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Chapter

Enhancing Social Sustainability through Education: Revisiting the Concept of Multicultural Education

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Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development holds that education is essential to achieving a sustainable future. Thus, many countries around the world have made multicultural education imperative. However, a pertinent question is how multicultural education should be understood and how inclusive teaching and learning approaches should be initiated and integrated within educational systems. In this chapter, I critically discuss the concept of multicultural education and explore how it may contribute to realising the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. First, I give an overview of the main characteristics and goals of multicultural education. Second, I discuss what I see as two major hindrances to realising a sustainable multicultural education: the lack of integrating issues of diversity into everyday school practices and the deficit discourse that still characterises contemporary educational debates on diversity.

Keywords: social sustainability, multicultural education, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism, deficit discourse

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been worldwide interest in how education can optimise social and academic outcomes for all students, regardless of gender, class, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds [1, 2]. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, holds education to be essential to achieving a sustainable future and realising all 17 sustainable development goals. Goal 4 of the agenda is focused on education, aiming to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” [1]. Against this background, many countries around the world have made multicultural education imperative. However, a pertinent question is how multicultural education should be understood and how teaching and learning approach that foster diversity should be initiated and integrated within educational systems.

The attention to multicultural education resembles that of the social dimension of sustainability, asking what type of society we want to sustain. As emphasised by Wolff and Ehrström [3], many of the contemporary challenges regarding
sustainability relate to the social dimension: “Risks and vulnerability arise from social polarisation, urban poverty, conflict, terrorism, and natural disasters. Moreover, climate change and its effects have a strong connection to social life”. All these challenges call for a rethinking of education. In particular, the UN agenda challenges schools to find ways of enhancing positive interpersonal relationships between students and to create an inclusive school community that expands opportunities for all students to succeed, both socially and academically.

In this chapter, I critically discuss the concept of multicultural education and explore how it may contribute to realising the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the first section, I provide an overview of the main characteristics and goals of multicultural education as outlined by leading scholars in the field. In the remainder, I discuss what I see as two major hindrances to realising a sustainable multicultural education. When practices of multicultural education are treated separately without truly permeating everyday school activities, they may function counterproductively to their aim of inclusion and, paradoxically, reinforce the boundaries they were meant to dissolve. Furthermore, drawing attention to the challenges that emerge from the deficit discourse that still characterises contemporary educational debates on diversity, I argue that well-meaning school personnel may often unintentionally reinforce a deficit discourse, even when applying practices of multicultural education.

2. Multicultural education: main characteristics and goals

Multicultural education is a term that refers to a conglomerate of educational practices used by a variety of educators, researchers, and policymakers in a variety of ways [4, 5]. Therefore, multicultural education as a concept could not be reduced to a single approach or one identifiable course or educational programme. Nevertheless, this does not prevent us from agreeing on some main characteristics and goals of multicultural education. Although the concept encompasses a variety of practices, theories, and understandings and captures multiple definitions and explanations, sufficient similarities in definitions exist.

According to Nieto [5], multicultural education emerged as part of a social movement for equity and social justice and has been a significant part of the strive for equal opportunities in general. Thus, multicultural education started as an attempt to develop an educational system that holds the potential of improving education for all students. In this way, multicultural education represents an idea, an educational reform, and a process [6]. As an idea, multicultural education acknowledges that “all students, regardless of the groups to which they belong, such as those related to gender, ethnicity, race, culture, language, social class, religion, or exceptionality, should experience educational equality in the schools” [7]. Furthermore, understood as a reform movement, multicultural education is a direct challenge to the Eurocentric focus and curriculum that creates uneven outcomes for students whose culture, language, ethnicity, and social class differ from the majority group [5]. Instead of overlooking dominant paradigms and practices, multicultural education should encourage critical thinking and enhance the transformation of schools so that all children and youth have the same opportunities in terms of access and outcome throughout all aspects of school. Lastly, multicultural education should be considered a continuing process, which indicates that the idealised goals, it aims to realise must always be addressed in human society [8]. Hence, as an idea and reform movement,
multicultural education always expands traditional approaches to teaching and learning and is never a completed or concluded project. Rather, it continues as a process, always struggling for equal opportunities in schools.

3. Historical background

Historically, the claim for multicultural education can be traced back to the civil rights movement of the 1960s in the USA [8]. For almost 90 years after the abolition of the forced enslavement of Africans and African Americans, school authorities in the USA continued to embrace state-sanctioned segregation and cultural hegemony in public education. Segregated schools remained lawfully in existence until 1954, when the Supreme Court finally proclaimed that every individual, regardless of race, is entitled to equal protection under the law [9]. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the civil rights movement worked actively against discrimination in the public, demanding that the educational system should respond to a wider range of needs, cultures, and histories [5].

In the European context, the growing awareness of multicultural education has emerged in parallel with the different phases of migration in post-war Europe, as well as, with the major shift in policy following the 9/11 attacks in New York [10]. Migration within and into Europe contributed to changing the composition of students in many classrooms, which led to a greater awareness of the mutual rights and responsibilities of migrants and societies, not least related to language policy. With the terror of 9/11, the beginning of the new millennium brought with it a major shift in policy, making security concerns related to migration a priority. In recent decades, the focus of multicultural education has therefore been on what holds societies together rather than on how diversity and differences divide communities within European countries. Although all EU countries have considerable autonomy in the field of education, EU institutions and the Council of Europe have played a role as major supranational actors in the educational field, providing unifying calls for acknowledging the intercultural dimension in schools and education. An example is an Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which is an intra-European initiative aimed at identifying common multicultural challenges in schools, spreading best practices, and encouraging countries to review their existing national policies.

4. Different dimensions of multicultural education

The concept of multicultural education comprises several dimensions that partly overlap. At its core, multicultural education calls for a curriculum no longer limited to content charted for the majority group. Furthermore, it challenges how education is done, and critically reviews the purpose and outcome of education [5, 8]. Hence, the concept of multicultural education promotes a re-envisioning of education, striving for equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of ethnicity, social class, and cultural or racial backgrounds.

Such a wide conception thus stands in contrast to how teachers and educators have often thought of multicultural education as primarily related to curriculum content [11]. Although a critical reflection on curriculum is an important dimension, conceptualising multicultural education exclusively as content is problematic because it fails to consider multicultural education as an integral part of all subjects.
When multicultural education is exclusively bound to content related to various cultural and ethnic groups, teachers who cannot see the relevance of the content within their disciplines easily dismiss multicultural education as peripheral to their day-to-day work in the classroom.

The content dimension of multicultural education encourages teachers to use a variety of examples and knowledge from different cultural contexts in all their teaching [10]. For instance, when working with songs and different kinds of folktales in school, teachers should include histories and cultural material from parts of the world other than those of the linguistic and cultural majority. This would also imply letting the students see how cultural motives find their parallel in different cultural and ethnic contexts [12]. By becoming aware of how to expand the curriculum, teachers can draw on multicultural content in all subjects, although it will be easier within social studies, language instruction, arts, and music than in science and mathematics [7]. Nevertheless, advancing the general awareness of teachers on the kinds of knowledge and experiences presented—and therefore made legitimate—in the classroom will help schools better address the diversity of the students.

An important task for teachers is also to present content and knowledge to their students from different perspectives and to discuss the extent to which the world looks different from different angles [4, 6]. This may help students understand how implicit frames of reference and biases within a subject area or discipline influence the way knowledge is constructed. By raising the awareness that narratives are constructed and, in most cases, represent only one perspective out of many, often the majority’s perspective, students may critically investigate the often-hidden cultural assumptions that characterise presentations of content in the schools. Nieto [5] draws on examples from the subject of history and illustrates how examinations of the knowledge construction processes may contribute to challenging the narrative of European discovery of America. History can “no longer be about the exploits, conquests, and achievements of Europeans and White Americans” [5]; it also has to include “the study of Brown and Black and working-class people, and of imperialism, colonization, and exploitation” [5]. Thus, the claim for a critical stance against a one-dimensional presentation of history parallels post-colonial studies, for example, Said’s [13] work on oriental representations, which challenges the idea of history as a ‘neutral’ and ‘universal’ concept.

Connecting the curriculum to students’ lives and identities and fostering a critical awareness of how knowledge is constructed, schools may contribute to reducing stereotypes and prejudice. Described by Banks and Banks [7] as a key dimension of multicultural education, prejudice reduction refers to activities and practices teachers use to help students to develop positive attitudes towards cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. Prejudice and stereotyping are biases that work together to create and maintain inequality in society and schools. Stereotypical beliefs and assumptions that teachers need to address may include prejudicial attitudes towards cultural groups, sexual orientation, gender differences, and social background—diversities that often make up the student body in a plural classroom. Positive intergroup relations may thus develop as students become acquainted with each other through their interactions [14].

Finally, multicultural education comprises an empowering dimension, referring to the organisational and structural changes that the idea of multicultural education requires [4, 8]. Thus, implementing multicultural education in a school means rethinking the culture of the school and reforming its power relationships. Therefore, multicultural education initiatives cannot be reduced to a single activity separated
from the day-to-day work in the classroom. Rather, to realise an empowering school culture through the means of multicultural education, issues of diversity should be integrated into the entire curriculum [15]. As emphasised by May and Sleeter [4], developing empowering school culture, all sides of schools’ practices should be examined, including perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, teacher-student interaction, assessments, evaluation programmes, and extracurricular activities. It is also important that all members of the school staff are involved in reforming the culture and organisation of the school [16]. In this way, multicultural education will be more easily integrated as a strategy that affects all aspects of the school’s practice.

5. Multicultural education in light of multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a concept that has affected the understanding of multicultural education decisively. Arising in the context of what Modood [17] called a “liberal or social democratic egalitarianism and citizenship”, multiculturalism is a new political idea that developed in parallel to multicultural education in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For Modood, multiculturalism “presupposes the matrix of principles, institutions and political norms that are central to contemporary liberal democracies” [17]. As a modern political idea or philosophy, multiculturalism advocates equity and equal rights between cultural communities in a plural state.

Modood [17] followed Kymlicka’s [18] contextualisation of the concept, defining multiculturalism in close relation to certain norms and political understandings of society. According to Kymlicka [18], multiculturalism has both descriptive and normative aspects. Understood in a descriptive sense, multiculturalism refers to the understanding of society as a patchwork of different cultural and ethnic groups living side by side within the same community or geographical territory. Hence, used in a descriptive way, the concept implies a recognition of the integrity and distinct identities of cultural groups, accepting that groups have their own existence relative to other groups. Normatively, multiculturalism advocates the view that cultural and ethnic groups should receive special acknowledgement of their differences within a dominant political culture. The argument has been that a modern, liberated democratic state should provide equal rights for the different minorities, ensuring their existence and helping them withstand the pressure to assimilate into the majority culture. For some theorists, equal rights have been equivalent to acknowledging a group’s contributions to the community as a whole, while others have argued for special protection under the law or autonomous rights for minority groups [18].

With its descriptive and normative perspectives, Kymlica underlined Modood’s understanding of multiculturalism as a liberal, political, and ethical response to the fact that societies have become more diverse and contain some different groups existing within the same society. Furthermore, by framing multiculturalism within this specific political and historical context, the idea can be seen as moral compensation for the former treatment of minorities, aiming to make up for past oppression, violation, exclusion, and discrimination [17]. In both a descriptive and normative sense, multiculturalism is an inclusive philosophy that aims to address the diversification of society in a way that prevents balkanisation and hostile conflicts.

Given that multiculturalism as a political idea finds a parallel in the emergence of multicultural education, there is a close relationship between the ideas and norms within the two concepts. Consequently, several of the early studies in the field of multicultural education focused on issues of recognition, exploring ways that teaching
can better match the home and community cultures of students who are different from the majority. A telling example is Jordan’s [19] classical work on the affirmation of Hawaiian children in school, in which she introduced the term “culturally compatible” to underline the responsibility that schools have for creating equal learning opportunities. Jordan [19] discussed cultural compatibility as follows: “Educational practices must match with the children’s culture in ways which ensure the generation of academically important behaviours. It does not mean that all school practices need be completely congruent with natal cultural practices, in the sense of exactly or even closely matching or agreeing with them. The point of cultural compatibility is that the natal culture is used as a guide in the selection of educational program elements so that academically desired behaviours are produced and undesired behaviours are avoided.” [19].

Jordan [19] addressed the need for schools to affirm the local culture of students in ways that make it a relevant source of knowledge in the classroom. Given that students enter schools with different cultures, teachers should know these cultures and reflect them in their teaching. Finding the right match between the students’ cultures and the school, the teaching becomes “culturally compatible”—that is, students’ home cultures are recognised as significant contributions to the mainstream.

As Ladson-Billings [20] emphasised, the term “culturally compatible” finds its parallel in terms such as “culturally appropriate” [21] and “culturally congruent” [22], used by pioneers of multicultural education. A common feature of these studies is their concentration on the content dimension of multicultural education, promoting the recognition and affirmation of students’ cultures in school through the use of examples and knowledge from different cultural contexts. According to Ladson-Billings, however, these terms included Jordan’s [19] cultural compatibility and “seem to connote accommodation of student culture to mainstream culture” [8]. As an alternative, she suggested the term “culturally relevant” [20], which some years later was picked up by Gay [23, 24] in her much-cited work on culturally responsive teaching.

Similar to the other concepts, Gay’s [23, 24] work on culturally responsive teaching is closely connected to the ideas of multiculturalism on recognition and equality. Being one of the pioneers of multicultural education, the author was concerned with the recognition of minority students, emphasising dimensions of content integration, and equity pedagogy. It is important for Gay [24] that teachers need to know in-depth the cultural characteristics of the different ethnic groups represented in the classroom. According to Gay [23], the “knowledge that teachers need to have about cultural diversity goes beyond mere awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in various ways”. Rather, a “requirement for developing a knowledge base for culturally responsive teaching is acquiring detailed factual information about the cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups (e.g., African, Asian, Latino, and Native American)” [23]. For Gay [23], “the intellectual thought of students from different ethnic groups is culturally encoded in that its expressive forms and substance are strongly influenced by cultural socialization”. Hence, to implement multicultural education in schools, teachers must be able to decipher the codes of various cultures and to use this information to get to know and relate to their students better, exploring the kinds of differences that make communication difficult.

According to Gay, the school’s attention to the cultural characteristics of ethnic groups is important because many teachers are hesitant to address cultural differences for fear of stereotyping or making generalisations [23]. Teachers will therefore try to compensate for the fear by ignoring or denying the existence of differences,
and conduct their teaching from an assumed neutral position, which in most cases is equivalent to a majority culture perspective. Nevertheless, Gay’s [23] approach has been criticised, an important critique that has targeted the concept of multiculturalism and its versions of multicultural education. Among others, Mason [25] emphasised that multiculturalism presupposes an essentialist conception of culture, reifying the identities and practices of ethnic groups. Therefore, when Gay [23] argued that teachers need to know the “ethnic groups’ cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns”, she faced the risk of treating cultures as static, bounded, and homogeneous [25].

This conception of cultural affirmation has proven to be problematic for several reasons. First, the diversification of societies has made communities highly differentiated [26]. This implies that a person’s identity is rarely bound to one particular group or community; rather, it reflects a range of the communities in which the person is a part. Identity is produced and reproduced in transformative processes of cultural interaction and exchange [27]. Second, seeing people as representatives of certain cultures or groups is a limitation of identity that may potentially put restrictions on who people are capable of becoming in their community. To claim that the intellectual thought of students from different ethnic groups is culturally encoded, or that teachers’ should be able to discern specifically cultural traits that are characteristic for a group of people, risk trapping people within a narrow understanding of identity that shuts off identity options for people [28]. Hence, culturally responsive teaching aimed at breaking down walls can paradoxically lead to the reinforcement of cultural borders. For minorities, being seen as a distinct group with certain characteristics may, in turn, lead to psychology of separatism, which isolates minority groups and creates a division between the groups inside a country as well as between the groups and the state [29]. By reinforcing a specific type of difference, newcomer cultures may become even more isolated in schools and society.

6. Multicultural education in light of critical multiculturalism

The problems associated with multiculturalism have led scholars to argue for alternative ways of engaging with questions of difference. In this way, they have provided important corrections to the concept of multicultural education.

In a British context, antiracist educators such as Troyna and Foster [30, 31] have argued that liberal multicultural education has largely ignored the structural racism, sexism, and discrimination that often affect students from minorities. As an alternative, antiracist education requires “eliminating from the educational system any practices which are racist or which indirectly restrict the chances of success of members of a particular racial or ethnic group” [31]. In the United States, the critique of liberal multicultural education has often been framed within a similarly critical approach, a critical race theory [4], which combines a progressive political struggle for racial justice with the critique of what is seen as an oversimplified approach to cultural recognition. Similar critical thoughts can also be found in critical pedagogy, for instance, the classical work of Freire [32], who rejected the idea that education should affirm students’ experiences only for motivational reasons. In line with antiracist education and critical race theory, a critical pedagogy argues for the inclusion of a global critical dimension that transcends the given and even alters the students’ experiences, ultimately changing illegitimate hierarchies that are embedded in social practices within education.
However, in recent years, developments in cultural studies, particularly within education, have been influenced by critical multiculturalism, which has taken up the range of concerns offered by critical responses to multiculturalism. As such, critical multiculturalism has confronted the last decades’ hegemony of liberal multicultural education more broadly than a single critique [33]. In line with other critical responses to multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism argues for a critical analysis of the conditions necessary to realise social emancipation for all individuals despite race, class, gender, cultural background, or ethnicity [12]. As emphasised by May and Sleeter [4], structural inequalities and discriminatory practices continue to persist, given that schools have adopted multiculturalism as a pedagogical approach. Hence, multicultural education does not seem to have the ability “to tackle seriously and systematically these structural inequalities, such as racism, institutionalized poverty, and discrimination” [4]. This inability is a result of its “continued use of the affirmation of cultural and politically muted discourses of ‘culture’ and cultural recognition” [4], where the cultural background is essentialised, depoliticised, and treated as a set of practices that can be described, labelled, and taught [15]. By contrast, critical multiculturalism seeks to highlight structural inequalities that prevent education from responding to the variety of needs in a diverse student population and to realise optimal learning conditions for all students [4].

Critical multiculturalism is therefore critically concerned with the consequences of multicultural education. When cultural background is treated as something fixed that should be affirmed and recognised, cultural practices and experiences are understood as something that can be categorised and compared [34]. This understanding reflects a conception of cultural background and identities as integral, unified, and related to a specific geographic or ethnic community. Moreover, it undermines the experience that cultural identities are increasingly being deconstructed, altered, and redefined in dynamic processes of change. Although multiculturalism has its roots in the civil rights movement and has highlighted issues of racism in education, it has proven insufficient when it comes to recognising, questioning, and altering structural systems of injustice and embedded power. Thus, from the perspective of critical multiculturalism, there is a need to challenge a multicultural education approach that draws on multiculturalism and stimulate reflexivity, critical thinking, and self-awareness to create opportunities for transformative learning [4].

In the remainder of the chapter, I now turn to what I see as two major hindrances to realising sustainable multicultural education: the reduction of multicultural education to one-off events separated from everyday school activities and the deficit discourse that characterises contemporary debates on diversity.

7. Integrating multicultural education into the curriculum

As we have seen, adopting the concept of multicultural education in schools does not necessarily imply a more inclusive and socially just practice and school environment. When practices of multicultural education are treated separately without truly permeating everyday school activities—for example, reduced to single happenings and one-off events—practices of multicultural education may function counterproductively with regard to their proclaimed aim of inclusion. Hence, structural inequalities and discriminatory practices may continue to persist when schools adopt multiculturalism as a pedagogical approach.
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In a study of multicultural education in American schools, Hoffman [35] introduced the notion of "hallway multiculturalism", which problematises the practice of celebrating cultural diversity without really integrating issues of diversity into the curriculum. According to Hoffman, schools often turn to superficial ways of recognising cultural backgrounds, displaying posters and decorations made up of collages of "ethnic faces" and statements proclaiming "All Cultures are One" and "Diversity for Unity" [35]. Hoffman's critique corresponds with Troyna's [36] well-known description of the three S's of multicultural education: saris, samosas, and steel bands, that is to say, clothing, food, and music, which often characterise practices of multicultural education. By focusing on the exterior of culture, schools avoid a more critical engagement with deeper issues and become examples of superficial ways of addressing cultural differences in schools [12].

Watkins and Noble [37] offered a recent example of such a critique from migrant-based nations, such as Australia, the UK, the USA, Canada, and New Zealand. Taking an ethnographic orientation to the field of multicultural education, Watkins and Noble [37] examined how schools often resist the intellectual task of doing diversity differently. Although integrating multicultural education into the curriculum requires an overall approach in which all sides of education are influenced, Watkins and Noble [37] found that schools' practices often offer little more than a superficial celebration of ethnic differences. As examples of unreflexive forms of multicultural education, schools entail simplistic understandings of culture. Thus, instead of enhancing social sustainability, which was the intended meaning of the pedagogical initiatives, schools' practices may reproduce essentialised understandings of difference, providing flawed representations of the complexities in today's classrooms.

An integrated approach to multicultural education requires that issues of diversity affect all subjects in school and that diversity has ramifications for all sides of teachers' professional work in the classroom [15]. Such an approach includes a wider conception of content, assessment, learning approaches, and teaching methods. Thus, to enhance the UN agenda on social sustainability in schools, multicultural education cannot be reduced to a single activity. Rather, issues of diversity should be integrated into the entire curriculum, thereby creating an empowering school culture for all students. This implies that knowledge should be presented not as a neutral objective statement but rather as several—and to a certain extent—competing narratives that comprise different perspectives. Understood in this way, multicultural education may create a space for action, intervention, and even transformation that may contribute to enhancing social sustainability as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

8. Counteracting the deficit discourse on diversity

In this last section, I highlight the significance of counteracting deficit thinking within practices of multicultural education. Within education, discourses of deficit are often used to explain why students misbehave in class and underachieve. From this perspective, students perform badly because of their problematic family background, their communities, and/or their culture. Individuals' failure in school is thus ascribed to the deficits and problems of people from marginalised communities rather than to inequities in access and opportunities [38]. Minority children and their families are seen as culturally, socially, and linguistically deprived and in need
of repair, and school becomes the cure that should repair the errors and deficiencies. Subsequently, the role of education is to remove the barriers that the student’s home culture and resources represent in the encounter with the dominant culture.

According to Cummins [39, 40], however, such discourses are never limited to schools and education alone. Rather, a deficit discourse of diversity is interwoven in public debate as an everyday way of speaking and thinking about people, communities, and cultures. Cummins [39] explained that there are certain power relations between dominant and subordinated groups within wider society that directly influence pedagogical practices within the classroom: “Teacher-student interactions within the classroom are a direct function of the choices that teachers make, individually and collectively, about what kind of educators they want to be.” [39]. According to Cummins [39], teachers may institute what he calls collaborative relations of power, in contrast to coercive power relations. The relationship between the teacher and the student may counteract and actively challenge oppressive patterns on the macro level: “The choices that define teacher identities also open up or shut down identity options for their students” [39]. Hence, for Cummins [40], teachers always have the opportunity to challenge and counter the deficit discourse that plagues the media and institutions, such as schools. This can happen when teachers empower their students by recognising and affirming their cultural and linguistic background as being relevant to the school community and, therefore, also relevant to the society in which the school exists.

Bourdieu and Passeron [41] remind us that school, as a social system and an integrated part of society, transmits, and maintains the dominant culture. Schools integrate political and social discourses, mirror their communities, and thus may contribute to reproducing inequality. For some students, the content and form of the school correspond to their upbringing—their habitus. The subjects, language, and learning activities at school recapitulate the atmosphere around the dinner table, the discussions being a part of the daily life in the families, and the literature the parents read for their children. For other students, however, school represents something different from daily life, demanding access to social and cultural capital that they do not have or can possess because of the position and dispositions that their family and communities are assigned in society. According to Bourdieu and Passeron [41], to succeed academically in school is, therefore, harder for some students than for others, not because of their intellectual capacities but because they face structural hindrances. In this way, schools may contribute to social stratification, reinforcing the structural discrimination that also characterises other parts of society.

Moreover, according to Bourdieu and Passeron [41], parents from the dominant culture actively seek to give their children part of what can be framed as ‘free culture’, which supports and strengthens the activities conducted in school. Free culture includes leisure activities, such as travelling, which should not be confused with mass tourism. While tourism is associated with collectiveness, shallowness, and disruption of the environment, travelling—often to remote and expensive destinations—is pictured as a transformative journey that is unique in its duration and the personal commitment of the one who performs it. The traveller discovers new insights, learns about other cultures, and advances his or her individuality and self-development. In contrast to deprived families that do not have the same opportunities, affluent groups of people will thus have an advantage in school. First, they are able to give their children first-hand experience with language and culture. Second, the children are given self-confidence that is strengthened by the school and the content of the curriculum. Third, the ‘free culture’ may create relations between the families and the teacher in the sense that they share experiences, capital, and even habitus.
Taking Bourdieu and Passeron’s [41] analysis of schools and society into consideration, the process of education is never neutral. Scholars such as Mayo [42] and Cummins [40] have emphasised the possibilities that teachers possess to challenge the unarticulated and often hidden mechanisms that reinforce social inequalities. Mayo [42] writes: “There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

As we can see from the quote, Mayo admitted that Bourdieu and Passeron [41] were right to claim that school and education transmit the dominant culture and hence contribute to the reproduction of the power relations and hierarchies within society. By drawing attention to the deficit discourse that often characterises debates on immigration and immigrants in school and society, Mayo illustrated the opportunities that teachers have to challenge marginalisation in school and make education a “practice of freedom” [42]. Becoming aware of the deficit discourse in schools and society—how it works and how it affects students—can help us better perceive the prospects and potentials for multicultural education in the future. Such an awareness reminds us of the political nature of schooling and its relationship to the dominant society. Hence, it may also enhance a critical stance against the perceived neutrality of schools that covers hierarchies, power relations, and other mechanisms that reinforce social inequalities. Counteracting deficit discourses, multicultural education can make a difference by promoting the transformation of societies towards social sustainability.

9. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter is to address the concept of multicultural education and explore how it may support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development introduced by the United Nations. By tracing the concept of multicultural education back to its origin and discussing it in light of multiculturalism and critical multiculturalism, we identified the following main challenges:

First, practices of multicultural education that enhance the aim of social sustainability should be seen as an integrated part of education, not an appendage. Although many countries have embraced the idea that multicultural principles should be incorporated in the curriculum, and for that reason has posed multicultural education as an overall aim in curriculum plans and educational documents, issues of diversity are often treated separately from everyday activities in school. The idea of multicultural education—that all students, regardless of their background, should have an equal opportunity to learn in school—is frequently trivialised, taking the form of superficial practices of cultural affirmation. When this is the case, a majority perspective is often taken for granted, as teaching is charted primarily for the mainstream students and the mainstream classroom.

Second, I have presented the challenges that follow from the deficit discourse characterising contemporary debates on diversity. In this chapter, I have argued that schools and educators—often unintendedly and with good intentions—may reinforce such discourses, even when applying practices of multicultural education. By ignoring the political nature of schooling and its relationship with the dominant society, the process of education is seen as neutral. Consequently, schools run the risk of
overlooking opportunities to address and transform hidden prevailing majority-ori-
ented perspectives and practices. Despite their best intentions, schools may therefore
miss the opportunity to challenge the devaluation of identity and background that
many students with migrant backgrounds still experience in school and society.

As emphasised by May and Sleeter [4], critical responses to multicultural educa-
tion “has tended to focus on the theoretical parameters of the debate rather than on
their actual application”. Consequently, there is a risk that critical approaches—such
as the one presented in this chapter—are more interested in what multicultural
education should not be, rather than what it may look like in practice. In response, I
would like to emphasise the need for critical studies that challenge our understand-
ing of concepts such as multicultural education. We need a conceptual critique that
helps us question hidden and embedded power structures and hierarchies and see
more clearly what multicultural education can be as a significant contributor to social
sustainability.

Furthermore, the alternative perspectives articulated in this chapter illustrate the
centrality of teachers and the way they structure their interactions in the classroom.
Cummins [40] reminds us that planned change in educational systems involves
choices at different levels. Although choices are constrained by certain factors at each
level of decision-making, individual teachers exercise agency in the sense that they
determine for themselves how they chose to interact with their students, how their
orientation towards the students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds should be, and
the ways they implement the curriculum in their classrooms. Thus, teachers play a
key role in implementing multicultural education. Within their classrooms, they can
choose to make issues of diversity an integrated part of their teaching by adapting
curriculum material to connect to students’ prior knowledge and competencies. By
enabling migrant students to use their home language as a powerful tool, teach-
ers can also challenge fatalistic conceptions that reinforce deficit-based thinking.
Emphasising what a diverse student population has, and not what they lack, brings
attention to the wide array of skills and strengths students bring to the classroom and
the community. It is within such an understanding of multicultural education that the
ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be realised.

I want to conclude by reflecting on the prospects for integrating a multicultural
education approach that transforms education and expands opportunities for all
students to succeed. What are the opportunities for realising the high hopes and great
expectations of multicultural education?

For teachers working towards creating a positive classroom climate for diversity,
there is often a mismatch between the realised and the expected in their daily work.
Although diversity issues are high on the agenda in many countries, competing prom-
inent discourses continue to fascinate the minds of educators, politicians, and policy
makers [43], which ultimately affects the classroom. Both in European countries and
in the USA, a standardisation of education has long been the case. As governments
have aimed to raise standards and performances in education, a prescriptive cur-
riculum policy has been introduced, emphasising international comparisons and the
assessment of educational outcomes through standardised tests [44]. Hence, attention
is increasingly paid to an educational practice focusing merely on ‘what works’ within
a standardised curriculum and across different contexts. As Biesta [43] has empha-
sised, however, the aim to control and predict the outcome of a standardised process
of learning draws attention away from issues such as how to chart more equitable
educational opportunities for all students. Combined with a narrow focus on the
assessment of skills through international comparative measures, there can be little
space for discussions on how students’ cultural and linguistic repertoires should be activated in the classroom, or how schools can affirm the value of cultural complexity. For teachers, it is obviously demanding to balance the tensions between different educational agendas. However, as stated above, all teachers have the possibility to advance multicultural education in their daily encounters with students. By encouraging students to take pride in their cultural, linguistic, or ethnic background, introducing varied and diverse content, and taking an interest in the students’ prior knowledge and competencies, teachers contribute to challenging the devaluation of identity that many students experience in school and society. For some, this means that they must overcome a tendency to assume that the dominant culture is the implicit norm. For others who aim to be ‘colour blind’ and tend to overlook diversities in the classroom, they must reorientate and rather become aware of students’ unique needs and abilities. By establishing positive interrelations between students and between themselves and the students, teachers create an inclusive environment in which differences are acknowledged and appreciated. In this way, teachers play a key role in the work towards realising not only multicultural education but also the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
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