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Transformation in the Higher Education Curriculum: A Multicultural Approach to Responding to Student Diversity

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The intricate diversity and pluralistic nature of Iranian society, encompassing various ethnic, racial, and cultural dimensions among students, necessitates a thorough consideration within curricula and educational programs. Consequently, this study was undertaken with the objective of transforming the higher education curriculum through a multicultural lens to adequately address student diversity.

Methods: This research is applied in nature and is categorized as a survey as well as descriptive-analytical study, employing the library (documentary) method to construct a theoretical framework for the investigation and to assess prior research contributions.

Results: The analysis revealed that to implement a multicultural framework within the higher education system, it is imperative to establish the requisite infrastructure and foundational elements, which include the formulation of multicultural policies and the development of multicultural human resources. Subsequently, it is essential to address the diverse cultural requirements of students from cultural minority groups through the application of both macro and micro educational strategies.

Conclusions: The outcomes of this investigation substantiate the necessity for fostering a multicultural framework within the higher education system to effectively meet the varied cultural requirements of the student population.

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Introduction

In the relatively recent past, it was posited that educational frameworks would be developed without regard for the diversity and plurality of cultures and belief systems of individuals from different regions; however, in the contemporary context, characterized by the dissolution of traditional geographical, social, cultural, philosophical, and intellectual boundaries, and in light of the inter-cultural influences, this matter must be addressed with urgency (Todd, 2011). The co-existence of various cultures and their intersections has heightened the potential for challenges and tensions among individuals; consequently, it has become increasingly imperative to devise an effective mechanism that fosters cultural rapprochement, enhances mutual understanding, and establishes equilibrium among them to facilitate peaceful coexistence and mitigate potential misunderstandings (Smolicz, 2013). Within this framework, the higher education system is compelled, in response to this pressing necessity, to assist students in acquiring the requisite knowledge and competencies that will empower them to navigate cultural interactions successfully, in addition to imparting specialized knowledge. In this context, one of the principal responsibilities of the higher education system within a multicultural society is to develop culturally sensitive and responsive curricula that support individuals in preserving their cultural heritage as well as their personal and social identities (Shekari et al., 2013).

Iranian society exemplifies a multicultural framework, rendering the provision of equitable conditions for the attainment of educational opportunities across political, economic, social, and cultural domains of paramount significance. In this regard, the curriculum, as the cornerstone of the educational system, serves as a pivotal instrument to facilitate the achievement of this objective. Conversely, the notion of a multicultural curriculum has emerged as a critical concern within multicultural societies, highlighting the imperative and necessity of educational systems, particularly in such contexts, to effectively manage their interactions with both national and global cultures (Sadeghi, 2012). Curricula constitute the nexus of the education and training system as well as higher education; developments in broader society exert direct influence upon them and, consequently, upon the curricula themselves. The evolution of curriculum planning has long preoccupied educational experts across various levels. The remarkable velocity of scientific and technological advancements, coupled with an increasing focus on cultural diversity, has compelled societies to reassess and revise their curricula. A fundamental and sustainable transformation

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within any society is predicated upon the transformation of its educational framework. It is posited that one of the influential factors in the transformation and advancement of the educational system, as well as its overall efficacy, is the incorporation of cultural considerations within curricula. Given that a multicultural curriculum represents a critical and essential requirement for societies characterized by cultural diversity, attention to this aspect is not only a necessity but can also play a pivotal and foundational role in societal developments (Shirzadi Kandi, 2013).

One of the essential components of the current investigation is the imperative for multicultural societies to formulate a multicultural curriculum, which has been conspicuously overlooked within the Iranian educational framework (Hassanpour et al., 2022). The coexistence and livelihoods of diverse ethnic groups, including Persians, Turks, Kurds, Baluchis, Turkmens, Arabs, and Lors, who reside in proximity to one another, alongside their usage of languages such as Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, Lori, Turkmen, Arabic, Baluchi, Taleshi, Tati, Laki, and Armenian, in addition to the presence of various dialects within certain languages, exemplify the multifaceted nature of ethnicities and cultures in contemporary Iran.

Consequently, in light of the fact that the cultural landscape of Iran epitomizes a multicultural society, it is imperative for the Iranian educational system to prioritize multicultural education as a central aspect of its initiatives. Moreover, leveraging the inherent capacities and potentials embedded within diverse cultures can be regarded as a critical element in the fortification of national culture. This is due to the fact that all cultures and subcultures possess the potential to harness mutual advantages and mitigate their respective deficiencies when engaged in intercultural interactions. Thus, the formulation of a multicultural curriculum holds considerable significance from this analytical perspective (Bagheri et al., 2020). Furthermore, the necessity to emphasize the advancement of multicultural programs is underscored as a legal obligation, as delineated in the nation's foundational documents, including the Constitution, the resolutions of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, the 20-year development vision document for Iran 2025 (1404), as well as within the philosophical underpinnings of formal and general education, which collectively constitute a fundamental responsibility for planners operating in this domain. Therefore, the present study was undertaken with the objective of reforming the higher education curriculum: adopting a multicultural approach to adequately address the diversity of the student population.

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Material and Methods

This study constitutes an applied research endeavor with respect to its objectives and adopts a survey and descriptive-analytical methodology in terms of its procedural framework. The library (documentary) technique was employed to construct the theoretical framework of the study and to undertake a review of antecedent research.

Results

Theoretical foundations of the research

In the examination of the theoretical underpinnings of multicultural education, three conceptual and theoretical frameworks are proposed, which encompass:

1 -Conservative approach: Proponents of this paradigm advocate for the establishment of a universal and cohesive culture upon which social interactions are delineated and constrained. They assert that by obfuscating discussions pertaining to cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious diversities and subsuming them under a generalized cultural framework, a utopian society predicated on egalitarian and liberated principles can be realized. Although notions such as success for all, inclusion, empowerment, and equality are prevalent in their discourse and literature, this perspective predominantly emphasizes the assimilation of diverse cultures as a means to mitigate discrepancies, thereby marginalizing and excluding certain cultural identities. This framework regards students who deviate from the predominant demographic of the group (majority) as distinct or even inferior and disabled, thus perceiving it as the obligation of educational institutions and systems to furnish these students with the requisite competencies to surmount differences and to enrich disabilities. In summary, this approach, by purporting to adopt a non-political stance on the matter of societal diversity and characterizing all instances of discrimination and inequality as individual phenomena, seeks to deliver specialized education for individuals who diverge from the prevailing societal context, primarily aiming to acclimatize students to coexist and function within a shared cultural milieu, which is the paramount objective of this framework (Landreman, 2005).

2 -Liberal Approach: This theoretical framework, in contrast to the conservative paradigm, allocates greater significance to the phenomena of discrimination and inequality. Through a historical lens, liberals furnish a plethora of instances that illustrate the systemic discrimination faced by minority cohorts, deeming it a societal obligation to establish equitable competition by

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ensuring uniform opportunities for all individuals and groups. They assert the existence of inherent equality among humans; however, the provision of equal opportunities has not been universally realized, necessitating concerted efforts to rectify this imbalance. This approach is predicated upon human inclinations and interpersonal dynamics, with its ultimate aspiration being the formation of a society where the rights of minorities and diverse groups are honored, thereby fostering harmonious coexistence. Consequently, multicultural education within this framework encompasses the delivery of tailored educational experiences for distinct classes and groups, alongside the dissemination of knowledge, attitudes, methodologies, values, and targeted social activities, aimed at cultivating respect for minority and diverse groups while facilitating their harmonious interaction with other cultural entities. It is noteworthy that the majority of research and scholarship pertaining to cultural diversity is anchored in this particular approach. The liberal viewpoint on multicultural education endeavors to implement curricula that commemorate significant historical milestones of minority populations within academic institutions or that orchestrate local culinary festivals in educational contexts, thereby enhancing students' understanding of the traditions and customs of various cultural groups. Thus, the critique posited by numerous scholars regarding this approach is that, akin to conservative theorists, they too strive to deliver education and curricula that reflect the dominant societal class; the distinction being that liberals emphasize the importance of cultural and ethnic respect, advocating for both general education applicable to all subcultures and specialized programs aimed at fostering a deeper comprehension of subcultures (Manning, 2005).

3 -Critical and postmodern approach: Supporters of this approach believe that all policies and educational and curriculum programs of schools and universities are aimed at strengthening the hegemony of the dominant class in society and that education and training lead to the re-creation of social relations. This is where school and university education is based more on the cultural values of white men and the dominant classes in society in general. According to the critical and postmodern approach, multiculturalism and its education, without making fundamental changes in the existing policies in a society, can only create another form of existing relations within the society and does not change the content and context of communication. Accordingly, and unlike the liberal approach, which merely seeks to create corrective changes in the heart of the same social structure, the critical approach has gone further and seeks fundamental change, in other words, a

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change in the approach to the existing structure. In fact, the central principles of their multicultural education are based on presenting concepts of subcultures, greater participation of minorities in the design and implementation of educational and curriculum programs, having an open perspective towards all points of view and viewpoints, using several local and ethnic languages alongside the official language of education, paying attention to the different learning styles of students and creating education based on all those differences. The essence of these programs is based on making students aware of their place in the social system, which can provide them with the necessary awareness and motivation to take steps to create change in social structures (Moore, 2004).

Empirical Basis of Research

Khosravipour (2023) investigation titled Multicultural Education: A Novel Approach to the Iranian Educational System elucidated that the educational framework must exhibit responsiveness to the intricate cultural, social, linguistic, and ethnic heterogeneity and endeavor to actualize this progressive educational paradigm. The principles of upholding educational equity, fostering equality in educational opportunities, embracing cultural plurality, emphasizing peaceful coexistence, engaging with the doctrines of diverse religions and acknowledging and valuing their respective customs and norms, integrating a comprehensive approach within the curriculum content, and offering a multicultural citizen educational model as a substitute for the conventional cultural assimilation model are salient features of a multicultural curriculum. These attributes facilitate individual awareness by cultivating an environment conducive to mutual understanding, thereby advancing and enhancing multiculturalism, reconstructing a mono-national curriculum, mitigating ethnic biases, and fostering respect for diverse cultures.

Sādeghi and Azizi (2022) undertook an inquiry titled Identifying and Formulating the Principles of Multicultural Education within the Islamic Republic of Iran. The findings of this research encompass the extraction of eleven foundational principles of multicultural education pertinent to Iran, which encompass the following: the educational institution must uphold human dignity and individual rights irrespective of cultural disparities, and ensure the provision of high-quality educational opportunities without discrimination based on color, race, class, or religion. Education must foster an ethos of peaceful coexistence among various religions, sects, and ethnicities both within Iran and globally, while simultaneously facilitating opportunities for the religious education

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of minority faiths and the instruction of indigenous languages for learners. In the preparation of educators, it is imperative that they engage in practices that preclude the questioning of each other's convictions and refrain from assailing others for their differing viewpoints. Distinct identities should be cultivated in students and various groups, with due consideration for individual differences alongside shared identities.

A study conducted by Bagheri et al. (2020) titled Strategies for Developing a Multicultural Curriculum in Higher Education revealed that the optimal strategy for formulating a multicultural curriculum is as follows: educational curricula and topics should be tailored in accordance with the cultural diversity inherent within the nation, ensuring that the policy of unity amidst plurality is genuinely operationalized.

The outcomes of a study by Azarakhsh et al. (2022) entitled Investigating the Components of a Multicultural Curriculum from the Perspective of Experts in this Field in Iran indicated that among the 153 components scrutinized, 37 components were identified as fundamental constituents of a multicultural curriculum.

A scholarly investigation conducted by Mohammadi et al. (2016), entitled “Providing a Model for Multicultural Education in the Higher Education System: An Analysis of the Views of Experts in this Field in Iran,” elucidated that the establishment of a multicultural framework within the higher education system of our nation necessitates the preliminary provision of essential infrastructure and prerequisites, which encompass multicultural policy formulation and the development of a multicultural workforce. Subsequently, it is imperative to address the diverse cultural exigencies of students belonging to cultural minorities by employing macro-educational strategies (at both the university and ministry levels) alongside micro-strategies (at the classroom level). Macro-strategies comprise the formulation of specialized academic programs tailored for cultural minorities, the provision of elective and comprehensive courses for students from various subcultures, the design of curricula aimed at fostering mutual cultural understanding, and the enhancement of university library and information resources to include materials from diverse cultures and languages. Micro-strategies further encompass the provision of cultural exemplars and case studies, the definition of academic projects and thesis research focused on specific cultural themes, and the implementation of collaborative pedagogical approaches.

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In their scholarly work, Araghiyeh and Fathi Vajargah (2012) entitled "The Place of Multiculturalism in School Education and Higher Education," explored the significance of multiculturalism within the realm of school education while elucidating its implications for higher education. The findings of this research indicate the presence of familial and societal influences that perpetuate mockery of other cultures, foster feelings of cultural superiority and prejudice, and reveal a deficiency in religious knowledge concerning the principles of equality and fraternity among all individuals, as well as a lack of awareness among students regarding notable cultural figures and their contributions.

The findings of Amini (2012), titled "Explaining the Multicultural Curriculum and How to Implement It in the Iranian Curriculum Planning System," demonstrated a clarification of the role and significance of a multicultural curriculum within Iranian society, highlighting its multifaceted dimensions and functions. Consequently, the study underscores the critical importance of the integration and assimilation of multicultural elements, concepts, materials, and content within the curricula of students.

Azizi et al. (2010), in their research entitled “Investigating the Status of Multicultural Education in Sanandaj Teacher Training Centers from the Students’ Perspective,” demonstrated that, from the perspective of students, multicultural education lacks a significant presence, and educators within teacher training institutions exhibit minimal engagement with multicultural topics and concepts in their instructional practices. An analysis of the relevant literature reveals that scant attention has been devoted to the principles of multicultural education within the curriculum of teacher training centers. In their scholarly article titled “Integration: A Suitable Strategy for Developing a Multicultural Curriculum”, Araghieh et al. (2010) assert that the responsibility of higher education institutions is to furnish suitable frameworks within their curricula for the exploration of diverse cultures, emphasizing that numerous nations, including Iran, are directly affected by the plurality of various ethnicities and cultural identities. Saleh zadeh (2014) has approached this matter from a different standpoint in a study titled “Investigating Multicultural Education in Kurdistan.” This investigation employed a qualitative methodology alongside a phenomenological strategy, with the research population comprising all personnel within the cultural department of the university as well as members of the faculty at the University of Kurdistan, from which seven individuals were selected as a sample. Additionally, a thorough

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examination of all relevant research and educational regulations of this university was conducted. The outcomes of this study indicated that multicultural education is not officially recognized within the university framework. Furthermore, in an informal context, it has been addressed in a cursory and superficial manner, and the university's educational and research regulations have largely overlooked the multicultural dimension.

Discussion

The heterogeneity and pluralistic nature of Iranian society in various ethnic, racial, and cultural dimensions among students necessitate a thoughtful and appropriate incorporation into curricula and educational programs. Consequently, the present research was undertaken with the objective of reforming the higher education curriculum through a multicultural lens to adequately address student diversity. Empirical studies indicate that the cultural policymaking framework in our nation is predominantly predicated on a cultural engineering paradigm, which elucidates the limited success of universities and educational institutions in effectively addressing cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. Conversely, experts in the domain of multicultural education advocate for a paradigm shift, emphasizing that multicultural policymaking—rooted in polyphony and pluralism—should supplant the existing approach.

In this context, the outcomes of this study elucidate that the implementation of multicultural education necessitates the establishment of foundational infrastructure, which must be reflected in the policy-making and human resources planning frameworks. This anticipation is that scientific and cultural policymakers will acknowledge the multicultural essence of the nation, transcend ingrained biases, and endeavor to grant universities the requisite autonomy and independence to address their unique local and regional demands. Furthermore, it is imperative that universities focus on the recruitment and training of multicultural human resources. An insight derived from this segment of the findings is the existence of a certain paradox among various forces influencing Iranian cultural identity, which can be traced to historical antecedents. This paradox has engendered a duality or schism within Iranian identity and culture, characterized by the presence of traditional and conservative factions that strive to preserve the conventional or monolithic nature of Iranian society and culture, frequently regarding the notions of plurality and diversity as threats or nuisances. In comparison, there exists a professional class, intellectuals advocating for freedom,

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and a burgeoning middle class that endeavor to propel society towards pluralism, democratic discourses, and modernity. Revisiting theoretical literature, it becomes apparent that cultural policy-making entities predominantly adopt a conservative stance regarding cultural development, while intellectual and specialized factions tend to analyze and scrutinize the phenomenon of multicultural education through the prisms of liberalism, critical theory, and postmodern thought. Nonetheless, analyses conducted by cultural sociologists reveal that, in light of global trends and intellectual advancements, society is confronted with a crisis stemming from conservative doctrines, thereby necessitating a transformation in this approach towards pluralism and, by extension, multicultural education.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Allameh Tabataba'i University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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