SIG 21 Learning and Teaching in Culturally Diverse Settings

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Contents

Reports from the Future Visions Symposium held during EARLI 13, 2009

Notes on cultural diversity in education

Contribution to the Future and Vision Session of SIG21, EARLI conference, Amsterdam, August 29, 2009.

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The discussions on cultural diversity in education that we have in this session are probably an echo to the growing concern that teachers manifest in the face of the increasing numbers of migrant pupils in their classrooms and their difficulties in trying to adapt their teaching. Migrants have often been invisible in educational studies; and when they were studied, it was too often from the perspective of discrimination or from the perspective of deficit theories. Gradually, we are becoming aware of a main challenge for education: how can we help design pedagogical practices fruitful both for the integration of minority students in the local schools and for the enrichment of the members of the majority social groups? This is a double-sided challenge because neglecting one group for the other would not help if the aim is to facilitate community building, integration and peace.

Linguists (and anthropologists in the USA, but seldom in Europe) were often the first to study migrant pupils and culturally diverse classrooms. Educationalists were very slow in putting these questions on the agenda. The first studies centred on language and then on cultural discontinuities. When socialization practices were considered it was most often in families – and not in school. Psychologists engaged in comparative studies. They tended to take their (often ethnocentric) developmental norms for granted and not to question them. Minority groups were seen as having to adapt completely to the majority via an assimilation process. So called "under-developed" populations were pushed into adapting into an Occidental type of schooling without special attention

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[1] Many thanks to Ed Elbers for his help in editing these lines

paid to their specific needs in their economical, social and cultural background. Some authors (e.g. Hundeide,1991) have tried to call attention to the limits of this attitude and the risk of a kind of schooling that might result in out-rooting children from their social and psychological needs.

The educational research community is now facing the responsibility of studying cultural diversity in the perspective of social change; and to help teachers and school authorities to design school practices that can serve the goal of mutual understanding and social integration. This will require a multi-level perspective articulating different levels of analysis from the individual to society. I could not attend all presentations on cultural diversity at this conference. My impression is that many studies on diversity are concerned with pupils and that only very few are starting to focus also on teachers. We also lack studies engaged with pedagogy and pedagogical practices themselves. And the institutional background of these is not always sufficiently understood as setting the "rules of the game" of classroom interactions – but yet, for nice examples where this is done, see César and Kumpulainen (2009), a nice book born from this SIG.

As to methods of research, I noticed several approaches. Case studies of classrooms are very useful, because they rely on minute observations in situ of teaching and learning processes. Some of them put the role of language and classroom participation in the centre. That is valuable, because it allows us to understand the dialogic nature of learning and the way teachers manage the interactions in the classroom. Other studies have applied questionnaires, in order to capture the processes of adaptation, or to describe out group perception or stereotypes. Interview studies have tried to understand migrants" and pupils" identities. Remarkably, only a few studies have used triangulation of methods for validating their results.

Studies of diversity in classrooms and schools give an important contribution to our understanding of learning and teaching processes in general. These studies force educationalists to reconsider general questions about teacher-student relationships and learning activities that classrooms have always had to face, but that are easily forgotten in a period in which most attention is given to supposedly purely „cognitive" aspects of learning, irrespective of their social and emotional components. It is also important to consider the meaning of the teaching not only in the teachers' or educationalists' eyes, but also from the perspective of the students and of their parents.

I would like to contribute four issues to the agenda of the educational study of diversity and to the work of our SIG.

First, classrooms and schools do not exist in a social vacuum. Schools are institutions with traditions and political mandates that structure the interactions and relationships between all people involved (teachers, pupils, parents, authorities). The intellectual socialization of pupils is tightly dependent on the institutional rules that govern the school management, such as the preparations for exams or national tests, educational policies, teacher training, employers' criteria for recruitment, etc.

Secondly, children enter school with their life experiences framed by another major institution, the family, and its own social nesting in the wider society. For many migrant children the wider society extends to the country of origin of their family. Increasingly, the networks into which families are embedded have a global character. Finding or preserving one's own (often familial) identity, worldview, religion, well-being, competences, time-perspectives, etc. are important issues that seem sometimes difficult to deal with in a time when repeated transitions are experienced.

Then, focusing on the migration process, researchers should be aware that a transition requires from the person not only the development of new skills and competencies, but also the creation of new symbolic resources. These provide an identity that can help him or her to preserve a sense of integrity, and that allows to develop an understanding of the present within a time perspective that

includes the past and the future.

A fourth issue relates to the joint efforts of the older and the younger generation necessary to make education successful. These efforts are inseparable from affective and motivational processes experienced by all participants. The mutuality of efforts between teachers and learners, requires generativity i.e. a deeply felt awareness of responsibility on the part of the teachers and a strong motivation to nurture the next generation. Reciprocally, the younger generation has to identify to some extent with their parents and teachers in order to be motivated to appropriate the experience of the older generation. Productive learning processes and the development of identity as members of a new generation can only occur if there is a sense of mutuality and reciprocal respect. If the participants do not feel accepted and responsible, why would adults make efforts to reach in what Vygotsky called the
„zone of proximal development" of the child? And why would the learner wish to coordinate his or her actions with those of the experts to join in complex activities that are not hers?

Will the future of education result in a „win-win" or in a „win-lose" situation? A „win-lose" game will occur if society does not support schools for their contribution to the personal development of a linguistically and culturally diverse generation, social integration, cultural and economic sustainable development, peace, mutual understanding and equity. In that case, knowledge and cognitive growth will be appropriated by a few privileged groups who perceive themselves in competition with other groups and entitled to care exclusively for their own interests. We should always remember that the general process of knowledge creation and transmission hoped for in an „open society" might become distorted by procedures of social selection and exclusion.

But educationalists can contribute to a „win-win" situation. It requires a better knowledge of the interdependence between micro and macro processes and between cognitive and motivational factors. Individuals and groups are interdependent. Inter-group relations affect individual development. And socially skilled and educated individuals affect the lives of their groups. Educationalists are invited to investigate and design pedagogical practices that sustain not only minority or majority pupils but that transform their diversity into a resource for learning and for society at large. This will require interdisciplinary work in order to understand better the intertwining of the psychological, anthropological and sociological dimensions of knowledge creation and transmission in the life of individuals, and the social conditions that can offer thinking spaces to the young for them to learn and exercise the social and psychological skills that prepare them to "join society" in responsible adult roles.

A.-N. Perret-Clermont (2009). Introduction, in M. César and K. Kumpulainen (Eds.), Social interactions in multicultural settings (pp. 1-12). Rotterdam, Sense Publishers.

Hundeide, K. (1991). Cultural Limitations on cognitive enrichment. In K. Hundeide (Ed.), Helping Disav children (chap.4) (pp. 102-117). London: Jessica Kingsley.