

Students' Engagement with the Multicultural Education Curriculum through Multicultural Learning Experiences at Shandong University, China

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Abstract

This study examines the extent to which Shandong University students' multicultural-based learning experiences predict their perceptions and engagement with the Multicultural Education Curriculum. The research was designed as a quantitative cross-sectional survey study with 384 undergraduate students from Shandong University and from other universities in Shandong Province, China being surveyed using a structured questionnaire. The data were analyzed by using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to check the predictive power of the studied variables. The results revealed that all five dimensions of multicultural-based learning experiences significantly predicted students' perceptions of and engagement with the Multicultural Education Curriculum. Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.270$, $p < .001$), followed by Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning ($\beta = 0.238$, $p < .001$), Experiential Multicultural Learning ($\beta = 0.221$, $p < .001$), Community-Engaged Multicultural Learning ($\beta = 0.203$, $p < .001$), and Social Justice and Advocacy-Based Learning ($\beta = 0.179$, $p < .001$). The model explained 25.0% of the variance in students' engagement with the Multicultural Education Curriculum. Diverse multicultural learning experiences, especially in the form of collaborative learning, culturally responsive teaching, experiential learning, social justice, and community engagement, play important roles in students' engagement with multicultural curricula. From China higher education perspectives, students' experiences in multicultural learning situations greatly impact how they perceive the Multicultural Education Curriculum. Thus, for university instructors and curriculum developers, adopt in the multicultural education curricula of higher education in China a host of strategies and approaches in order to promote students' involvement and engagement in the curriculum. Future research will be necessary to investigate more variables including those that are higher education institutionally and contextually related, which can increase students' engagement with multicultural education curricula in a positive way.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Student Engagement, Multicultural Learning Experiences, Higher Education in China, Curriculum Development

Introduction

Globalization of higher education and an increasing number of culturally diverse students at universities all over the world have put the spotlight on multicultural education. Multicultural education encompasses aspects of inclusion and intercultural dialogue as well as social justice while attempting to incorporate a number of cultures into what educators teach in classrooms as well as how students learn in academic environments (Kim, 2024; Mitchell, 2023). The multicultural education curriculum at Chinese universities has garnered particular attention given the internationalization of Chinese higher education and the growing numbers of students from all over the world attending universities in China.

In terms of effective multicultural education, the learning experiences derived from the multicultural education curriculum, learning experiences which are provided to students through the implementation of multicultural education, are extremely crucial (Guillen-Yparrea & Ramirez-Montoya, 2023). The range of learning experiences that can be provided to students within the framework of multicultural education, encompasses a number of approaches including: Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning; Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning; Experiential Multicultural Learning; Social Justice and Advocacy-Based Learning; and Community-Engaged Multicultural Learning. As noted by Bowman (2011) and Gay (2018) among others, such learning experiences increase students' cultural awareness, facilitate students' intercultural understanding and stimulate students' educational engagement. In summary, the various approaches to multicultural education increase opportunities for students to realize and experience diverse perspectives, and to challenge their own cultural views and stereotypes through interactions with and observations of other cultures. Such experiences, in turn, are linked to the students' outside of the classroom reality.

While many studies have attempted to explore the factors which affect students' engagement with multicultural curricula in higher education across the globe, very few have focused specifically on the Chinese context. Much of the existing research conducted in China has focused on aspects of intercultural communication, or the experiences of international students, whereas there is a dearth of empirical evidence examining the specific influence of a range of multicultural learning experiences upon students' perceptions of, and engagement with, a Multicultural Education Curriculum in China (Denson & Bowman, 2013; Wang, 2022). The current study therefore to examines the multicultural-based learning experiences of students at Shandong University predict their perceptions of engagement with the Multicultural Education Curriculum in China.

Literature Review

The study is based on three perspectives: Multicultural Education Theory, Social Constructivist Theory, and Transformative Learning Theory. From the perspective of Multicultural Education Theory, Banks (2015, 2019) stated that multicultural education should aim at achieving educational equality, understanding of culture, and social inclusion by introducing different cultures into curriculum, teaching and education policies and enabling students to appreciate differences between individuals, develop intercultural

communication skills, and have meaningful contact with people of different cultures. Here, the focus is on the role of Multicultural Education Curriculum in higher education. From the perspective of Social Constructivist Theory, Vygotsky (1978) stressed that learning is a social process and takes place through interaction and collaborative learning with others. Students construct knowledge and understanding through dialogue and communication with others. Thus, Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning and Community-Engaged Multicultural Learning are crucial in helping students to develop intercultural understanding through interaction with their peers from diverse backgrounds and involvement with local communities. From the perspective of Transformative Learning Theory, individuals gain new perspectives through reflection on experience and learning. This theory posits that deep and meaningful learning occurs when learners critically examine and transform their current understanding of the world. Thus, Experiential Multicultural Learning and Social Justice and Advocacy-Based Learning are significant in helping students to gain insights into and learn to cope with cultural differences and social inequalities through their experiences of multicultural learning.

Research has demonstrated that, in general, students who have had exposure to diversity in higher education in a variety of forms have increased civic engagement, and increased awareness of and ability to interact with people of different cultures, and be democratic participants in their communities (Bowman, 2011). Specifically, university diversity experiences prepare students to be active participants in global society by promoting intercultural understanding through cross-cultural interactions (Denson & Bowman, 2013). Research has also focused on a range of practices that teachers can use in multicultural classrooms to increase student engagement and to foster multicultural learning. Students benefit from culturally responsive teaching practices that recognize students' cultures and support them in learning through practices that reflect their cultures (Gay, 2018). A range of research studies have recently reported findings from investigations into practices of culturally responsive teaching in online environments (Kim, 2024) and the preparation of teachers in teacher preparation programs to teach students of diverse backgrounds through culturally responsive teaching practices (Ulbricht, 2024). Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that practices of Collaborative Learning can aid intercultural competency development by providing opportunities for students to communicate, work together as team members, and understand each other's cultures as they engage in a variety of learning activities and projects (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023). In addition, the development of intercultural competence is significantly enhanced when students are able to engage in multicultural interactions and undergo processes of reflective learning (Mitchell, 2023).

Research conducted in China has increasingly focused on higher education internationalization and growing cultural diversity in Chinese society. While there is limited research on how intercultural teaching and learning practices are implemented in Chinese higher education institutions, the majority of studies indicate positive outcomes in terms of intercultural awareness and cultural sensitivity on the part of students (Van Maele, 2022; Wang, 2022). Research into multicultural competence in Chinese educational settings has recently underscored the need to develop a culturally responsive curriculum as well as teacher preparation programs that support teaching about diversity and promoting inclusion (Wang, 2022). Furthermore, experiential, social justice, and community-engaged learning

experiences allow students to learn and experience how to challenge stereotypes and engage in ways that foster deeper levels of empathy and intercultural understanding through direct contact with and involvement in a variety of diverse communities and with regard to a range of different social justice issues. The five dimensions outlined above include Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning, Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning, Experiential Multicultural Learning, Social Justice and Advocacy-Based Learning, and Community-Engaged Multicultural Learning are thus believed to be key predictors of students' perceptions of and engagement with the Multicultural Education Curriculum. However, although there is an increasing body of empirical research on these topics, there is to date a lack of in-depth studies that examine the collective effects of these dimensions of multicultural education within the Chinese higher education context, which is why the current study was conducted.

While prior research showed positive outcomes from practicing various forms of multicultural education through promoting students' intercultural competence in intercultural interactions, civic responsibility, and for culturally inclusive learning environments (Bowman, 2011; Denson & Bowman, 2013; Gay, 2018), most of the studies focus on single aspects of multicultural practices and are thus examined separately. While research on higher education in China focuses on topics such as internationalization and cultural awareness of students (Van Maele, 2022; Wang, 2022), there is a noticeable gap in research when it comes to the question of how various forms of multicultural learning can influence students' commitment to Multicultural Education Curriculum and their intercultural competence. The study presented here follows the guidelines provided by Multicultural Education Theory, Social Constructivist Theory, and Transformative Learning Theory. Within the Chinese higher education setting, this study for the first time ever assesses the impact of five dimensions of multicultural education on students' learning within a single model. Findings of the study will be used for completing the current state of research on multicultural education, for gaining first insights within the Chinese higher education environment and for teaching practices as well as for the development of Multicultural Education Curricula.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey approach in order to explore the ways in which multicultural-based learning experiences can predict students' perceptions and engagement with the Multicultural Education Curriculum (MEC) offered in China. The use of quantitative survey research within a cross-sectional design is suitable for testing hypotheses or investigating relationships between variables and which can provide generalizability to a larger population (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). This study took place at Shandong University, an institution found in Jinan, the capital city of Shandong Province in China, with participants drawn from undergraduate students studying a variety of subjects across different disciplines.

The study employed a stratified random sampling approach to ensure that all groups of students by gender, year of study, academic major and by ethnicity were adequately represented. The total number of participants included in the study was 384 valid completed questionnaires. All the questionnaires were organized into six key constructs or factors which included: (1) Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning, (2) Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning, (3) Experiential Multicultural Learning, (4) Social Justice and Advocacy-Based Learning, (5) Community-Engaged Multicultural Learning, and (6) Multicultural Education

Curriculum. Each of the above key constructs included a number of items, all of which were rated using a five-point Likert type scale.

All the items in the instrument were validated in terms of content and through a pilot study to ensure its validity and reliability. In the main study, the on-line survey was carried out through a survey platform and analyzed by using SPSS 29 and SmartPLS 4. Descriptive statistics were applied to detail the extent of multicultural learning experiences of the participants and their engagement with the Multicultural Education Curriculum. Moreover, the main study utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to investigate the predictive relations among the variables of the study.

Finding and Discussion

This section outlines and discusses the findings from Research Question 1 in examines the extent to which Shandong University students' multicultural-based learning experiences predict their perceptions and engagement with the Multicultural Education Curriculum (MEC) in China.

Table 1

Influence of Multicultural-Based Learning Experiences on the Multicultural Education Curriculum (MEC)

Multicultural-Based Learning Dimension	β (Beta)	t-value	p-value	Rank	Interpretation
Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning (CSIL)	0.270	6.067	< .001	1	Strongest predictor of MEC
Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning (CRTL)	0.238	5.309	< .001	2	Significant positive predictor
Experiential Multicultural Learning (EML)	0.221	5.348	< .001	3	Significant positive predictor
Community-Engaged Multicultural Learning (CEML)	0.203	4.561	< .001	4	Significant positive predictor
Social Justice and Advocacy-Based Learning (SJABL)	0.179	4.281	< .001	5	Significant positive predictor
R ² (MEC)	0.250	-	-	-	Model explains 25.0% of variance in MEC

Table 1 reveal that all of the five multicultural dimensions of learning predicted students' engagement with the MEC positively and significantly. The largest effect was found for Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning (CSIL), followed by Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning (CRTL), Experiential Multicultural Learning (EML), Community-Engaged Multicultural Learning (CEML), and last but not least, Social Justice and Advocacy-Based Learning (SJABL). It appears that, different from prior research that focused on one aspect of multiculturalism, the present study demonstrates that a multitude of multicultural learning experiences increase students' positive perception of multiculturalism as well as their engagement with multicultural curricula.

Table 2

Summary of Findings, Supporting Theories, and Previous Research

Finding	Supporting Theory	Supporting Research
CSIL was the strongest predictor of MEC ($\beta = .270$)	Social Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)	Bowman (2011); Denson & Bowman (2013); Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya (2023)
CRTL significantly predicted MEC ($\beta = .238$)	Multicultural Education Theory (Banks, 2015, 2019)	Gay (2018); Kim (2024); Ulbricht (2024)
EML significantly predicted MEC ($\beta = .221$)	Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2018)	Mitchell (2023)
CEML significantly predicted MEC ($\beta = .203$)	Social Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)	Van Maele et al. (2022)
SJABL significantly predicted MEC ($\beta = .179$)	Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2018)	Wang (2022)
All five dimensions positively influenced MEC	Banks' Multicultural Education Theory	Bowman (2011); Denson & Bowman (2013); Van Maele et al. (2022)

Table 2 presents the results from the five different dimensions of multicultural-based learning with relevant supporting theories and prior research on multicultural education. Overall, the results provide positive support for the application of Multicultural Education Theory (Banks, 2015, 2019), Social Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2018) as these learning dimensions influenced the Multicultural Education Curriculum (MEC) positively and are thus in line with existing research on multicultural education.

These findings are expected as Banks (2015, 2019) Multicultural Education Theory affirms that there are quality educational experiences that integrate various perspectives of different cultures in the aims and learning experiences of education, with the end in view of developing cultural understanding, striving for equity, and promoting social inclusion while providing educational experiences in which students learn while learning about their culture and the cultures of others. In an effort to achieve MEC objectives, these five dimensions support MEC in numerous ways. For instance, through involvement in different learning experiences, students acquire in-depth, meaningful experiences about how to learn about other cultures in addition to acquiring in-depth learning experiences about their culture. Therefore, by participating in various cultural experiences in school-based learning environments, students are able to meaningfully engage with a quality MEC, develop cross-cultural experiences and become equipped with multicultural education skills (Banks 2015, 40).

The strong influence of CSIL is also supported by Social Constructivist Theory as posed by Vygotsky (1978). Knowledge is constructed through social interaction, through learning with others. Students profit most from learning experiences when they are able to work with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds and engage in meaningful discussions with them. By

learning in a multicultural environment students develop intercultural understanding while they are learning multicultural contents (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023). Thereby, students also improve their communication skills, they learn to work in a team and to be respectful towards others who are different from themselves. This type of learning promotes intercultural competency. As research has shown before, also diversity-related educational experiences enhance students' civic engagement and their preparation for life in a globalized and multicultural society (Bowman, 2011; Denson & Bowman, 2013).

In addition to these areas, there were significant effects for CRTL, EML, SJABL, and CEML. Support for the application of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2018) was also found. This theory posits that learners go through a process of transformation while learning by way of critical reflection on their experiences. These culturally responsive teachings and experiences can facilitate a deeper connection for students between what they are learning and their cultural identities. Students can also gain understanding of various social justice issues by means of experiential learning, as well as through studies of various social justice issues within community-based learning environments. Students can critically examine cultural stereotypes and the social structures which support these stereotypes in these learning environments as well. The findings of the current study are consistent with Gay (2018), Kim (2024), Ulbricht (2024), Van Maele et al. (2022), and Wang (2022) who reported that in order to increase student engagement, and understanding of and support for multicultural education, it is necessary to implement culturally responsive and learnings which are based on multicultural education. The current study's findings indicate that the various multicultural-based learning experiences can serve as important predictors of students' engagement with the MEC, as well as for learning within an inclusive, and culturally responsive higher education environment.

Conclusion

This study examined the influences that multicultural-based learning experiences have on the perceptions of, and engagement with, the Multicultural Education Curriculum (MEC) of Shandong University by students who had completed the curriculum. The results revealed that all of the five dimensions of the Multicultural-based Learning Experiences Scale of Shandong University—Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning, Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning, Experiential Multicultural Learning, Social Justice and Advocacy-Based Learning, and Community-Engaged Multicultural Learning—significantly and positively predicted students' engagement with the MEC. In terms of the relative influences, however, Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning was found to be the strongest predictor, followed by Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning. The results of the present study support Multicultural Education Theory, Social Constructivist Theory, and Transformative Learning Theory, as well as prior studies on the effectiveness of multicultural education. They reveal that, through exposure to meaningful multicultural learning experiences, students not only gain cultural awareness and deepen their understanding of intercultural interactions but are also strongly motivated to engage with the curriculum. Students find that culturally responsive, experiential, socially engaged, and collaborative learning environments foster their appreciation for multicultural education and create an inclusive learning environment. All in all, this study confirms that, in order to make the multicultural curricula of higher education institutions more effective, multicultural-based learning experiences need to be reinforced. Implications for university administrators, for developers and deliverers of

curricula, and for teachers are discussed, with reference to the creation of a culturally responsive learning environment in Chinese universities.

Implication and Suggestion

Implications of findings for higher education institutions, teachers and policy-makers, recommendations for improving multicultural education, and directions for future research on students' engagement with the multicultural education curriculum.

The findings of this study will be of benefit to institutions of higher education, curricula and teaching practices around the world. This study indicates that by incorporating Multicultural-based learning experiences into study packages that are based on the Multicultural Education Curriculum, there will be an increase in student engagement in classroom learning. Interactive, Culturally Responsive (CR) teaching practices can be used in addition to other practices of teaching and learning that have been shown to increase student engagement, such as Experiential Education and Community-based learning. These learning experiences can be developed and delivered within the framework of Collaborative and Social Interaction Learning, in order to encourage meaningful dialogue and learning in a social environment that fosters study in an intercultural setting. By developing learning experiences that foster study in an intercultural environment, students from diverse backgrounds can learn from each other and benefit from each other's different perspectives of teaching and learning. The practices and experiences that have been discussed in this study can be used by academics teaching in a variety of settings and will assist in raising cultural awareness and in developing learning experiences that are inclusive of students from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, these practices and experiences will assist in developing a number of other attributes that are desirable in a global environment, including an appreciation of different ways of viewing the world and the ability to participate and engage with people from diverse backgrounds in a variety of settings.

Specific suggestions for putting the findings into practice can be elaborated as follows. First, the university should give even greater emphasis to the opportunities for students to learn through collaborative activities which foster meaningful interactions between students from a variety of different cultural and social backgrounds. The education provided in the classroom should be delivered through the use of teaching methods which are culturally responsive, thus enabling recognition of, and value to be placed upon, students' experiences of a variety of different cultures in the classroom. Furthermore, opportunities for students to gain experiential learning through a variety of formats including but not limited to, cultural exchange, service-learning, and multicultural workshops should be greatly increased, as these are among the best formats for students to acquire meaningful multicultural experiences. In addition, education needs to include social justice and advocacy in order to allow for critical analysis of the diversity, equity, and inclusion of issues in society. In order to gain meaningful full multicultural experiences through community-based education, opportunities should be increased for students to become involved in educational activities which are connected to a variety of real-life multicultural settings and communities. Future research should focus upon additional factors which may affect students' involvement with multicultural education in order to develop multicultural education. Recommendations for future research include a longitudinal study and a cross-section study of a variety of universities in different locations across China.

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