

Exploring primary school teachers' multicultural competence and its correlates

Yirgalem Alemu

College of Education and Behavioural Sciences, Haramaya University, Ethiopia.

Accepted 15 June, 2017

ABSTRACT

The study examined multicultural competence of primary school in-service teachers at one of the local teachers training colleges. Data was collected from 183 in-service teachers who were randomly selected from all batches of students (first year to fourth year). Multicultural teaching competence scale that had 44 items was used as an instrument to collect data. The result revealed that the majority of the participants were sure about knowledge dimension of the competence scale but not sure about their skill competence. The t-test result showed that the participants who had taken multicultural training had significantly higher mean score in awareness, knowledge, and skill domains compared to the participants who had not taken multicultural instruction/training. The number of languages participants could speak was also a good predictor of multicultural competence. However, age and teaching experiences, stream and gender were not significantly related to multicultural competence.

Keywords: Multicultural competence, quality education, in-service teachers, primary school.

E-mail: yalemu1982@gmail.com. Tel: (251) 911 91 01 94.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia experienced a change of government in 1991 that led to constitutional and educational reforms in the country. These constitutional provisions and educational reforms facilitated access to education to the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia. For instance, Article 39 of the constitution states, "Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history" (The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1995, p. 96). This constitutional provision was reinforced by reforms in the education system of the country. The educational reforms include a new education policy. One of the objectives of the Education and Training Policy (ETP) (1994) is to "... bring up citizens who respect human rights, stand for the well-being of people, as well as for equality, justice and peace endowed with democratic culture and discipline" (ETP, p. 7). The educational reforms also include educational administration, new school curricula, and the use of languages of nationalities as media of instruction.

The constitutional provisions and educational reforms

instilled a sense of freedom and pride among nations in the country. Encouraged by these reforms and expansions of schools in their vicinities, people from all corners of the country started to send their children to schools. For example, during the first two Education Sector Development Programs (ESDP I and II) enrolment rates in primary schools had risen from 3 million in 1994/95 to 15.5 million in 2008/09-an increase over 500% (MoE, 2010). People from different regions, cultures, languages, socio-economic status, sex, age, and religions backgrounds had obtained access to education. Currently, classrooms in Ethiopia are more diverse than any time before.

These diverse classrooms call for an educational practice that offers schoolchildren with the opportunities to appreciate their differences, while enabling them to acquire the skills, attitudes and knowledge essential for making a living within diversities. Scholars like Nieto (1996) stresses that the education system of the twenty-first century demand schools to be responsive to pupils regardless of their ethnic origin, social class, gender, language, or mental health and physical disabilities. This

again calls for teachers to be competent in their teaching approaches.

Multicultural teaching competence is any effort taken by a teacher to accomplish multicultural education. Fenwick et al. (2011) consider multicultural competence of teachers as interactive process in which teachers continuously explore their attitudes and beliefs about multicultural issues, increase their understanding of specific populations, and examine the impact this awareness and knowledge has on what and how they teach.

Why primary education?

To help people to be multiculturally literate, education and schools can be taken as a gate way. Many scholars (Ramsey, 1982; Derman-Sparks, 1989; Sleeter, 2002; Abdullah, 2009) emphasize the belief that primary education should be regarded as a critical site for introducing ethnic and diversity issue through the curriculum. The reason is that children are not born with attitudes that cause them to discriminate against others. However, they quickly learn such attitudes as they watch and learn from what others do and say (Ramsey, 1982). They also begin to notice differences and construct classificatory and evaluative categories very early (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Lynch and Hanson (1998, cited in Abdullah, 2009) stated that the "prime time" for emotional and social development in children is birth to 12 years of age. Therefore, it is better to "catch" them as early as possible before they develop negative stereotypes and biases (Abdullah, 2009).

Previous studies on multicultural competence revealed different results. For example, the study conducted by Henkin and Steinmetz (2008) indicated that primary school teachers had high level of cultural awareness, but were unsure on their skill and knowledge. Studies on correlates of multicultural competence revealed that female teachers were ready and willing to engage in multicultural training than their male counterparts (Murtha et al., 2006). Still other studies have found out that multicultural competence is positively related to levels of training (Tulman and Watts, 2008) but not to teachers' years of teaching experience (DeJaeghere and Zhang, 2008).

As far as the researcher knows, studies on multicultural education practice are very limited in Ethiopia. The existing ones focus on policy issues than practice, for example Belete (2011). Even though policy provisions are the first step to multicultural education, policy alone can do nothing to install concepts of diversity among students unless teachers are competent at it. Other diversity-based researches were conducted at University level focusing on diversity management, for example, Abebaw and Tilahun (2007) and Tilahun (2007). Still other researchers like Zelalem (2008) focused on diversity contents of primary school textbooks. However,

in all those studies multicultural competence of the primary operators, that is, teachers, is lacking. The implementation of multicultural education requires teachers who examine their own values, knowledge, and teaching practices about diversity to avoid biased multicultural education (Brown and Marchant, 2002). The purpose of the present study was, therefore, to fill in those gaps of research on the area. This study tried to explore the competence of primary school teachers to multicultural education by focusing on dimensions of awareness, knowledge, attitude and skill and its correlates.

Research objectives

The main objective of this study was to explore teacher's understanding and practices regarding multiculturalism in primary schools in the Eastern part of Ethiopia. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify forms of diversity that is most prevalent in Ethiopian primary schools context.
2. Assess participants' exposure to multicultural instruction or training.
3. Examine primary school teacher's competence regarding multicultural education.
4. Explore demographic correlates of multicultural competence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and design

The study employed cross sectional survey research design. The participants were 183 in-service primary school teachers who attend summer class at Harer College of Teacher Education. This College is located in the Eastern part of Ethiopia. Students from different parts of the country including Dire Dawa City Administration, Hareri Region, Southern Nations and Nationalities People Regional State, East and West Harerge Zones of Oromiya Region come to attend their education at this College. With the help of the program coordinators of the summer education program, representative sample were drawn from all batches (first year to fourth year) of the two streams of education (natural science stream and social science stream).

Instrument

The data-collecting instrument had two parts. The first part was about participant's demographic information. It included such information as sex, teaching experience, number of language spoken, stream of study and other variables that were believed to be important to the study.

The second part contained multicultural teaching competence scale. The four dimensions of multicultural competence model, that is, *awareness, knowledge, attitude and skills* were used in the present study. The scale had 44 items scored according to a 5-point Likert scale format ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Awareness element involves being aware of one's own cultural values, prejudices and biases and how these

dimensions influence one's action (Fenwick et al., 2011; Sue et al., 1992; Du Praw and Axner, 1997). This sub-scale contained seven items. Sample item includes, "I am aware social barriers exist". Multicultural knowledge dimension of the scale denotes teachers' knowledge of major socio-historical and current sociopolitical realities, and cultural dynamics (e.g., ethnic identity, gender socialization, etc) (Sue et al., 1982). The sub-scale contained 14 items. Example of item in this sub-scale includes, "I recognize the social and political implications of diversity". Attitudes dimension refers to positive or negative views about diversity (Cho and De Castro-Ambrosetti, 2006). The sub-scale contained 11 items. A sample item is, "I find it rewarding to teach pupils of multiethnic origin". Multicultural teaching skills represent teachers' self-reported skills or behaviours in implementing culturally sensitive teaching practices (Fenwick et al., 2011). This sub-scale contains 12 items. Example of this sub-scale includes, "I adapt lessons according to the student's cultural background". Higher scores indicate higher levels of multicultural teaching competence. Some items were worded negatively to reduce response bias but reverse scored during analysis. In the present study, the reliability of the subscales (as estimated by alpha coefficients) were Awareness = 0.79, Knowledge = 0.75, Attitude = 0.84 and Skill = 0.88.

Data analysis technique

The collected information were analyzed using statistical tools like correlation analysis, ANOVA, regression analysis and percentage.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics

Data was collected from 183 participants, of these 52.8% were male and the remaining 47.2% were female with average age of 27.5 ($SD = 7.05$). Regarding academic features the majority of the participants were from Social sciences stream (56.4%) and fourth year students (44.4). Participants teaching experience range from 2 years to 33 years (mean = 7.29, $SD = 5.39$). Another demographic characteristic of participants were regional states they teach and their language skill. This is shown in Table 1.

As it can be seen from Table 1, the majority of Participants were from Oromiya Regional state (51.4%) followed by Dire Dawa city Administration (32.2%). Regarding language skills, 42.4% reported that they could speak three different languages. Language skill of participants seems different across regions. As it can be seen from Table 1, 0% of participants from SNNP, 22.2% participants from Hareri region, 42.1% of participants from DDCA and 53.8% of participants from Oromiya regional state reported that they could speak three different languages. One-way analysis of variance was used to test if there were significant mean difference among the regional states regarding language skill. The result indicated that there was a statistically significant difference at $p < .05$ for the four regional states [$F(3, 173) = 8.73, p = .00$]. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for participants from SNNP ($M = 1.62, SD = 1.08$) was significantly lower compared to participants from DDCA [$(M = 2.52, SD =$

$1.00), p = 000$] and Oromiya regional state [$(M = 2.58, SD = 0.53), p = 000$].

The first objective of the study was to assess the type of diversity participants' face in their daily contact with their students. In the open-ended statement they were given, the majority of the participants mentioned *gender* and some mentioned *socioeconomic status* as diversity variables. The socioeconomic status diversity was expressed as "some students come to school without having breakfast".

The second objective of the study was to assess participants' exposure to multicultural course or instruction. The majority of the participants (72.2%) responded that they did not take any instruction related to multiculturalism. Participants were also asked if they took any workshop or seminar on multiculturalism, only 4.9% responded positively. Generally, the results showed that participants had poor exposure to multicultural training.

The other objective of the research was to explore multicultural competence of participants using the dimensions of awareness, attitudes, knowledge and skills. Out of a five-point scale, participants mean score was 3.3 for awareness, 4.0 for knowledge, 3.8 for attitude and 3.2 for skill domains. The results fall between 3 (not sure) and 4 (somewhat agree). Participants seem to have better multicultural knowledge (mean = 4.01) compared to multicultural skill (mean = 3.2). Different statistics were used to see if multicultural competence differed among participants in different categories including sex, regional states, year of study (batch), and among participants who have taken multicultural course/training and those who have not taken.

Independent sample t-test was used to test if there were significant mean difference between male and female participants and among participants who have taken multicultural course/training and those who have not. The result revealed that there was no significant mean difference in all domains of multicultural competence between male and female teachers. However, the test result revealed significant mean difference in competence domains between participants who have taken multicultural training and those who have not. Accordingly, participants who have taken multicultural training had significantly higher mean score in awareness ($M = 25.41, SD = 3.49$) compared to participants who have not taken multicultural training ($M = 23.16, SD = 4.24: t(170) = 3.27, p = .001$). Similarly, participants who have taken multicultural training had significantly higher mean score in multicultural knowledge ($M = 58.81, SD = 8.12$) compared to participants who have not taken multicultural training ($M = 55.37, SD = 7.58: t(164) = 2.53, p = .012$). There was also significant mean difference in multicultural skill domain such that participants who have taken multicultural training had higher mean score ($M = 54.61, SD = 15.91$) compared to participants who have not taken multicultural training ($M = 49.29, SD = 6.72: t(170) = 3.08, p = .002$). However, inspection of ANOVA results showed no significant mean

Table 1. Number of languages participants can speak per regional state cross tabulation.

| Number of languages participants can speak | | Regional states of participants | | | | Total |
|--|-----------------|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | | Oromiya | Hareri | DDCA | SNNP | |
| 1 | Count | 0 | 2 | 9 | 12 | 23 |
| | % within Region | .0% | 22.2% | 15.8% | 60.0% | 13.0% |
| | % of Total | .0% | 1.1% | 5.1% | 6.8% | 13.0% |
| 2 | Count | 40 | 5 | 18 | 6 | 69 |
| | % within Region | 44.0% | 55.6% | 31.6% | 30.0% | 39.0% |
| | % of Total | 22.6% | 2.8% | 10.2% | 3.4% | 39.0% |
| 3 | Count | 49 | 2 | 24 | 0 | 75 |
| | % within Region | 53.8% | 22.2% | 42.1% | .0% | 42.4% |
| | % of Total | 27.7% | 1.1% | 13.6% | .0% | 42.4% |
| 4 | Count | 2 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 6 |
| | % within Region | 2.2% | .0% | 5.3% | 5.0% | 3.4% |
| | % of Total | 1.1% | .0% | 1.7% | .6% | 3.4% |
| 5 | Count | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| | % within Region | .0% | .0% | 5.3% | 5.0% | 2.3% |
| | % of Total | .0% | .0% | 1.7% | .6% | 2.3% |
| Total | Count | 91 | 9 | 57 | 20 | 177 |
| | % within Region | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| | % of Total | 51.4% | 5.1% | 32.2% | 11.3% | 100.0% |

SNNP = Southern Nations and Nationalities People Regional State.
DDCA = Dire Dawa City Administration.

difference among participants from different regional states and different batches on the four competence domains.

The correlates of multicultural competence were also computed. The Pearson product moment correlation test result at 0.05 level of confidence showed that the number of language a person speaks had significant positive relationship with knowledge ($r = .449$, $p = .000$), attitude ($r = .278$, $p = .027$), and skill ($r = .220$, $p = .004$). Participants age was significantly related to knowledge domain ($r = .224$, $p = .034$), but not to other domains. Teaching experience, unfortunately, was not significantly related to any of the competence domains. Number of language is significantly related to knowledge, even when the influences of age, sex and teaching experiences were controlled. However, age was not significantly related to knowledge when number of language was controlled. This means that language moderates the relationship between age and knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to explore multicultural

competence of in-service primary school teachers. The first objective of the study was to identify the type of diversity in-service teachers experience in their day-to-day school duties. The majority of the participants stated gender issue. This seems compatible with the different governmental and non-governmental organizations reports of gender imbalance in enrolment and achievement at all educational levels. A country wide study about quality education by Amare et al. (2006) indicated that gross enrolment rate (GER) for grades 1 to 8 in Oromia for 2004/2005 was 7 percent above the national average. However, the gender disparity rate was very high. GER for boys was 100.5 percent for grades 1 to 8 compared to 74.3 percent for girls. The same study revealed similar gender gaps between boys and girls in SNNP. In this region GER for boys in grades 1 to 8 was 91.7 percent and for girls it was 66.0 percent. The enrolment disparity continues to higher grade levels. For example, UNESCO (2011) report indicates that for every 100 boys enrolled in secondary education, there are approximately 77 girls only. The same report indicates that Over 1.8 million adolescent girls were out of school in 2009. The problem of girls' education is not only enrolment, but also achievement and drop-out. In 2009,

only 41% of girls survived to the last grade of primary education and there were only 30% enrolled in secondary education (UNESCO, 2011).

To narrow down the gender gap, the Ethiopian government has taken different measures including the drafting of new laws and policies. For instance, the focus of Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) I & II were to improve access to education for girls. To achieve this, a gender mainstream guideline and a five-year female education strategy was developed (MoE, 2005). Schools were made friendlier to girls, more female teachers were employed to give support to girls and community awareness raising activities were made. As a result, an increase of 75.6% girls' enrolment was achieved from 1999/2000 to 2004/05 (MoE, 2005). That is why the participants in the present research mentioned gender as diversity element that they are dealing with. It is the writer's believe that there are other diversity elements in the primary schools like language, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Such diversities need to be brought on the board so that teachers can deal about it.

The result of the present research also revealed that the participants had high level multicultural knowledge and attitude; however, they were unsure about their skill and awareness. It is known that knowledge should be translated in to action in order to get the intended objectives. Participants of the present research lack the "core" domain of multicultural competence, i.e., skill. This needs great considerations from the sides of policy planners and curriculum developers.

It seems that training on multiculturalism has a positive impact on multicultural competence. Participants who had taken training on multiculturalism had significantly higher mean score in awareness, knowledge and skill domains compared to participants who had never taken any training. However, the majority of the participants (72.2%) reported to have never taken any training related to multiculturalism. The Ministry of Education document indicates that, "primary school textbooks have been based on the realities of the specific region and on the culture and achievements of the local populations" (MoE, 2002:30). Including cultural and diversity component in the textbooks is very appreciable. However, teachers also need to get training on as to how to handle and teach such contents. Still there are criticisms from some authors about the inclusion of diversity contents in the textbooks. For instance, Zelalem (2008) revealed that diversity and multicultural issues were poorly included in the first cycle primary school (1 to 4) textbooks. Two facts need to be considered here. First, the contents of primary school textbooks have to be revisited about the inclusion of diversity and cultural components. Second, curriculum designers are required to include courses on multicultural education in the primary school teacher education curriculum. These help teachers to develop skill in multicultural competence that they are already in short of

it.

Number of language participants speak was the single most predictor of multicultural competence. Language was significantly related to multicultural competence even when the effects of sex, age, teaching experience, and years of education were controlled for. In the present study like the studies of De Jaeghere and Zhang (2008) teachers' years of teaching experience was not significantly related multicultural competence. Participants' age was significantly related to the knowledge domain of multicultural competence. However, age was not significantly related to the knowledge domain when the effects of language were controlled for. This tells that language moderates the relationship between age and multicultural competence.

Language is central to culture and to education. It is one of the major cultural elements that students and teachers bring to schools, classrooms and all interactive processes (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2005). Linguistic competencies are fundamental for the empowerment of the individual and promote "access to other cultures and encourage openness to cultural exchange" (UNESCO, 2006:13). In fact, Abdullah (2009) stated that multilingual and bilingual teachers are an asset to any children's service. The Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia had given due attention to language competency. Other than making mother-tongue as media of instruction for primary school students, upper primary school students are expected to know at least "two additional languages". One for national communication (Amharic language), and another one is for international communication (English language) (MOE, 2002:40). In the present study, about 47.6% of participants could speak at least three different languages. This might have increased participants multicultural knowledge.

The above results indicate that teaching experience or age does not improve teachers' multicultural competence. Teaching in diverse context needs special training than special experience unlike some would think.

Implications of the study

The study revealed that participants who had taken multicultural training had better competence score compared to those who did not take. The study also revealed that teaching experience or age of teachers did not justify multicultural competence. This implies that in-service teachers need to take instruction on multicultural education. *The National Curriculum Framework for Secondary School Teacher Education Program in Ethiopia* includes a 2 Credit hour course named "Teaching in Multicultural Setting". A similar course should be included in the primary school teacher education curriculum so that teachers can develop their skills in addressing diversity issues in the Ethiopian classrooms. A short-term training can also be arranged to

those teachers who are in the in- service program.

Strengths and limitations of the study

Strengths

The diversity of the participants of the study is the first strength. Participants from four regional states (Dire Dawa City Administration, Hareri People Regional State, Oromiya Regional States and Southern Nations and Nationalities People Regional State (SNNP) were represented in the study. The second strength of the study was that the participants' were in-service teachers that had teaching experience that range from 2 to 33 years. They had real experiences of diversity and reflected their day-to-day encounters while filling the questionnaire. The responses they gave were believed to be dependable compared to the responses we would have obtained from pre-service teachers. The last but not the least strength of the study was that teaching competence was measured using scales that had been used by other researchers and tested to be reliable and valid.

Limitations

There are limitations of this study that must not be overlooked in the interpretation of the results. First, the study relied up on self-report instruments to measure key constructs. Self-report measures are usually exposed to self-serving bias. Therefore, the honesty of the participants is presumed but not ascertained. The second limitation is related to the translation of the instrument used in the study. Translating the English instrument to Afan Oromo or Amaregna was difficult. The meaning of some words in English were easily understandable than in the local languages, for example, *stereotype*.

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Citation: Alemu, Y. (2017). Exploring primary school teachers' multicultural competence and its correlates. *African Educational Research Journal*, 5(3): 194-199.
