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Intercultural communication skills and students' attitudes: transnational projects as an instrument in citizenship education

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Every country has its borders, but as everyone knows, if you look from above there are no borders! No red lines which say 'this is my side!' This world is one big nation.... (Terry¹, Finland)

The capability of Intercultural Communication [has become] a key qualification not only in the political and economic but also in the social scope..... The better teachers are prepared in dealing with similarities and differences in interculturality and are able to let it be part of daily school life the better children will be able to act and value with 'Strangers'. (*Margie, Austria*)

Introduction

As Europe becomes more unified and simultaneously local environments become more diversified, education systems are expected to be a central instrument in facilitating mutual understanding and respect for other individuals and cultures. Such a school culture needs teachers with conviction, who have not only positive attitudes to these challenges, but also procedural knowledge about intercultural communication. This paper discusses a transnational project promoted European-minded citizenship through the joint training of future teachers. Aspects of it will be described, followed by the results of discourse analysis of three comparative groups, which clearly demonstrate that students involved in the international project exhibited greater open-mindedness toward diversity, thus suggesting that such experiences would be a positive factor in future educational strategies.

The context

The socio-economic changes in contemporary society and the process of globalisation require new ways of understanding and communicating in many different arenas, on personal, professional and social levels. Likewise, the current 'cultural mix' in European society signifies a need for change in attitudes and skills; changes which cannot be left to social and political dynamics alone. Within this context that the school system has experienced an inevitable and growing demand for developing new competencies: families and society look to the school not just for instructional and educational needs, but also to resolve questions generated by society itself (Fennes and Hapgood, 1997). When teachers' work is observed and discussed in such a context, expectations about the outcomes of schooling can be quite high. In all of this, teachers are facing a challenging new situation with a lack of appropriate resources and experience, not only in the area of materials and support, but also from a personal point of view (Lewis 1999).

As the European Constitution works toward consolidating the idea of 'European citizenship', the need to develop mutual knowledge and understanding of the European cultural mix, and to encourage a new mentality, which avoids misconceptions and

¹ Names have been changed.

stereotypes, is even more necessary. This new European dimension has a vital role within the educational framework, because it promotes positive acceptance of a plural society. At the same time, the fluidity of the European dimension (population movements, relocation for employment, etc.) requires teachers able to work in complex multicultural and plurilingual societies. Learning to manage this complexity should be one of the main tasks of teacher training – although it is really more than ‘managing’ and teacher training should encourage positive answers and attitudes toward intercultural communication and diversity. In other words, Europe has become a privileged context for the meeting of ‘the other’, and teacher training would do well to take advantage of this context.

Within this context, and with these principles in mind, the project outlined in this paper was developed at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. It dealt with education for citizenship through intercultural communication practice and reflection, and its principal focus was to combine theoretical work with full immersion in a different culture, achieved through teaching practice in a primary school in a partner (foreign) country².

Intercultural communication in practice: involving students, university and schools in a common experience

The project was designed for undergraduate students from eight different European countries. It was carried out during an intensive eight-week course each year, and had as its core issue the topic of intercultural communication. We targeted students from different cultural backgrounds who were willing to be involved in an experience in which personal communication skills were essential. The students were placed in primary schools outside their own countries for two months, and we thus constructed multicultural working groups of approximately ten student teachers in each country.

Each group shared life experiences, academic work and school practice with people from different countries and cultures. In the primary schools in Catalonia, foreign language teachers acted as mentors for these students in their immersion in the school. The students’ academic work was based on e-portfolios which were linked to a common website.³ This website also included case studies, theoretical readings (Hofstede, 2002; Jandt, 1995) and assignments which had to be analysed and completed, and which were then used as the basis for reflection, discussion and analysis in group sessions. These intensive courses were held twice in Barcelona and involved a total of 20 students, 8 school teachers, 6 Primary schools and 3 university tutors. As the project was developed in eight different universities at the same time, the total number of students involved was around 70.

Alongside the virtual coursework students were involved teaching practice in primary schools. This was used as an empirical platform, not just to reflect on culture, but also to analyse their own communication skills and attitudes towards intercultural situations

² The project (*ARGONAUTS of EUROPE*) was directed at future school teachers and was coordinated by the Hogeschool van Educatie in Utrecht (NL). The Pedagogische Akademie des Bundes in Vienna (AT), the Masaryk University in Brno (CZ), the Universities of Linköping and Karlstad in Sweden and the Teachers Training College in Szczytno (PO) and Facultat de Ciències de l’Educació, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona were the associated members.

³ (http://www.respect_network.org/argo)

(Corson, 1998). The students were helped by school mentors and university tutors to debate educational factors and critical aspects which arose during their stay, leading to an enhanced awareness of issues of interculturality by the student teachers. The presence of international students in the schools proved to be an efficient way of improving the host English teachers' oral skills, and of enhancing the openness of the host schools towards internationalisation.

General outline of the learning environment of the project

The project was based on a blended learning environment which included *web based learning environment* and *experiential learning*. The course had four main pillars:

- 1) A blended learning course on Intercultural Communication, based on case studies in which students analysed, discussed and solved selected 'critical incidents', in which intercultural situations were the main axis of the situation. These cases were related to the school environment. Individual and group work were combined, and the results presented in the students' e-portfolios. These cases were also used in discussions in face-to-face work.
- 2) A teaching practice of 100 hours in a primary school, as a platform for immersion and reflection on the culture and society of the host country.
- 3) A workshop planning and managing transnational projects, to make students aware of different European Union educational programmes and to give them the skills needed to plan, propose, organise and implement transnational projects.
- 4) An introductory course on the country they would visit, focused on the main social and cultural features of the host country, particularly those that would help overcome stereotypes and misconceptions.

The e-portfolio was the intersection of the different elements: the daily use of ITT, the direct access to databases and the organisation of the students' work in a systematic way which could be accessed, commented upon and evaluated easily. The host teachers, along with the faculty mentors, participated in an individualised tutorial for each student's e-portfolio, thus allowing cross-referencing between schools, participating student teachers and the teacher training faculty.

The incorporation of the project into wider research data

The student teachers in the first Barcelona group (2003-2004) were participants in a larger research project on teachers' attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity. The other groups in this study were a group of teachers training to become foreign language teachers at the UAB and a group including inservice teachers working in various schools in Barcelona. For ease of identification, this paper will refer to them respectively as the intercultural group, the preservice group and the inservice group. There were 61 participants in the study, and approximately 25 hours of audio recordings were made and transcribed, including discussions by project participants about the 'critical incidents'. Students' journals were also analysed.

Our research took a qualitative approach, and one of the principal analytic approaches was the use of Sack's Membership Categorization Analysis (1974, 1982, 1992), in analyses how participants in a conversation organise their 'categories' by 'common sense'

background knowledge. The analysis looked at the different ways in which participants constructed categories about linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, and the features which were most common to these categories.

Some of the ways in which categories were assembled were repeated across different study groups with quite similar frequencies. For example, they often used category features that placed the 'normal' classroom in opposition to the 'multilinguistic/multicultural' classroom. The 'normal' classroom was understood as 'monolingual' and composed of students from the local culture. This was interesting feature because the study took place in Catalonia, which is an Autonomous region of Spain and officially recognised as a bilingual region. The following example is just one of many found in the research, which aligned the 'monolingual/monocultural' classroom in direct opposition to the 'diverse' classroom.

Preservice group: Multilinguistic Task (Mandy, Helen, Lori)

Helen: you have an_ if you have so many different different languages and cultures you have to make a different structure in your classroom | it's not like if you have only people from the from the same country same

Lori: yeah\

Another feature common to all three groups was how they all categorised the 'multilinguistic/multicultural' class as difficult, hard and problematic, as shown in the following extract:

Preservice group: Multilinguistic Task (Cindy, Julie, Maud)

Maud: ok | so I want to discuss eh eh the first impression of a multilinguistic class and it is made up of the students in the pictures | so what do you think of multilinguistic classes?|

Cindy: I think it's_ |

Maud: what's the first impressions if you come into a class and these children are sitting there? what do you think is your first impression?|

Cindy: difficult\

Julie: difficult|

This negative categorisation of diversity occurred in all three groups, and overall the negative attributes concerning diversity outnumber the positive ones. However, the analysis provides a means to distinguish significant differences about the way in which the different groups *constructed and used* the negative categories. For instance, in both the preservice group and the intercultural group the negative categorisations of diversity

were frequently *re-negotiated* and *re-constructed*, resulting in a new categorisation of diversity as a favourable resource.

Intercultural group: Multilinguistic Task (Hank, Mary, Dan)

Hank: yeah I would be happy about the fact at the possibility of teaching a class with different cultures | because it's_ it's easier for a teacher because she have another possibilities to make the | the tuition more interesting

Mary: mm

Hank: cause you have more choice

Dan: yeah I think that you have a a lot of variety of things to do with all this there is lots cultural things you can do with them

Hank: yes and you can learn a lot too

The evolution of the construction of the category of diversity from generally negative to more positive was especially noticeable in the intercultural project group. In transcripts and journals it could be seen how different understandings of diversity were proposed and made available by the participants, and in many cases eventually appropriated, indicating the students were constructing new understandings of diversity.

(Reflective Journal – Kathleen)

I can see that the first time you said don't generalise. I thought yes, easy to say but hard to beware of. The second time I thought again is everybody generalising? Than later on we where talking and Linda said don't generalise. I thought mmmm.. And the last discussion I heard myself saying Don't generalise please!! So one thing I learned for sure is Don't generalise please!

Another common feature for this group was that they recognised the need for discussion when dealing with linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom. As happened frequently in this group's dialogues, this kind of understanding of the multilingual/multicultural classroom emphasised the teacher's responsibilities as 'cultural mediator' when working with the class, instead of focusing on the students' individual responsibility to adapt to the norms of the 'regular' classroom (as was the case of the inservice teachers). Interestingly, this role of the teacher extended into a new categorisation of the multilinguistic/multicultural class with positive attributes such as a means of sharing different cultural ways of problem-solving. Moreover, despite their initial categorisations of the diverse classroom as in opposition to the monolingual/monocultural classroom, this group eventually re-constructed the category of both types of classrooms as having all the same problems.

Intercultural group: (Janet, Lucille, Terry)

Janet: I think it's nice to have many people from many countries because you can eh do more and make culture.

Lucille: yeah

Janet exchange culture and things like that and you

[...]

Janet: yes they can help each other with different things I think also the difficulty is that eh it's eh (...) but I think when you have only your culture you have the same problems

The study also indicated that there was a greater fluidity in the intercultural group's categorisations. In many cases, when confronted with new situations the intercultural group members were able to jointly construct *different, innovative* categorisations of the diverse classroom, showing they have the potential to be open towards diversity and to provide creative ways to incorporate diversity as a resource in their classrooms. The research highlighted an increasing awareness of the group about diversity; including the need for 'new attitudes' and 'aptitudes'.

Both the preservice teachers and the intercultural group showed more evidence of renegotiation of their categories than did the inservice group. In particular, the intercultural group, which had been exposed to multicultural ideologies and intercultural studies, showed much greater dialogue and negotiation in their assembly of categories. This bodes well for the possibility of new understandings and better preparation for the challenges of diversity, and suggests that this should be considered as an element in teacher training. That these groups were able to shift their positions and reconstruct some of their categorisations shows that their categories are not fixed stereotypes, but can be renegotiated, and that this can be encouraged during teaching practice.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that more open-minded perspectives towards diversity are related to openness to change. This research shows that in many cases when preservice teachers are confronted with new situations they were able to jointly construct *different, innovative* categorisations of the linguistically and culturally diverse classroom. This was especially true of the intercultural group, which had been given considerable training in resolving intercultural conflict through dialogue. This is consistent with the position proposed by Zeichner and Hoelt (1996), who suggest teacher training needs to focus on helping them develop attitudes, knowledge and skills which will be effective when working with a diverse student population. This is based on the perspective that 'all individuals are intercultural beings and all teachers have to be concerned with the challenge of intercultural communication regardless of their particular cultural identity' (*op. cit.*, 525).

The intercultural group's categorisation of the 'teacher of the diverse classroom' is also in line with Zeichner and Hoelt's profile of the 'intercultural' teacher. This suggests that teacher training should encourage positive approaches and attitudes toward intercultural

communication and diversity, as was the case for the principal objectives of the project described above. Raising future teachers' awareness of diversity will also make them more aware of the ways in which they are influenced by the development of their own personal and professional background and by the social and cultural environment in which they live. In many cases people are unaware of how these elements shape or construct their sense of a social world (Shotter, 1993, 20). Teacher training should attempt to provide a meeting place for teaching practices, classroom diversity and awareness of the intercultural voices that are the conversational background of everyday life. More interactions such as those described in this project will help shape and construct new understandings of future teachers, and help construct greater professionalism in the educational system, through facilitating mutual understanding and respect for other individuals and cultures.

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