

The Attitudes of U.S. Secondary School Graduates Towards the Components Characterizing Multicultural Education

ამერიკის საშუალო სკოლადამთავრებულთა დამოკიდებულება მულტიკულტურული განათლებისთვის დამახასიათებელ კომპონენტთა მიმართ

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Abstract

Political, demographic, socio-economic and cultural changes challenge American secondary school in the 21st century more than ever. One of the focal points in the US current politics is multicultural secondary education.

This article will introduce findings and analysis that are based on the results of the survey conducted among U.S. secondary school graduates. The goal of the survey to provide the depiction of the multicultural secondary education in the U.S. and to identify the attitudes of U.S. secondary school graduates of different nationalities towards the components characterizing multicultural education being in the center of scholars' discourses; and how they personally view the possible changes necessary for solving the existing challenges in a multicultural secondary education.

Keywords: multicultural education, academic achievements, PTA(Parent-Teacher Association), curriculum and extracurricular activities

რეზიუმე

პოლიტიკური, დემოგრაფიული, სოციალურ-ეკონომიკური და კულტურული ცვლილებები არსებულ საშუალო განათლების სისტემას აშშ-ში XXI საუკუნეში უფრო პრობლემურს ხდის, ვიდრე ოდესმე. ამერიკის მიმდინარე პოლიტიკის ერთერთი საკვანძო საკითხია მულტიკულტურული საშუალო განათლება.

სტატია წარმოადგენს ამერიკის საშუალო სკოლების კურსდამთავრებულთა შეხედულებების ანალიზს და მის შედეგებს. მიმოხილვის მიზანი იყო აშშ-ში არსებული მულტიკულტურული განათლების სისტემის აღწერა და ამერიკის საშუალო სკოლების კურსდამთავრებულთა დამოკიდებულებების შესწავლა მულტიკულტურული განათლებისთვის დამახასიათებელი კომპონენტების მიმართ. ჩვენ გვაინტერესებდა მკვლევართა აზრი ამ საკითხებზე, მათი იდეები სასურველი ცვლილებების თაობაზე, რომლებიც გადაჭრიან მულტიკულტურული განათლების მწვავე საკითხებს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: მულტიკულტურული განათლება, აკადემიური წინსვლა, კურიკულუმი და კლასგარეშე აქტივობები, მშობელთა და მასწავლებელთა ასოციაცია

Introduction

The demographic, social, and economic trends have important implications for education (Banks & Banks, 2001). It is also important to consider the fact that the U.S. students are becoming increasingly diverse. By the year 2020 the students of color will make up about 48 percent of the U.S. school-age youth (Banks, 1995).

The huge wave of immigrants entering the nation each year, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the changing characteristics of the nation's student population make it vital that schools be formed in ways that will help students and teachers to re-envision, rethink, and

reconceptualize America.

The issue of multicultural education is of paramount importance in the twenty-first century (Banks & Banks, 2001). How does multicultural education respond to the changing demographics of the United States?

Multicultural education is aimed to reduce race, ethnicity, class, and gender divisions by helping all students attain the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need in order to become active citizens in a democratic society and participate in social change (Valdez, 1999).

The goal of multicultural education is not only to teach children about other cultural groups or countries. It is also to help children become accustomed to the idea that there

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are many lifestyles, languages, cultures, and points of view. The purpose of multicultural curriculum is to attach positive feelings to multicultural experiences so that each child will feel included and valued, and will feel friendly and respectful toward people from other ethnic and cultural groups (Dimidjian, 1989).

Multiculturalism cannot be addressed separately within one social institution or one field of study. It is rather a focal point from which the whole American culture should be viewed.

The purpose of my study was to examine the attitudes of American secondary school graduates in regard to bilingual education, secondary school curriculum, PTA and community involvement in American secondary schools. I used the survey to gather the information from the participants about their attitudes.

The instrument of my survey is the questionnaire which was composed on the bases of the methods of data collection taking into consideration the main 15 principles of questionnaire construction. The questionnaire items match my research objectives.

While working on the questionnaire I considered the possible demographic and cultural characteristics of my potential participants in order to make it understandable for them. Piloting questionnaires is vital for the project success as they do not come out fully-fledged. The informal piloting with my colleagues tested the questionnaires for reliability, validity and errors. Through piloting I made sure that there were no ambiguous, double-barreled or leading questions and that the posed questions adequately addressed research objectives and no mistakes were left unnoticed. The survey was administered in an on-line format. The questionnaires were e-mailed to 100 U.S. secondary school graduates.

The questionnaire consists of 14 questions. I subdivided questions in four categories while analyzing the responses of the survey participants. First three questions are general questions to identify the year the respondents finished the secondary school, their native language and the other language they speak in their family. The following six questions aim to illustrate the core issues of U.S. secondary school, mainly the type of class, language barrier, low academic achievements, the effectiveness of multicultural curriculum in their schools and the minority students' willingness to participate in extracurricular activities. The open-ended questions included in the questionnaire were directed to share the respondents' viewpoints about minorities' reluctant participation in extra-curriculum activities and their recommendation over different kinds of extracurricular activities they consider helpful and essential in order to help minority students to integrate into the mainstream of American society.

Numerical rating scales and close-ended questions intended to clarify the students' attitudes and position to-

wards specific issues such as PTA and school board participation in different aspects of schooling and necessary changes that should be introduced into the school curricula to help national minority students to accomplish educational and social goals successfully.

This part of the article will present empirical findings generated from the questionnaire conducted via internet. SPSS 18 was used to obtain descriptive statistics of the survey.

Background Information about Participants

The survey participants were U.S. secondary school graduates. Totally a hundred of students completed the questionnaire. The responses to the first question - "When did you finish secondary school?" - revealed that 43 % of respondents finished school in 2008.

The participants were asked the second question in order to investigate the respondents' native language and determine how diverse the group of survey participants was. The group appeared multilingual with the high percentage of English (38%) and Spanish (32%) native languages.

The following question "Do you speak a language other than English in your family?" aimed to elicit the information whether the participants were bilingual in the family environment. The results revealed that 79% of respondents speak language other than English in their families, and 21% appeared monolingual.

The first three questions shed the light on the general information of the survey participants and helped me to assume the possible outcomes of the survey.

School environment, academic achievements and multicultural curriculum

The following six questions tried to reveal the language of instruction of the participants in the secondary school, whether the class environment was multicultural and whether the students of different nationalities experienced difficulties in their studies and academic achievements because their native language was other than English. Further the questions focus on the extent to which a multicultural curriculum managed to help the participants to integrate in the mainstream of U.S. society. The questions also aimed to investigate whether ethnic minority students participate willingly and actively in extracurricular activities and compare the responses to the general perspective on this issue suggesting the idea that ethnic minority students are sometimes reluctant to participate in such activities because of language barrier and feeling being inferior to the domain culture.

When posed with the question - "Was the language of instruction at your school only English?" - 78% of survey participants responded that it was not only English. For

22% of school graduates it was only English.

When the respondents were given the following question to answer – “Were in your class students of different nationalities whose native language was other than English?” - 98% of survey participants selected the positive answer, while only 2 % - a negative response. The result proves that many schools in the U.S. are multicultural.

The question aimed to identify whether the students of different ethnicity experienced difficulties in their study because of the language barrier. The responses revealed that 64% of our respondents agree that students with multicultural background experience some kinds of difficulties. Presumably, they witnessed some impediments the students experience in their classes because of language barrier. Only 35% considered that students do not face such problems.

Among the major goals of the U.S. multicultural secondary education is the urge to increase the academic achievements of minority students. To reveal the real picture of this process I was given an opportunity to question the school graduates who have gone through the schooling processes. Figure 1 shows that the academic achievements of language minorities is lower, which leads us to the assumption that some changes are required to be carried out in multicultural education in order to reach its main objective.

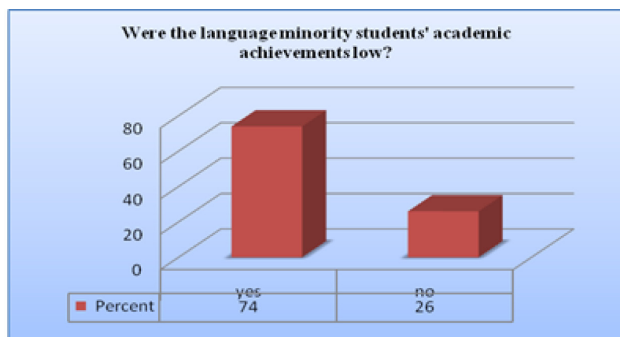


Figure 1: Response Statistics of Question 7

As the curriculum plays an essential role in the schooling process and the education based on appropriate and high-standard schooling helps minorities to integrate in the mainstream of U.S. society. I considered it vital to elicit the respondents' view point concerning a multicultural school curriculum and its influence over the ethnic minority students' integration process in the U.S. society. The numerical scale was provided to indicate the extent of this process. 22% of survey participants selected number 8 on the numerical scale of 10 as the highest average of positive answers and number 3 was the indicator of the lowest scale. Majority of respondents (totally 79%) highly assessed the curriculum (6-10). However, it is evident that there are school graduates who are not satisfied with curriculum. Only one respondent left the answer blank.

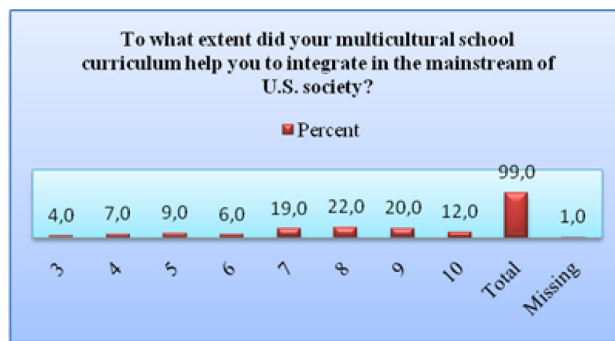


Figure 2: Response Statistics of Question 8

Besides the academic achievements and the curriculum effectiveness I aimed to elicit whether the general perspective on minority students' unwilling participation in extracurricular activities is accurate. 87% of participants' positive responses proved that the general viewpoint may not be precise. The results showed that minority students willingly and actively participate in extracurricular activities.

PTA and school boards – participants of the multicultural secondary education process.

The responsibilities of the school board and PTA participation in schooling process are discussed widely. I considered it interesting to find out the extent of PTA and school board participation in different respects, such as:

- Choosing text-books;
- Developing curriculum;
- Organizing extracurricular activities;
- Having influence on integration of ethnic minorities;

All these issues represent a significant part of the U.S. multicultural secondary education. PTA and school board participation in this process is also of paramount importance. To elicit participants' viewpoints to what extent PTA and school boards participate in the above mentioned processes, numerical scales were provided to select the rate of extent of their participation. The results show that the average highest number 6 was selected on the numerical scale by 24% of participants to indicate the extent of PTA and school participation in choosing text-books. Majority of respondents (71%) highly (6-10 points on the scale) assess PTA and school board involvement in choosing text-books. However, there is still place left for improvement. Totally 98% of respondents answered the question. 2 participants left the answer blank.

When posed with the question – “To which extent do PTA (Parent-Teacher –Association) and school board participate to: develop curriculum”- 25 % of respondents selected 7 point on the numerical scale as the highest av-

erage. 1% scaled their participation in this process with number 1. Again, satisfaction is high (78 % of respondents chose high assessment of 6-10 points), but improvement is possible. Totally 99% showed their viewpoints, 1 participant left the question without answer.

Extracurricular activities are essential part of multicultural secondary education that gives the chance to minority students to experience different settings beside class environment together with their peers of different nationalities. The 7 point was selected by 22% of participants as the highest average rate on the numerical scale for the extent of PTA and school participation in organizing extracurricular activities. Like in the previous two questions, satisfaction is high

(56 %) of respondents chose high assessment of 6-10 points), but improvement is possible. Totally 99% of responses were received. 1 respondent left the answer blank.

To the question, to which extent PTA and school board participate to influence the integration of ethnic minorities, totally I received 98% of responses. 2 respondents refused to indicate their viewpoints. Out of 98% the 6 point on the numerical scale was selected as the highest average by 30% of survey participants, 1% was given to the number 1 on the scale. Respondents' satisfaction is high (68 % of respondents chose high assessment of 6-10 points), but improvement is possible.

Further I wanted to reveal if PTA helps students to overcome ethnic diversity problems at school. When posed with this question the participants we asked to select one of three options, whether they agree, disagree or partially agree with this statement. Out of 98% of total responses 33% of survey participants agreed with the statement that PTA helps to overcome ethnic diversity problems at school, 21 % disagreed and 44 percent partially agreed with this viewpoint. It is visible that in this direction serious improvement is needed. Two respondents left the answer blank.

Possible changes in the curriculum

As curriculum reflects the goals of the school, it is always crucial to develop such a curriculum which best meets the school objectives. Curriculum development is a very complex process; it requires many reforms and endeavors. I was really interested in participants' opinions on this issue and tried to evoke their responses concerning the possible changes in their school curricula that they consider crucial.

The following question aimed to find out what changes should be introduced into the school curriculum to help national minority students to accomplish educational and social goals successfully. Participants were presented with several options in order to elicit their viewpoints.

Out of total 98% of obtained survey participants' re-

sponses, 71% of positive answers were given to the option whether academic subjects dealing with multiculturalism should be added to their already existing secondary school curriculum. 27 % of respondents considered their school curriculum sufficient to reach the goal introduced in the question above. 2% of survey participants felt reluctant to express their viewpoints.

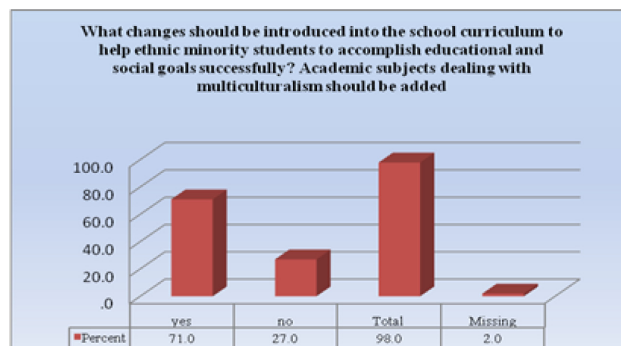


Figure 3: Response Statistics of Question 14 (a)

Another option suggested the focus on minority students' active involvement in extracurricular activities. 64% of survey participants out of 98% selected the positive answer. 34% did not consider it necessary to focus on this issue and 2 respondents left the answer blank.

My perspective is that PTA and community programs are crucial for a multicultural secondary curriculum especially in helping ethnic minority students to accomplish educational and social goals successfully. As expected, participants tended to show the positive attitude towards this change. 69% of survey participants selected a positive answer. 28% respondents disagreed with the introduction of PTA and community programs in their school curriculum. Totally 97% answered the question and 3 % left it blank.

One of the options of possible changes in school curriculum was the introduction of new academic programs. To this question the total amount of responses was 97%. 55% of survey participants selected the positive answer, 42% disagreed with the idea by selecting the negative answer and 3% left the answer blank. Thus, about as many people support changes in the curriculum as those who prefer to keep the existing curriculum.

Bilingual education is becoming increasingly controversial. There are lots of discourses whether such programs help ethnic minority students to accomplish their educational and social goals successfully or they just keep their pupils below a glass ceiling of functional literacy and substandard English instead of easing their transformation into the mainstream of the U.S. society. Offering the necessity of transitional bilingual education at elementary levels as one of the options of changes that should be introduced into the secondary school curriculum I expected more

positive answers as it actually happened. However, 62% of respondents out of total 98%, which is about two thirds, agree that transitional bilingual education is necessary at elementary levels, 36% opposes this idea. 2 % left the answer blank.

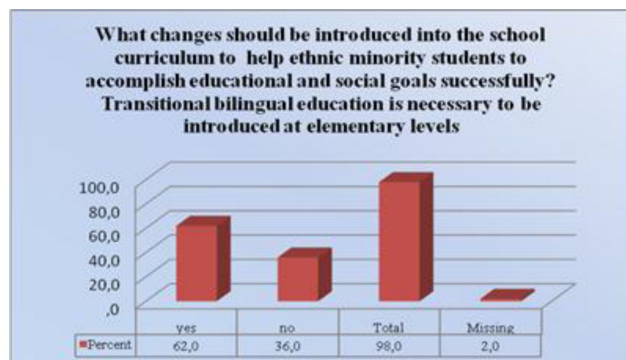


Figure 4: Response Statistics of Question 14 (d)

Throughout my questionnaire I considered it necessary to give the survey participants the right to express their perspectives towards some specific issues and give reasons or suggest their own opinions and recommendations. For this I included some open-ended questions, but to my surprise I received no alternative ways or opinions from the survey participants. The open-ended questions were as follows:

a) Give the reasons why ethnic minority students are reluctant to participate in extracurricular activities?

b) What kind of extracurricular activities would you recommend to introduce in secondary multicultural schools, which will help ethnic minorities to integrate into the mainstream of American society?

c) What changes should be introduced into the school curriculum to help ethnic minority students to accomplish educational and social goals successfully? - Others (suggest your opinion)

Conclusion

Based on the results of my survey analysis, I can conclude that U.S. secondary school graduates' viewpoints over multicultural secondary education in the U.S. coincide with the scholars' discourses over the same issue. The results reflect existing challenges in multicultural secondary education and the possible ways to overcome these challenges. The dilemmas really exist in multicultural secondary education and the survey participants once more proved this with their responses. The respondents, who are of different nationalities, who studied in multicultural settings in the secondary school and whose school curriculum was multicultural, and the language of instruction was not only English, could carefully reveal the peculiarities of multicultural education. The difficulties that ethnic minorities experience because of the language barrier and the fact

of their low academic achievement were also proved by the results of the survey. The outcomes of the survey provide depiction of the success of existing multicultural secondary school curriculum in helping ethnic minorities to integrate in U.S. mainstream society, though some changes are still required to make the curriculum more efficient. The results also showed that PTA and school participation in schooling processes should be enhanced. The survey participants consider that the introduction of new academic subjects concerning multiculturalism will improve the existing multicultural secondary curriculum and make it more flexible, attractive and efficient for ethnic minorities. The enhanced involvement of PTA and community, and the introduction of bilingual education at elementary level are also of paramount importance.

As expected, the survey reflected the situation of multicultural education in the U.S. secondary schools with its pros and cons. In addition, it is worth mentioning that respondents realize the existing problems, positive sides and the necessary changes in the U.S. multicultural secondary education.

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