

Multicultural Awareness for Developing Global Leadership in Early Childhood Education

Haijiao Zhang

School of Monash University, Melbourne 3800, Australia

Abstract

This article adopts a literature research method, integrates and compares relevant literature, incorporates the concept of multicultural awareness, and critically discusses the importance of multicultural awareness for early childhood education. In addition, based on the neoliberal context, the paper critically discusses how multicultural awareness can be utilized to build bridges of cross-cultural understanding and cooperation and to promote social inclusiveness within the framework of the neoliberal value of prioritizing the economy over society.

Keywords

Multicultural awareness; Neoliberalism; Global early childhood education.

1. Introduction

With the development of globalization, the population of all countries in the world is showing a trend of diversification. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 (ABS, 2021)[1], 27.6% of Australia's population was born overseas. In addition, the top 5 languages used at home, other than English, were Mandarin (2.7%), Arabic (1.4%), Vietnamese (1.3%), Cantonese (1.25), and Punjabi (0.9%). In a diverse and developing society, some special groups have more rights and interests than the general group due to race, ethnicity, and language, and education can help students from different cultures and backgrounds to better adapt to the changing society (Boutte, 2008)[2]. Early childhood education, as the beginning of the educational stage, undoubtedly has an important responsibility (Abdullah, 2009)[3]. However, due to the lack of a theoretical basis for multicultural awareness and strategies to address dissonance, most early childhood teachers are fearful of the rapidly evolving diverse demographics (Boutte, 2008)[2].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Concept of Multicultural Awareness

There are many conceptual definitions of multicultural awareness, for example, Chauhan (2023)[4] summarizes multicultural awareness as the ability of an individual to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds without barriers in exchanging each other's knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Hall and Theriot (2016)[5] state that multicultural competence is manifested in three main ways: awareness of one's context, awareness of different cultural contexts, and strategies for adapting to different cultural contexts. In addition, Lum (2019)[6] argues that multiculturally aware individuals have unique perceptions and skills through which they interact with multicultural people through this unique cultural competence (p88). Schachner (2019)[7], on the other hand, argues that multicultural awareness is evidenced by the ability of different groups to recognize and respect the differences between them and to view such differences as a resource. Harding (2005)[8], on the other hand, summarizes multicultural awareness most succinctly: being culturally sensitive. While the above literature interprets multicultural awareness at a macro level, some of the literature goes deeper by integrating multicultural awareness with teachers. Chauhan (2023)[4]

suggests that multicultural awareness for teachers means that they can treat students from different cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds with tolerance, respect, and fairness. Baeten et al.'s (2013)[9] explanation of teachers' multicultural awareness is that teachers can recognize and understand the ideas of students from different cultural backgrounds and examine teaching methods and instructional materials related to multiculturalism.

In addition to the definitions of multicultural awareness in academic literature, some governments have enacted relevant documents to support the development of multiculturalism and emphasize the importance of multiculturalism. For example, Multicultural Australia - united, strong, successful (Australian Government, 2017)[10] issued by the Australian Government. The document claims that multiculturalism is one of Australia's greatest strengths and stimulates creativity in society. In a multicultural society, there are no restrictions on race, religion, or culture. The document argues that multicultural societies are built on the same values of respect, equality, and freedom. The multicultural awareness promoted in this document is the ability to establish harmonious relations with different religions and cultures and to have cross-cultural understanding.

2.2. The Importance of Multicultural Awareness for Early Childhood Education

2.2.1. Promoting Cognitive Development in Children

According to Porter (1971)[11], people begin to develop perceptions of racial and physical differences at a young age. Meanwhile, Bellini et al. (2016)[12] also claimed that children of preschool age are influenced by racial attitudes and perceptions. This shows that multicultural education in early childhood is crucial. The above two kinds of literature use a qualitative research method, and although the argument is complete, it lacks the support of data and experimental research. However, some educators have conducted relevant experiments to remedy this shortcoming. For example, Bernstein et al. (2000)[13] conducted a controlled-variable study with 4- and 5-year-old children. The study allowed children to recognize family life in different cultures through reading stories. The results of the study proved that reading stories could help children recognize cultures of different races and enhance children's perception of multiculturalism. In addition, Chi et al. (2019)[14] conducted a multicultural sensitivity test on 200 children between the ages of 3 and 5 years old. Chi et al. (2019)[14] stated in their article that childhood is an important period of social interaction for children, and it is important for early childhood educators to help children recognize different cultures and appearances through multicultural education to enhance their cognitive abilities toward multiculturalism. Meanwhile, the test results proved that cognitive ability is the strongest influence on children's multicultural sensitivity. Chi et al. (2019)[14] suggested in their article to increase multicultural experiences in early childhood to improve children's multicultural sensitivity, as well as to achieve cognitive ability by expanding knowledge.

2.2.2. Fostering Acceptance and Inclusion in Children

Motti-Stefanidi et al. (2012)[15] as well as Eccles and Roeser (2011)[16] have demonstrated that school is an important context for social emotions development from a social-psychological perspective. In addition, Schachner (2019)[7] states in the literature that a school is an important place for social emotions development and an important cultural context, especially for children from multicultural backgrounds, and that the school environment helps them to adapt better to the culture. Horenczyk and Tatar (2012)[17] also confirmed that for children from multicultural backgrounds, schools can help them learn about the culture of their location and develop tolerance for different social culture aspects. In addition, Schachner (2019)[7] shows in the literature that when schools emphasize equality and inclusion, it can help schools from different cultural backgrounds to better integrate into the mainstream culture. At the same time, when schools emphasize cultural diversity, it promotes students' identification with different ethnic cultures. Schachner (2019)[7] argues that the combination

of these two approaches helps to foster acceptance and tolerance of multiculturalism. Schachner (2019)[7] also emphasizes in her article that multicultural education is a way to teach cultural differences and relationships between different cultures to help students reduce prejudice and increase inclusion. Schachner et al. (2016)[18] are in agreement with Schachner (2019)[7] who argued that equality and inclusion of multiculturalism in schools has a positive psychological effect on students from different cultural backgrounds.

While the above literature is based on global discourse, Zilcher and Říčan (2014)[19] are based on a more specific and targeted study in the Czech social context. Zilcher and Říčan (2014)[19] argue that multicultural education not only increases students' knowledge of their cultural roots but also fosters their understanding of different cultures, thus fostering students' sense of justice and tolerance. In addition, inclusiveness as expressed in the above literature is more emphasized as identification with and adaptation to multicultural environments. Whereas, Zilcher and Říčan (2014)[19] emphasize the ability of students from different cultural backgrounds to find their own identity and space to exist in a specific cultural context.

3. Critical Discussion

The origins of neoliberalism can be traced back to the mid-20th century, and it has begun to emerge globally since the 1980s with an expanding scope of influence (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022)[20]. Brown (2016)[21] argues that making everything “economic” is the core of neoliberalism, which extends market indicators and practices to politics, culture, education, and other areas. According to Moss and Roberts-Holmes (2022)[20], neoliberalism is the view of everything in the social environment as a commodity that can be traded. Gupta (2018)[22] on the other hand, argues that the core idea of neoliberalism is the market economy, which emphasizes on humanism, consumerism, competition, and efficiency among others. Based on the rapid expansion of neoliberalism globally, both Adriany (2018)[23] and Moss and Roberts-Holmes (2022)[20] argue that current early childhood education has been influenced by neoliberalism. Adriany (2018)[23] argues that as a result of the emergence of neoliberalism, one of the most dominant discourses in the field of early childhood education is currently economic. Unlike Adriany, Moss, Roberts-Holmes, and Sims' globally based research perspective, Gupta (2018)[22] targeted the research perspective to several countries in Asia, namely: India, China, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. Gupta (2018)[22] focused on the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity of these countries. According to Gupta's (2018)[22] findings, in several of these countries, there is a growing trend toward the privatization of kindergarten education and the commodification of early childhood due to the development of neoliberalism. Gupta (2018)[22] also suggests that influenced by neoliberalism, many early childhood teachers in current early childhood education in Asia do not have enough knowledge and experience to face cultural diversity in the classroom.

As evidenced by relevant research, neoliberalism has had a tremendous impact on global early childhood education. This section will therefore discuss how multicultural awareness builds bridges of cultural understanding and cooperation and promotes social inclusion when global early childhood education leadership is framed within the neoliberal values of prioritizing the economy over society.

3.1. Building Bridges of Cross-cultural Understanding and Cooperation

Under the neoliberal framework, society tends to be more inclined to pursue economic growth and market competitiveness (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022)[20], while ignoring the importance of social-cultural diversity and social equity Gupta (2018)[22]. Therefore, Multicultural awareness plays a vital role in this context.

Firstly, cultural differences are an inevitable product of the era of globalization, and multicultural awareness helps to understand and respect these cultural differences Schachner (2019)[7]. Under neoliberal values, the basic principle of the market economy is the relationship between supply and demand. Parents are one of the consumers, and they will choose the kindergarten or educational institution suitable for their children based on their own needs (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022)[20]. Therefore, under the framework of neoliberal values, early childhood education leaders need to face children and parents from different cultural backgrounds. And differences between different cultural backgrounds can pose challenges to educational activities. According to the concept definition of multicultural awareness and ability in the Literature review section, early childhood education leaders with multicultural awareness can better understand and respect the needs and behavioral habits of children and parents from different cultural backgrounds, thereby more effectively carrying out educational work and improve the quality of education (Chauhan, 2023[4] ; Hall & Theriot, 2016[5]).

Secondly, multicultural awareness helps to establish cross-cultural cooperative relationships. Gupta (2018)[22] mentioned in the article that neoliberal globalization means that the domestic market will accept foreign investments and companies. It can be seen that in the context of globalization, early childhood education leaders need to cooperate with partners and families from different cultural backgrounds. These families may have different cultural traditions, values, and educational philosophies. Early childhood education leaders with multicultural awareness can better understand and respect partners and families from different cultural backgrounds, establish mutual trust and win-win cooperative relationships, and jointly promote the all-round development of children.

3.2. Promote Social Inclusion

First of all, according to the review of articles by Chauhan (2023)[4] and Baeten et al. (2013)[9], we can see that early childhood education leaders' adoption of multicultural awareness in the educational process means that the education system will pay more attention to children's individual differences and cultural backgrounds. Under the neoliberal framework, education is often driven by economic benefits (Adriany, 2018)[23], which may ignore the diversity of children. However, relevant policies have emphasized that to build a multicultural society, we must tolerate different cultures or races (Australian Government, 2017)[10]. At the same time, some educational researchers have confirmed that multicultural education in schools is conducive to cultivating children's tolerance and respect for multiculturalism (Horenczyk & Tatar, 2012[17]; Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012[15]; Schachner, 2019[7]). Therefore, as a global leader in early childhood education, we should pay more attention to children's cultural differences and adopt more inclusive teaching methods, to ensure that every child receives equal treatment and educational opportunities.

Secondly, multicultural awareness helps reduce inequality and discrimination in society. Within an economic priority framework, marginalization and discrimination against specific cultural or social groups may occur, which may exacerbate social divisions and instability (Bottery, 2005)[24]. However, according to research by Schachner (2019)[7] and Schachner et al. (2016)[18], by promoting multicultural awareness, society can better understand and respect people from different cultural backgrounds, thereby reducing discrimination and inequality and building a more harmonious society. and an inclusive social environment.

4. Conclusion

According to research findings, current early childhood education is heavily influenced by neoliberalism. The main discourse of neoliberalism is to emphasize the economy and neglect the development of multicultural awareness among teachers and the importance of

multicultural education. However, according to literature studies, multicultural awareness builds bridges of cultural understanding and cooperation and promotes social inclusion. Therefore, early childhood educators should continue to improve their intercultural communication skills, actively seek to understand the commonalities and differences between cultures, and incorporate these understandings into their daily teaching and management practices.

References

- [1] Information on: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-diversity-census/2021#cite-window1>
- [2] Boutte. G. S : Beyond the illusion of diversity: How early childhood teachers can promote social justice, *Social Studies*, Vol. 99 (2008) No.5, p.165-173.
- [3] Abdullah. A. C: Multicultural education in early childhood, *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*, Vol. 12 (2009) No.1, p.159-175.
- [4] Chauhan. V: Cross-cultural competence in teacher education: A curriculum evaluation, *Journal of The Asiatic Society of Mumbai*, Vol. 96 (2023) No.34, p.47-56.
- [5] Hall. J. C and Theriot. M: Developing Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills: Diversity Training Makes a Difference?, *Multicultural Perspectives*, Vol. 18 (2016) No.1, p.35-41.
- [6] Lum, D: Culturally competent practice : a framework for understanding diverse groups and justice issues, (Thomson Brooks/Cole, The United States of America 2007).
- [7] Schachner. M. K: From equality and inclusion to cultural pluralism–Evolution and effects of cultural diversity perspectives in schools, *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 16 (2019) No.1, p.1-17.
- [8] Harding. N: The ethnography project: A method for increasing sensitivity in teacher candidates, Retrieved May, 29, 2008.
- [9] Baeten. M., Dochy. F and Struyven. K: The effects of different learning environments on students' motivation for learning and their achievement, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 83(2013) No.3, p.484-501.
- [10] Information on: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/our-statement>.
- [11] Porter. J. D. R: *Black Child, White Child; the development of racial attitudes*, (Harvard University Press, The United States of America 1971).
- [12] Bellini. S., Pereda. V., Cordero. N and Suarez-Morales. L : Developing multicultural awareness in preschool children: A pilot intervention, *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 4 (2016) No.7, p.182.
- [13] Bernstein. J., Zimmerman. T. S., Werner-Wilson. R. J and Vosburg. J : Preschool children's classification skills and a multicultural education intervention to promote acceptance of ethnic diversity, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, Vol. 14 (2000) No.2, p.182-192.
- [14] Chi. S. A., Lee. D. E and Yeon. G. S : An Analysis of the Relationships among Multicultural Sensitivity, Cognitive Ability, Language Ability, Emotional Ability, and Self-esteem of Children, *Journal of Children's Literature and Education*, Vol. 20 (2019) No.2, p.141-160.
- [15] Motti-Stefanidi. F., Berry. J., Chrysochoou. X., Sam. D. L and Phinney. J: *Positive immigrant youth adaptation in context: Developmental, acculturation, and social-psychological perspectives*, (Cambridge University Press, The United States of America 2012).

- [16] Eccles. J. S and Roeser. R. W: ASchools as developmental contexts during adolescence,ournal of Research on Adolescence, Vol. 21 (211) No.1, p.225-241.
- [17] Horenczyk. G and Tatar. M: Conceptualizing the school acculturative context: School, classroom, and the immigrant student, (Cambridge University Press, The United States of America 2012).
- [18] Schachner. M. K., Noack. P., Van de Vijver. F. J and Eckstein. K: Cultural diversity climate and psychological adjustment at school - Equality and inclusion versus cultural pluralism, Child Development, Vol. 87 (2016) No.4, p.1175-1191.
- [19] Zilcher. V. and Řičan. J: Multicultural education as a way to inclusion, Internationalization in teacher education 6, (2014), p.192-207.
- [20] Moss. P. and Roberts-Holmes. G: Now is the time! Confronting neo-liberalism in early childhood, Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, Vol. 23 (2022) No.1, p.96-99.
- [21] Brown. W: Sacrificial citizenship: Neoliberalism, human capital, and austerity politics, Constellations, Vol. 23 (2016) No.1, p.3-14.
- [22] Gupta. A: How neoliberal globalization is shaping early childhood education policies in India, China, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and austerity politics, Policy Futures in Education, Vol. 16 (2022) No.1, p.11-28.
- [23] Adriany. V: Neoliberalism and practices of early childhood education in Asia, Policy Futures in Education, Vol. 16 (2018) No.1, p.3-10.
- [24] Bottery. M: Systems of Education (Routledge, UK 2005).