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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## RETHINKING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION BEYOND CULTURAL CELEBRATIONS: PEDAGOGICAL BARRIERS IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

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#### Abstract

Grounded in Banks' (2010) conceptualisation of multicultural education and the culturally relevant pedagogy of Ladson-Billings (1995), this review paper highlighted the urgent need to integrate multicultural education in schools beyond surface-level practices, such as celebrating different festivals, food habits, and traditional attire. The purpose of this paper is to foster transformative multicultural education by critically reviewing the challenges in the school and addressing the deeper social issues, inequities, and injustices. The study identified pedagogical barriers, namely, a superficial understanding of multicultural education and multiculturalism, limited representation in the curriculum, inadequate teacher preparation, pressure to complete the syllabus, and structural biases in assessment. These discussions align with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 by fostering equity, inclusion, and Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). Hence, this paper underscores the importance of integrating multicultural education in schools without limiting it to festivals and celebrations. Thus, the paper empowers the school environment inclusively.

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#### Introduction: -

In an increasingly interconnected world, understanding and appreciating the vibrant communities from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds is a social skill with an educational imperative. Multiculturalism as a social philosophy questions ongoing social issues and tries to identify the crucial thread that still exists in society and is the reason for the social inequalities. It also values the diverse cultural identities without neglecting one's own cultural values. In such a scenario, multicultural education translates this philosophy into practice by integrating the diverse perspectives and experiences into classroom practices. It has become a necessity in today's education system, especially in the Indian context. Culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching are two significant approaches of multicultural education and are effective for making the school environment inclusive. Banks (2015) mentioned that pedagogy enriches learning only when the teaching method acknowledges cultural diversity. Despite its importance, many schools and educators view multiculturalism merely as the celebration of festivals and are confined to one specific day, and treat all students equally in school. These assumptions are misinterpreted in schools and hinder schools from achieving an inclusive environment. Though the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has focused on the need for equity and equality in the education system, the

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implementation of the NEP 2020 vision needs to be critically reviewed and to formulate effective strategies that are practically feasible. Furthermore, there is a gap in the need for the learners, teaching methods, and classroom practices. Hence, this paper addresses that multicultural education is not only a necessity for achieving educational excellence but also for creating a fair and just school environment.

**Conceptual Framework: -**

The present study is grounded in the two interrelated ideas of Bank's Multicultural education and Ladson-Billings's Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Together, these frameworks provide a holistic lens of understanding the structural reforms and pedagogical adjustments in creating inclusive school environments.

**The Bank's 5 dimensions of multicultural education serve as the guidelines for implementing the aspects of multicultural education in the school environment and also help in addressing the misconceptions that people hold: -**

1. **Content Integration:** Content integration includes not only the festivals or lessons about a particular culture but also all the culture-related aspects in the lessons. Also, it helps in clarifying that it is for all subjects, including science and maths, and not just for the humanities.
2. **Knowledge Construction:** Knowledge construction helps teachers to build critical thinking in students and examine assumptions and biases from the content that students study.
3. **Prejudice Reduction:** Prejudice reduction allows students and teachers to work on addressing stereotypes and biases and helps in creating an inclusive environment.
4. **Equity Pedagogy:** Equity pedagogy helps teachers to adapt instructional methods that accommodate varied cultural learning styles. It goes beyond awareness and ensures equal educational opportunities and academic success.
5. **Empowering School Culture and Social Structure:** Empowering school culture and social structure stresses not only the individual classroom but also the broader school environments, including school policies, institutional practices, and teachers' roles.

Similarly, Gloria Ladson-Billing's culturally relevant pedagogy adds a critical understanding of multicultural education, embedded in teaching practices that promote equity, respect, and empowerment.

**Culturally relevant pedagogy complements the Bank's framework by emphasizing: -**

1. **Academic success:** Teachers must set high expectations for all students without being biased and support all students to do well in school.
2. **Cultural competence:** Teachers must integrate students' cultural aspects while teaching a lesson through examples and stories. In doing so, each student feels proud of their own culture and, at the same time, is ready to learn about others' cultures.
3. **Critical consciousness:** Education is not only about exams, but also a responsibility of the teachers to develop critical thinking and reasoning in students. There must be open platforms and opportunities for discussion on social issues and inequalities.

Together, these frameworks shape teaching approaches that empower teachers to lay the groundwork for cultural inclusion in school.

**Pedagogical Barriers to Multicultural Education: -**

1. **Superficial Understanding of Multiculturalism:** Many educators limit their understanding of multiculturalism to the celebrations of festivals, food fairs, wearing traditional dresses, and cultural events. This assumption reduces multicultural education to occasional events and fails to address social issues, equality, respect, and cultural inclusion through its teaching.
2. **Limited Representation in Curriculum:** The Indian education system is mainly exam-oriented, where we find limited room for cultural knowledge and critical engagement. Textbooks are more dominant, neglecting the voices of marginalized groups. Thus, this lack of representation makes the marginalized groups invisible in the curriculum and narrows their understanding of society. Teachers give less attention to integrating culturally responsive practices in their teaching to complete the syllabus under pressure and reinforce inequalities.
3. **Inadequate Teacher Preparation:** Most of the teacher preparation programs in India lack extensive training in multicultural education. Teachers enter the school with very little knowledge about their students' cultural aspects and end up generalizing students based on their cultural diversity. This lack of preparedness weakens the school's ability to produce an inclusive environment. Geneva Gay stresses that to have culturally responsive teaching,

teachers need to have a deliberative training where teachers easily connect pedagogy with the students' lived experiences (2010).

**4. Pressure on completion of the syllabus:** The school often pressures teachers to complete the syllabus within time. In such a situation, teachers avoid integrating cultural aspects in the teaching. Thus, there is little room left for the teachers and students to have a culturally responsive classroom practice.

**5. Structural biases in Assessment:** Gloria Ladson Billings (1995) argues that equity pedagogy is violated when the dominant language is reflected in the standardized tests, leaving the marginalized groups behind. As a result, the academic performance seems weaker, not because of their knowledge and ability, but due to the structural biases in the assessment.

#### **Critical Discussions: Reimagining Multicultural Education Beyond Barriers: -**

The pedagogical barriers identified in the practical application of multicultural education in classrooms address systematic challenges and require deep structural transformation in schools and classrooms. Banks (2016) argues that multicultural education must foster critical awareness and democratic participation against tokenized cultural representation. Banks' five dimensions are a comprehensive framework for reducing the pedagogical barriers that are identified. Most of the schools and educators limit their understanding of multicultural education to cultural events, festivals, foods, and traditional dresses, and ignore the crucial social injustice (Nieto, 2002). Such symbolic representation is often visible through cultural celebrations, annual cultural programs, observance of national events in Indian schools, and the lack of deeper classroom issues related to caste-based exclusion, regional gap, tribal representation, regional disparities, and language hierarchy. Thus, Indian schools must move beyond ceremonial inclusion towards everyday pedagogical practices that address diverse socio-cultural identities (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Gay (2010) extends this view by emphasizing culturally responsive teaching where teachers successfully connect the students' home culture with the lessons. She further argues that teachers need to have extensive training in multicultural pedagogy to avoid the unconscious biases and stereotypes in the classroom. Within the Indian education system, this pedagogical approach must be implemented in the B.Ed. and M.Ed. curricula. Thus, inclusive pedagogy and bias awareness need to be integrated as core professional competencies. Likewise, Vavrus (2002) mentioned that teachers need to integrate multicultural education into the lesson as a core component and not just a minor topic in the lesson. Ladson-Billings (1995) critiques that standardized tests bring more disparities among diverse cultural students when it is dominated by the majority language and cultural codes. She further argues that culturally relevant pedagogy enhances students' academic performance by promoting equitable pedagogy in the classroom.

While these theoretical perspectives provide a strong conceptual foundation for multicultural education, their applicability in the Indian classroom context requires critical adaptation. Beyond race and ethnicity, Indian classrooms are shaped by multiple intersecting diversities such as tribe, caste, region, religion, and socio-economic inequalities. Therefore, the present discussion argues that multicultural education in India must be grounded in the lived realities and structural challenges of the Indian schools. However, these perspectives align with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 vision of a demanding, flexible assessment system and instructional methods. Also, NEP 2020 supports regional languages to bridge learning and inclusion. Furthermore, the policy addresses the need for socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) by emphasizing cultural diversity, equity, and inclusion in the school.

Banks (2010) explains that multicultural education should be accessible to all students "regardless of their gender, social class, and ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics" (p. 3). This conceptual grounding echoes the NEP 2020 vision of learning for all, which included the SEDGs. SEDGs are explicitly categorized based on gender identities, socio-cultural identities, geographical identities, disabilities, and socio-economic conditions (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 24). These strategies are possible through multilingual class interaction, inclusion of local histories and indigenous knowledge systems in lesson planning, culturally responsive assessment practices, and community-linked learning experiences. Therefore, reimagining multicultural education in the Indian context requires not merely curricular inclusion of diverse cultures but also a transformation of pedagogical practices, institutional structures, and teacher preparation processes to address systematic inequities and promote social justice.

**Conclusion: -**

Multicultural education emerges as an essential pedagogical approach for promoting equity, inclusion, and social justice in India. The paper highlights that multicultural education is not confined to superficial practices such as food habits, celebrations, and traditional attire, but has much more significance that addresses prejudices, social inequities, and unequal learning opportunities. The discussion further reveals pedagogical barriers such as superficial understanding of multiculturalism, limited representation in the curriculum, inadequate teacher preparation, pressure on completion of the syllabus, and structural biases in assessment that continue to hinder the practical implementation of multicultural education in schools. The conceptualization of multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy emphasised the need to reimagine school in such a way that respects students' lived experiences and cultural identities. Such a transformation required not only academic and in-textbooks but also sustained teacher training and institution-level commitment to an inclusive environment. Furthermore, this concern is strongly addressed in the NEP 2020, focusing on equity, access, educational needs of socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). Therefore, the paper concludes that meaningful multicultural education is central to building a democratic and inclusive school environment in India.

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