Diversity Issues: A Concern in Teacher Education Programs in the Ethiopian Higher Institutions

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Introduction

The issues of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism had emerged in education as an agenda in the 18th century and had become the bases for the emergence of sociology of education (Angell, 1928) quoted in Ballantine (1993, p.12) which mainly deals with the relationship of schooling processes, practices and outcomes to the organization of society as a whole (Abdi and Cleghorn, 2005). Thus, different theories that were meant for sociological studies have been applied in studying the social aspects of education; this has brought about the discipline, sociology of education. The dominant theories in sociology, such as functionalism, structural functionalism, conflict, interaction and systemic approach, have become instrumental in studying the social aspects of education. In short, as a number of factors interplay in diversity issues, these theories have complemented one another to investigate the multifaceted social aspects of educational issues.

One of the areas of research in which these theories are applied in the education sector is related to investigate diversity issues which are usually manifested through cultural and ethnic variations and/or similarities. Culture and ethnic backgrounds are social phenomena that discern societies from one another. It seems normal that people of the same cultural background tend to perceive and interpret reality in a similar pattern. That might be why perception and interpretation of reality may vary from society to society. Thus, as a social phenomenon such a difference may influence human behaviors and reveals differences among societies in inter-cultural interactions. These are usually reflected in beliefs, norms, values and statuses. Such differential patterns of behaviors reveal themselves mainly in intercultural communication situations. Thus, it is argued that in most cases, one's pattern of behavior is largely influenced by his/her cultural background (Ballantine, 1993).

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One of the circumstances in which this kind of intercultural interaction happens in multicultural countries is an educational setting such as schools, colleges and universities. In countries with heterogeneous societies, students from different cultural backgrounds usually join the same educational institutions. This is because either each society may not have a capacity to run one for its own or may not be large enough to own one or such a scheme may not be feasible for economic, social and political constraints. In deed, it may not be feasible as such to have an exclusive educational environment for a cultural group in the current global world.

This phenomenon is particularly common in higher educational institutes. Glazer (1997, p. 6) states, "Multiculturalism has established a powerful position in higher education." In most multicultural countries, colleges and universities accept students of varied cultural backgrounds as far as the candidates are eligible and are able to fulfill the entrance requirements. In some areas governments also take affirmative action to integrate disadvantaged cultural groups for educational equity and equal opportunity. When students of such backgrounds mix together, it is likely that each group starts to reflect its cultural differences which may be perceived positively or negatively by other groups. Thus, if the differences are recognized positively, despite their differences, students remain friendly and academic activities will smoothly move and the teaching and learning environment becomes harmonious and conducive. On the other hand, if the differences are seen negatively by other groups, the teaching learning environment may become inconvenient and difficult to run educational activities smoothly. In the latter context the conflict environment is likely to hamper the attainment of educational objectives.

The Role of Education to Promote Social Cohesion within Diversity

It is believed that education itself is a major alternative to overcome hostile cultural and ethnic circumstances and bring about cohesion in the educational environment. In fact, in most cases educational schemes are framed to serve this purpose. Tekeste (1990, p.74) argues, "A major

objective of a national education is the transmission of political and cultural values that enhance the continued existence of the nation or state." Although White and O' Hear (1996) and many others further argue that the aim of a national curriculum is to prepare students to be citizens of a 'liberal democratic society',   the main goal needs also to comprise what Ballantine (1993) stresses as the passing on of the knowledge and behaviors, skills, and dispositions necessary to maintain students' own life and order in their society. This simply means schools are formal institutions in which students acquire occupational, professional and socially up-held morals and values which in turn make the survival of a society possible. Hence, it is believed that students endowed with such social value frameworks could work hard and contribute to their own development as well as to that of their community, and there by bring about a cohesive society.

Thus, the goal of education should take into account aspects such as, the students' background knowledge, values and attitudes, motivation and interest in subject matter, and the relationship they are expected to have with their peers as well as with their teachers (Ballantine, 1993). These factors play pivotal roles in the teaching learning processes and have their own impacts in the roles students play to complete a course of education. As mentioned earlier, in a convenient educational environment, these factors can become good motivators and promote learning. In this regard Ballantine (1993, p.39), moreover, argues: "If learners are active attentive, enjoying themselves and motivated, they are likely to learn better." This kind of teaching learning atmosphere would exist in a multicultural classroom if the important factors mentioned above bring about an encouraging academic atmosphere. In brief, if learners do not feel comfortable to be in a given educational environment and do not feel at home to work on a given material with their peers and teachers, they may not be motivated and the learning brings minimal educational out put.

Classroom Contexts

Classroom interaction is one of the major ways in which diversity can be reflected. Here, interaction is used to refer to dealings that take place

between members of different ethnic groups within higher education classrooms (Abdi and Cleghorn, 2005). This interaction takes place in class when teachers provide group or team tasks or whole class discussion. In these situations students show the degree of their partnership with their classmates as well as with their teachers. If they are not willing to work with anybody in the class and tend to group themselves based on their cultural and ethnic proximity, the classroom activity may not attain its objective.

In the classroom, such divergence may result from students' lack of understanding about others and/or lack of awareness about diversity. This type of misunderstanding could germinate a conflicting atmosphere in the classroom and could also affect the relationships among students and their communication with the faculty. This might in turn be perceived as differential treatment among the participants and may disrupt the smooth flow of the teaching learning process. Hence, it could be argued that these explicit or implicit   kinds of intolerance might greatly contribute to academic failures in institutions at large.

The complex social factors mentioned earlier are brought together into classroom by a teacher through the medium of teaching materials and methodology of presentation of the materials which totally comprise the general educational system- the curriculum. In this regard, Shiundu and Omulando (1992, p.216) argue that:

> Education takes place, not in a vacuum, but in a cultural milieu in which many cultural forces of many kinds affect it. The cultural context of the educational system has a great effect on the disposition and capacity of the children going through the system. Culture is also a dominant basic content of the curricula implemented in schools. The teacher has to be alive to these cultural forces and understand them in order to be able to provide valid instructional options. He must understand the forces influencing student learning and their effect on himself, his students and the school curriculum.

Thus, if the materials used in class, the teacher who implements the teaching learning activities and the curriculum that govern the whole educational system at large do not pay attention to differences and diversity in a classroom where students come from varied cultural backgrounds, misunderstanding, suspicion, and hostility may recur in the teaching learning process. This gap may also extend itself to outside classroom environment such as in lounges, dormitories, and recreational areas in campuses. As a result, differences may be polarized and may become a cause for social upheaval and instability. Therefore, these kinds of hindrances in an educational institute, whatever their form may be, require a thorough study which could help to develop mechanisms of intervention to overcome such barriers.

There are different studies on the impacts of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism in educational settings. Most of them, however, deal with inter-racial situation at schools. Reeds (1994), for instance, reviewed a number of researches and has conducted a study on language awareness of bilingual students and found that "…the teaching of language awareness in schools has raised the self-esteem of bilingual children, increased knowledge and helped to reduce prejudice." (P. 19). Datta (1994) also conducted a similar study on "The effects of cross- ethnic tutor on interracial relationships and academic achievements in a multi-cultural comprehensive school," and observed, "progress was made in social and educational areas – in proportion to the individual's skills and abilities. Friendship between paired pupils extended into other subject areas," (p. 116).

Some similar studies have also been conducted at college level. For instance, Schlesinger (1994) has conducted a study on using curriculum material and teaching methods to reduce prejudice and maintain academic standards in an A level human geography course. He used the same material, but different methods of teaching for experimental and non-experimental groups and found that the curriculum materials that emphasize on positive image of developing countries and that use a mixture of methods are likely to induce positive attitudes in students. Singh (1994) also

investigated how to improve social relationships through teaching methods and concluded that the methods of teaching could help to reduce bias or prejudice that can be attributed to differentials such as race, sex and class.

The Need for a Responsive Teacher Education Program

The main objective of teacher education is to train teachers to adequately play their role - facilitate learning - in a teaching learning environment. On the other hand, this role is highly influenced and in a varying degree determined by the nature of the context in which [the teacher] works. (Mc Donough and Mc Donough, 1995). Thus, the contents of teacher education need to comprise knowledge and skills that help him/her cope with these contextual factors. In this regard, Abdi and Cleghorn (2005, p: 5) also claim, "Teachers need to be prepared for mixed student groups with a range of prior experiences stemming from varied social class, language, and cultural backgrounds." This implies that teachers should be trained with profound instructional options to skillfully handle cultural diversity forces in educational environment. In other words, the contents of teacher training programs need to consider the cultural and ethnic reality of the society in which the education system is implemented

The Ethiopian Contexts

Inter-cultural issues are common in Ethiopia, a multicultural and multinational country, where students of higher education come to a classroom from different cultural backgrounds. These days, it is not uncommon to listen to and read student-student, student-teacher and student-university administration conflicts in higher institutions of learning in the country; most of these conflicts might be attributed to lack of tolerance to diversity - cultural and ethnic differences. There have been a number of incidents of this nature in most of the universities in the country at different times. However, nowadays the magnitude has augmented in most of the higher institutions. Hence, it seems a high time to investigate the impact of this problem so as to overcome it.

In Ethiopia there are more than eighty nations and nationalities and obviously these nations and nationalities have their own cultures and languages. In recognition of this diversity, the Ethiopian Government has proclaimed an educational policy that asserts: "The use of nationality languages as media of instruction is of particular significance as an expression of democratic right for cultural development and improvement of the teaching learning process," for the nations and nationalities (Ministry of Education 1996,p. 93). In fact, there may not be an empirical evidence to refute this proposition in a multicultural society like Ethiopia, because it is argued, "A student's ethnic culture imbues the knowledge and perspectives the student brings from home to the learning environment." (Neiser and Nota, 1999, p. 20). This also implies that one's system of interpreting reality develops and can be framed by parents and the cultural community at large in which he or she is brought up. Thus, when this system is affected by the teaching learning environment due to cultural and ethnic diversity and difference, it might lead not only to educational failure, but also to conflict which might transform itself to disagreement and violence.

The current educational policy encourages nations and nationalities to promote their cultures and languages in primary and secondary education (Gizaw, 2001). Based on this proclamation, most nations and nationalities are preoccupied with promoting their cultures and identity in the first and second educational cycle. The government also asserts that the use of learners' cultural backgrounds at these levels is imperative because" ... the child gets immersed in his own culture which is expressed in his mother tongue. He is, therefore, encouraged to appreciate, cultivate, develop and preserve his cultural heritage at home or among his peers at school." (Ethoipian Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 99). It is also further claimed that the objectives of education in general is to transmit knowledge, values, norms and other elements of culture to which the individuals belong. In fact, this is strongly advised by many for its pedagogic advantages - that students' norms, values and general understanding of themselves and the world at large are deeply rooted in their culture. This is because; cultural background could help the child cope with academic demands.

However, a study in the Ethiopian education indicates that educational goals have failed to reach the desired expectations. Silashi (2001, p.1) assessing a number of studies made on the development of education in Ethiopia, confirms that the Ethiopian education has "…failed to satisfy the aspiration of its people." Though this assertion has been made as regard to the general educational sector in the country, it might have implications to teacher education higher institutions. The Ethiopian educational policy envisages and promotes cultural and ethnic diversity in the country, but there is a discontinuity of such scheme at higher levels. In other words, for children who are brought up in a relatively homogenous cultural and educational environment at schools, there is no a clearly stated educational diversity input at the higher institutions. Thus, students seem to employ personal or group mechanism to cope with diversity issues when they encounter students as well as instructors outside their cultural backgrounds. This approach is likely to lead to cultural and ethnic groupings which in turn might lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding among counter groups. This misconception might germinate conflicts and violence which are now observed in different forms in a number of universities of the country. A recent study conducted on diversity factors in Baher Dar University revealed that ethnic differences and diversity have become a considerable challenge to the institution (Ababaw and Tilahun, 2007).

In the Ethiopian context, cultural differences are manifested in institutions in different ways. To begin with, it is to see students in a classroom organizing themselves according to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This can affect smooth classroom interaction among students. This obviously impedes not only the teaching learning process but also students' socialization. In addition, similar kind of grouping and informal organizations are also observed among students in their social lives outside the classroom in the campus. These can be seen in the corridors when they wait for their instructors during class times, in their dormitories, in their dining halls and in some playgrounds and social and religious gatherings.

Although the government claims the aims of higher education in Ethiopia is to cultivate citizens with an all round education capable of playing conscious and active role in the country at various levels (Ministry of Education 2002), in the existing situation where students of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds have less interpersonal communication, it may be very difficult to achieve such an all round personality development. Particularly with regard to higher education, in the policy document it is stated, "Higher education at diploma, first degree and graduate levels, will be research oriented, enabling students become problem-solving professional leaders in their fields of study and in overall societal needs," (TGE, 1994, p. 15). Though it seems general, 'the societal needs' stated here might refer to the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia. If so, for a student who is trained within the educational environment described above, it may be difficult to satisfy the societal needs outside his/her own society. Hence, the goals mentioned in the policy can hardly be achieved. On top of this, scholars in the field of education recommend that students should be trained to work not only within their own cultural settings but also at national and international levels (Neiser and Nota, 1999).

In general, the curriculum of Ethiopian higher institutions does not provide a mechanism through which cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity of the learners and the peoples of the country at large could be incorporated into higher education programs. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to devise an education program that incorporates diversity "…to create a learning environment which values students' cultural diversity …" (Neiser and Nota 1999, p.21) that help them have an all-round well developed personality. This might help students and teachers and the societies at large to diverge from their personal cultural frames of reference and to learn to recognize the benefits of mutual understanding. This in turn can also help learners acquire and value the knowledge of others in the classroom and in the institutions at large.

Concluding Remarks

Generally, the short discussion made above is an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which cultural and ethnic diversity issues have become an important concern in higher education in Ethiopia. As indicated earlier, there seem to be a gap in the educational policy concerning diversity matters in higher institutes of the country. There is no clearly stated policy statement that stipulates cultural and ethnic diversity guidelines for higher education. As a result institutions are observed when attempting to manage such issues at random. Although this kind of endeavor might help to play down the tension to some extent, it can hardly bring a lasting solution. Thus, in the Ethiopian higher education there is a need for a policy that addresses diversity situations in the country so as to develop mutual respect and supportive atmosphere among the community within the institutions. This could also be used as a benchmark to develop mechanism for social cohesion that promotes tolerance and co-existence-unity within diversity-in the country at large.

The other alternative may be to integrate multiculturalism and diversity studies into the teacher education programs. As teachers are expected to work in diverse cultural environments across the country, they might promote diversity in their day-to-day teaching activities and in the community they work in as well.

The last, but the most important approach, parallel to that of teacher education scheme proposed above, could be integrating multiculturalism into the school curriculums at different levels. This would help students understand the diversity in the country at lower levels so that they would not encounter difficulties to embrace differences positively when they join higher education.

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