Faculty's Perspectives of/on Cultural Diversity Management in a Multicultural Classroom: The Case of a Ugandan University

Muhamadi Kaweesi, Justin Ayebare, Dennis Zami Atibuni and David Kani Olema

Abstract

Higher education institutions are changing fast in terms of the inclusion of international students. Consequently, faculty are expected to provide enabling learning environments and experiences for education in diversity. Based on the beliefs and practices of social constructivism philosophy and rooted in the interpretive paradigm, this article examines how faculty in a Ugandan university manage multicultural classes and their efforts to promote inclusive classes and curriculum. Qualitative research methods were employed with a sample of eight faculty. Data were collected by means of face-to-face individual semi-structured interviews that were triangulated with document checks. Data analysis followedGay's (2000) culturally responsive pedagogical framework, with faculty perspectives summarised in themes. The findings point to challenges in implementing a culturally relevant classroom management model, such as faculty's inability to fully multiculturalise due to inadequate knowledge of cultural minorities' backgrounds. However, they reveal that some faculty manage their classes adequately, show care and concern for non-Ugandan students, use several strategies to communicate with them, and endeavour to adjust to suit minority students' learning styles. The study suggests that much remains to be done to ensure inclusivity and to promote the social constructionist perspective that is inclusive in teaching and learning.

Keywords: cultural diversity, culturally relevant classroom management, managing diversity, culturally relevant teaching

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: MUHAMADI KAWEESI*, JUSTIN AYEBARE, DENNIS ZAMI ATIBUNI and DAVID KANI OLEMA *Department of Education, Faculty of Science and Education, Busitema University, Uganda, email: ahmedkaweesi98@gmail.com; mkaweesi@sci.busitema.ac.ug

Résumé

Les établissements d'enseignement supérieur évoluent rapidement en termes d'inclusion d'étudiants internationaux. Par conséquent, les enseignants sont censés fournir des environnements d'apprentissage et des expériences favorables à l'éducation à la diversité. Basé sur les croyances et les pratiques de la philosophie du constructivisme social et ancré dans le paradigme interprétatif, cet article examine la manière dont les enseignants d'une université ougandaise gèrent les classes multiculturelles et leurs efforts pour promouvoir des classes et un programme d'études inclusifs. Des méthodes de recherche qualitatives ont été employées avec un échantillon de huit enseignants. Les données ont été collectées au moyen d'entretiens individuels semi-structurés en face à face, triangulés par des vérifications documentaires. L'analyse des données a suivi le cadre pédagogique culturellement réactif de Gay (2000), les perspectives des enseignants étant résumées sous forme de thèmes. Les résultats mettent en évidence les difficultés liées à la mise en œuvre d'un modèle de gestion de classe culturellement pertinent, notamment l'incapacité du corps enseignant à être pleinement multiculturel en raison d'une connaissance insuffisante des antécédents des minorités culturelles. Cependant, ils révèlent que certains professeurs gèrent leurs classes de manière adéquate, se soucient des étudiants non ougandais, utilisent plusieurs stratégies pour communiquer avec eux et s'efforcent de s'adapter aux styles d'apprentissage des étudiants des minorités. L'étude suggère qu'il reste beaucoup à faire pour garantir l'inclusivité et promouvoir la perspective constructionniste sociale qui est inclusive dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage.

Mots clés : diversité culturelle, gestion de classe adaptée à la culture, gestion de la diversité, enseignement adapté à la culture

Introduction

Cultural diversity management has become a reality in many universities due to the internationalisation of higher education (HE) and, in particular, the mobility of students pursuing their studiesacross borders. This concept has expanded dramatically, gaining volume and scope with globalisation that has accelerated the movement of people, encounters with other cultures, sharing of knowledge and technologies across

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borders, and interconnectedness (Marginson, 2010). In 2006, Altbach reported that more than two million HE students were studying outside their home countries (Altbach, 2006) and in 2017, it was reported that more than 5.09 million students were pursuing HE in foreign countries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2018).

Although the most common direction of cross-border student movement is from developing to developed countries (Varghese, 2020), South-South, and North-South flows are also increasing (Ssempebwa, Edwan and Mulumba, 2012). Even top international student-receiving countries in the North are now encouraging their young people to study abroad, especially at higher education institutions (HEIs) in middle- and low-income countries(Altbach, 2006; Brooks and Waters, 2009). According to Bourn (2011), this trend has been heightened by the desire to become more globally aware, acquire intercultural skills, and learn other languages. As such, the number of students from multicultural backgrounds continues to grow in Ugandan universities, with a sizable majority concentrated in private universities (European University Association [EUA], 2012).

In Uganda, this trend has also been occasioned by the expansion of the liberalised HE sector that has encouraged universities to look to foreign students as a source of income. For example, 48% of student enrolment at Kampala International University (KIU) in the 2013/2014 academic year was international students (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2014), while during the 2019/2020 academic year, international students accounted for 2,599 of the total student population of 10,245 at the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) (IUIU, 2019b). These students mainly hailed from Rwanda, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Sudan, Japan, and Norway (Ayebare and Onen, 2021; IUIU, 2019a). Although the Uganda National Council for Higher Education [NCHE] (NCHE, 2014) revealed a declining trend in international student exchange, the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) 2012 report estimated that around 10% of Uganda's student population were international students (Murphy, 2019).

Enrolment of international students creates a diverse classroom setting that offers several benefits to students, faculty, and HE. For instance, students learn from multiple cultures (Spencer-Oatey and Dauber, 2017); the institution earns prestige through a diversified student population (Ssempebwa, Eduan, Nassir and Mulumba, 2012); tolerance of different cultures increases (Schapper and Mayson, 2004); and diversity of thought and the reshaping of academic disciplines and the university as a whole is promoted (Hegarty, 2014). While it is clear that universities take pride in their student population's diversity, what is not understood is how faculty respond to cultural diversity, especially concerning classroom management and how they plan and deliver lectures.

This article explores the various ways in which academic staff adapt their classroom management to the diversity of their classes through a mechanism that supports culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM). In consonance with Gay (2002), we propose that CRCM can be achieved through five key components, namely, developing a cultural diversity knowledge base; designing culturally relevant curricula; demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community; engaging in cross-cultural communication; and practising cultural congruity in classroom instruction.

The Research Gap

While previous studies investigated classroom diversity management practices in HE (e.g., Samuels, 2018; Jabbar and Mirza, 2017; Hegarty, 2014), these practices have not been explicitly examined in culturally diverse classrooms in Uganda's private universities. More specifically, there is a paucity of scholarship on how faculty in these multi-cultural institutions perceive classroom cultural diversity management. Furthermore, earlier research (Ladson-Billings, 2000; McKenzie, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2010) found that pre-service and experienced teachers' knowledge of diverse cultures was inadequate, suggesting that a culturaldisconnect could exist between faculty and minority students in these institutions' multi-cultural classrooms. This study aimed to fill the research gap by examiningfaculty's perceptions of student cultural diversity management with particular reference to Uganda's first private international university,the IUIU.

Research Purpose

The study assessed faculty perceptions of cultural diversity management

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management within multicultural classrooms. They are also somewhat inconsistent with the social constructivism view that diversity plays a central role in classroom management and learning. This implies that more needs to be done to fully entrench CRCM practices for culturally relevant teaching. Major enablers suggested in this study include deliberate university-wide attempts to multi-culturise the curriculum, providing information about the cultural characteristics of the diverse groups that faculty teach, and appreciating the existence of diversity in classrooms, how it manifests, how it should be addressed and its benefits.

We recommend that HE managers' research agendas and policies should, among others, focus on the most promising culturally responsive classroom management and teaching practices and policies. Faculty need to learn about students' cultural experiences and the type of cultural content that should be provided; how multiculturalised curricula can be designed and implemented; the most relevant classroom management strategies for minority students; and pedagogical practices that respect and affirm diversity. They also need to learn how to alternate their management and communication strategies to accommodate minority students, understand the difference between CRCM practices and conventional classroom management styles, and re-examine their own biases to improve their perceptions of minority students in culturally diverse classrooms. Howard (1999) observed with regard to multiracial schools, "we can't teach what we don't know". Similarly, we contend that faculty need to know more about CRCM and that such learning opportunities should be systematically incorporated into and implemented as part of the curriculum in teacher education at university.

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