The Initial Training for Educators about Cultural Diversity in School

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Abstract

Nowadays, in a plural and diverse society, schools are characterized by their heterogeneous population as a result of different origins and levels of cultural awareness. This social transformation entails putting into practice the competencies of schoolteachers in order to provide the companionship and integration between students. This paper aims to define and understand students’ perceptions about development, command and relevance in specific competencies of the primary education degree at the University of Murcia. 319 last year students of this degree have taken part in this study by means of an ad hoc questionnaire. Finally, we conclude that the formation of these competencies that are involved in cultural diversity from learning communities should be increased.

Keywords: Competencies, teacher, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, initial training

1. Introduction

In 21st century society, the school must tackle the challenges it encounters, particularly the existence of different cultural identities in the school context. Globalization, economic growth, the reduction of travel fees and many other factors in the past two decades facilitate the transformation of Spain into a welcoming country for immigrants from several contexts such as the north of Africa, Latin America and eastern Europe (India, China, Pakistan, etc). This change has proportionally increased the presence of foreign students in schools and creates a

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new challenge for the school that must face unknown educational situations. In this new socio-educational reality, we find a common desire among the teaching personnel to adapt teaching to the new scenario in order to comply with these minorities needs and to take advantage of the cultural wealth of an origin-diverse studentship. As Leiva (2011) pointed out, school classrooms have turned in a few years from monocultural spaces into multicultural ones, with all the opportunities and difficulties that involves. Clearly, this new context forces awareness and the training of the whole educational community regarding this issue which most of those involved appreciate, in order to avoid inadequate education due to cultural diversity inside the classroom and learning center.

In the words of García, Bienciento and Asensio (2012), two decades after approval of the 1990 Act on the General Organization of the Educational System, which presumes the recognition and legal support for diversity, we can still find problems in schools to fully develop it. One of these problems, according to usual statements of teaching personnel, is attention to cultural awareness of the students since, such as Gómez, Medina and Gil (2011, p.37) claim, “the teacher has become a promoter and mediator of intercultural relationships in the school”. For these authors, teacher education is important; they point out as basic characteristics of it the encouragement of a better knowledge of one’s own culture and that of others, intercultural methodologies and strategies, communication competencies, conflict resolution, collaborative work and learning, etc. Apparently, teachers are aware of the learning gaps and sense that; Jordán (2011) highlights that intercultural education is not only a fashion, but an important social need that teachers must address in their professional activity from an inclusive point of view. Saéz Alonso (2006) understands cultural diversity as a value that creates an educational need for citizenship in cognitive and emotional competencies, which become the well-known intercultural competence that should be set in motion in order to move forward from intentions into actions. School, classrooms and the teachers must be considered as the key and the place to acquire this competence because it has an individual and general function. This way we would soon be speaking about intercultural education from everyone to everyone.

An important effort has been made by continuous educational centers to update teachers in order to pay attention to diversity in the school. However, we need to convert the initial education of the future teachers to become more consistent and focused on professional competencies, as required (Rodríguez, Gallego, Sansó, Navarro, Velicias & Lago, 2011).

This diverse and heterogeneous reality requires systematic and deep work in two main areas, particularly from the college education level, specially the one training future teachers. The first main area would be content planning, which must take into account the professional competencies they will be dealing with in multicultural schools. The second area would be teachers’ ability to develop this type of competence in their students, an issue that will require launching new methods aiming not only at the theory of knowledge transmission, but also the encouragement of values, attitudes, commitment and professional skills.

Teachers are change agents capable of great education accomplishments and must be prepared and trained to fulfill the social function of guaranteeing equal opportunities arising from respect, tolerance and recognition of others’ differences. Cultural diversity is a complicated issue that cannot be simplified or generalized. Knowing exactly what it is about helps teachers to act responsibly and to understand that this type of education is not secondary but primary in their role as teachers. Therefore, teachers must command a range of competencies that enable managing and enriching as possible the multicultural environment where they work, ranging from competencies from different languages and communication skills to those of mediation and conflict resolution.

Schools must encourage cultural identity, building individually and collectively and from an inclusive approach. This means acting in continuous intercultural dialogue in which constant learning and, as Leiva (2005) sustains, the recognition of cultural roots can be coordinated, resulting in becoming open to new influences and contributions regarding the involvement field and social activity in educational contexts.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this research is to discover and analyze the development, command and relevance of the primary school degree competencies related to awareness towards cultural diversity in the school. This will give us the occasion to think about and to elaborate proposals for improvement and good practices for initial training of future teachers in our path for an excellent development of intercultural competencies within the classroom.
This study was carried out from a descriptive educational approach since it aims to know, analyze and compare the participants’ perspective related to the goals of this study. It also has a cross-curricular approach due to the particular time where the information was collected. A survey method was used because it is the “research method capable of answering descriptive and variable issues after the systematic information collection according to a pre-established design that guarantees the accuracy of the obtained information” (Buendía, Colás & Hernández, 1998, p.120). The use of this method can show descriptions of the studied areas, detect patterns and relationships between categories and establish relationships among specific events.

This research took place in the Education Department at the University of Murcia, particularly in the primary school degree classrooms. This decision was based under the desire to gather the perspective and evaluation of the last year students.

2.1. Participants

The total number of participants involved in this study is 319 students of the primary school degree at University of Murcia. 77.43% of them were female, a fact that shows the unbalanced presence of male and female in the education studies at a college level. The average age of the participants is 23.31 years old. All participants were in their final academic year of the degree, so the information they provided was based in a wide experience within their degree.

2.2. Instrument

This research used an ad hoc questionnaire named Questionnaire for the Evaluation of Degree Competencies (CECGRA according to its initials in Spanish) from the gathered information which aims to collect students’ voices related to the competencies of the degree. This document structure consists of three parts:

- Part 1: Personal data of the participants (age and gender) for comparison purposes.
- Part 2: Introduces 5 basic competencies, 7 cross-curricular, 7 general and 20 specific competencies from the primary school degree that must be evaluated according to three dimensions: development (level in which these competencies were dealt with in classes), command (level achieved by the student) and relevance (level of importance the student grants to the competence). All of these dimensions have been graded according to a Likert-type scale (from 1= nothing to 5= a lot).
- Part 3: Includes two half-open questions and three open questions aiming to obtain information on the evaluation of the studies and their education and professional perspectives after the ending of the degree.

In this paper we focus on part 2, specifically on the specific competencies from the questionnaire that were related to the purposes of this research and are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Competencies description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CET3a</td>
<td>Efficiently approaching language learning situations in multicultural and plurilingual contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CET4</td>
<td>Design and control learning spaces in diversity contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CET5</td>
<td>Promotion of inside and outside the classroom cohabitation and contribution to conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CET8</td>
<td>Maintenance of a critical and autonomous relationship towards knowledge, values and social institutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3. Procedure

This study is part of a wider research study that includes the different competencies of the University of Murcia education department degrees by analyzing students’ opinion regarding their development, command and relevance. The procedure was as follows. Firstly, a deep bibliography research was launched in order to establish
the theme for the study and to transform into goals the questions that were discussed at the beginning. Afterwards, the information gathering instrument was created by the research team. To grant this instrument with full recognition, it was tested and the collected information was analyzed by an expert panel. Then, the information was collected voluntarily and anonymously among the students. The obtained data was analyzed by the statistical package SPSS v19. Finally, this report was written based on the results.

3. Results

Firstly, we compare the level of development, command and relevance of each one of the competencies this paper is focused on. The Friedman test shows with a \( p < .05 \) value that there are significant differences. As observed in Table 2, in these four competencies there is little development and command, contrasting with the high level of relevance granted by the students. These high levels in the four competencies show that students are aware of the importance of acquiring the competencies that will help them face diversity in their future work as school teachers. The Álvarez, Iglesias and García (2007) study also points out that college students consider the competencies related to multiculturalism as highly important. As you can observe, the level of command of the four analyzed competencies is higher that the development the participants claim to have experienced along the subjects. This will determine that college education in these competencies is lower than students’ need who were forced to seek it outside.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency Description</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Command</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CET3a Efficiently approaching language learning situations in multicultural and plurilingual contexts</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>347.356</td>
<td>1.073</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CET4 Design and control learning spaces in diversity contexts</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>347.677</td>
<td>1.081</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CET5 Promotion of inside and outside the classroom cohabitation and contribution to conflict resolution</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>398.928</td>
<td>1.130</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CET8 Maintenance of a critical and autonomous relationship towards knowledge, values and social institutions</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>252.800</td>
<td>1.059</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We also used the Friedman test to compare the levels of development, command and relevance among the different competencies (Table 3), coming out in all three cases with significant differences \( (p < .05) \). Competence CET5 seems to have a higher level of command and relevance, while the competence with the lowest command level is CET3a, which also happens to be the same one with the lowest development levels.

On the other side, competence CET8 is the one the students considered least relevant in their college education.
Table 3. Friedman test. Comparison among the development, command and relevance of the four competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Command</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>86,468</td>
<td>126,354</td>
<td>132,574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gl</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Gender comparison**

In a comparison between genders, we used the U test by Mann Whitney, and we found differences regarding the relevance granted to CET3a, CET4 and CET5a. In all the three cases the relevance granted by females was higher than by males, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Gender differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>d.t.</th>
<th>U Mann-Whitney</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CET3 (Relevance)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>.872</td>
<td>7444.500</td>
<td>-2.153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>.958</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CET4 (Relevance)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>.975</td>
<td>6806.000</td>
<td>-3.352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>.790</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CET5 (Relevance)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>.832</td>
<td>7651.000</td>
<td>-2.145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>.692</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These differences show a higher sensibility of women towards the competencies related to diversity awareness, a fact that should be taken into account in college education, even by boosting more positive attitudes towards diversity awareness and intercultural context work in male students. This will require a more personal college education not only focused in the one-way knowledge transmission but also in the sharing of values and attitudes. Research carried out by Vila (2006) also highlights a greater intercultural sensibility of female teenagers than male. This fact suggests that these gender differences are not only present in the college environment but also in other social areas that must be acknowledged.

**4. Conclusions**

In the past years, cultural diversity has become no longer an exception for certain schools but the usual situation in most schools. This important diversity demands the training of future professionals in specific competencies that will help them face it appropriately in continuous and initial college education.

In this paper we have analyzed the competencies related to cultural diversity awareness at the University of Murcia primary education degree regarding the students’ command, their development through college education and the relevance students grant to each one of them.

Firstly, we would like to highlight the relevance students have granted to the studied competencies since the results for the four competencies had quite high values. As far as development is concerned, we find quite low values, always fewer than 3, which make us think that, although these competencies are clearly present in the curricular content, they have not been encouraged enough through the college experience.

There are also other studies we can compare with ours, such the Balear Islands’ project related to R + D + I (BSO2002-02542) under the title “Intercultural education in Illes Balears, and the education proposal for primary education” that Grup de Recerca en Educació Intercultural (GREI according to its initials in Spanish) has been
carrying out since 2002 with active teachers (Vallespir & Romey, 2006). Their results show that nearly half of the teachers (46%) do not feel properly prepared to fulfill the educational needs arising from cultural diversity. On the other hand, 42% of teachers consider themselves prepared.

This data also match the Peñalva and Soriano (2010) study carried out through different Spanish degrees on educational studies which determines that interculturalism has low impact in curricular content, especially in optional subjects (85.2%) and theory subjects. Palomero’s (2006) research states similar results showing that 29% of the 112 analyzed degrees lack interculturalism content.

Catholic University of Temuco (Zapata, 2011) developed another study pointing out that society’s perception of multiculturalism shows up in the participants’ opinion through the building of the multiculturalism idea. In the center of this idea we can find different characteristics, world vision, beliefs, identities and ways of life of a person as individual and as part of a group.

The recent Marín, Vilá and Pavón (2013) project highlights that, even if young people build their identities based in their countries of origin, they also build it in their welcoming countries. This implies that a person can feel himself represented in several cultures at different levels.

In our study we have come across some gender differences. However, they seem only remarkable in the relevance each gender grants to the competencies and not in the development or command of them. According to our data, women consider three of the competencies more important than men.

From our point of view, the obtained material probes the need for a greater development of these competencies at a college level through different methods that will enhance students’ learning and practice of the competencies they will need to use in their future multicultural schools. This will overcome the traditional teaching model which was focused more on the knowledge transmission in order to deal with the educational challenges of the future.

Finally, we would like to conclude by quoting Leiva (2012, p. 4): “although actions in the formal educational context are needed, they are not enough to evolve from the only multicultural coexistence into multicultural cohabitation”. In this sense, we also agree with UNESCO (2009, p.17) when it claims that “intercultural competencies promotion must not be limited to the classroom but must be extended towards the university of life”. We can learn from these lines that we must properly deal with cultural diversity within the school, starting from the initial and continuous specific competencies training of teachers, until we overcome the school level and reach the different social structures. We believe in schools, professionals and teaching personnel as a vital action key from which to initiate the building of the educational society.

References


