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# THE INTEGRATION OF MULTICULTURALISM INTO THE ETHIOPIAN UNIVERSITIES' ENVIRONMENT

**Abstract:** This study examined the extent to which the issue of multiculturalism is infused into the environments of Universities in Ethiopia. Four hundred forty-four instructors and students were selected using random sampling technique from the five universities. A structured questionnaire and an unstructured interview were used as data collecting instruments. The quantitative data were analyzed using one sample t-test where as the qualitative one was analyzed using narration. The quantitative data disclosed that the issue of multiculturalism is infused into the programs of the Universities, where as the qualitative one did not.Therefore, a detailed future investigation shall be made in this area of concern.

**Keywords:**  environment; multicultural; student diversity; integration; infusion.

## Background of the Study

Multicultural curriculum transformation is an outgrowth of the field of multicultural education, which emerged in the 1970s (Nieto, 2000). In the 1980s and the early 1990s, multicultural curriculum transformation rose to the center of discussion, and often heated debate, on college and university campuses (Berman, 1992; Bloom, 1987; D'Souza, 1991). At the core of this discussion and debate was the question of whether or not curriculum should be transformed in terms of multiculturalism.

Those in favor of transformation argued that a transformed curriculum does for both minority and majority group students, what the mono-cultural curriculum knowledge in terms of multiculturalism does for majority group students. This shows that both groups of learners are beneficiaries from multicultural curriculum. The mono-cultural curriculum knowledge affirms majority group students in terms of what it teaches, how it teaches its components, and how it evaluates learning on it. In so doing, it privileges majority group students above all other students, thereby giving them an advantage. Atransformed curriculum in terms of multiculturalism affirms diverse groups of learners in leveling the playing field (Banks & Banks, 1997; Nieto, 2000).

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Those who opposed to transformation argued that the most valuable knowledge is already in place in the mono-cultural curriculum knowledge. A transformed curriculum in terms of multiculturalism waters down the mono-cultural curriculum knowledge making it possible for less capable students to be academically successful (Bloom, 1987; D'Souza, 1991).

More interestingly, those who are on both sides of this debate expose the sociopolitical nature of education, whether it is mono-cultural or multicultural in nature. That is, they reveal that education is not neutral, but rather contingent on the relations of power in society-past, present, and future (Kozol, 1991; Nieto, 2000). In this way, we come to understand that education is not always intended to make us comfortable. A multi-culturally transformed curriculum must push the envelope forward without overtaxing instructors and students in the process; walking a difficult but exciting line.

Although opponents of multicultural curriculum transformation remain in the University academy, they are becoming scarcer as research began in the 1970s, and continuing today, shows that a transformed knowledge in terms of multiculturalism is more rigorous than the mono-cultural one, not less (Clark, 1999). Furthermore, a transformedcanonprepares all students in terms of multiculturalism for the world as it currently exists; a world in which cultural border crossing is the norm, not the exception, in the everyday life (Giroux, 1992). Today the discussion and debate surrounding multicultural curriculum transformation focuses little on whether or not to undertake it, but rather, almost exclusively, on how to engage in it effectively (Nieto, 2000). That is why the current researchers have made an attempt to push forward and investigate the issue of how far multiculturalism is being integrated into the overall environments of Universities in Ethiopia.

## Statement of the Problem

Student diversity is a common global issue in Universities, although it is highly sensitive in Africa. This is because Africa is a continent where there are diverse nations and nationalities and ethnic groups and this diversity is more sensitive in Sub-Saharan Africa than others which needs due care, attention and address the issue properly. Ethiopia is ethnically diverse with different religions and nationalities. Having this context of the nation into consideration, university environment should be designed in such a way that it entertains all types of students. However, Higher Learning Institutions in Ethiopia have not clearly addressed the problems of university environment. There seems ignoring and neglecting the issue of multicultural environment of their respective campuses.

To the researchers' best knowledge, only few studies were made in the Ethiopian context. For instance, Asmamaw (2012) and Semela (2012) investigated university environments in different universities of Ethiopia. But they did not address the problems sufficiently and well. For example, they did not treat the case of student relations in light of student differences in campus environments such as hearing impairment, physical disability, and the like both in the classroom and outside of the class room. Moreover, they did not consider the appropriateness of the libraries, dormitories, play grounds and recreation centers to the physically disabled or other individual differences.

Therefore, this research is directed towards investigating the integration of multiculturalism into the environments of Universities in Ethiopia. The researchers have observed university environments that are not diversity friendly during his attempt to investigate some selected

university environments as part of his dissertation data collecting process. Accordingly, the observed universities were not friendly especially to those students who were physically handicapped. This triggered the researchers to make an investigation in the area.

The current study is aiming at examining the extent to which *the issue of multiculturalism is infused into the environments of Ethiopian*Universities. To realize the purpose of this research, the following research question was formulated.

- *How far is the issue of multiculturalism infused into the environments the Ethiopian Universities?*

The researchers hope that the findings of this study will help University instructors to:

- create classroom climates that are conducive to learning for the culturally diverse students,
- overcome prejudice and discrimination in education,
- acquaint themselves with the concept of equality and inclusive education,
- be culturally responsive instructors who are capable of facilitating the teaching-learning process for culturally diverse learners, and
- benefit themselves as well as administrators, educators and different programs of Universities' by making them more effective in understanding and meeting the diverse needs of students.

The study is delimited to investigate the integration of multicultural issues into the educational environments of Ethiopian Universities. Moreover, for the purpose of feasibility, and to make the study manageable, the researchers have decided to delimit their area of study geographically to five Universities namely, Bahir Dar, Jimma, Dilla, Mekele and Alemaya Universities.

## Operational Definition

**Multiculturalism:** refers to differences created among students as a result of multicultural parameters such as, ethnicity, culture, gender, religion, learning styles, disability, exceptional talents, and learning disabilities.

**Integration:** Refers to whether or not the University environments such as students' dormitories, lounges, cafeteria, library services, chairs and tables are user friendly, and inclusiveness of department choice.

## Nature of University Environment

University instructors, who have been engaged in multicultural curriculum transformation, must also be attentive to the impact of the physical and aesthetic organization of the immediate learning environment on their students (Clark, 1999). Is the classroom clean and neat? University instructors should go to their classroom early to make sure that it is welcoming to students at class time. *Should the chairs be set up seminar style (around small tables), or in a circle to best facilitate the learning of the day's lesson?* Multicultural education discourages having students sit in rows (Zuniga et al., in press).

Staring at the back of someone's head is isolating and, therefore, not conducive to building a relationship with the students. Furthermore, it perpetuates the fictional notion of faculty as

knowing everything, discussed previously by forcing a professor to sit or stand at the front of the classroom, instead of interacting with students (Freire, 1990). Class-rooms where furniture is bolted to the floor prevents professors from being creative by changing the configuration of chairs and tables from one week to the next as the curriculum lends. *Do the pictures on the wall in the classroom affirm the representation of all the students in the class as well as those they may meet in the world beyond it?* Although University instructors often have little control over the aesthetics of a classroom to which they are assigned from one semester to the next, they can use course relevant materials and student work that reflect diversities to decorate the walls during a single semester. If other University instructors use the same room at different times, all should come together to coordinate the aesthetics of the room for the semester in a team. This has the added effect of encouraging relationshipbetween and among instructors from different departments who might not otherwise meet each other or develop an appreciation for each other's disciplines.

Obviously, the discussion of the environment can extend beyond a classroom to a departmental space, an entire building, and a campus at large. This discussion can also extend beyond the context of concrete space, taking into account psychological space or campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1998; Sedlacek, 2000). Students, staff, and administrators must learn to engage all people, whether inside or outside their area of familiarity (e.g., ethnicity, language, geographic origin, socioeconomic class, gender, disability, religion, physical appearance, marital status, employment category) with dignity and respect.

Whether in the classroom or elsewhere on campus, and whether physical or psychological in nature, an affirming environment is crucial to the development of highly skilled and principled students (Sleeter, 1996). If students are not affirmed at home, for example, they will not join the local, regional, national, or international worlds beyond the campus in a manner that affirms others (Clark et al., in press).

### Design, Subjects, Sample, Sampling Technique of the Study

As the purpose of this article is to describe the integration of the issue of multiculturalism in Ethiopian Universities, descriptive-survey design was used.

The participants of this study were instructors, students, cultural center coordinators, gender club leaders, guidance and counseling officers, student union leaders and student service personnel's of the five Universities of Ethiopia.

Five states (government) Universities were selected from the different NRS of the country. Accordingly, BDU from Amhara NRS, Mekele University from Tigray NRS, Dilla from SNNPRS, and Jimma and Alemaya Universities from Oromiya NRS were selected among the ten RS and thirty-two Universities as samples of the study.

It was felt that the sample Universities would be representative of the population, as they are taken from the four directions (East, West, North and South of Ethiopia), the Universities reside in the major nation nationalities regions and where the Universities have diverse student population and large campuses. The samples of the study were five hundred sixty eight.

Random sampling technique was used to select instructors and students from the five universities. This is because this kind of sampling technique can give equal chances to the participants under the study. But for the other participants aforementioned (cultural center coordinators, gender club leaders, guidance and counseling officers, student union leaders and student service personnel's), purposive sampling technique was used, as selection was made on the basis of their appropriateness for the relevant data.

### Instruments of Data Collection

The main tools of data collection for this study were questionnaire, interview, and observation. Questionnaire items and interview schedules addressed the issues of how far multiculturalism was considered as an integral part of the environments of Universities' educational set-up. Moreover, informal observations of the situations of the five university campuses unfolded whether or not the attributes of the universities actual context fit with multicultural characteristics reviewed in the literature section.

### Methods of Data Analysis

To analyze the integration of multiculturalism into the environments of the Universities'set-up, narration was used. This analysis technique enabled us to investigate the extent to which the issue of multiculturalism is integrated into the Universities' set-up.

### Demographic Data of University Students and Instructors

*Table 1: Demographic Data of UniversityStudents*

| Demographic Attributes of the Respondents | | No. (percent) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Sex** | Male | 318 (75.5) | |
| | Female | 126 (28.3) | |
| | Total | 444 (100) | |
| **Ethnic Origin** | Amhara | 179 (40.2) | |
| | Oromo | 102(22.9) | |
| | Tigray | 85 (19.1) | |
| | Others | 79 (17.7) | |
| | Total | 444 (100) | |
| **Religion** | Orthodox | 309 (69.4) | |
| | Muslim | 57 (12.8) | |
| | Catholic | 9 (2) | |
| | Protestant | 66 (14.8) | |
| | Others | 4 (0.9) | |
| | Total | 444 (100) | |
| **Parents' Monthly Income** | Below 1000 birr | 206 (46.3) | |
| | From 1000 – 2000 birr | 112 (25.2) | |
| | From 2000 – 3000 birr | 76 (17.1) | |
| | More than 3000 birr | 51 (11.5) | |
| | Total | 444 (100) | |
| **Parents' Residential Area** | Urban | 164 (36.9) | |
| | Rural | 281 (63.1) | |
| | Total | 444 (100) | |
| **Parent's Educational Level** | | Father | Mother |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Unable to read and write | 96 (21.6) | 161 (36.2) |
| Literate | 95 (21.3) | 72 (16.2) |
| Primary education | 127 (28.5) | 146 (32.8) |
| Secondary education | 59 (13.3) | 34 (7.6) |
| Diploma | 36 (8.1) | 19 (4.3) |
| Degree and above | 32 (7.2) | 13 (2.9) |
| Total | 444 (100) | 445 (100) |

Table 1 shows that University students selected as samples for this study were 318 (75.5) male and 126 (28.3) female. Of these participants, 179 (40.2) were from Amhara ethnic origin, 102 (22.9) were from Oromo Ethnic origin, 85 (19.1) were from Tigray ethnic origin, and the rest 79 (17.7) were from other ethnic origins such as, Wolayta, Guragie, Kembata, Hadiya, Shinasha, Raya, etc. Concerning the participants' religion, 309 (69.4) were followers of Orthodox Christianity, 57 (12.8) were Islamic religion followers, 9 (2) Catholic Christians, 66 (14.8) Protestant Christians, and the rest 4 (0.9) were from other religions such as Jehovah. In terms of their parental monthly income, 206 (46.3) participants reported that their parents monthly income was below 1,000 Ethiopian birr, where as 112 (25.2) participants reported that their parental monthly income was from between 1,000 – 2,000 Ethiopian birr, also 76 (17.1) participants reported that their parental monthly income was from between 2,000 – 3,000 Ethiopian birr, and the rest 51 (11.5) reported that their parental monthly income was above 3,000 Ethiopian birr. The data showed that 164 (36.9) of University students parents' residential area was urban; the rest 281 (63.1) were from the rural areas of Ethiopia. Regarding parents' educational level, 96 (21.6) fathers and 161 (36.2) mothers were unable to read and write; 95 (21.3) and 72 (16.2) of them were able to read and write, respectively; Others, which means, 127 (28.5) fathers and 146 (32.8) mothers had primary school education, respectively. Still 59 (13.3) and 34 (7.6) of students' fathers and mothers had secondary school education, respectively. The data also disclosed that 36 (8.1) and 19 (4.3) students' fathers and mothers were Diploma holders, respectively; and the rest 32 (7.2) and 13 (2.9) of them reported that their fathers and mothers were Degree holders and above, respectively.

From the foregoing presentation, one can see that the research University sample students were more of male, most of them were Orthodox followers, with insufficient parental income, came from the rural parts of Ethiopia, and their parents were unable to read and write. Of the parents of the sample University students, the male were relatively well educated than the female.

*Table 2: Demographic Data of University Instructors*

| **Demographic Attributes of the Respondents** | | **No. (percent)** |
|---|---|---|
| ***Sex*** | Male | 106 (86.2) |
| | Female | 17 (13.8) |
| | Total | 123 (100) |
| ***Ethnic Origin*** | Amhara | 48 (39) |
| | Oromo | 38 (30.9) |
| | Tigray | 29 (23.6) |
| | Others | 8 (6.5) |
| | Total | 123 (100) |
| ***Religion*** | Orthodox | 91 (74) |
| | Muslim | 14 (11.4) |
| | Catholic | 1 (0.8) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Protestant | 11 (8.9) | |
| | Total | 123 (100) | |
| *Educational Level* | First Degree | 26 (21.1) | |
| | Second Degree | 88 (71.5) | |
| | PhD | 9 (7.3) | |
| | Total | 123 (100) | |

Table 2 shows that University instructors selected as samples for this study were 106 (86.2) male and 17 (13.8) female. The participants' ethnic origin was, 48 (39) Amhara, 38 (30.9) Oromo, 29 (23.6) Tigray, and the rest 8 (6.5) were from other ethnic origins such as, Wolayta, Guragie, Kembata, etc. Seen in terms of religion, 91 (74) of them were Orthodox, 14 (11.4) Islam, 1(0.8) Catholic, and the rest 11 (8.9) were Protestants. On educational level, 26 (21.1) parents hold First Degree, 88 (71.5) Second Degree, and the rest 9 (7.3) PhD Degree.

From the foregoing presentation, one can see that the research sample University instructors were more of male, most of whom were Orthodox followers, came from the Amhara ethnic origin, who had Second Degree.

## Presentation and Analysis of the Findings

*Table 3: The State of University Classroom Environment as Perceived by University Instructors and Students*

| University Environment | | N | Test value | Calcu Mean | Std. Deviation | df | t | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | University Students | 444 | 3 | 9.7658 | 3.49835 | 443 | 58.821 | .000 |
| | University Instructors | 122 | 3 | 14.8934 | 4.71819 | 121 | 34.866 | |

Table 3 indicates that the calculated means are above the test value (3.0) for both University instructors (14.8934) and students (9.7658). This value is significant at α value of 0.01. That is, both participants perceived that University classroom environments are conducive to diverse learners. This further implies that the issue of multiculturalism is well integrated into the classroom environments of the sample universities.

## Discussion of the Findings

**The Integration of the Issue of multiculturalism into the Ethiopian Universities'environment**

Table 3 shows that the calculated means are above the test value (3.0) for both University instructors (14.8934) and students (9.7658). This value is significant at α value of 0.01. That is, both participants perceived that Universities' classroom environments are conducive to diverse learners. This further implies that the issue of multiculturalism is well integrated into the classroom environments of the Universities.

The current finding is consistent with prior research findings. University instructors who are engaged in multicultural curriculum transformation must also be attentive to the impact of

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the physicaland aesthetic organization of the immediate learning environment on students (Clark, 1999).

Regarding the integration of the issue of multiculturalism into the Universities' environment, there comes a big difference between the quantitative and qualitative data results. While the quantitative results show significant value confirming that classroom environments are conducive to diverse learners in the Ethiopian Universities, the responses from interviews and observations uncover a totally different result. The explanation and descriptions of the interview and observation disclosed that both aesthetic and physical environments are not considered and overlooked. The physical environment has ignored major concerns in student diversity, such as poor classroom arrangements, and the inconvenient structure of the libraries. Besides, the nature of the entire buildings is not giving the necessary attention to the gifted, talented and people with disabilities. Therefore, as to the qualitative data analysis the current status of the environment in the Universities is not encouraging. Next, few sample results of the interview are presented as follows:

For example, one of the student interviewees from Mekele University reflected the following major issues:

> …The classroom environment is not suitable to individual differences, including persons with disabilities. The preparation of chairs and tables do not consider students' physical abilities or disabilities. Em… Hence, we usually suffer from uniform and rigid sitting arrangements that are designed for only to the face-to- face interaction. We do not have circular, semi-circular, horse-shoes, triangular, individualized type, and one- on-one, and other active learning classroom arrangements.

From this one can infer that only conventional seating arrangement is not comfortable to the learners who have hearing impairments, sight impairments, and short people, lame people, left-handed, single handed and students with disability of any nature. Especially, this is very difficult for students who have lost their feet or hands because they are not given the necessary attention to entertain their difficulties.

Another student interviewed from Bahir Dar University has put her idea as follows:

> Um… Students' special needs are not taken care of. For example, classroom arrangements, and dormitory sights are not naturally comfortable for students with special needs and physically impaired. In addition, library services are designed for students who are without physical disabilities, and the entire-building construction never treats and considers multi-cultural settings.

This idea was supported by the researchers' informal observation and informal discussions with teachers, students, gender club leaders, and student leaders that the auditorium, the dormitories classroom buildings, student cafeterias, student recreation centers, student lounge, etc., are not really well established to entertain the issue of multiculturalism or are not well thought of about student diversity.

Another interviewee from Alemaya University has said the following: "I am left-handed. I …have a great problem to use these chairs. They were not made considering students with physical disability and individual differences. In my opinion, they were made for those who are right-handed who can use the tables or chairs properly."

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From all these qualitative analysis, it could be said that the issues of multicultural environment seem far from the expectations laid down to the universities under study.

Another reflection from a fifth year student, Department of Civil Engineering, Jimma University, goes as follows:

> *Though I am really lucky to join civil engineering being physically disabled, there are various problems, such as…lack of knowledge and skill about students with physical disability, lack of experience with these students (like me in this case), absence of training in teaching the physically disabled students, absence of the necessary materials for physically disabled students, the uncomfortable nature of classrooms and workshops for disability…..For me, these are the major negative contributing factors among others to entertain student diversity in Ethiopian universities.*

From the reflections given above, it seems that student diversity in the Universities is not given the necessary attention which of course calls for the immediate reconsideration of the issue.

Regarding campus environments in the universities, one of the Gender Club Leaders of Dilla University has said the following:

> *Uh…I think multiculturalism is not giventhe necessary attention on the university campuses. There are no sufficient services for students with disabilities in the cafeteria, dormitories, recreation centers, libraries, lounge, sidewalks, halls, sports fields, etc, related to the physical environment. I feel in the curriculum, students' varied back grounds, cultural differences, gender sensitive issues, methodologies, learning styles, learning strategies are not considered well…Assessment techniques, nature of examinations and the like are ignored individual differences. I would rather say multiculturalism is there nominally for the sake of pretention. Major multicultural issues are not included in many aspects of the university campuses as required. I hope, this condition be improved soon.*

From the reflection given above, one could say that the environments are not conducive to be inclusive for all types of students in their campuses. That is, multicultural environments in the respective universities are not given the necessary attention. And this can have drawbacks on students' learning and performance, which in turn might affect students' multicultural conceptions and practices when they go to live and work in the society.

The argument is also strengthened by the responses of the guidance and counseling officers from the five universities, that is, Bahir Dar, Dilla and Jimma, Mekele, and Alemaya Universties which are now under study. They stress that the concept and application of multiculturalism in their universities is not well understood and appropriately implemented. This is because multiculturalism is not infused in the curriculum of the current university courses. Besides, both the physical and social environments are largely forgotten to be included at various course levels. Furthermore, the approaches used by instructors do not seem to entertain multicultural elements. They usually apply teacher-centered approach, forgetting diverse student needs in the classroom. In addition, the relationship between the universities and the respective community is scant. Also the assessment system is not in line with the standard given in the Education Policy (1994)- such as narrowing the gap between boys and girls, and urban and rural children, and between students with special needs and other students, and

other parameters of multiculturalism. Therefore, from our experience and working in counseling affairs with the students and teachers, we could possibly conclude that the issue of multiculturalism is not given the necessary attention.

Based on the above explanations, it might be possible to say that the infusion of multiculturalism into the environments of the universities under study seem disregarded, and is not given due attention.

## Conclusion

Instructors' and students' responses from the five Universities obtained through both quantitative and qualitative data displayed mixed results. The quantitative data disclosed that multicultural issues are infused into the programs of the Universities, in spite of the quantitative finding the qualitative one showed the absence of infusion of multicultural attributes into the environments of the Universities. Thus, the quantitative and qualitative data results of this study are far apart each other. However, during the observation of the sample Universities and focus group discussion and interview the researchers found out the absence of diversity friendly environment, such as the physically disabled and others at libraries, dormitories, lounges, etc.

Ethiopian universities nowadays are becoming the champion of multiculturalism. To serve each diverse need of students in the universities, stakeholders should promote the universities' environment to be student diversity friendly.

The researchers, therefore, recommended future investigation in this area of concern.

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**Authors' bio-sketch for the topic entitled "*The Infusion of Multiculturalism into the Pedagogy of Ethiopian* Universities"**

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