

**Multicultural Education! How Schools handle Learner Cultural Diversity at Four  
Zimbabwean Private Schools (1<sup>st</sup> Series)**

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**Abstract**

*The article is part of a broad study that was carried to establish the extent to which multicultural education issues are being embraced at four private schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. This article specifically explored ways used by the schools to handle cultural diversity issues in the school. The study paradigm was largely quantitative though some elements of qualitative research were also employed in sampling. The survey design guided the study. The population included all 16 administrators and 115 teachers. Convenience sampling was used to come up with a representative sample of 4 administrators (one from each school) and 20 teachers (five from each school). Structured interviews were used to collect data from school administrators while questionnaires were administered to teachers. The results showed that there are school rules which are against discrimination. Schools also emphasize equality and equal treatment among learners and teachers. Christian values were also used to counter discrimination. Lastly the schools are also using Religious and Moral Education subject which emphasizes moral aspects of life. Teacher in-servicing is also used. The study concluded that while the schools are using brilliant ways of dealing with cultural diversity Christianity is given precedence over other religion which is a potential source of conflict. The study recommended that challenges of multicultural education should be addressed in teacher training programmes at college and university level. Schools were also encouraged to embrace religious pluralism. Lastly schools were recommended to involve and work more with parents on multicultural issues and activities*

**Key Words**

*Culture, Multicultural Education, Teachers, Administrators, Learner Diversity, Private School*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Zimbabwe is one of the African countries that embrace multiculturalism in educational, political, economic and social aspects. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) is the major law that shows everybody is welcome in all national activities. While Zimbabwe does not have specific stand alone laws on multicultural education she is a signatory to a lot of international charters on multiculturalism and non discriminatory education. Domestically there are a lot of policy frameworks that informs educational practice. These include the Zimbabwe Education Act (Education Act, 1987, revised 1996), the Disabled Persons Act (Disabled Persons Act 1992, revised 1996) and various Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education circulars such as (Education Secretary's Policy Circular No. P36, 1990). These require that all students, regardless of race, religion, gender, creed, and disability, have access to basic or primary education (up to Grade 7). The Zimbabwean Education Act introduced free and compulsory education for all students regardless of any demographic differences implying support for multicultural education (Chireshe, 2011).

Zimbabwe has four major categories of schools. These include government owned schools, church owned schools, and council owned schools and trust or privately owned schools. The researchers experience as an educationist for about two decades has shown that while most schools enroll learners from different cultural backgrounds significant multiculturalism is in private schools. These schools are mainly run by trust funds and they are considered as elite schools. There is a mixture of learners in these schools inter alia, Blacks, Indians, Chinese, Coloureds, and Whites. What motivated the execution of this study is the need to find out the extent to which multicultural issues are being handled in these private schools. This study was broad in nature and has been published in parts or series. This current study sought to answer the question:

How do Schools handle Cultural Diversity Issues in Zimbabwean Private Schools?

## **2.0 Delimitations**

The study was restricted to four private schools in Harare only. The private schools included two primary schools and two high schools. Thus respondents were two administrators and ten teachers from two primary schools while the remaining two administrators and ten teachers were from two high schools. Other private or public schools in and outside Harare were not covered in this study. The Early Childhood centres in the 4 private schools were also not part of the study.

## **3.0 Literature Survey**

### **3.1 Meaning of Multicultural Education (MCE)**

The concept of MCE has been talked about seriously after the Second World War. This follows the rapid increase in migration as states were gaining self rule. The increase in immigrants necessitated the call for cultural sensitivity in the schools. Multicultural education encompasses theories and practices that strive to promote equitable access and rigorous academic achievement for students from all diverse groups to enable them work toward social change. It is a process of educational that challenges oppression and bias of all forms, and acknowledges and affirms the multiple identities that students bring to their

learning. Researchers and scholars have been finding it difficult to come up with a generally agreed definition of MCE. Instead, the majority of these researchers found it better to define multicultural education as a matrix of practices and concepts rather than a singular static notion. They agreed that MCE must be constructed within its history and roots in the civil rights movement (Banks 2004; Grant, Elsbree & Fondrie, 2004; Gay, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004).

One of the most renowned scholars of MCE is James Banks. The meaning of MCE in this study is therefore in line with his definitions. Banks (2006) advanced a definition of multicultural education as a broad concept and extrapolated on five dimensions. These are content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 2004). Content integration deals with the infusion of various cultures, ethnicities, and other identities to be represented in the curriculum. The knowledge construction process involves students in critiquing the social positioning of groups through the ways that knowledge is presented. Prejudice reduction describes lessons and activities that teachers implement to assert positive images of ethnic groups and to improve intergroup relations. Equity pedagogy concerns modifying teaching styles and approaches with the intent of facilitating academic achievement for all students. Empowering school culture describes the examination of the school culture and organization by all members of school staff with the intent to restructure institutional practices to create access for all groups (Banks, 2004). According to banks, while these dimensions are inextricably intertwined, a lot of effort must be put by schools to address each dimension separately. This makes the foundation for MCE assesement.

### **3.2 Teachers are Key to MCE**

Teachers are at the centre of providing multicultural education. They are the key stakeholders who may make MCE a success or a failure. Teachers who share their students' culture can minimize some of the differences between home and school. Often these teachers serve as role models, validating the identities of culturally diverse children. Considerable research (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba 1991; Halcón 2001; Moll 2001; Ogbu 2001) indicates that teachers who do not share children's cultures can provide culturally compatible instruction if they understand the children's "cultural funds of knowledge," which can be thought of as the different ways of knowing, communicating, and doing that exist within diverse homes (Moll 1994, 2001). Teachers who understand and appreciate culturally different strengths and funds of knowledge are more likely to provide enriching and responsive learning environments that celebrate and capitalize on children's cultural differences. Beginning the journey toward increased cultural competence (the ability to understand diverse perspectives and appropriately interact with members of other cultures in a variety of situations) requires teachers to rethink their assumptions and consider life's issues through the lenses of people who come from cultural backgrounds different from their own. The activities most likely to increase cultural competence are those that immerse teachers in meaningful interactions with members of other cultures and promote cultural disequilibrium or a sense of being lost (Sleeter 1995). According to Delpit (1995) teachers cannot hope to begin to understand who sits before them unless they can connect with the families and communities from which their children come. To do that it is vital that teachers and teacher educators explore their own beliefs and attitudes about others.

Research has shown that the relationships that develop between parents and teachers are negative. On the teachers' side of the relationship, Galinsky (1989) notes that in the teachers' lounge parents are often spoken of negatively; if the word "black" or "woman" were substituted for "parent," many of the comments would seem racist or sexist. On the parents' side of the relationship, many parents enter school assuming that teachers will ignore their concerns and alienate them from the classroom. Family-teacher relationships are essential for learning about the children from an additional and valuable source, promoting children's emotional health, and helping children deal with difficult problems that may have lifelong consequences. Gonzalez-Mena (2000) reminds teachers that when children come to school, it is important that the child does not lose her own culture while becoming part of the mainstream culture, since cultural identity and family connectedness are crucial for emotional health. This study sought to establish the extent to which teachers and parents are dealing and handling cultural diversity issues in Zimbabwean private schools.

### **3.3 Theoretical Framework**

The study was guided by Social Reconstructionism which describes a complete redesign of an educational program. The notion of reconstructionism draws from Brameld's framework to offer a critique of modern culture (Sleeter & Grant, 2006). Such a redesign recommends addressing issues and concerns that affect students of diverse groups, encouraging students to take an active stance by challenging the status quo, and calling on students to collectively speak out and effect change by joining with other groups in examining common or related concerns (Sleeter & Grant, 1987, 2006). The study explored whether parents and teachers have embraced the need for reconstructionism among the children and learners respectively.

### **4.0 Methodology**

The study was largely the quantitative though some elements of qualitative research were also employed in sampling. The survey design guided the study. Permission was first sought in writing at each school before data was collected. The population included all 16 administrators of the four schools that included school heads, deputy heads, senior masters and senior ladies. The four schools had a teacher population of 115. Convenience sampling method was used to come up with a representative sample of 4 administrators (one from each school) and 20 teachers (five from each school). While parents were a key stakeholder in this study, those approached expressed mixed feelings towards participation and were dropped. Teachers were in turn asked questions related to the parents which is a great limitation. Structured interviews were used to collect data from school administrators while questionnaires were administered to teachers.

## 5.0 Results

### 5.1 Demographic Data

**Table 1: Response Rate**

Respondents	Sample	No. from which data was collected	Response Rate
Administrators	4	4	100%
Teachers	20	20	100%
Totals	24	24	100%

From the information presented in the above table, it shows that the response rate was 100% for both teachers and administrators.

**Figure 1: Distribution by experience- Length of Service**



Information presented in Fig 1 shows that all administrators and teachers had great experience in private schools. Teachers were had mainly 11-16+ years of experience and all administrators had over 16 years of experience.

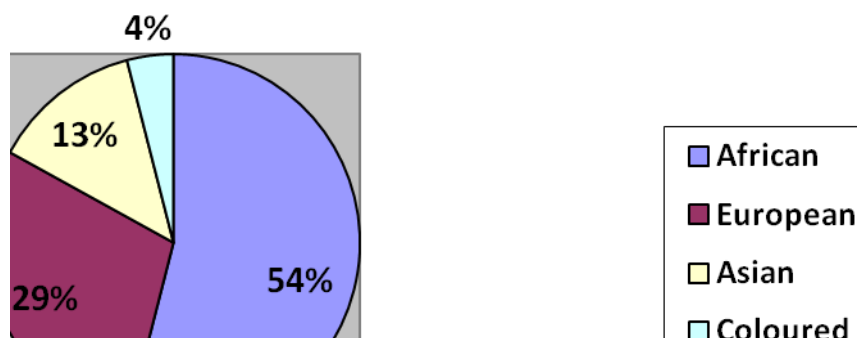
The research intended to establish the levels taught by the teachers and the following was established

**Figure 2: Distribution of Teachers by levels taught**



The data in Fig 2 shows that teachers from all levels participated, however concentration on respondents was from the lower primary and lower secondary which had 30% and 35% respectively. The upper primary and upper secondary accounted for the remaining 20% and 15%.

**Figure 3: Distribution by Race**



It was deduced that the majority of the respondents were African which constituted 54% Asians constituted 13%, and European constituted 29% while coloured constituted 4%.

### 5.2 How teachers and parents handled diversity in the schools

Question 8 for teachers was to establish whether they had dealt with issues that arose from cultural differences.

**Table 2: Whether teachers had dealt with issues arising from cultural differences  
 N=20**

Response	Primary Schools		High Schools	
	Frequency	Rating %	Frequency	Rating %
Yes	9	90	4	40
No	1	10	6	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 reflects that teachers mostly in primary schools had dealt with clashes among students that had arisen from cultural differences. It also reflects that as children matured, they were more understanding and accepting cultural differences. 70% of teachers admitted not having dealt with issues of cultural differences. 10% were from primary schools and 60% were from high schools.

Question 9 for teachers requested them to cite the major sources of cultural differences. The following were the findings:

**Table 3: Sources of cultural differences**

**N=20**

Respondent	Major Sources	Frequency	Rating %
	Religious beliefs	20	100
	Language / Communication style	18	90
	Superiority and inferiority issues	20	100
	Gender differences	7	35
	Behaviour patterns	16	80
	Economic status of family	2	10

Table 3 shows that religion and value placed on other cultures, that is superiority and inferiority complexes had 100% frequency as sources of cultural clashes. Language/communication and behavior patterns had 90% and 80% respectively. Gender differences and family economic status were also identified as sources of cultural clashes.

Question 10 for teachers aimed to establish competence of teachers on issues of cultural diversity. Results are shown in the following table.

**Table 4: Whether students accepted cultural differences N=20**

Response	Frequency	%
Yes	7	35
No	13	65
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

The results in Table 4 indicate that the majority of students (65%) still had problems with cultural differences while 35% seemed to have accepted cultural differences.

Not only were students affected by diversity, but teachers were similarly affected. Question 11 for teachers was also to establish whether teachers had cultural clashes and to find out the sources of the clashes. Responses are given in the table below;

**Table 5: Whether teachers had clashes among themselves  
N=20**

Response	Frequency	Rating %	Sources of clashes
Yes	2	10	Values placed on ethnical or racial groups
	2	10	Preferential treatments of other racial groups
	5	25	Superiority and inferiority complexes of different racial groups
No	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>45</b>	-

Information in the table shows that only 45% of the teachers had had cultural clashes while 55% seemed to have had appreciated cultural differences. Sources of the clashes were as shown in table 11 above.

Question 8 for administrators was to establish how teachers handled diversity. Administrators pointed out that they in-serviced new staff to explain cultural differences and how to handle issues of cultural differences. One administrator pointed out that,

*“Some of my staff members have problems in dealing with cultural diversity as they care seen to refer to higher authorities problems that arise from the cultural issues. We have since put in place a teacher who is experienced to deal with cultural problems that we face in the school.”*

Question 3 for administrators was to establish how they managed diversity in the schools. The following responses were given;

**Administrator 1**

*First we have our school rules, which are against discrimination, and we stick to them. We emphasize equality and equal treatment among our members. None is superior or inferior to others’*

**Administrator 2 and 3**

*“we are a Christian based school and we stick to Christian values. We explain this to parents before taking in their children and we expect the children to adhere to our values. Generally these values do not Condon discrimination in any way. We do not condemn other religions though and neither do we convert students to Christianity.*



**Administrator 4**

*“Sometimes we have to tolerate the cultural practices, if they are good and have a good moral base e.g ‘kupfugama, nekuombera’.*

**All Administrators**

*We have the Religious and Moral Education subject which emphasises moral aspects of life. Different religions are studied and children try to analyse the moral views in the different religions. This helps students understand their differences.*

*We try to in-service our teachers on multicultural education so that they may not face problems with students from diverse cultures. Most of our teachers have been trained abroad where fortunately they include multicultural education in their teacher training programs.*

The responses given show that in all schools, diversity was apparent and administrators took measures to manage the diversity in line with cultural issues. These measures ranged from training of staff in cultural issues to behavior management of students, which came in the form of school rules.

Question 11 for administrators was to reveal whether staff establishment reflected cultural diversity. Responses given were not clear but from observation, staff cultural representation was not fair. This can also be explained by information reflected on figure 3 of this document where 54% of respondents were African by race, 29% were European, Asians were 13% and 4% were mixed race.

Question 12 was to establish how private schools recruited their teachers. Administrators gave almost the same responses. One replied that,

*“It’s strictly by merit. If and when we have a vacant post, we advertise, interview the candidates and who ever meet our demands, get the post.” “We also emphasize the ability to coach at least one sporting discipline. We are particular with the overall development of a child.”*

## **6.0 Discussion**

Diversity was a reality in the schools. It therefore meant that teachers and parents had to work and handle diversity carefully to cater for all students. However research established that teachers faced challenges in dealing with diversity. 60% of the teachers indicated that students partially accepted their differences after attempts by them to resolve differences. It implied that teachers could be dealing with issues they have little knowledge about. 40% however admitted to having helped students accept their differences. Administrators 100% indicated that their schools had laws that address issues of culture. Research showed that all the schools are based on Christian principles, which helped and guided them in issues of

diversity. However the researcher noted with concern that all the schools were based on the Christian religion while other religions were ignored. This therefore implied that Christianity influenced the education in the schools for the students' benefit or otherwise.

Due to challenges of diversity, 50% of the administrators admitted to having special personnel who dealt with issues that arose from cultural misunderstandings. These included school counselors and experienced teachers. Through research, parents were also seen to contribute to the implementation of harmonious multicultural schools. 100% indicated that they held culture days in which parents took part through acting as resource persons, preparing their traditional foods to showcase and providing traditional attires for them and their children. 25% indicated to having invited even a foreign embassy to explain and guide them in a drama based on a foreign themes. However literature indicated that parents can have difficulties in handling diversity (Gay, 1983). In the USA, some parents reacted to multiculturalism by withdrawing their children from the schools, while those who could not, influenced placement in academically gifted classes. This was evidenced in over – representation and under- representation of different cultures in special classes.

### **7.0 Recommendations**

- Issues on challenges of MCE should be addressed in teacher training programmes at college and university level
- Schools should embrace only specific religious beliefs as these may have a direct clash on other religions leading to inequality in the provision of education. They must have religious pluralism.
- Laws and policies that support culture diversity in schools and the community should be instituted.
- Schools should improve on working and involving parents on multicultural issues and activities.

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