

Multiculturalism and the Japanese Classroom

Brett R. WALTER

(accepted December 21, 2017)

Abstract. Recent data given on the population of Japan suggests that the foreign population of people living in Japan has consistently risen over the last decade. It is inevitable that the children of these minorities will continue to enroll in Japanese schools, but are the schools prepared for this new age of multiculturalism in Japan? This paper will discuss the movement for multicultural education, potential methods for improving multicultural education in the Japanese classroom, and some of the challenges that multicultural education faces.

Key words: Multicultural Education, Multiculturalism, Classroom instruction, Teacher training

Introduction

With the rising population of minorities in the United States, and the inevitable enrollment of the children of minorities, one aspect of education that has been receiving increasing attention for a decade or more in the American classroom is the idea of Multiculturalism. Almost reflecting this, the population of foreigners living in Japan has increased steadily according to the Japan population census, increasing by 6.3% (or 1.24% annually) between 2010 and 2015 and reaching 1.4% of the total population (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2016). This information, combined with the lowest population of people under 15 years old (12.6%) and the highest population of those over 65 (26.6%), suggests that Japan as well is facing the beginning of an era in which multiculturalism in the classroom has become an issue to consider.

This issue has been explored at all levels of education in the western world, from primary to university level academics, and researchers abroad (i.e. Piland & Barnard, 1996; Connely, Phillion, & He, 2003; Sturgess & Locke, 2009) have attempted to tackle the complicated topic of “diversity” in a number of ways, not all of which are agreed upon by these researchers. Such researchers as Piland and Barnard (1996)

have taken a look at how the diversity (defined by these authors as a difference in such areas as ethnicity, religion, native language, social class, physical limitations, and sexual orientation) can be recognized appropriately in the classroom. Much as was discovered by these same researchers, this is not an easy task, especially as many find that the difficulty may originate even from how instructors are taught.

The current research has been done for two main reasons: to show the need for multicultural education in universities in Japan and to provide some information on how to implement multicultural education. In order to address the first of these goals I will be looking into some of the movements that have been initiated in Multicultural Education research. For the second goal, I will introduce strategies being used in the classroom that may help to move some universities toward more of a multicultural curriculum. Further, I will explore the argued benefits and disadvantages to a multicultural curriculum. Although the recent shift of attention toward multiculturalism in education has provided a great deal of literature on the subject, I have chosen only a small fragment for the purposes of the current study.

Multicultural Education

The following review of the literature will be divided into three general sections: a brief review of the need for a movement toward multicultural education in the West and in Japan, an exploration into some articles or the research utilizing multiculturalism, and a summative review of the data showing the difficulties facing multicultural education.

The Multiculturalist Movement

Multiculturalism, or more specifically multicultural education, is frequently referred to as a fairly new field in educational research, but various aspects of and issues concerning this idea can be traced through history. The idea of multicultural education has not historically gained much attention mostly because until recently it was not labelled, and as such was often looked over. It was through the push for intercultural education initiatives and a strong move forward in the civil rights movement in the West that researchers and educators really began to think of how students of minorities were being affected by their instruction.

In the United States, this push for multiculturalism has mostly been centered on issues of race. Connelly et al. (2003) further report that multiculturalism “has been focused on equity for groups: equity for African Americans, equity for Native Americans, equity for French Canadians, equity for Native Canadians, equity for particular immigrant groups” (p. 365). Although this led to a focus mostly on programs for language teaching of English Language Learners, it eventually led to an overall examination of education in the normal classroom, and led to a large effort to “understand, to better educate, and to make society more equitable for classes and groups of citizens” (Connelly et al., 2003, p. 365). This movement can be seen in as recent research as that performed by Sturgess and Locke (2009), who utilized an ESL class’ diversity to formulate a multicultural program.

Movements for multicultural education in Japan have also been present for many decades,

having been reported as existing since the mid ‘80s (Seo & Qi, 2013). However, perhaps reflecting the movements in the West, Seo and Qi (2013) have also found that these Japanese movements focused mainly on language problems, whereas truly multicultural education goes beyond simply language issues and focuses on student living conditions, school activities, and community life. Further, in their analysis of the Japanese literature, they found that even though there was much research on language problems for minority students, the researchers in Japan were most interested in “how to teach and learn Japanese for minority children” with “relatively little research on L1” (p.1501) and bilingualism in general. This, combined with a lack of research on such topics as bullying of minority students and minority student relationships with friends and teachers has led the Japanese education system to be perceived as a “non-inclusive education system” (p. 1499). Despite these advancements in the research, as Sidorkin (1999) points out, not all researchers are at an agreement as to how to go about making multicultural education more prevalent in the classroom, leading to a variety of types of research occurring in the field.

Multiculturalism in the Classroom

In order to explore how to educate students for democracy in an ever-growing multicultural society, Anand Marri (2005) looked at the multicultural instructional methods of three social studies teachers who were chosen because they were reported as excellent teachers. Through these observations, Marri proposes a new framework for multicultural democratic education. For this framework, instructors are required to “allow the lives, histories, and experiences of diverse socioeconomic and cultural groups, especially those who have been ‘shortchanged,’ to play a critical role in the study of multicultural democracy” (Marri, 2005, p. 1038). Marri takes on the role of a critical theorist not only by suggesting this new framework, but also by suggesting that the way of approaching multicultural education in this context has

been flawed and incorrect until the introduction of this framework.

Similarly, Joann Phillion (2002) created a method of including multiculturalism in the classroom, which she labelled as narrative multiculturalism. Although the basic theory behind including multiculturalism in the classroom is the same, the strategy itself is drastically different. While Marri put a large pressure on the teacher to include every group of students, especially those who have been ignored until recently, Phillion puts more responsibility on the students themselves, and those groups represented by the students. Phillion believes that “multicultural understandings do not spring forth from a deductive mind using pre-formulated theoretical frameworks; they flow from a slow thoughtful process of immersing oneself in the midst of life...” (p. 281). This is closer to the idea of postmodernism, which states that change is related to differing perspectives.

Many other researchers (e.g. Reid & Garson, 2017; Oikonomidou, 2015; Sugimura, 2015) have provided suggestions for making a classroom focused more on multicultural education, but many of these articles suggest that one way to adjust classroom instruction, whether in Japan or anywhere else, is not to focus instruction on local events or overarching global events, but rather to find a way to make a connection between the two. In order to do this, it may be necessary to adjust courses to “resituate multicultural education from the periphery to the center of global educational discourses” (Oikonomidou, 2015, p. 41). As we will discuss in the following section, however, this may not be so easily done.

Multicultural Barriers

According to Sidorkin (1999), the issue of multiculturalism is split very generally into two groups of people (each sitting on one of two stools in terms of their opinion), those who base the theory in postmodernism and those who base it in critical theory. This divergence has reportedly weakened the argument for the importance of multicultural education.

Looking at the few examples shown above, these frameworks are an influencing factor of the conclusions drawn by some researchers.

For example, although it is certain that Marri’s (2005) research is heavy on the critical theorist side, calling for a reconstruction of the instructional framework, postmodernists would criticize this research, as they would see this new framework as simply a new change in perspectives and conditions placed upon the class. These same postmodernists would rather focus on how the new instruction was effective, rather than trying to state explicitly whether one framework was better than another. Likewise, Phillion’s (2002) article makes some postmodern suggestions, stating that the act of tapping into their suggested perspectives is a key for creating a multicultural environment in the classroom. A critical theorist would take this same data and argue that the model suggested by Phillion still suggests that a change in the current model is required, emphasizing that this research is more focused in critical theory. This type of rift in views across research creates some inconsistency in the interpretation of the data, which in the eyes of many researchers would weaken the overall argument of any such research.

These challenges are further escalated in Japan, where the degree of introduction of cultures and languages from outside of the country is still fairly unrecognized by its citizens, and multicultural policies developed at the national level have even been described as falling short of creating equal opportunities between the majority and minority groups (i.e. Vogt, 2017). Possible reasons behind this have already been discussed above, in reference to the article by Seo & Qi (2013), but further support for this falling short can be found in such policies as forbidding students to take an entrance exam because their certificates “earned from Chinese schools in Japan cannot be recognised as meeting the requirement to sit” (Sugimura, 2015). Even in places where new ideas are being developed to make Japan

more multicultural, these innovations are reportedly often met with “opposition and obstacles” (Sakamoto, 2012).

Conclusion

There is no easy answer to the riddle of how to create effective multicultural instruction for the classroom. As has been seen above, this is particularly true in Japan, where multiculturalism is still a comparatively newer issue. For researchers such as Piland and Barnard (1996), who could be viewed as having a Critical view of the topic, the simple answer for correcting the problems with multiculturalism in the classroom seems to involve providing support to teachers in the form of formal training in multicultural education; to fix the problem where many may see it beginning. However, as has been discussed, the disagreement between researchers in the field is not helping in clarifying the question of what to do with multicultural education to make it more effective. Further, as specific to Japan, the focus on the Japanese language and assimilation into the culture over the development of methods for integrating multicultural students into the Japanese classroom creates further complications (Vogt, 2017). The only way to move forward may require a movement toward Sidorkin’s (1999) idea of “sit[ting] comfortably in both stools [of critical theory and postmodernism] and not go between them” (p. 143), a daunting task itself.

References

- Connely, F., Phillion, J., & He, M. (2003). An exploration of narrative inquiry into multiculturalism in education: Reflecting on two decades of research in an inner-city Canadian community school. *Curriculum Inquiry, 33*(4), 363-384.
- Marri, A. R. (2005). Building a framework for classroom-based multicultural democratic education: Learning from three skilled teachers. *Teachers College Record, 107*(5), 1036-1059.
- Oikonomidou, E. (2015). Positioning multicultural education across the mirror of globalization. *Multicultural Education, 22*(3-4), 39-42.
- Phillion, J. (2002). Classroom stories of multicultural teaching and learning. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 34*(3), 281-300.
- Piland, W. E., & Barnard. (1996). Multicultural education in the classroom. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 20*(1), 49.
- Reid, R., & Garson, K. (2017). Rethinking multicultural group work as intercultural learning. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 21*(3), 195-212.
- Sakamoto, M. (2012). Moving towards effective English language teaching in Japan: Issues and challenges. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 33*(4), 409-420.
- Sidorkin, A. (1999). The fine art of sitting on two stools: Multicultural education between postmodern and critical theory. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 18*, 143-155.
- Seo, J., & Qi, J. (2013). A multi-factor paradigm for multicultural education in Japan: An investigation of living, learning, school activities and community life. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, 93*, 1498-1503.
- Statistics Bureau of Japan. (2016). *Basic Complete Tabulation on Population and Households* [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/info/news>

/20161227.htm

Sturgess, J., & Locke, T. (2009). Beyond "Shrek": Fairy tale magic in the multicultural classroom. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39(3), 379-402.

Sugimura, M. (2015). Roles of language in multicultural education in the context

of internationalisation. *Educational Studies in Japan: International Yearbook*, 9(1), 3-15.

Vogt, G. (2017). Multiculturalism and trust in Japan: Educational policies and schooling practices. *Japan Forum*, 29(1), 77-99.