seminars, interaction of students of different races can offer students diversity experiences and promote their critical thinking skills.

This study of the Pakistani context revealed that professors' responses indicated that they attempted to provide diversity experiences in the classroom. However, students need more classroom diversity experiences. According to researchers (Astin, 1993; Gurin et al., 2002; Laird, 2005); classroom diversity is an important indicator of development of student critical thinking. Laird (2005) suggested that diversity courses and positive interaction with diverse peers can be a mechanism to develop critical thinking among college students. Also, in many college campuses there is a marked growth in thinking skills of students through exposure to interactional diversity rather than to diversity topics covered in classrooms (Pascarella et al., 2012).

These findings hint at the scale of classroom diversity that should not be too superficial to capture genuine classroom exposure to diversity experiences.

Gurin et al. (2002) suggested that helping faculty develop a pedagogy that makes the most of the diverse perspectives and student backgrounds in their classrooms can foster active thinking, intellectual engagement, and democratic participation. Therefore, it is suggested that Pakistani colleges and many other national colleges should provide a continued development and offering of curricular opportunities for students and teachers to engage in multiple aspects of diversity. The classroom teachers should provide such opportunities to students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to interact respectfully and productively.

Findings of this research study in the Pakistani context reinforce the argument that engagement in diversity experiences may have important implications for the development of the critical thinking skills of college students. Thus, an institutional policy that encourages student exposure to diverse individuals, ideas, and perspectives may produce better citizens for society. One limitation of this study is that the results obtained may not be generalizable to every classroom. Future research should examine the interplay of diversity experience and critical thinking in a quantitative investigation.

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