



Cultural Pluralism in Higher Education Institutions in India

Lalita

Research Scholar, Department of Education, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract: Cultural diversity has become an important feature of contemporary higher education. Higher education institutions bring students from diverse cultural backgrounds together to share their experiences. However, a diverse student population does not, by itself, create an environment in which differences are understood, respected, and valued. This theoretical paper explores cultural pluralism as a way of thinking about how higher education institutions can respond to diversity. The paper considers the theoretical ideas of Dewey, Banks, Parekh and Schachner. It draws on these scholarly works and recent research on diversity, inequality, intercultural relationships, and institutional practices. It also proposes that cultural pluralism involves more than providing equal access or acknowledging the presence of different cultural groups. It requires conditions in which cultural identities can be recognised, meaningful interaction can take place, institutional practices can respond to diverse needs, and students can participate without feeling excluded because of their backgrounds. On this basis, the paper develops a theoretical framework connecting recognition, interaction, institutional responsiveness, participation and belonging. The framework offers a basis for understanding cultural pluralism as an ongoing institutional process rather than simply a characteristic of a diverse campus.

Keywords: Cultural pluralism, higher education, cultural diversity, intercultural interaction, participation

1. Introduction

Cultural diversity is now a visible part of higher education. Students enter colleges and universities with different dialects, beliefs, cultural practices, social experiences, and ways of understanding their surroundings. This diversity can create opportunities for students to learn from one another and encounter perspectives that may differ from their own. However, the presence of students from different backgrounds does not, by itself, ensure that every cultural group receives recognition in the sense that all students participate equally in academic and social life.

This makes it important to look at diversity not only in terms of who is present in an institution, but also in terms of how differences are understood and responded to. Cultural pluralism provides one such perspective. It gives importance to the recognition of cultural differences while also maintaining a common social and educational space. In this sense, cultural differences are not expected to disappear in order to create unity. Instead, different identities can remain meaningful while individuals participate in a shared environment.

The discussion of cultural pluralism has developed alongside broader debates on equality and inclusion. Schachner (2019) explains that earlier approaches to cultural diversity often focused on equal treatment, access, and positive interaction between different groups. Later approaches placed greater emphasis on recognising cultural identities and adapting educational environments to cultural diversity. Cultural pluralism therefore adds another dimension to equality and inclusion by asking whether cultural differences are acknowledged and valued within the educational setting.

The ideas of Dewey (1997), Banks (1996), and Parekh (2005) provide useful foundations for understanding this perspective. Dewey viewed education as a social process in which learning develops through interaction and shared experience. Banks drew attention to the relationship between culture and knowledge and showed why educational knowledge cannot be separated from the cultural perspectives through which it is produced and understood. Parekh (2005) emphasised the importance of recognising cultural differences and maintaining dialogue among people with different cultural backgrounds. These ideas, although developed in different contexts,



point towards an understanding of education in which interaction, recognition, and participation have an important place.

Research on cultural diversity has also shown that institutional approaches matter. Schachner et al. (2016) examined cultural diversity climates through the perspectives of equality and inclusion and cultural pluralism. Their work suggests that the way diversity is addressed within an educational setting is related to students' experiences and adjustment. Civitillo et al. (2017) similarly examined cultural diversity approaches through institutional norms and practices, showing the importance of looking at how ideas about diversity are reflected in everyday educational settings.

The issue becomes particularly relevant in the Indian context, where higher education includes students from varied social backgrounds, dialects, classes, beliefs and cultural backgrounds. Desai and Kulkarni (2008) discussed continuing inequities in educational participation among different social groups. Tierney et al. (2019) also highlighted structural inequalities affecting Scheduled Caste students in Indian Higher education. Varghese et al. (2022) further pointed to disparities in access and participation despite the expansion of higher education.

Earlier research has also shown that the institutional and social environment can influence how cultural diversity is experienced in higher education. Biju et al. (2023) highlighted the role of campus culture in creating inclusive learning environments through institutional values, peer support, faculty practices and student engagement. Mallman et al. (2021) showed that everyday cross-cultural interactions on campuses can shape experiences of belonging, although such interactions may also reflect existing social boundaries. Owusu-Agyeman (2021) further reported that supportive campus environments and cross-cultural interactions were associated with students' sense of belonging. Singson et al. (2024) also examined intercultural sensitivity among university students in India, highlighting the importance of intercultural interaction in a culturally diverse university environment.

This study therefore examines cultural pluralism as a way of understanding cultural diversity in higher education. The discussion is theoretical and brings together ideas from earlier philosophical and educational scholarship and recent research to examine what cultural pluralism may involve in educational settings. It focuses on five related aspects: recognition of cultural differences, cross-cultural interaction, institutional responsiveness, participation, and a sense of belonging. These aspects are considered as connected elements through which cultural pluralism can be understood as an ongoing process within higher education.

2. Conceptualising Cultural Pluralism

Cultural pluralism is based on the recognition of different cultural identities within a shared social environment. People from different cultural backgrounds may have their own practices, values and experiences. These differences can exist alongside participation in a common social setting. Thus, cultural pluralism does not require cultural differences to be removed in order to create unity. In higher education, the idea is relevant because students with different cultural and social backgrounds come together in the same academic environment.

The concept is closely related to ideas such as diversity, equality and inclusion, but it has a somewhat different focus. Diversity mainly refers to the differences that exist among individuals and groups. Equality is concerned with providing similar rights and opportunities, whereas inclusion is related to participation and acceptance within a common environment. Cultural pluralism gives additional importance to the way cultural differences are recognised and represented. Schachner (2019) explains that cultural pluralism differs from approaches that focus mainly on equality and inclusion because it gives greater attention to the recognition and maintenance of cultural identities. In this sense, having students from different cultural backgrounds in an institution is only one part of the process. The way these differences are understood within the educational environment is also important.

McFeeters (2021) presents cultural pluralism as an approach in which different cultural identities remain recognised within a common educational setting. In education, this involves more than having students from



different backgrounds in the same institution. Attention also needs to be given to how cultural perspectives find a place in teaching, curriculum and other institutional practices.

Thus, cultural pluralism can be understood as more than the presence of cultural diversity within an educational setting. It involves recognising different cultural identities while creating opportunities for these differences to be understood and respected. The concept also draws attention to the place of cultural perspectives in the educational environment, including teaching, curriculum and everyday interaction. In higher education, cultural pluralism therefore provides a way of thinking about how diverse students can participate in a shared academic environment without losing the importance of their cultural identities.

3. Theoretical foundation of cultural pluralism

The theoretical understanding of cultural pluralism can be linked with ideas about experiences, culture, knowledge and social relations. Dewey (1997) viewed education as a social process in which learning develops through experiences and interaction. This view supports cultural pluralism because students do not learn only through formal teaching. Their experiences with people from different backgrounds can also become part of the learning process. A diverse educational setting can therefore provide opportunities for students to encounter different ways of thinking and to develop understanding through interaction.

Banks (1996) adds another important point by connecting culture with knowledge and education. Different cultural groups may not receive the same place in educational content. Some perspectives may become more prominent, while the experiences of other groups may receive less attention. Cultural pluralism therefore also raises the question of representation in education. Giving space to different cultural perspectives can make the learning environment broader and help students understand that knowledge can be viewed from more than one cultural position.

Parekh (2005) gives importance to culture in understanding how people develop their values, ideas and sense of identity. From this view, cultural differences are not limited to visible practices or traditions. They are also connected with the ways in which people understand themselves and the world around them. Education can provide opportunities for students to encounter such differences and learn about experiences that may not be a part of their own cultural background. This makes dialogue and mutual understanding important parts of cultural pluralism. Respecting cultural differences, therefore, involves being open to different perspectives while also allowing individuals to maintain a connection to their own cultural identity.

The ideas of these scholars can be brought together to understand cultural pluralism from different but related perspectives. Dewey gives importance to experience and interaction in the learning process, while Banks shows how culture is connected with the development and understanding of knowledge. Parekh shows greater emphasis on cultural identity and dialogue between different cultural perspectives. Together, these views suggest that cultural pluralism is not limited to recognising cultural differences. It also involves opportunities for students to learn through interaction, encounter different perspectives and develop understanding while participating in a common educational environment.

4. Cultural pluralism in higher education

Higher education brings together students who may differ in their cultural background, dialect, social experiences, and everyday practices. These differences become part of their academic environment as students study, communicate and work with one another. In this context, cultural pluralism is relevant to the way cultural differences are experienced within the institution. The concern is not simply whether different groups are present, but how their experiences and perspectives are accommodated in the academic setting.

The educational environment can influence how students understand and respond to cultural differences. Classroom discussions, group work, peer relationships and informal interactions may expose students to



perspectives that are different from those with which they are familiar. At the same time, institutional practices can shape the nature of these experiences. Teaching methods, curriculum content, communication practices and the general campus environment may either provide space for cultural differences or leave some perspectives less visible.

Cultural pluralism in higher education can therefore be considered an ongoing process within the educational environment. It involves the ways in which students encounter cultural differences and participate in academic and social activities while retaining their cultural identities. This understanding provides a basis for examining the relationship between cultural recognition, interaction, institutional practices, participation and belonging.

5. Theoretical synthesis

The discussion brings together five related elements for understanding cultural pluralism in higher education: recognition, interaction, institutional responsiveness, participation and belonging. Recognition provides space for cultural identities, while interaction creates opportunities to encounter different perspectives. Institutional responsiveness concerns the ways in which educational practices respond to cultural diversity. These conditions can influence students' participation in academic and social life and, in turn, their sense of belonging. The five elements are not viewed as fixed stages but as connected aspects of the educational environment. Cultural pluralism can therefore be understood as an ongoing process in which cultural differences are recognised, and students participate in a shared educational setting while retaining meaningful connections with their identities.

6. Conclusion

Cultural pluralism provides a useful way of looking at cultural diversity in higher education beyond the simple presence of different groups. The theoretical perspectives discussed in this paper show that cultural differences are connected with learning, identity, knowledge and social interaction. A culturally diverse institution therefore needs to consider how differences are experienced within the higher education environment. Understanding cultural pluralism in this way can help broaden discussions of diversity in higher education and provide a basis for further theoretical and empirical work.

References:

- [1] Banks, J. A. (1996). The canon debate, knowledge construction, and multicultural education. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *Multicultural education, transformative knowledge, and action* (pp. 3–29). Teachers College Press.
- [2] Biju, S. K., Mohan, V., & Tharian, K. T. (2023). Campus culture as the soul of higher education: Building inspiring learning environments. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29(4), 5033–5040.
- [3] Civitillo, S., Schachner, M., Juang, L., van de Vijver, F. J. R., Handrick, A., & Noack, P. (2017). Towards a better understanding of cultural diversity approaches at school: A multi-informant and mixed-methods study. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 12, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2016.09.002>
- [4] Desai, S., & Kulkarni, V. (2008). Changing educational inequalities in India in the context of affirmative action. *Demography*, 45(2), 245–270. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.0.0001>
- [5] Dewey, J. (1997). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/852>
- [6] Mallman, M., Harvey, A., Szalkowicz, G., & Moran, A. (2021). Campus convivialities: Everyday cross-cultural interactions and symbolic boundaries of belonging in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(7), 1449–1461. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1685484>
- [7] McFeeters, B. B. (2019). Cultural pluralism (education). In *Research Starters*. EBSCO. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/cultural-pluralism-education/>



-
- [8] Owusu-Agyeman, Y. (2021). The relationship between supportive campus environment and cultural diversity in enhancing students' sense of belonging in higher education. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 15(4), 429–444. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jme-06-2021-0089>
- [9] Parekh, B. (2005). *Rethinking multiculturalism: Cultural diversity and political theory* (2nd edn). Palgrave Macmillan.
- [10] Schachner, M. K. (2019). From equality and inclusion to cultural pluralism – evolution and effects of cultural diversity perspectives in schools. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 16(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2017.1326378>
- [11] Schachner, M. K., Noack, P., Van de Vijver, F. J. R., & Eckstein, K. (2016). Cultural diversity climate and psychological adjustment at school—Equality and inclusion versus cultural pluralism. *Child Development*, 87(4), 1175–1191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12536>
- [12] Singson, K., Syiem, I. S., & Singson, M. (2024). Intercultural sensitivity among university students in India. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 35(4), 1641–1658. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10567879241267980>
- [13] Tierney, W. G., Sabharwal, N. S., & Malish, C. M. (2019). Inequitable structures: Class and caste in Indian higher education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(5), 471–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418817836>
- [14] Varghese, N. V., Sabharwal, N. S., & Malish, C. M. (2022). Equity in higher education for inclusive growth: Evidence from India. *Changing Higher Education in India*. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350192409.ch-003>