

## Preparing Teachers for Multicultural Classrooms — Implications for Teacher Preparation and Professional Programmes

Rashmi Diwan \*

### Abstract

*The world aspires peace and harmony for our generations to come. There is lot of unrest and turmoil in the world mainly due to intolerance for other cultures and religions. But this will not take any country far since narrow perceptions and attitudes impede progress and prosperity of any country of the world. India is no exception. The present times calls for expanded horizons for a prosperous future of a nation. The onus lies with a teacher to nurture and sustain climate conducive for a child to accommodate in a multicultural classroom. The task of the teacher is not confined to curriculum transaction within the four walls of a school but also has to shoulder a larger social responsibility of reaching out to parents and families as well as cultural, ethnic, and religious groups. A school teacher plays a vital role in dispelling misconceptions about culture and cultural ignorance. At the same time, this does not mean that they should be loaded with another curriculum on peace and value education; rather they need to be guided through ways of integrating academic subject teaching with an inbuilt methodology of nurturing values and ethics for peace and harmony. This can be supported by a well thought out teacher preparation and teacher education programme that provides direction in several ways for integrating teaching of different subjects with values and ethics among children for tolerance of all cultures and religions. The paper emphasises on the importance of peace education not as separate subject but as an integral part of day-to-day school activities.*

### Introduction

In a multicultural and multi-religious society in every nation, people have to

learn to live in harmony and peace. India represents a highly diverse multicultural society where great

\* Associate Professor, National University of Educational Planning and Administration, 17-B, Sri Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi-110016

responsibility in nurturing the spirit of humanity, mankind and unity lies with teachers. Equally important is the role of school administrators, parents, families and the community. Transition in society begins from the recognition that school is the basic unit of change and the teacher is the kingpin to drive changes in the thinking, attitudes, opinions and perceptions from small children in a multi-cultural classroom to society at large. The centrality of the paper lies in the message '*Trust on a teacher as a prime change agent*'.

### **Understanding Multiculturalism**

In the most generic terms, multi-cultural society involves and consists of people of different cultures. It is a situation in which different people from different races, religions, cultures, political affiliations, etc. live together as a society. India has rich tradition in multiculturalism with people from diverse cultures and religions. Andrew Heywood explains two forms of multiculturalism. The term 'multiculturalism' has been used in both descriptive and normative ways. "As a descriptive term, it has been taken to refer to cultural diversity ... As a normative term, multiculturalism implies a positive endorsement, even celebration of communal diversity, typically-based on either the right of different groups to respect and recognition, or to the alleged benefits to the larger society of moral and cultural diversity."

### **Multicultural Education**

Today India is a country of micro-cultures. Since ancient times, the history of education system in India had been more focussed on the needs of elitists of all cultures. While education for Brahmin boys was tailored more to read and write by Brahmin teachers, education of Hindus was greatly influenced by geography, social sciences, family custom, social position, social preference, etc. Similarly Muslim education had also been elitist in the same manner. But mainly primary schools were shifted to mosques and education for Muslim boys was more preferred and all teachings were mainly based on the teachings of holy Quran. Muslim colleges provided opportunities to Muslim boys to study Arabic language, Islamic theology, literature, law, history, science, etc. Other cultures are also prominent in the country. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism grew from indigenous populations. No special multicultural education requirements are made in the teacher education programmes in the country.

Multicultural education is "comprehensive school reform that challenges all forms of discrimination, permeates instruction and interpersonal relations in the classroom and advances the democratic principles of social justice" (Nieto, 1992). The impetus towards this move came from the Ministry of Human Resources Development, the erstwhile Ministry of Education and Culture that promoted

cultural pluralism in the school curriculum in the country. In addition to English and Hindi as language of instruction in primary and secondary schools, regional languages are also promoted for teaching in these schools. While separate schools are provided for children who wish to be taught in their native language, there has been no history of forced racial segregation in the education of this country. In the school curriculum, the history of indigenous people is stressed so that students can learn to appreciate the vast ethnic and cultural differences in the country. In India, curriculum materials and textbooks are evaluated to ensure racist-free content.

Education in India is directed towards unity in diversity. In Indian context, one can say for sure today that transition from *Education of Elite* to *Education for All (Sarva Shiksha)* and *Education for Equality* is itself indicating a move to multicultural education. Serious efforts are directed towards making education inclusive by bringing gender parity, promoting education of women, disabled and SC/ST children from all cultures under one roof and teaching them all tolerance, harmony and acceptance of all cultures. Similarly, in the attempt for Universalisation of Elementary Education, the Government of India is moving towards policies, programmes and strategies for each child to have access to quality education with recently implemented Right to Education Act-2009. The concerns of

the government also get articulated in the National Focus Group, Position Paper on Education for Peace (NCERT, 2005). In addition to these concerns, Planning Commission took one step ahead by bringing out a perspective on peace education through *Vision of Peace in 2020* in India. This shows that the whole philosophy of school education in India is guided by protection of core values and national interest. The beginning towards this move largely depends on the strong foundations a teacher has laid to shape destiny of this nation. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that a teacher is empowered to take decisions at her own level to create an inclusive classroom nurturing love, harmony and peace among children from all social groups. She need not wait for policy directives from the Government but her real test begins from the manner attitudinal changes among children are brought about in a diversified multicultural classroom right from their childhood.

### **The Role of Classroom Teacher in Fostering Pluralism**

Schools are one of the few places where young minds of diverse backgrounds come together day after day, and if schools fail to help to harmonise the society, what will be the consequences? In augmenting this spirit, the teacher in a school is one driving force for igniting minds of our younger generation towards cultural harmony through peace and value education. A

teacher carries a big responsibility in her classroom in bringing children of diverse cultures, religions and languages together. Everything the teacher says will have an impact on the students. The teacher can bring positivity in thoughts, attitudes and actions. Language is one such medium of instruction that acts as a means of establishing rapport with one another in the class. It helps to develop thoughts that need to be presented with integrity and compactness. "Communication is not passing of information, but involves conceptualisation of concepts and experiences, of identification and classification, of argumentation and assertion through correct language" (Pattanayak, D.P. 1987)

The messages of a teacher spreads fast among children, are deep-rooted and more contagious. Teachers are, in fact, more responsible for the social behaviour in the classroom and through this can nurture and facilitate young minds in overcoming both misconceptions about culture and dispel cultural ignorance through several ways:

- **Handle biases:** Small children may get influenced by biased statements of parents and other family members about racial, ethnic and gender differences in the home environment but these may not yet be deep-seated prejudices and can easily be handled by the teacher as the child grows in the school, year after year.
- **Recognise similarities as more**

**basic than differences:** Schools are only one of the few places where children from diverse cultures and religions come together for years. If they are nurtured right from the beginning to harmonise the society, appreciate cultures of each other, a sea change can be brought by the teacher by breaking the shackles of narrow understanding and hatred largely produced in the society due to cultural ignorance today. As children grow, they will gradually come to realise that regarding cultures as superior or inferior can lead to hurt feelings, frustration, and eventually to major conflicts.

- **Infuse respect and appreciation of different cultures:** Teachers can also go an extra mile to expose children to the fine, beautiful aspects of the cultures of humanity. Help children understand the most beneficial aspects of the cultures of their society including the universal human values and moral values they uphold. Another way is to link these issues while teaching school subjects such as mathematics, computer classes, art, crafts, drama, home economics, music, languages and history.
- **Promote the spirit of secular society:** Right from childhood if strong bondages of humanity and foundations of common religious beliefs are instilled among children, a new world gets created.
- **Address heterogeneity through cooperative learning:** A healthy

cooperative learning with heterogeneous groups helps students to understand viewpoints different from their own and appreciate the cultures of the group members when solving problems. The peaceful classroom extends its outreach to peaceful communities and further to society. Solidarity within a school does not require any policy directive or outside intervention but can be made an integral part of a school life.

- **Encourage interactive sessions:** Where on one hand, teachers check their own prejudices against certain groups in the society, on the other can place positive impact through book reading, clubs and encourage reading of books with characters from various ethnic groups. Studies have revealed that peer groups place greater influence than parents in developing shared understanding of each others point of views.

### **Expanding Horizons: Some Propositions for Teacher Education Programmes**

Despite best intentions of a teacher to promote a climate conducive for multicultural education, she would require a direction. A well thought out pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes can equip her with specific skills of bringing change and managing multiculturalism in her classroom. The programmes designed for the elementary classroom can expose teachers to the roots of conflict

and violence among children and offer suggested activities, exercises and games to help build self-esteem, cooperative behaviour and conflict resolution skills. Such programmes will help the teacher to understand the need for removing prejudices and discriminations from society. The in-service programmes needs to incorporate such activities for elementary school teachers that guide them to plan activities for children to help them learn how to communicate, cooperate and prevent or solve conflicts through creative thinking. The teacher here would be expected to sustain cooperative environment in the classrooms and schools. This would require imparting of certain practical tips and techniques to teachers to help them implement class activities to create such an environment. One way of doing this is to create fun games for children and group activities like drama, games, role play, etc. in the classrooms to strengthen interpersonal relations. Listening games necessary for developing good communication skills can be taught through telephone games. Children can also be made to solve problems through skits, puppet shows, etc. The teachers would require training on how group activities can be used with other categories of children like children with mental impairment, emotionally disturbed children or others placed in difficult circumstances like those belonging to broken homes or those coming from families of victims of racial riots or militancy or terrorist

attacks, etc. Teachers would also need training on evaluation techniques.

Within a bigger programme, one short duration course or workshop encouraging cooperative learning and cooperative games that engages teachers in exploring and implementing what methodology works best in their situation seems to be a meaningful proposition. They need to be given a feel of freedom to decide and plan ways of linking teaching of different subjects with peace education. The teachers need to be oriented to recognise that they have a unique potential to develop and spread peace education by helping them to internalise values related to generosity, forgiveness, helpfulness, etc. Similarly such activities which facilitate a teacher to feel confident enough to link peace education with subjects and as a general practice to reduce prejudices towards anybody may be important part of teachers' orientation. Training for administrators to view themselves in a redefined role, more supportive, geared towards empowering teachers to take classroom-based decisions would be important to achieve better results.

Looking at massive number of teachers in the country and schools under different managements, it may not be possible to reach out to every teacher. The most feasible and workable proposition needs to be worked out. Convergence among different

professional institutes at national, state, district, block and cluster levels can work in India through well articulated roles and responsibilities of each training institute and professionals therein. Special workshops can be conducted for involving teachers to prepare manuals, guidance material, modules for including value and peace education in their teachings. A cascade approach substantiated with module preparation with the help of teachers in different training workshop sessions and also chalking out school-based modalities may be expected to work in India.

### **Concluding Statement**

In a school, teachers are the key players for generating an environment of peace and harmony in its multicultural classrooms. The sustenance of this climate, of course largely rests on four strong pillars—satisfaction, peace, happiness and enthusiasm. When these pillars are strong, the relationships among teachers, head teachers and community members will become more enduring. When each member in school and community is satisfied, happy, enthusiastic and at peace, the returns to children and to society will be greater. Therefore, teachers have a substantial role to play in shaping classroom environment for bringing harmony, peace, happiness and satisfaction among children.

## REFERENCES

- ADAMS, HETTY. 1954. *Peace in the Classroom: Practical Lessons in Living for Elementary Age Children*. Penguin Publishers, Winnipeg, Canada.
- ALLPORT, GORDON, W. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc. Reading, Massachusetts.
- BALASOORIYA, A. S. 2001. 'Learning the Way of Peace: A Teachers' Guide to Peace Education.' United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, New Delhi.
- HARRIS, IAN, M. AND MARY LEE MORRISON. 2003. *Peace Education*. Second Edition. Jefferson, McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers. North Carolina.
- HEYWOOD. 2007. *Political Ideologies*, Palgrave Macmillan. p.313
- HUDSON, DALE L. 1992. *New Tools for International Understanding: A Peace Education Curriculum for Elementary School Students*. Spark M. Matsunaga Institute for Peace, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Hawaii.
- LANTIERI, LINDA AND JANET PATTI. 1996. *Waging Peace in Our Schools*. Beacon Press, Boston
- NAIR, P. K. G AND MOLLY FERNANDES. 2001. *Peace Education and Conflict Resolution in Schools*. St. John's Peace Forum, Mumbai, India.
- NATIONAL CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK. 2005, Position Paper, National Focus Group on Education for Peace, NCERT, New Delhi-110016
- NIETO, S. 1992. *Affirming Diversity: The Socio-political Context of Multi-cultural Education*, Longman Publishing Group, New York.
- PATTANAYAK, D.P. 1981. *Multilingualism and Mother Tongue Education*, Oxford University Press.
- REARDON, BETTY (ed.). 1988. *Educating for Global Responsibility: Teacher Designed Curricula for Peace Education*, Teachers College Press, New York.
- UNESCO. 1996. *Learning: The Treasure Within*, Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education of the Twenty- first Century, UNESCO/HMSO, London.