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DIVERSITY

Why read this text..

The concept of diversity points to the notion of difference. From a sociocultural point of view, diversity is used to describe the overt and/or perceived differences among individuals or groups. Difference is socially and culturally organized and produced on the basis of cultural characteristics (i.e. gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, age) and/or social attributes (i.e. social class, socioeconomic and professional status, sexual orientation, religious affiliation). As such, difference is understood not as an essence but a relationship, position or perspective that refers to the non-identical and dissimilar. Moreover, it implies distinction, division, multiplicity and otherness.

Diversity, situated in the educational context, demonstrates the need for multicultural awareness and understanding, along with a reform in education systems in order to correspond to the increasing number of culturally diverse students across countries and localities. Thus, diversity is a term with pedagogic significance in that it adopts the meaning of exploring and integrating difference in the teaching and learning process. From an educational point of view, a focus on diversity involves understanding the ways in which difference defines the position of individuals and groups in social institutions and cultural practices, informs intersubjective communication, renders relationships meaningful, and regulates the performance of social interaction.

Being responsive to diversity implies taking a positive stance towards heterogeneity, accommodating varied student perspectives, and incorporating inclusive teaching and learning practices. From the point of view of educators, the acknowledgment of diversity, when teaching in an intercultural school with students of different racial, ethnic and national background, implies a consideration of the different ways students experience teaching and learning. In this regard, diversity becomes a positive context where exclusion and devaluation of members of non dominant groups can be prevented, and the benefits of difference can be discussed, taught and expected to be effectively managed.

Historical Context

Diversity (or human variation as is an alternative term) has been called anthropology's business (Hannerz 2010). From its formative years, sociocultural anthropology specializes in the study of diversity and accounts for the social and cultural variation in the world (Barth et al. 2005). As expressed in the words of two key figures of the discipline, anthropology "*...tries to grasp its object through its most diverse manifestations*" (Levi-Strauss 1985: 49), or, in another formulation, explains "*how different people can be, and, at the same time, what all humans have something in common*" (Eriksen 2001:1).

In pursuit of knowledge about human diversity, anthropology has employed the concepts of culture and society in order to illustrate the social and cultural variation across the world. The idea of culture refers to the acquired, cognitive and symbolic aspects of existence (see, Moore 2009), whereas the notion of society refers to the social organization



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of human life, patterns of interaction and power relationships (Kuper 1988). Both terms refer to basic similarities and to systematic differences between people. Both produce comparisons and generate analytical distinctions in the study of cultural and social diversity (Eriksen & Nielsen 2001, Barnard 2004). Overall, and despite its frequent use, or its implication in the documentation of socio-cultural variation, diversity has mainly been a descriptive term in anthropological literature.

In conceptualizing diversity in the contemporary transnational world, Ulf Hannerz (1996) has proposed seven approaches to understanding the manifestation of diversity. One entails advocating cultural diversity as an expression of human creativity; another is shaped by the ideas of equity and self-determination; a third is related to the adaptation of human life to the physical environment and its limited resources; a fourth is a way to counteract relations of political and economic dependency; a fifth acquires the meaning of receiving pleasure from the different cultural expressions; a sixth is viewed as a useful provocation to the intellect and a seventh as a fund of knowledge about ways of going about things (56-64).

Yet, a concern with ideas of difference that has gained ground during the 1990s and 2000s has turned the notion of diversity somewhat fashionable. Diversity appears as a key concept in global and local discourses related to an emphasis on particularity and preservation of cultural difference. It is, mostly, perceived as self-evident, good and valuable, but also something that involves misunderstanding and conflict. It is used in conjunction with discussions and practices of multiculturalism, human mobility (migration and refugee movements), nation-state policies, identity politics etc (Brewster et. al. 2002, Vertovec & Wessendorf 2004). Diversity has become an ideology of shared humanity and unconditional commitment to the positive side of difference, and, in some cases, a guiding principal of policy making. As Hannerz notes, *“a study of diversity remains the best antidote to unthinking ethnocentrism”* (2010: 544).

a) Discussion

Diversity, especially cultural diversity, has been introduced in the education and pedagogic literature as a term for discussing various forms of heterogeneities and serving as a paradigm to address the impact of multiculturalism on education. Diversity may refer to any approach which recognizes differences in educational contexts and practices on the basis of social and cultural variability. Moreover, the discourse on diversity tends to include not only a descriptive dimension on how cultures and groups (and their respective members) are diversely structured, but also a strongly prescriptive dimension stating how cultures and groups (and their respective members) should interact within themselves and among each other (Dietz 2009: 58-59).

Contemporary global phenomena (i.e. immigration and refugee movement) have gradually transformed classrooms to a place of multi-cultural encounter. Research on culturally diverse education discusses the obstacles that teaching in a multicultural classroom encounters (Chouari 2016). These classrooms differ from previous monocultural ones and require that teachers are equipped with supplementary competences (McAllister & Irvine 2002), such as skills to communicate and interact effectively with all students, to manage



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and assess correctly every situation in the classroom (Chamberlain, 2005). Rego and Nieto (2000) argue that good teaching is possible in the multicultural classroom when teachers are aware of the major challenges of these classes, are well trained and equipped with adequate competencies. A fundamental prerequisite remains that schools are reformed towards multicultural education praxis.

b) Practical Example

Rego and Nieto (2000) present in their study two countries, the United States and Spain, with regard to the challenges teachers face in schools with cultural, ethnic, racial and linguistic diversity. The questions they pose explore the efficiency of training practices teachers have to go through in order to acquire skills for managing cultural diversity issues in schools. Many students in the United States, especially those from racially, culturally and economically oppressed backgrounds fail. Traditional explanations for this have been based on students' supposed genetic inferiority and cultural deprivation, or on family indifference to the benefits of education (Rego & Nieto 2000: 417).

As schools become more diverse, it is becoming evident that students' backgrounds and experiences need to be taken into consideration. Thus, blaming students' background for their failure is quite problematic for teacher preparation programmes. Most colleges of education have poorly transformed them to address teaching in culturally diverse contexts. Furthermore, the percentage of teachers from culturally diverse groups (Latino, African-American, Asian, etc) still remains low. However, some significant changes have begun to take place, such as introducing cultural and historical knowledge in courses; promoting teachers self-knowledge through courses and other activities; encouraging teachers to do ethnography-like research in the communities in which they work or embolden teachers to write books for teacher training based on their experiences. This approach places teachers in the center the training process (Rego & Nieto 2000: 417-418).

The case of Spain is different. Historically, the country has been was a place of conflict among different groups (Christian, Jewish, Muslim). Apart from the linguistic and cultural plurality, the country has received large numbers of immigrants. Its educational system is organized on an integrational rather than a pluralist approach. Cultural diversity is hardly considered as essential. Nevertheless, the vast growth of cultural exchange programs among students and teachers (such as Erasmus, Socrates, Leonardo, etc) in the last 20 years has contributed to an increasing awareness of cultural diversity. Teacher associations, NGOs and universities have started to include courses and programs for educators reflecting intercultural issues.

According to Rego & Nieto, most preservice teachers conceive of the intercultural education as nothing more than a temporary accommodation of a few immigrants. Thus, a complete reform of teacher education becomes mandatory. Rego and Nieto believe that reforming the teacher education curriculum is not enough; it is equally important that teachers need to learn from and count on students' and families' 'funds of knowledge', a valuable tool in teaching procedure

Thinking further:



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- How do teachers experience diversity in educational contexts?
- What kind of stance do the national education system and the dominant ideologies take on ideas about diversity?
- What are the challenges of teaching in a culturally diverse classroom?
- What skills should teachers acquire in order to be more effective in a culturally diverse classroom?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Difference, culture, inclusion, exclusion, multiculturalism, intercultural education.

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