

SCHOOL LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS ON INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Brian Vassallo
brianvassallo7671@gmail.com
Malta Europe

Abstract: The increasing diversity of students in our schools have brought school leaders to realise the importance of investing their time and energy in Intercultural Education. The paper examines the perception of eight successful school leaders in their daily quest of weaving intercultural practices in their schools and highlights the factors which contributed to this success. Interview analysis suggests that school leaders have heightened awareness of need for Intercultural Education and emphasise the benefits to other educational stakeholders. They stressed the need to channel more resources to fund projects that enhance the multicultural environment of their schools and placed strong emphasis on the need to train teachers in culturally responsive pedagogical practices. The paper concludes by suggesting ways to augment research in intercultural education, thus providing a strong knowledge base for future practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalised world, many schools are experiencing rapid changes in their demographics due to the influx of multiethnic students permeating the walls of their schools. Children from different socioeconomic statuses, skin colour, religious beliefs, linguistic differences and cognitive abilities form a heterogeneous mix of learners whose common goal is to feel part of an exciting journey called schooling. Catering for such myriad of differences has precipitated an impending need for intercultural classroom practices catering for culturally diverse school populations. These practices have been the subject of intense debates among educators generating a variety of opinions (Gurin, et.al. 2002; Zúñiga, Nagda & Sevig, 2002). Individual perceptions shape how one sees the world around him/her and act in ways which do justice to his/her beliefs as an educator. Research suggests that the perceptions which school leaders hold towards Intercultural Education are key determinants into the success or otherwise of its implementation in schools (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Sleeter, 2000; Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). Villegas and Lucas (2007) further emphasise that school leaders' approach to Intercultural Education has an impact on the way students understand and respond to culturally responsive teaching. Hence it is important to study how school leaders perceive the implementation of Intercultural Education in their schools. While research on Intercultural Education has been going on for a number of years few studies have focused on school leaders' perceptions towards its implementation. This study aims to provide scholarship into the perceptions of Maltese school leaders on Intercultural Education and gives an account on how are these perceptions are translated into concrete educational outcomes for both teachers and students. The study also attempts to forge new avenues in positive intercultural school practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A salient feature of *The Maltese National Minimum Curriculum* (2012) is the promotion of respect for diversity with the aim of instilling in the learners the values of tolerance, understanding and mutual respect. Several scholars suggest that the cultural diversity of a country is evidenced in school systems (McCray et al., 2004; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Okoye-Johnson, 2011). In Malta, contrary to popular perception, the majority of ethnic minority students come from Western Europe and only 15% of ethnic minority students come from African countries. Muslim students account for 25% of students belonging to minorities, with the majority being of Christian origin. Such a high influx of multiethnicity in Maltese schools is calling on school leaders to develop the skills necessary to promote cross-cultural education.

INTERCULTURALITY AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Leading, teaching, and learning are interconnected parts of school improvement. Fullan (2001) pointed out that school leaders constantly experience the challenge of promoting and sustaining "learning under conditions of complex, rapid change. [As such, schools] must become learning organizations or they will fail to survive" (p. xi). Leaders embark on the exciting journey of leading their schools with a mission of responding to changes, generating physical resources, and motivate and inspire teachers (Day, 2004; Fullan, 2002; Hackman & Johnson, 2004). School leaders are the bearers of strong moral principles which are exemplified in their social conscientiousness towards their staff, parents, students and the community (Fullan, 2002). Also, as Day (2004) rightly points out that success for school leaders is heavily dependent on their passion to lead their school with

enthusiasm and strive for achievement in an atmosphere of collaboration, care, cooperation, commitment, inclusivity and trust.

Fullan (2002) also suggests that “the single factor common to successful change is that relationships improve” (p. 18). Positive relationships, therefore, provide the necessary fabric upon cooperative learning, mutual collaboration, critical reflection and knowledge sharing take place. Mulford and Silins (2005) also stress that for any significant change to take place “the context for leadership and school reform must be taken more into account” (p. 150).

School leadership and pedagogical practices are interrelated. Pedagogical vision stems out from the way the leader leads and the manner in which the teacher accepts and translates such leadership into everyday practice. During communicative processes between school leaders and teachers culturally responsive practices are discussed. It is the responsibility of school leaders to promote culturally inclusive pedagogies which embrace diversity, as reflected in both school climate and the classroom learning environment.

Interculturality refers to a dynamic concept dealing with relations between cultural groups. It has been defined as “the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect” (UNESCO, 2005). Intercultural education encourages the understanding of different people and cultures. It promotes teachings that acknowledge and values the normality of diversity in all areas of life. It strives to inculcate in learners the notion that we all develop differently and require different needs. Whilst promoting equal opportunities for all, intercultural education works to achieve individual and societal transformations which go beyond passive coexistence. It aims to develop a sustainable way of living together in pluricultural societies through the creation of understanding, respect for and communication between different cultural entities. Hence Intercultural Education lies beyond simple tolerance and moves towards embracing and celebrating the cultural wealth inherent within each individual.

Maltese education policies promote has high expectations for *all* learners and purport equitable educational experiences tailor made at reaching individual needs. It also aims to develop learners’ aptitudes, knowledge and skills, to enable them to forge effective pathways in their educational journey. The challenges posed on school leaders by the increasing diversity of students are by no means unproblematic. In a study on leadership in multicultural schools, Aamodt (2004) found that most school leaders in primary schools lack training in intercultural education. The perceptions which school leaders have on how to manage and implement Intercultural Education heavily influences their decisions related to issues and events concerning the provision of education for ethnically diverse minorities. School leaders inherently engage in reflective processes and prioritize issues on interculturality and behave in manners which shape how they should be understood (Diamond et al., 2007).

School leaders must be vigilant on educational practices which sideline individuals and groups of learners. School leaders should also contribute to construct and develop practices aimed towards influencing the school's content, direction, and practice. There is no simple formula for best leadership practices within a culturally diverse school context. It is the role of school leaders to reflect on their school context and create environments that promote teaching and learning, as well as forging positive relationships between various ethnic groups. The increasing multiethnic diversity urges school leaders to direct efforts into catering for the educational needs of minority students (Dimmock & Walker, 2005). Dale (2008, p.8) argues that leading a culturally diverse school needs to be seen as a “normal state, and not a state of emergency” -a practice in which the principle of adapted education is understood to include all students in academic learning processes.

Ryan (2006) theorises that inclusive leadership involves the strengthening of relationships between school members, the careful distribution roles and responsibilities, and the sharing of purposes and goals within the organization. Ryan (2006) affirms the challenges school leaders face in multiethnic schools and stresses the need to examine the manner in which goals, responsibilities, and relationships promote or hinder inclusive practices. School leadership is therefore seen as a collective process where team members are influenced or influence others. Leadership is therefore a tool which catalysis team efforts into positive group outcomes outcome of, inclusive leadership. Inclusive leadership (Ryan, 2006) is therefore an unswerving and steady commitment towards the principles of equity and social justice. It purports to develop schools’ curricula, policies, and teaching practices in such manner as it equips all students with the knowledge, aptitudes and skills required to ensure their participation, both at school and in the wider community.

School leaders, therefore, uphold inclusion and ensure that both students and teachers broaden their knowledge about cultural diversity, ensuring that teaching methods cater for all students irrespective of cultural diversity and that decisions are taken in full respect of, and reflecting the cultural ‘weight’ of teaching staff and students.

Inclusive Leadership is not only preventive but proactive in that it strives for change in school policies and practices that may be exclusive. It also attempts to generate knowledge by participating in local and international fora, thus increasing critical cultural awareness. An open and supportive school culture is necessary in order to establish a healthy critical dialogue where exclusionary practices are detected, recognized and challenged (Riehl, 2000). Stirring a school's cultures and practices towards inclusionary philosophies will not succeed unless school leaders, staff, parents and students partake and invest their time and energy into stimulating positive change. School leaders, however, are not always cognizant on the latent manner in which the school's practices inadvertently privileges some students and marginalize others (Riehl, 2000).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study examines the perception of Maltese school leaders into creating meaning from the term 'Intercultural Education' and elicits from them the outcomes of implementing Intercultural Education. These perceptions characterise, influence and direct the interpretation of issues surrounding the school milieu (Ryan & Wignall, 1996; Diamond et al., 2002). The meanings they construct are shaped by the interaction of values, background, and personal and professional experiences, all of which have an impact on what they prioritize, emphasize, or disregard (Evans, 2007). Meanings are then translated into actions and outcomes. Such an enterprise is by no means easy and certainly challenging for school leaders. From this challenge three research questions stem out:

1. What are the perceptions of Maltese School Leaders about Intercultural Education in their schools?
2. How are these perceptions translated into concrete educational outcomes?
3. What is the way forward towards implementing Intercultural Education principles arising from these perceptions?

METHODOLOGY

The research study was conducted using a qualitative method of investigation. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as a multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. Qualitative research is an ideal method to uncover trends in thought and opinions and delve deeply into issues of concern. Qualitative research allows researchers to study phenomena in their natural settings, while attempting to create meaning and interpret them in terms suggested by participants. As with any small-scale research a critical issue was the choice of schools participating the study and also the selected pieces of data chosen to form the basis of analysis. It must be stated that schools were purposefully selected, based on their known cultural composition, disposition of school leader and student achievement. Eight school leaders, 6 females and two males, aged between 40 and 60 years, and purposefully selected on the basis of their known ability to provide great information about the research in question. The data gathering instruments used in this study were open-ended semi-structured interviews lasting around forty-five minutes each. Interviews were recorded and data was transcribed verbatim on a wordprocessing application and coded for emerging themes with the aid of CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software). Validity of data was ensured by returning the final transcript back to the participants and soliciting them to check accuracy in transcription (Creswell, 2008).

ANALYSIS

The purpose of the research was to analyse the perceptions of Maltese school leaders educators about intercultural education and to discuss its implementation arising from these perceptions. Findings from the interviews were categorized into four themes.

These were: 1) More awareness on intercultural education, 2) Increase resources for implementing Intercultural Education, 3) Benefits of intercultural education, 4) Training of teachers into fostering a culturally responsive pedagogy.

1) More awareness on Intercultural Education

The school leaders interviewed stressed on the importance of speaking warmly and respectfully across all cultures present at school. Fostering mutual respect and trust demonstrates a keen awareness on the importance of working in a multicultural environment. "More tolerance", "mutual respect", "caring attitudes", "increased cooperation" and "need for more awareness" were statements words which came out often. A particular interviewee stated that she took particular measures in her school to promote intercultural awareness. In particular she communicated to teachers her intentions to include intercultural awareness as integral part of the School Development Plan (SDP).

Another school leader stated that each child has the right to receive education, irrespective of his/her (dis)abilities, socioeconomic status or cultural background. He also connected the religious saying taken from the Bible which says “Let the little children come to me”, commenting that Jesus did not specify who the children were but included all children. This school leader associated cultural awareness with his religious and moral imperatives. Another school leader emphasised the importance of cultural awareness as tool towards the reduction of stereotypical behaviour and prejudices in schools. This would be the “gaining greater self-awareness and forming new friendships and relationships with others”. Also “...by developing intercultural awareness helps teachers, students and parents to develop better interpersonal skills and equips all educational stakeholders to be better equipped in today’s multicultural world”(excerpts taken from interviews).

2) Increase resources for Implementing Intercultural Education

All school leaders interviewed stressed about the need for more resources. Six out of eight respondents urged the education division to allocate funds specifically dedicated to the sponsorship of intercultural education. They also suggested the publication of books, leaflets and brochures which promote intercultural activities. DVDs may be used during professional development to assist teachers into planning for diversity in their classroom. Four school leaders emphasised the important role of parents into urging their children to socialise with children of different nationalities within the school environment. This would help students appreciating the pluralistic nature of our world and engage in an exchange of values with the cultures they meet. Libraries constitute an invaluable tool for educational stakeholders to promote intercultural competencies. School and classroom libraries should contain books by authors from different countries. Four school leaders also stated that the teaching of school subjects in different languages is virtually nonexistent and that initiatives need to be directed towards this aim.

Three school leaders advocated for the use of academic literature as an important source for awareness in intercultural education. Academic journals dive deeper into the subject and provide challenging and reflective reading for all stakeholders. Lesson planning which is inclusive and reflective of the multicultural weight present in the classroom needs to be encouraged and supported. Besides there has to be lesson plans which specifically target the exploration of topics like race, socioeconomic disparities, ethnic diversities, gender differences and sexual orientations. These resources provide insights into approaching race and gender equality issues, empathy, and bullying prevention during class.

Five school leaders out of the eight interviewed perceived the library as an important resource for intercultural education to flourish in schools. One of the school leaders eloquently stated that despite the ever increasing numbers in students from multiethnic origin, there seems to be no awareness of the need to provide human resources which would partnership with existing teaching teams into providing an education which is inclusive of all cultures. One school leader stressed that the Ministry of Education needs to be providing more specialised resources which would help the integration of students from minor ethnic communities. Making use of human resources especially parents to make interesting presentations, targeting specific cultural aspects from various countries may prove beneficial in the classroom.

Two of the interviewees indicated that there needs specific support such as Arabic Language Teachers, Islamic Language Teachers, Russian Language teachers, Cultural Mediators and others. They argued that many a time parents need to fork out extra money to teach their children their language of origin. This is due to the lack of funds from the educational directorate. All school leaders interviewed mentioned that “language of instruction” will remain a major debatable issue in intercultural education and that a lot of resources are needed to educate ethnic minorities in their language of origin. These issues were regarded by school leaders as essential prerequisites towards the implementation of intercultural awareness in the classrooms.

3) Benefits of Intercultural Education

Three out of eight school leaders stated that diversity is an asset for educators and societies and that efforts should be geared at tapping this rich resource for the benefit of the entire Maltese community. One of the school leaders interviewed cited Kofi Annan, (Former Secretary-General of the *United Nations*) who said that “Tolerance, inter-cultural dialogue and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where people are becoming more and more closely interconnected”(United Nations, 2004).

An effective school system views diversity as a springboard for potential growth rather than an unsurmountable barrier to student performance. Diversity provides flexibility to teachers and allows them to elicit hidden potential from their students. During the interview one school leader eloquently stated that her school is a model for intercultural education. She referred to her initiatives as ‘effective, enjoyable and well worth the effort’ and her leadership ‘has never been so incisive and successful’. Hence, for Intercultural education to be effective in a

school, it needs not be promoted as an “add on” to the regular curriculum but as another skill incorporated in daily practice. It needs to form an integral part of the learning process permeating all aspects of school life, policy making processes, school development planning, professional development sessions, curriculum development, teaching methodology, student interactions, and learning resources. This can be achieved through continuous discourse and the inclusion of multiple perspectives and voices. This would benefit the development of inclusive curricula highlighting the important contributions which various colonizing powers had on our island (Malta).

According to the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME, 2016), students studying within a culturally diverse environment develop a positive self-esteem, an increase in self-worth and develop multiple ways of thinking which ultimately have a positive effect on the whole community. Furthermore the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences (AAAS, 2016) points out that intercultural education benefits the development of problem-solving skills and promote constructive relationships with students, decreases stereotypes and supports cognitive and moral growth. Rather than letting themselves being constrained by their own cultures, these school leaders thrive upon multiperspectivity and influence students into affirmative identification with other cultures.

4) Train Teachers in Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Practices

Four of the eight school leaders interviewed iterated that although there exists no prescribed strategy as to what works best in the implementation of intercultural education, training into the basic principles of teaching for diversity needs to be enacted. Teachers need to be educated into the concepts underlying intercultural issues and into creating an evidence base to guide policy makers. They emphasised the importance of Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Practices preservice and inservice teachers. One school leader placed special emphasis on urging teachers to specialize in intercultural education as part of their professional development. He cited various examples on how teachers are trained in intercultural competencies and how these competencies are enacted in the classroom context. The issue of training teachers in intercultural competencies must be addressed urgently. One school leader argued that “teachers need to be able switch between multiple ways of seeing, thinking and solve difficulties arising from cultural incongruencies”. Another school leader pointed out that teachers must first and foremost be critically conscious of their background and how this influences their planning in their classroom. Another school leader placed emphasis on developing skills to detect biases in textbooks, software, multimedia and other educational materials.

Three school leaders equated intercultural education with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy which “skilfully reaches all minorities present in the classroom”. Equity pedagogy urges educators to cultivate a thorough understanding of the different learning styles students develop from their own cultural upbringing and use those learning styles to develop alternative instructional strategies aimed at helping all students learn subject content, notions and interpretations in the various content areas and academic disciplines. For such an enterprise to be possible educators will need to develop pedagogical aptitude, knowledge, skills, and dispositions that allows them to reach teaching objectives using differential teaching methods. Equity pedagogy advocates for the attainment of the highest of standards in academic quality for all students. Within the context of equity pedagogy classroom climates need to be redefined to include the academic success of all students, irrespective of their cultural background. Educational stakeholders who profess equity and social justice education would require knowledge about the historical heritage students and its contribution to their overall background, a genuine desire up reshape aptitudes and a commitment towards the development of social action skills. It would also mean debunking of myths on Intercultural education by raising awareness on the short and long term consequences of individual and institutional discriminations, racist and stereotypical attitudes, sexism, socio-economic differences, and other forms of discrimination emphasising basic human commonalities. As one school leader put it “we need to be the frontliners of this change ... we have a responsibility to stimulate change with valour and without fear and with a predisposition to continue learning”.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD.

Due to the small sample, results cannot be generalised on the entire Maltese school population. Also, as in any qualitative study, findings cannot be generalised to wider populations. Unlike quantitative studies, findings of the research are not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or not. Another limitation was that participants knew beforehand that the researcher was an activist in intercultural education and hence they could have felt compelled to provide the researcher with answers he was looking for.

Maltese Educational leaders are advocating for scholarship on culturally relevant pedagogies and skills in intercultural educational practices which will better serve the diverse student body found in our schools. Results from interviews have shown that the need for culturally relevant pedagogies is ever more powerful. Pedagogies which reflect the cultural composition of the classroom is beneficial for all students as is the insurgent need to

discuss issues of race and ethnicity without implementing “colourblind” practices. The need to promote more intercultural approaches in our schools is clear. How this need is met within the Maltese education system is rather complex question but the discussion demonstrates that this need is growing and requires immediate attention. The school leaders interviewed in this study have offered a wide and profound set of changes within their schools. Not only are they aware of the impending need for intercultural education but have embarked on a personal journey to promote opportunities together with their teachers and students. Fostering intercultural dialogue in schools became a self-professed goal. They transformed themselves into ‘self-trained cultural brokers’, aware of their ethnic background and how this is influencing their daily decisions. They are aware of their cultural heritage, are not dictated by it but carefully weigh conceptions and interpretations. They actively sought to broaden the curriculum and advocate cultural knowledge as a tool towards the implementation of Intercultural Education principles. They recognised that intercultural learning is the major driving force behind global coexistence, collaboration and successful leadership. They used the principles of intercultural learning as a tool to develop in their students the skills and abilities which will equip them in the future.

The impact of intercultural education on cooperative learning, prejudices reduction and stereotypical behaviours has been very well documented, as have been studies on social justice equity pedagogy. However, the relationship between leadership practices and intercultural education needs to be augmented. More systematic research, perhaps including the effects on parental participation would add values to such studies. Studies using the quantitative research approach, demonstrating the influence of intercultural educational practices on discrete measures of students’ achievements (eg student grades, school attendance; participation in informal learning; success at postsecondary education, graduation rates and others) need to be developed. This would provide educational stakeholders with the necessary platform on which to further develop their roles and contribute effectively to the increasing challenging enterprise of educating across cultures.

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