

Short Essay on Managing Multicultural Students Groups within Diversity Context

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Abstract

The present essay focuses on summarizing the key elements that should be considered when educators are in a position to manage and interact with a group of students from different cultures or social environments. In this respect, we consider that the challenge educators' face in connecting with students of diverse backgrounds is to develop a critical consciousness of the ways in which these larger discourses operate in their classrooms and to care enough to question them, to challenge them and to advocate for their students. To care for students who come from historically marginalized populations educators need to remember that schooling can serve either a liberating or marginalizing function. They can empower students to identify structures in society that have contributed to marginalizing their perspective and seek to maintain inequitable structures in society or even narrow communities.

Key words: Diversity, Intercultural Competence, Multicultural Context, Students Groups

J.E.L. classification: A14, M14

1. Introduction

The nowadays expansion of the social, economic, demographic and cultural diversity represents a much discussed subject, within different approaches in the social sciences. Diversity is inevitable being an intrinsic attribute of the social, nature and culture contexts. There would be nonsense to consider us living in a world of homogeneity and of obsessively repeated identical forms. The territories of unmixed and pure cultures, with unmovable and impermeable borders, exist only by artificial means. The real world instead is made of open contexts and cultures of variable geometry (Nedelcu, 2008). Within this approach, we find evidences of different issues on diversity also in the worldwide educational systems. For example, we bring into discussion the fact that the challenge educators' face in connecting with students of diverse backgrounds is to develop a critical consciousness of the ways in which these larger discourses operate in the classrooms and to care enough to question them, to challenge them and to advocate for them. To care for students who come from historically marginalized populations (e.g. for Europe, the most relevant cases being the Roma population and the migrants from Middle Orient) we need to remember that schooling can serve either a liberating or marginalizing function. Within educators' particular approaches in conducting or coordinating groups of students, they can empower students to identify structures in society that have contributed to marginalizing their perspective and seek to maintain inequitable structures in society or even narrow communities. Educators can therefore incorporate in their lessons ways for students to identify these inequities, engage in social critique and work for change and even advocate for their students when they need someone to reveal, reframe and help them cope with unfair systems (Davis, Summers, Miller, 2012, p.122).

2. Introducing the concept of cultural synchronization

We can bring into discussion, within the discussed approach, the concept of cultural synchronization introduced in 1988 by Jacqueline Irvine in order to describe the ways in which

conflicts occurs in relationships between students of minority environments and their majority teachers when their values, patterns of interactions and ways of being are not aligned (Irvine, 1988). In this context, it often happens that the relationship between teacher and the particular student becomes characterized more by patterns of conflict and perceived disrespect rather than by understanding and cooperation. We can cite the study of Wubbels, den Brok, Veldman, & van Tartwick (2006) that founds the majority of teachers tend to misinterpret the intentions and actions of minority students and vice versa.” teachers may be more inclined to regard students’ interpersonal messages as personally offending or threatening, and consequently the potential for conflict is higher than for conflicts with majority students” (p.416). There are other studies that found out that teachers perceive multicultural classes as more emotionally charged and by this, they are more likely to be confronted with their mistakes and to be persuaded to negotiate procedures, grades and tasks (Wubbels, Brekelmans, van Brok & van Tartwick 2006). Teachers need to learn therefore how to reassess problems in a way that enables them to understand students’ behavior (Chang&Davis, 2009; Wubbels, Creton & Holvast, 1988). To conclude this assertion, we consider that we can begin the process of synchronizing with students when we model how to take ownership of our own misinterpretation.

3. Ways of developing intercultural competencies

We argue therefore that the solution for us as educators/ teachers within this multicultural and turbulent context is to be more culturally competent in our relationships. Intercultural competence in turn implies a mindset oriented to intercultural communication, intercultural competence skills and intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2001). If the first two statements are necessary but insufficient to generate intercultural competence, being culturally sensitive is assumed to be definitive. This sensitivity is not simply a positive attitude towards cultural difference or a desire to relate to others, but rather, the ability to experience cultural difference. Such an experience is not the natural result of cross-cultural contact. Understanding the meaning of intercultural sensitivity can be facilitated via the following explanations: “An individual can witness a huge sequence of events and yet, if it fails to relate to them [...] he earns little experience in that was there when the events happened. Not what is happening around individual equips him with experience; interpretation and rebuilding successively what is happening, as it happens, enriches the individual's life experience” (Kelly, 1963, p.73).

The literature review on culturally responsive management and instruction allows us identifying four central factors (Brown, 2003; Gay, 2006; Milner, 2006):

- Effective teachers model respect for diverse students during instructional, social and personal interactions;
- Effective teachers respond explicitly to the needs of diverse students;
- Effective teachers are assertive about appropriate social and academic behavioral expectations;
- Effective teachers develop a responsive, integrative and problem-based curriculum that empowers students to become involved in their educational centers and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Developing relationships with students from diverse backgrounds requires learning aspects from the sociohistorical context (Beatty-O’Ferrall, Green, & Hanna, 2010). As students seek to understand their own identities, the meaning they associate with historical events that have affected their group and how they position the teachers and representatives of school can dramatically affect someone relationships. Learning to interact with people who have different life experiences and ways of representing the world is not something easy to do. It requires from the one in that position to make a commitment, to allocate intellectual and emotional resources. When faced with conflict or resistance from students, the professional can frame conflict as opportunities to learn new strategies to understand and connect with students, to learn ways to involve students in understanding and solving the challenges society poses and to learn new ways to support students ‘mastery of the educational content (Davis, Summers, Miller, 2012, pp.131-132).

From a conceptual perspective, we can summarize by referring to the fact that the concept of intercultural competence was first introduced through the Geertz’s semiotic vision on culture and consists of a sum of specific intercultural beliefs and compartments that pledges for openness,

empathy and communication in order to understand and valorize the logic of each near or distant culture. This complex structure of elements described above has been grouped by Byram and Zarate (1997) into five distinct categories of intercultural competence components:

- *The attitudes*, as curiosity, openness for fighting stereotypes;
- *Knowledge* on different social groups, related to different social practices and general processes of interaction, both on micro and macro-levels;
- *The abilities for interpretation and develop relationship* in relation with the others;
- *The abilities to interact and discover* in relation with the others, meaning the capacity to recipe new practices belonging to different cultures and to operate attitudes and abilities in an alterity context;
- *The abilities for reflections and critical assessment* based on criteria, perspectives, practices and products of own and alter cultures.

4. Intercultural education and intercultural learning

In order to connect the concept of intercultural competences within the framework educators could operate when dealing with multicultural students groups, we introduce the concepts of intercultural education and intercultural learning.

When having in mind the first concept, meaning intercultural education, we can refer to any systematic pedagogical effort that cumulatively focuses on developing (1) a better understanding of culture in modern societies, (2) a wider capacity of communication with people from other cultures, (3) better adapted attitudes towards the context provided by cultural diversity and social groups, due to a better understanding of psychosocial mechanisms that gives and encourages heterophobia and racism, and (4) a better capacity of participating to social interaction (Quellet, 1990). Gollnick and Chinn (1990) provides in addition some other specific descriptors to those above, meaning (1) the promotion of diversity potential, (2) the focus on human relations and the respect towards alterity, (3) the acceptance of alternative life styles, (4) the promoting of equity and the social justice values, and (5) the focus on the equal distribution of power within different cultural and ethnic groups.

The concept of intercultural learning, well designed and conceptualized within Council of Europe's documents and programs, is defined as an approach that "involves developing a comprehensive openness to other cultures , appreciation of cultural diversity , overcoming cultural stereotypes and ethnocentrism" (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997, p.37). As this definition is much closed to that given to intercultural education, Fennes and Hapgood (1997) provide four objectives for the intercultural learning, which are:

- Overcoming ethnocentrism, that implies the consciousness on the fact that perceptions on alterity are influenced by the own experiences and specificity of cultural background;
- Acquisition of the ability to empathize with other cultures, that implies openness towards alterity and putting aside the so called "fear of stranger";
- Acquisition of the capacity to cross border communicate;
- Development of ways of cooperation beyond cultural borders.

However, between the coverage areas of the two concepts one could identify some sketched differences. These differences hold to a greater inclination of intercultural learning to non-formal education sector while intercultural education becomes comparatively more an ameliorative pedagogy within the education system with future effects in social assembly. Summarizing we can say that the intercultural learning addresses everybody, not only the professionals. As a matter of fact, the two concepts are related and interdependent: the learned and applied intercultural behaviors are a desirable result of any endeavor towards a diverse world (Nedelcu, 2008).

5. Conclusions and future proposals

Understanding context, making a commitment, and finding a way to connect with diverse students is the first step in developing a culturally competent classroom. Culturally competent

classrooms are characterized by a critical consciousness toward the curriculum, school and community. Cultural competent educators aren't afraid to involve their students in asking the tough questions about education and to develop a critical perspective. Within this approach, we find the importance of developing students' skills in order to spot oppressive discourses and practices in society. Learning to spot sexist, racist, classist, homophobic and intolerant discourses in educational curricula and media is an important skill for all students to develop (Tatum, 1997).

In conclusion, we raise the importance of intercultural competences and the importance of intercultural education and learning. Therefore, "a fundamental objective of the schools is to strive to create a nation and a destiny providing an incredible cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity. To congeal this common destiny, educators must respect and value the cultural opportunities and all the features that students from different cultural groups bring to school. At the same time, educators need to help students acquire the skills, knowledge and values to become active citizens of a larger community" (Banks, 2001, p.5).

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