



The Relationship Between Covid-19, Online Learning and Intercultural Education

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Abstract: *This paper aims to describe and analyse various effects that COVID-19 pandemic might have on online learning and multicultural education. The following questions will be investigated: Has COVID-19 pandemic made an impact on the development on multicultural education during online classes?; How have the teachers contributed to enhance online multicultural education?; and What are the positive effects of COVID-19 pandemic on multicultural online education?*

Multicultural online learning received unfavourable criticism and was characterized with prejudice primarily due to stereotypes that have been present from the very beginning of online education. The paper proposes constructive ways of online collaboration, various strategies applied by both teachers and students, and applicable activities and materials provided for students in order to sustain a multicultural online learning environment. Findings demonstrate that cultural diversity is beneficial for learners and that their involvement in online activities as well as their overall achievements and grades improved due to efficiently organized online lessons. Further, other factors like motivation, communication, anxiety, and confidence all proved to have been positively impacted by cross-cultural learning, where students themselves contributed to learning and understanding of cultural knowledge. A multicultural community was formed during online classes and students generated their own community of learning following the guidance from their teacher. Ethnicity and cultural backgrounds of students only encouraged them to learn from their peers and merged them into a united multicultural environment.

Keywords: COVID-19, multicultural education, online classes

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present the status of the multicultural education in the times of pandemic, to prove how well-developed multicultural classrooms are, and to indicate that students face no difficulties in communication through online platforms. Online lectures are held without any difficulties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it was of great importance to establish good communication with students from diverse cultures and ensure a comfortable online learning experience. It was an unfamiliar environment to students, however, using the online platforms and websites which are all in a foreign language has further proved the importance of having mixed classrooms and signified comprehensive benefits of such organized classes. Multiculturalism represents a rather broad topic, but the most important component of a term is that it enlightens its participants; it helps students meet other cultures and accept everyone as they are. Online platforms used during the pandemic have shown that everyone can be connected and multiculturalism can exist even when students are not present in the same room.

The importance of multicultural education has been continually emphasized, however, in the wake of predicaments like the current one caused by COVID-19 pandemic, the significance of multicultural education resurfaced and acknowledged an extensive impact of COVID-19 on the development on multicultural communication in online classes.

Due to the overall contemporary social trends, the need for pedagogical reflection on the relationship between multiculturalism and education, that is, upbringing and education in a multicultural society, is of extreme importance in today's society. Hence, it is evident that there is an increasing number of authors who are tackling this issue. The phenomenon of multicultural education is gaining importance, referring not only to some distant countries, but also to closer geographical and ethnic areas, especially where and when social contradictions are resolved by conflicts and wars between nations. Analogously, the crisis of multicultural education can be at the same time a component of both cause and effect of social conflicts. Additionally, regardless of the sign in the evaluation and approach of observing the relationship between multiculturalism and education, it is certain that this phenomenon is high on the agenda of many scientific, primarily social, humanistic, cultural, sociological, and pedagogical disciplines (Ivanović, 2009).

Especially significant to note is that multiculturalism is important for eliminating discrimination, which exists in classrooms on a different level, such as discrimination based on the model of assimilation, aimed at the full inclusion of individual members of minorities in the society - by abandoning their mother tongue, traditional norms and other specific cultural characteristics. The concept of assimilation is based on the belief that by complete absorption into the society, the basis for ethnic conflict ceases to exist. In such a social environment, the effort

to preserve the cultural norms of minority groups implies rejection by the majority culture, perceiving it as a threat (Baron & Byrne, 1997; Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998).

Many previous studies have been conducted on the topic of multicultural online learning and its affects as well as empirical studies on various online courses from different academic fields (Ke & Kwak, 2013). It is vital that studies on this topic are based on the learning environments and how student's cultural background and ethnicity affect their online learning overall. Thus, the questions addressed in this study are:

Has COVID-19 pandemic made an impact on the development on multicultural education during online classes?

How have the teachers contributed to enhance online multicultural education?

What are the positive effects of COVID-19 pandemic on multicultural online education?

Positive effects during online lessons include interaction among students during discussions, willingness to discuss various topics and provision of responses to ideas from their peers through postings and comments, and ultimately, access to a large variety of readings and materials on LMS encouraged participation in online activities (Learning Management Systems and Course Management Systems). In comparison with traditional classroom settings, aside from the increased participation in class and lowered anxiety levels, students also interacted with each other and teachers by e-mail.

2. MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION WORLDWIDE

As noted in a plethora of previously conducted studies, multicultural education plays a very important role in the development of many educational systems worldwide. According to Han Erbas (2019), multicultural education in Turkey was among its best improvements introduced there and it contributed to the connection and combination of different cultures, while helping students to communicate and create interactive discussions with people of different backgrounds. Research has showed that students were not aware of the importance of multicultural education so far, and there was a need for raising their awareness on different cultures and importance of coexistence, but of course, some pedagogical and organisational processes needed to be established, in order to create the proper environment to teach about and in people of different cultures (Salavatova, 2019). Breshkovskaya and Ezhkova (2020) agree with Salavatova on the previously mentioned insight, while explaining the dialogue approaches in multicultural education, which is needed in order to establish good communicative and interaction activities in a multicultural classroom, it is of great importance to create good educational environment and have certain problems carried out that might occur in multicultural education, as it depends on whether the students are ready to interact with people of another culture. Zamurueva (2019) argues that multicultural education certainly is a

concept which needs to create a mixture of various approaches to fight the problems concerning racism and discrimination. When speaking of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bećirević, Brdarević-Čeljo, and Zavrl (2019) agreed that in education on territory of BiH, a certain need for the development of multicultural education is evident. The afore-mentioned authors proved that it is crucial to introduce the importance of introducing multicultural education in educational systems. According to Bećirević (2012), the role of multiculturalism is to enhance diversity and promote good interpersonal activities among people of different cultures. Podojak and Bećirević (2018) proved that the culture of people who live out of their culture changes as they get acclimatized to the new culture they live in, and as such it is of great importance for everyone to learn how to embrace other cultures, and that is done best in multicultural classrooms.

Nowadays people face many difficulties and many types of influences which evolve from their lives and education. It is of great importance that students study and are acquainted with the benefits of multicultural classrooms, from broadening student's horizons about other cultures, but also making teachers' professional lives a lot easier (Bećirović & Bešlija, 2018).

Online learning has been implemented in education since the mid-1990s and has proven to be immensely successful and versatile for students of various ages and cultures. These online classes began at universities and were expected to cause issues, especially sociocultural issues. There are different opinions of whether multicultural online classes are beneficial and whether they can be compared to face-to-face learning. As claimed by Terenzini et al. (2001) and Gurin et al. (2002), in standard face-to-face classes not only was student learning promoted, but also ethnic identity, as well as growth and understanding of various racial groups. A major point that needs to be emphasized is that a lot of hard work and time go into the planning of multicultural online classes. However, during the pandemic, a mutual decision by the state was made for education to continue uninterrupted and that is how a multicultural online community began to form. Online courses saved students as well as teachers a lot of time, by not having to hold make up classes.

The goals of multicultural education are meta-cultural with the ultimate goal of liberating and empowering students. By considering the issues and problems of different races and cultural groups, students will be emboldened to understand themselves and the diversity of others and thus enable them to gain insight into different interpretations of the world that various individuals have. It is believed that this way students are enabled to understand broader social problems, which is the basis for inclusion in a society characterized by a multitude of value-ideological orientations (Washburn, 1995).

The learning and teaching environment can be quite isolating which makes it more challenging for teachers to further their lessons by implementing different methods. In online education, success rates based on cultural diversity mostly depend on how the teachers acknowledge students and their cultures and how they connect and implement them into their teaching materials. The teacher's competency plays a major role and possesses great responsibility to

include various reading materials and prepare various activities complemented by additional handouts so that students from diverse backgrounds are presented with a variety of resources (Bećirović, Delić & Brdarević-Čeljo, 2019; Bećirović, & Brdarević-Čeljo, 2018). During the period of COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and their preparation patterns for online classes were much easier because they have been well informed about cultural backgrounds of their students in advance, since they have been teaching the same students for years. Equally important to highlight is the fact that the multiculturalism in online classes was promoted through different learning materials which helped students of diverse cultures to be involved in discussions and online debates, where they are provided with opportunities to relate to their past experiences and culture.

According to Wahyuni and Bayu (2020), multicultural education during the refugee crisis might cause some difficulties due to the sociocultural diversity. Some things that might seem unimportant to some, are considered very problematic to others; most of the issues being the ones dealing with their homecountries, ethnicities, or even social status. All of these factors might add up to creating a huge gap in communication between students. In order to overcome these issues, promotion of multicultural education by default promotes diversity and variety of different social and ethnical groups which can prompt individuals to overcome prejudice towards different groups of people, in this case refugees.

Saha (2019) claims that Australian education system, contributed to Australia's changing immigration and immigration policy due to the development of multicultural education. He claims that an assimilation policy promoted a multiculturalism policy in the time period between 1973 and 1979, and helped change the lives of immigrants coming from different cultural backgrounds, and it stayed until today. In his paper, Saha also claims that while taking into consideration backgrounds of all European children, Asian migrants, many other refugees and indigenous Australians, their educational profiles require different sociological variables. Today, educational differences between indigenous Australians and migrants are almost completely overcome.

3. MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND MEDIA

The work within international and multicultural conditions is increasing and there is an emphasized need to learn foreign languages (Dubravac & Skopljak, 2020; Dubravac, Brdarević-Čeljo & Bećirović, 2018; Skopljak & Dubravac, 2019), as well as the need for multilingual and multicultural courses (Yaman & Bećirović, 2016) at universities. Learning foreign languages can enhance an individual's potential and can also be useful in their professional career (Kyppo, Natri, 2016).

The sociocultural component of foreign language learning is the most important part of this type of education in the context of multicultural experience. It involves introducing the individual to the cultural traditions of the

community from which the foreign language comes but also enables the individual to present their own culture using a certain foreign language and thus achieve communication between the two cultures. Through learning foreign languages, dialogue between different cultures is enabled, reducing the possibilities of misunderstandings. Developing a multilingual and multicultural personality is one of the main aspects of multicultural education. It is believed that an individual with a multilingual and multicultural personality possesses an advanced linguistic consciousness but also a developed multicultural consciousness. An individual with a developed multicultural consciousness recognizes the integrity of human civilization and accepts the differences that exist between different cultures (Khairutdinova, Lebedeva, 2016).

4. BACKGROUND ON MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

This paper deals with how beneficial online classes are and how multicultural education is emphasized through these platforms. Online instruction needs to be properly designed, as stated by Banks (2004) and students need to be exposed to different voices and also exposed to online discussions on various topics in which they have many opportunities to lead cross-cultural dialogues. This has proven to be very effective in online classes, especially when different cultural backgrounds are mixed and where students learn from one another and assist one another in learning. The teacher's role in multicultural classrooms is to motivate the students no matter what race, gender, or ethnicity they are, which is also the case in online classes. As stated by Le Roux (2001), the influence and attitudes of teachers determine the student's expectations and outcomes. At the time of COVID-19 pandemic the teachers placed all their energy and skills into teaching diverse students online, their education program being very beneficial, proving to have communicated with students of different cultures on all given topics.

Most students approached online classes with a positive and an open mind, trusting their teachers and allowing the cross-cultural experience and learning to develop. Thus, just as in a traditional classroom, the teacher in online classes must be mindful of cultural sensitivity whilst engaging in the crucial process of inspecting prejudices as well as personal biases and realizations that influence the students learning experiences. Students are also the ones who contribute to the online classes with their own resources that amplify their learning experience.

Since communication is the main asset in online classes, the teacher is the one who leads the lessons and encourages all the students to speak and get involved in discussions. Cultural background and even social network diversity are the factors that affected the involvement of some students with their colleagues from different countries (Mittelmeier, Hélot, Rienties, & Whitelock, 2016). Current multicultural situation in Germany has been changing over time, and research conducted by Josefova (2016) proved that other countries such as

Czech Republic are influenced a lot by migrations. Therefore, she also claims that multicultural education plays significant role in development of eLearning courses, and providing opportunities for creating intercultural dialogues. She agrees that the importance of intercultural expansion is a common topic and that more countries and nations are becoming aware of the cultural sensitivity.

5. STUDENT INTERACTION IN ONLINE CLASSES

The inclusion of online cultures helps the learning process for students as they relate more to certain topics and want to participate in discussions for which they are familiar with. That in itself leads to a more successful and valuable learning that can be seen at the time of the pandemic. Students willingly wish to participate and enjoy discussions (Rizvić & Bećirović, 2017) because they express their divergent social views and their cultural background flourishes as well, making them feel confident and empowered. This type of multicultural online education which allows interaction between teachers and students as well as students and students, leads to a higher appreciation of cultural diversity among the students and indicates cultural inclusion in the online classes. Students are not only benefitting on an educational level but also their cultural experiences are broadening.

One of perhaps the most important factors influencing the effectiveness of online classes is the physical distance between students and professors. If students, apart from virtual cooperation, are not introduced to at least a small number of face-to-face meetings, during which they would establish a common framework of knowledge and experience on the cognitive level, and establish mutual relations of support and understanding on the affective level, online collaboration might become very slow, complicated and crowded. In addition, the absence of a non-verbal component in virtual collaboration can slow down or completely prevent the effective exchange of ideas, which in turn can be resolved by face-to-face meetings in situations where that is possible (Walsh & Maloney, 2007).

6. TEACHERS' ROLE IN ONLINE TEACHING

When teachers provide students with activities they need to be strategically conducted and planned in order to be constructive and favorable, whether they are problem-based activities, group-based discussions or student-based content, they need to be appropriate for the students' needs and their backgrounds.

Furthermore, teachers have also been observed to have incorporated various learning activities and materials in order to help culturally diverse students achieve better results. As stated by Boone, Safrit and Jones (2002), students have individual learning strategies and needs when it comes to learning, as well as diverse interest's communication styles, values and learning outcomes.

All of these factors must be taken into consideration and aligned in order to compose an effective online curriculum, beneficial for all students. During the time of COVID-19 pandemic and online classes, teachers have mostly been focused on motivating students, by using videos, visual tools, blogs, assigning projects, and encouraging group work and pair work; a variety of options to boost student's motivation. Students needed extra motivation because they were not used to online classes at first, many of them have never had the opportunity to experience an online class prior to the pandemic. Through group work or pair work the students had a chance to be acquainted with each other's backgrounds better, the activities proved to be very beneficial and allowed students to share ideas and get feedback from teachers.

Communication between the teachers and students in online classes was encouraged immensely, which lead to the creation of diverse groups, and it is of great importance for teacher to introduce and incorporate more multicultural content.

These multicultural online classes enhance education as well as cultural experiences for the students. Halverson and Tirmizi (2008, p. 12), claimed that students of diverse cultures bring positive aspects to online classes and also positively influences their academic success. On the other hand, Gay (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2009), argue that teachers should include as much diverse materials and use various techniques as possible to enhance the students learning outcomes. Butorac and Mraović (2013) claim that differentiation and segregation of members of a minority can generate many different types of discrimination that have shown devastating effects on human rights and freedoms. Therefore, multicultural education becomes a central element of social policy at the national and transnational level. This is why they believe how increased professional education in the field of recognizing, combating, and sanctioning discriminatory treatment is also a form of support for victims of discrimination. Potential victims of discrimination, and in particular the most vulnerable groups, must be made aware of the available protection instruments available, and the protection system must be effective and without harmful consequences for the victim. According to Marjanovic et al. (2013) a system such as an online platforms allow organizations to save their employees, the time they would spend in classroom training by accessing the system at a time and place that suits their schedules. In order for the e-learning platform to be used effectively in corporate education, it is necessary to measure learning outcomes in a systematic way. Also, various cultural resources and perspectives can be integrated into the curriculum in order to stimulate cross-cultural activities that enhance multiculturalism in online classes (Pattanpichet, 2011). Dautbasic and Saracevic (2019) agree that choosing proper learning methods and techniques will improve students' skills and achievements.

7. IMPORTANCE OF A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Findings of several studies disclosed that teachers were not familiar with cultural diversity in their curriculums and of the importance of including those curriculums in the classes (Anakwe & Christensen, 1999; Thompson & Ku, 2005). Luckily that was not the case with online classes during the pandemic, where the teachers were well informed and well prepared to include cultural diversity in any sphere of their online teaching. Communicative activities in which students build relationships with their peers are crucial for students' academic success, therefore their intercultural competencies need to be taken into consideration to make communication more beneficial. Students of diverse cultures need to be able to read and understand the reading materials provided, since that is one of the main steps in increasing their confidence and motivation for learning (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

Studies by Adeoye and Wentling, (2007); Goodfellow and Hewling (2005); Mushtaha and Troyer, (2007), claim that online classes promote cross-cultural learning where students themselves contribute to the learning and cultural knowledge understanding. Teachers must consider the identities of students and not just their ethnic backgrounds in order to provide the best learning strategies for online multicultural classes Ladson-Billings (2014). He goes on by saying these strategies should help the student intellectually, their skills and most importantly their attitudes towards multicultural learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 16-17). The achievements of students in class are based completely on how skilful the teacher is (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Since students need to be aware of their cultures and the importance of their backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36), their consciousness will develop and their beliefs will broaden, making them self-aware of the multicultural community they live in. That way they will bring that awareness to class and be willing to share it with others, creating a healthy multicultural learning community. Since students in Bosnia and Herzegovina are mostly aware of their cultures, because it is something that is taught in schools from a very early age, students had no difficulties engaging in a multicultural online class during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The environment of a classroom, in this case online classe, is of great importance for the students, therefore their learning environment must feel trusting and safe so that the students will feel comfortable and motivated to learn and participate. According to Kourova & Modianos (2013), the teacher's main obligation in a multicultural class is to create a learning environment which will empower the students to learn more about their peer's cultures. Also the findings of Zhang, Briggs, and Nunamaker (2006), show that teachers should include as many visuals like videos, and various images to enrich multicultural learning but also to keep the classes interesting.

Students like to be involved in learning (Brdarević-Čeljo & Asotić, 2017; Sinanović & Bećirović 2016), they like the feeling of their contribution to the procedure of learning and that is the reason why their needs and diverse cultural backgrounds must be carefully investigated by the teachers. Students enjoy

discussing their cultural differences and experiences and sharing their thoughts with other students, that is why different cultures collide together and make the online learning even more meaningful.

There are many stereotypes claiming that students cannot learn online, that media only distracts them and the students are not interested and not motivated to learn during online classes. That is not the case at all, proven now during the COVID-19 pandemic that online multicultural education is running smoothly, and with the right preparation it is on the same success level as in traditional face-to-face classes.

8. IMPORTANCE OF APPROPRIATE LITERATURE USED IN ONLINE CLASSES

The books utilized by teachers need to be appropriate and useful as well as diverse, so that all the students can locate the content that is relatable and not exclusive. Also, teachers make lesson plans just as they would normally do for traditional classes; they construct their plans according to the student's needs, using various teaching strategies. The results of the students exceeded many expectations especially because they only had online classes, their achievements had not lowered, they remained at the same level or they improved. That was viewed with much scepticism before the online classes began; people were sceptic about how the students would adjust to the online classes and whether multicultural education would even be possible.

Kim and Bonk (2002); Zhao and McDougall, (2008), encourage teachers to create diverse online classes as much as possible, the more diverse the better and more beneficial they will be. Some of the issues teachers face in online classes is linked to the situations in which they do not provide enough diverse reading materials, or if teachers fail to create a discussion among students as well as if students lack motivation. These issues can all lead to having negative results when it comes to online learning, but that has not been the case with online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the teachers were very aware of their duties and very successfully engaged students in multicultural classes.

9. CONCLUSION

The results of various findings proved that COVID-19 pandemic had made an impact on the development of multicultural education in online classes, benefiting the students and requiring a lot of preparation and work from the teachers. During the classes the students shared ideas and learned of different cultures, they participated in online discussions and they built a multicultural online community. The online environment motivated them to collaborate with their peers, working in groups or pairs, which is one of the most effective ways of promoting multicultural education in online classes. The curriculums and teachers lesson plans play a major role in the effective online classes, literature

and materials used and student's backgrounds evaluated in order to develop multicultural classes which will engage and benefit the students. That is how have the teachers have contributed to enhance online multicultural education during COVID-19 pandemic, they helped the students adapt to the online classes and multiculturalism as quickly as they could, by using appropriate strategies of planning the classes.

Multicultural education is advanced in terms of approach to education transformation that has been criticized and corrected by following the discriminatory curricula, as well as the bad practices and policies in education. It is based on ideal social justice and equality and is dedicated to help all students become equal citizens and become culturally aware of diversities around them. Thus, multicultural education is recognized as a type of education that helps remove early injustices and connect racial ties (Ford, 2014)

The positive effects of COVID-19 pandemic on multicultural online education are that students learned from their peers, they got to bond over their cultures and ethnic backgrounds more than they had in traditional face-to-face classes. A multicultural community was formed during the online classes which motivated the students and encouraged teachers for further online classes.

In a community such as online classes, students have a major part when it comes to building interaction and communication amongst themselves; they build their community of learning with the guidance of the teacher (Garrison, 1997). The achievements of the students during COVID-19 pandemic were impressive, as many had doubts of how the students will adapt to online learning, the results showed few setbacks and many benefits. As Gunawardena and Zittle (1997, p. 10) claimed that social presence of the teacher is the most important, a real person is perceived differently in communication that a voice or video presence in the online classes. That proved to be wrong, communication was just as successful online through microphones and video chats, as it had been in face-to-face classes.

The students themselves promoted multicultural learning, wanting as much cultural diversity to be included in the classes, through materials such as books, videos, presentations and so on, prepared by the teachers. Ladson-Billings (2009) believed that the more teachers get introduced to their students ethnicity and cultural backgrounds, the better and more efficient the learning experiences will be.

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