

Difficulties Encountered in the Education of the Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Culture and other Issues

Maya Ezzedine

Notre Dame University

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to examine the difficulties encountered in the education of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, particularly those related to classroom management and cultural differences between teachers and students. The sudden migration of Syrian students to Lebanon has necessitated great changes, and Lebanese schools have been facing the challenge of catering for the refugees' educational needs. Interviews were conducted with twelve teachers in the elementary level at three official schools in the Shouf area. An interview guide was prepared by the researcher to direct the interviews towards the needed targets. The outcomes revealed that Instructional and management strategies are likely to fall short of achieving their aim if not planned in a way to respond to the cultural factors which characterize the parties involved in the educational process. In addition, ensuring that students possess the academic capabilities needed to grasp the material explained in class is a priority in the educational mission. Curriculum reformation has to take into consideration the needs of all learners since the system, as it is now, is not fair for Syrian students.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity; Classroom Management; Curriculum; Learners' Needs; Elementary

Introduction

Since 2012, the beginning of the Syrian revolution, and later war, Syrian refugees have been heading to Lebanon in countless numbers, often with absent organization and planning for their new life conditions. This sudden migration has necessitated great changes in various aspects, including social structure, business, employment, services and education. Hence, Lebanese schools have been facing the challenge of catering for the refugees' needs and rights to receive an appropriate type of education. Whatever their ages, academic backgrounds, and educational levels, they have had no other choice than finding in Lebanese schools a place where they can be prepared to become an active community member.

Nevertheless, given the multiple complex factors which have normally existed in such unfamiliar conditions, this has seemed to be such a difficult mission to accomplish. El-Ghali, Ghalayini and Ismail (2016) reported that the official schools in Lebanon are not prepared to cope with the sudden and massive influx of refugees who are entitled to receive an education. Attracting only about 30% of the students, the public schools had needed reformation even before the onset of the Syrian war. Despite the great efforts that the NGOs and Ministry of Education are exhibiting to provide education for, including refugees and Lebanese school-aged children, the majority of Syrian refugees are still unable

to access appropriate formal education. Aiming to explore this issue and its implications on teachers and students, this paper's purpose is to investigate the challenges which the Lebanese teachers have been facing in their teaching experiences with the Syrian refugee students and the complications these students are experiencing as perceived by the teachers. This research particularly addresses teachers at Lebanese official schools from which a number of teachers are interviewed to obtain an overview about the different types of difficulties they have been passing through, particularly those related to classroom management and cultural differences.

Literature Review

Many factors have played a role in complicating the learning experience of the Syrian refugees. For instance, the educational system in Lebanon places a great emphasis on bilingualism, which is reflected through using the English, French, or German language to teach the majority of school subjects including Mathematics, Life Sciences, and Physics. This is in addition to dedicating a large number of sessions, about nine per week at the elementary level, to teach the second language chosen when starting school. This is not the case in Syria where the priority is given to the native Arabic language, relying on it to teach the majority of school subjects.

Bilingualism as a Barrier

Variations in language levels may constitute a major barrier for the refugees' learning process. According to Peltokorpia and Clausen (2011) language barriers act against intercultural communication, create a sense of isolation, and have a negative influence on the interaction process. Such differences in the language level between Lebanese and Syrian students may complicate the mission of the teachers and create put them in a situation where they are required to resort to solutions which might not be suitable to all parties involved. Deciding whether to translate to them and shift sometimes to Arabic or to keep using the same language of instruction or trying to find another solution are all difficult decisions that might be frustrating and overwhelming to the teachers, especially if they had not been fully prepared and trained to handle such challenges. El-Ghali, Ghalayini, and Ismail (2016) wrote that among the essential reasons of the difficulties that Syrian students faced in their education were being bullied and unable to cope with the language needs particularly that many of the subjects are taught in a foreign language. These challenges have led many Syrian refugees to quit school at a high rate, reaching 70% in 2012. Even some Lebanese parents have decided to change their children's schools because of their worries that the level of education would be affected by the existence of the Syrian refugees. These facts demonstrate that there is a socio-cultural clash standing as an obstacle which is hindering the achievement of the ideal situation and that is providing the best quality of education for all those who need it.

Cultural Differences and their Implications

Other than the second language barrier, Syrian students have had to be suddenly emerged in Lebanese schools and taught by Lebanese teachers whose cultural values and beliefs are different from their own. This has imposed an unfamiliar situation as well on the teachers who have been required to interact and manage students of different backgrounds without necessarily being knowledgeable about their norms, traditions and behavior patterns.

In fact, according to Geert Hofstede (2017), a pioneer in national cultures research, Lebanon's and Syria's cultural scales demonstrate variations as per each cultural dimension being examined. For instance, the Lebanese cultural scale records 75 on Power Distance, 40 on Individualism, 65 on

Masculinity, 50 on Uncertainty Avoidance, and 14 on Long Term Orientation. On the other hand, the Syrian cultural scale records 80 on Power Distance, 35 on Individualism, 52 on Masculinity, 60 on Uncertainty Avoidance, and 30 on Long Term Orientation (Geert Hofstede, 2017). TO BE ADDED

Eventually, these cultural differences might complicate the learning process and the relation between students and teachers who pertain to the mainstream culture and might perceive these cultural differences as daunting as is the case with many teachers who are required to teach in culturally diverse settings. (Rothstein-fisch & Trumbull, 2008). Examples of cultural variations concern the differences that exist between collectivist and individualistic societies. In individualistic societies such as the USA, the educational system as a whole is designed in a way that conforms to the individuals' needs and capabilities to the extent that individuals' rights are given a priority over students' behaviors consequences. This does not apply to the collectivist cultures, such as China, where the educational systems emphasize the standardization of the curriculum. Another difference lies in the beliefs people have about effort and ability. In collectivist societies, effort is given priority over ability since there is an emphasis on social rank and status. On the other hand, the individualistic societies value ability over effort since the greater emphasis is placed on individual skills development according to special needs and capacities (Cheng, 1998).

Misinterpreting Differences

Cross-cultural understanding often faces the deterring effect that the tendency to treat differences as hindering to child development plays. This is because people with differences are often seen as mistaken and ignorant. Eventually, when the group of educators and teacher enjoy more social power than the minority group of families and students, it becomes easy to determine whose opinion will have the dominance and authority. "When teachers attribute students' 'inappropriate' behaviors to cultural deficits in child rearing, they may consciously exclude parents from the problem solving process" (Rothstein-fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 49). Thus, instead of involving the students' parents in a constructive way, the teachers would be prevented from gaining the information needed to help students achieve the utmost of their learning experience.

On the other hand, the teachers who participated in the Bridging Cultures project, which was held to improve diverse classroom management, have enhanced and intensified their communication with students' parents, both formally and informally. They have addressed behavior issues more fully with them, and they have gained insight about how their way of thinking may influence students' conduct in class. This approach has been demonstrated as greatly helpful for teachers to develop the feeling of empathy needed to understand the students and to improve classroom management and organization. Teachers then can take advantage of families' strengths and use what they offer of values, such as sharing and working in groups, to enhance the quality of learning and classroom management (Rothstein-fisch & Trumbull, 2008).

McGrady and Reynolds (2013) referred to previous research to emphasize the fact that the reality often comes to be different from students' expectations to be treated fairly and equally regardless of their cultural, ethnic, racial and other social backgrounds. Eventually, a substantial number of white teachers often have negative perceptions of black students' conduct and academic performance. These views are likely to have an impact on the assessment and grades given to students. These views are likely to have an impact on the assessment and grades given to students. The writers aimed at examining white teachers' views about students of other cultures and whether nonwhite students tend to have a better performance when taught by nonwhite teachers.

The writers departed from the idea that mismatch plays a destructive role in terms of complicating the relationship between teachers and students. On the other hand, students who are taught by teachers of the same socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural backgrounds have the advantage of being positively evaluated and reported. After conducting a longitudinal study on students of different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, McGrady and Reynolds (2013) found that having a white teacher is the norm for more than 80% of Asian, black, Hispanic and white students. This indicates the pervasion of racial /ethnic mismatch between teachers and students. In terms of evaluating students' behaviors, the results showed variations in white teachers' views about white and nonwhite students. For instance, according to white teachers, black students had the lowest rates on being attentive in class and Hispanic students recorded a similar disadvantage. Nevertheless, Asian students were reported positively, and they even received more favorable perception than white students on four measures including attentiveness and non-disruptive behavior. In terms of academic ability, the results were greater indicators of teachers' biased views. For example, in accordance to white teachers' perceptions, black students were rated as having much lower academic capabilities than white students while Asian students received the most elevated rates (McGrady and Reynolds, 2013). The results of this study emphasize the fact that teachers have large discrepancies and biases in perceptions about students. These views are constituted based solely on preconceived ideas that teachers have about certain races and cultures, and, unfortunately, these views often constitute a barrier which deters the smooth interaction that is necessary to ensure the existence of an efficient learning process.

Rollin (2013) discussed in an article titled *Teachers, students and the impact of social class* how teachers' attitudes and behaviors are affected by their social backgrounds. The writer remarked that teachers who lived in poverty during their own childhood and had teachers trying to build good relationships with them turned out to become thoughtful and understanding in the way they perceive their own students' social characteristics. Thus, their experiences helped them interact in a positive way with their students.

Nevertheless, a substantial number of teachers had predisposed concepts which they inherited from their various social class backgrounds. These stereotypical concepts often shape their attitudes and perceptions of their students' behaviors and academic performance. In fact, many teachers' reports reflected their biased views towards their social classes, associating negative assumptions and qualities with poor people. For instance, one of the teachers interviewed used a discourse which revealed clear blame and social hierarchy. This was clear through their perceptions of African American students as lacking energy and motivation for learning and as constituting the major cause for classroom difficulties. Thus, she considers the low class who live in poverty as entitled to be illiterate and lazy. As per the writer's opinion, this situation necessitates that seminars and discussion sessions be held so that teachers would be aware of social assumptions and preconceived ideas which are likely to affect their careers and their relationships with students.

Ways to Handle Cultural Differences

Identifying what constitutes good teaching is not a marginal issue with the existence of the challenges of dealing with cultural differences in schools. Thus, implementing good teaching strategies is essential to eliminate the gap in the achievement levels in order to improve the educational quality provided to the colored minority. Traditionally, educators considered students whose culture differs from the mainstream as deprived and doomed to suffer in an educational system tailored to meet the needs of the general dominant culture. These students were generally thought to be

demoralized and incapable of academic achievement. Hence, this did not leave space for perceiving the culturally different students as contributors to their classroom and as additional resources for teachers. Nevertheless, this approach was challenged by scholars who criticized culture hierarchy which placed the white mainstream culture in a privileged position. Consequently, many educators refused to consider difference as problematic and called for a reformation to curricula and teaching strategies. Cultural difference then was no longer treated as a deficit; instead, educators started to interpret difference as an additional advantage to create a richer classroom environment. Teachers started to be aware that cultural knowledge could be used to enrich their teaching strategies and, consequently, help students to have a better performance (Schmeichel, 2012).

This stage was followed by the emergence of an approach which emphasized educational equity through the implementation of ‘culturally relevant teaching’. This type of pedagogy emphasized maintaining cultural integrity, encouraging cultural competence through criticizing social inequity, and implementing good practices which support minority students to achieve academically. Nevertheless, culturally relevant teaching was challenged by the lack of adequate cultural knowledge and the biased concepts of a number of teachers. Additional obstacles were the high number of students in class, the lack of support and the over reliance on standardized tests. Consequently, the reality established the mainstream white culture as the norm to which culturally different students are compared. Students were positively reported when being able to fit in the mainstream culture. “Although culturally responsive scholars have situated students of color positively within their critique of schools, educators who raise the culturally relevant teaching banner can claim to be doing equity work without having to consider inequity...” (Schmeichel, 2012, 228). This necessitates leading open discussions and continuous reformation processes for what is called culturally relevant pedagogy in order to eliminate the possibility of sticking to what might be harmful rather than helpful to students.

Cheng (1998) describes the cultural factors which underlie the educational premises and policies two of the eastern countries which are Japan and China. Eventually, the writer showed how many of the educational beliefs like people’s expectations about personal capability and effort are greatly shaped by national cultures. Hence, when there is a cross-cultural educational setting, the possibility of encountering challenges and obstacles increases because of the potential differences in educational values. “This suggests the possibility that the implementation of foreign educational policies and practices could result in a subsequent shift in the value system of a society” (Cheng, 1998, 14). Thus, the societies undergoing such rudimentary changes may not be ready to accept the challenges accompanying them even if they hold a positive attitude towards them. Such educational complications do not have a simple straightforward solution. Expecting the possibility of creating a comprehensive idealistic system of educational values would be irrational. It would be more realistic and rewarding if the educational policies being adopted at the international level are set in a way to take into account the cultural diversity in educational strategies.

Ukpokodu (2003) states that many of the novice teachers have not passed through experiences with socially, culturally, economically and linguistically diverse students. Moreover, many of those teachers have stereotypical views and preconceived ideas about low-income and racially different students. Also, a lot of them explicitly expressed their demotivation about teaching culturally diverse students and their preference to teach in other areas where chances of diversity are low.

Eventually, preservice teachers may not be aware of how their institutions' culture and their own attitudes and behaviors may emphasize inequality between people of different economic backgrounds. This is likely to create a tendency to underestimate the capability of students and, consequently, to

attenuate the curriculum. "Preservice teachers, who have been socialized into the belief that racial minorities are intellectually incompetent, unknowingly undervalue and underestimate the potentials of diverse students." (Ukpokodu, 2003, p. 17) Thus, the writer recommends engaging in 'teaching from a critical multicultural perspective which requires constructing knowledge, criticizing all forms of inequalities, and seeking to implement culturally responsive strategies. Teachers then need to be provided the capability and chances to challenge their pervasive cultural and philosophical positions and attitudes in order to develop the open minded needed to assist the diverse students in achieving their academic goals. One specific method of doing this is to do an activity which requires the students to imaginatively adopt a new racial and socioeconomic status and the point out the hardships as well as the benefits and privilege they are likely to gain in the new identity. This is a way to let the teachers challenge their attitudes and socio-cultural privilege and to consider the inequality that their students may experience because of their difference.

Gaining insight about students' cultures characteristics endows the teachers with the ability to facilitate the process of acculturation that the students have to pass through in their new educational settings. "Teachers must be sensitized to the needs and feelings of their students; they must understand the cultural backgrounds and the contribution each student can bring to the classroom." (Fraser-Abder, 2001, p. 130).

Sturz, Kleiner, and Fernandez (2005) stress the fact the current evolution has affected multiple life aspects including education. Thus, classrooms have changed to include more diverse students and different teaching styles. In order to cope with these changes and to provide the ultimate learning opportunities, instructors have to be aware of racism, preconceptions, bias, and stereotypical views which take place in different cultures. Moreover, teachers have to cater for the needs of different learners through management, varied teaching style, technology integration, and responding to multiple intelligences and multicultural education. One particular harmful thought pattern is ethnocentrism, the tendency of considering one's culture as superior. This might be disclosed in certain actions which trigger feelings of embarrassment, alienation, and inferiority in minorities. Ethnocentricity is likely to be revealed through teachers' behaviors when they ask more questions and praise students of highly considered cultural backgrounds more than others. In order to avoid such instances and their detrimental effects, teachers can apply multiple strategies like communication styles, assertive behaviors, and authoritative approaches to gain students' respect and encourage cooperation.

Cronje (2011) explored how Hofstede's four initially identified cultural dimensions, which are quantitative in their nature, could be used as a guide to interpret qualitative data obtained from an educational technology Masters' program. The purpose of the study was to identify the commonalities that South African professors and Sudanese students tried to establish despite the differences that exist between their cultures.

Cronje's study revealed that there are crucial factors which should be taken into consideration in the interaction between cultures, including reducing uncertainty in communication, constructing common meaning, and using technology appropriately. For example, the dimension of power distance which was high in the students' culture explained their tendency to rely on the 'more powerful' instructors to take the responsibility, their reluctance to take the initiative, and their low self-confidence. These behaviors were not familiar to the South African professors. As a result, trying to give more authority to students, helping them to take more responsibility, and building a relationship of friendliness and trust were necessary actions to diminish the cultural distance. The researcher calls the attention and

emphasizes the importance of establishing commonalities across cultures as a useful process. This harmony can be easier to be achieved when educators familiarize themselves with the substantial differences which exist between educational systems pertaining to different cultures. Siwate and Polydore (2010) shed the light on the fact that African American Students' number in special education outweighs other students' number. The writers associated this issue with the limited awareness that instructors have about the extent to which cultural factors influence educational strategies and students' manners. This lack of awareness deprives them of the capability of adopting culturally responsive teaching strategies. Hence, the writers' purpose was to study the new teachers' attitudes and reflections about the efficacy of intervention methods implemented to address a culturally-related conflict. The study targeted ninety-five instructors who were supposed to identify the most suitable intervention techniques. 'Culturally responsive/ relevant' occupied the second place after 'enhancing student motivation' among the most frequently items mentioned by the novice teachers. It was also revealed that the intervention technique which was perceived to be the least efficient is the one which does not account to cultural factors.

The dilemma that remains unsolved is whether this realization of the crucial role which culturally responsive educational strategies play is implemented in classrooms by the teachers themselves. Siwatu and Polydore (2010) stressed the importance of implementing culturally responsive education through accomplishing a high level of self-efficacy in terms of adopting culturally responsive intervention methods. If not, novice teachers who suffer from a lack of confidence in their proficiency level may not be determined and persistent enough when addressing difficulties encountered in culturally diverse classrooms.

Sleeter (2001) remarked that nowadays the cultural gap between learners and instructors is wide and gradually increasing. The increasing rate of multiculturalism in education has led to serious negative consequences such as students' disengagement, restricted learning and elevated rates of dropping out. This problem is fatherly intensified by the fact that many novice teachers pertaining to the mainstream culture resort to color blindness as a means of dealing with their anxiety and lack of knowledge. Moreover, the educational institutions which belong to the mainstream often fail to provide the pedagogy which responds to the increasing cultural gap. The writer highlighted a number of ways of handling effectively culturally diverse classrooms. One way is hiring teachers of different culturally backgrounds, including the minority, since studies have shown that teachers of color were often able to transfer previous experiences, dispositions and other attributes to their classrooms. A second strategy that as shown to be efficient is the process of immersion in culturally diverse communities. This experience was reported as highly fruitful since it gives education learners the chance to explore the characteristics, values and practices of the community people, which requires a high level apprehension and interaction, making it hard to them to return to the comfort zone of their own familiar culture.

Finally, multicultural education courses, with or without field experience, enrich future teachers with knowledge about race, discrimination and culture privilege issues. Learners reported that these courses increased their cultural awareness and provided them insight about stereotypical concepts they had. Sleeter stated that research is needed not only in the stage of teacher preparation, but also in the following stage of classroom teaching in order to link "preservice education with community-based learning and with ongoing professional development and school reform" (Sleeter, 2001, p. 102).

Beaty-O’Ferrall, Green and Hama (2010) stated that the way teachers behave, particularly concerning classroom management, has a greater impact on students’ attitudes and conduct than other features such as assessment methods and peer interaction. Thus, one essential attribute for attaining efficient classroom management is the presence of a good relationship between teachers and students. To achieve this purpose, it is crucial to deeply understand the learners. Instructors who implement a classroom management strategy based on building a strong relationship and on developing the whole character of a student have a greater ability to encourage and assist students to be more open, positive, and socially interactive (Beaty-O’Ferrall, Green and Hama, 2010). The writers suggested a number of strategies which can be implemented by instructors to have strong bonds with learners. Some of these methods comprise developing empathy and tolerance toward negative attitudes, avoiding self-centeredness, and handling cultural diversity. The feeling of fear from different cultures and the unfamiliarity with other cultures’ characteristics and values might constitute barriers which should be surpassed by teachers to establish strong connections with students of different cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, it is important to be aware of the existence of stereotypical concepts and intolerance toward culturally different people. Consequently, helping teachers to realize how their own cultural premises and values affect their behaviors in class and their class atmosphere is an important step to exterminate any biased ideas and unfairness towards others. Their cultural knowledge would assist them in identifying perceived inappropriate behaviors which are culturally originated. The awareness that instructors have about cultural values and characteristics endows them with the empathy needed to move away from self-centeredness and accept differences.

Methodology

This research falls under qualitative research design, adopting a semi-structured interview in order to obtain insights about the Lebanese teachers’ experiences with Syrian refugee students. It involves interpretation and analysis of the input and verbatim obtained from the interview. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of providing objective, comparable data. Since the questions are prepared ahead of time, using an interview guide, this type of interviews is particularly helpful for the interviewer to be thoroughly prepared and to stay within the limits of the topics in concern. In addition, interviewees enjoy the freedom of using the discourse they want to express their opinions (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Interviews were conducted with twelve teachers in the elementary level at three official schools in the Shouf area. The teachers interviewed had been teaching Lebanese students and have recently started teaching Syrian refugees in their classes. Thus, all interviewees have experienced teaching both Lebanese and Syrian elementary students and are able to give their feedback about both kinds of experiences and the differences between them.

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