

WP 13, Teachers as Cultural Workers, Summary

The Danish University of Education

May 07

Introduction

This is the second work package out of three analysing Danish teachers' experiences, understandings and expectations with regard to the intercultural dimension of citizenship education. The objective of this work package is to gain insight into teachers' perceptions of intercultural education, how they define their professional role as intercultural educators, and how they approach intercultural education. The analysis is structured according to themes that emerged from coding the data as well as the main categories that the partner teams agreed upon, which were:

- The teachers' professional role in developing a multicultural society and/or multicultural nation-state
- The impact on how students see themselves as intercultural citizens or on their participation in multicultural societies
- Teachers' disbelief that their teaching has any connection with the development of a multicultural democracy
- Conceptual Framework
- Teacher Education

Methodology

The work package is based on interviews with teachers in primary and lower secondary schools as well as upper secondary schools in Denmark. At both levels interviews have been carried out with teachers in the following subjects: Danish, foreign languages (French, English, German and Spanish), history, social studies and religion (for further elaboration on this see summaries of WP 10 & 11, Denmark).

The epistemological framework of this report is a combination of a social constructivist and a critical (Freirian) approach to the teacher interviews. Within this framework culture is perceived as a social construction that establishes a landscape of meanings within which subjects can navigate. Teachers are seen as important agents in these processes of cultural association and imagining. An aim is to grasp the definitions and discursive actions the teachers are making, in an attempt to conceptualize their daily praxis within intercultural citizenship education. In this process they express several subject-positions and ways of thinking about, doing, embracing or resisting 'culture', and these notions are important, to reach an understanding of the teachers' construction of their role as cultural workers and their perception of the broader term 'intercultural education'. First, we need to outline some thoughts on the concept of *culture* as a key concept in a discourse of intercultural education and teachers as cultural workers.

Conceptual Framework

In our specific context and argumentation the concept of “culture” is seen as highly political in its representation and reinforcement of power structures (Grant & Sachs 1995: 98). Furthermore our assumption and premise is an understanding of culture as a process: “... *culture is not simply a factor, or an influence, or a dimension, but... it is in process, in everything that we do, say, or think in or out of school. (...) With this in mind we designate the school as a mandated cultural process and the teacher as a cultural agent*” (Spindler & Spindler 2000). Questions such as whose knowledge is taught and how does the teacher think, act and talk about intercultural and multicultural issues thus becomes pivotal.

Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, the concept of ‘cultural worker’ can be used to discuss the role of the teacher as cultural agent in a discursive field. Freire elaborates on the emancipatory practices of the teacher’s role, and puts this forward as an important teaching task. The teacher needs to be conscious about the significant cultural divisions in the classroom that reflects the hegemonic structures of society. These divisions need to be contested and developed into new emancipatory movements, to empower the students and ultimately “set them free”. The role of the teacher as a cultural worker is primarily a political and intellectual role inside the Freirian paradigm. Culture is seen as equivalent to politics, and the intellectual development of the students into culturally conscious agents is the primary goal of the teaching. (Freire, 1998) As a cultural worker, the teacher stresses a certain perception of culture in the classroom and amongst the students, and is in this way significant in a process of multicultural/intercultural education.

The teachers’ professional role in developing a multicultural society and/or multicultural nation-state

A central concept in elaborating on teachers as cultural workers and in the overall objectives of INTERACT is the concept ‘intercultural education’. The teachers do generally not use the concepts of intercultural and multicultural education and confusion and insecurity are expressed regarding the definition and understanding of the intercultural dimension of education.

One of the significant things that come forward when teachers are asked about intercultural issues is that they answer that this is not something they deal with a lot since, as they say, *‘it is not a problem’*. This tells us that teachers do connect intercultural issues with problems of some kind. When the concept ‘intercultural education’ is used, this is closely connected to the concept of ‘integration’ which again in this specific context is associated with ‘problems’, i.e. a deficiency approach. An understanding exists that when it comes to intercultural questions, there must be problems even though this is not a part of the practice or experience in schools, or the questions asked. The discourse is connecting *‘intercultural issues’* to *‘problems’*.

At the same time, teachers wish to distinguish themselves from this discursive frame, by telling us about their non-problematic experiences. They are in reality trying to challenge stereotypes, but at the same time they are consolidating and reinforcing them. They aim to escape from the chain of equivalence that connects intercultural issues to integration and problems, but they do not have a language that enables them to establish an including cultural horizon for all children in the classroom.

From a Freirian perspective the teachers are generally conscious about the cultural divisions in the classroom and they challenge the negative stereotyping of children with a minority background by referring to the unproblematic every day life of the children with different cultural backgrounds. A number of teachers also point to their explicit aim to deconstruct stereotypes through their teaching.

A distinction is expressed in the data between a group of students called “*us*” and a group of students called “*them*”. It is not only students with a perceived ‘*other*’ religious background that are talked about as ‘*them*’. Teachers from schools near the German border are talking about the German minority in Denmark in the same terms. The structure of binary oppositions between “*us*” and “*them*” is dominating in the data and is used to mark both ethnic, linguistic, religious and national differences. In some cases though, the teachers explicitly try to change the discursive attitudes of the pupils.

A number of teachers stress how students combine values and practices from their ‘cultural’ backgrounds with values and practices which are characterised as ‘Danish’. It is stressed by some of the teachers that the students aim to combine ‘the best’ from two ‘cultures’ which is emphasized as an example of how students deal with intercultural issues in practice.

The impact on how students see themselves as intercultural citizens or on their participation in multicultural societies

One aim of this WP was to analyze the perceptions of culture and intercultural understandings that the teachers are promoting, presenting and embodying in the classroom to get a more contextualised understanding of how intercultural education takes place in the school. The data point to two main teaching approaches to intercultural education; the first is about the students learning from each other by emphasizing situated knowledge in the classroom. This might be students’ experiences from living in other European countries or knowledge related to students having another cultural background than European. The knowledge the students possess in these regards is sometimes activated by the teachers in different ways, as part of an intercultural educational practice. Some of the teachers also explain about situations where they have tried to involve students’ knowledge about their cultural backgrounds which turned out not to exist. According to these teachers the students generally do not know a lot about the cultural or social conditions in their ‘*homelands*’, and they often do not identify themselves with the cultural heritage in any distinct way.

The data points out how teachers construct ‘*cultures*’ as something connected to the organization of families as well as nationalities. In general there is an understanding of ‘culture’ as something very specific, distinct and demarcated. The students are constructed as carriers of specific cultures – belonging to “*one or the other culture*”.

Another approach to intercultural education is the teachers’ focus on the positive aspects and potentials of the European integration process, as well as on internationalisation and globalisation. Teachers generally talk in positive terms about the intercultural aspects of education when these are related to internationalization and globalization. For instance, it is a common practice in Denmark for the oldest classes to go on study travels to other European countries. The teachers explain about these trips in a detailed and enthusiastic way, and the importance of these intercultural exchanges

amongst the students is stressed - both referring to the interaction among students as something which connects the students and also as an element that widens the students' horizons.

There is a distinct border in the discourse that seems equivalent to the geographical border of the Danish nation; intercultural issues are often related to 'problems' inside the national borders whereas they are embraced outside the national borders – in the realm of 'the international' and 'globalisation'.

Promoting unity or diversity?

This passage will focus on the question of the teacher's professional role in developing a multicultural society. In particular the focus will be on teachers' contribution to recognizing multiculturalism and how they incorporate diversity in the classroom. At the same time, we shall search for indicators of disbelief amongst the teachers that their teaching has any connection with the development of a multicultural society.

Two main tendencies are found in the data regarding the promotion of unity or diversity among the students. One is an approach which stresses the common elements of different 'cultures' and religions, hereby aiming to show that there is no reason to create cultural or religious conflicts. Some of the teachers explain how they - in explicit ways - stress, for instance, passages from the Koran and the Bible to emphasize the common elements of different religions to the students.

Some teachers also give weight to the common aspects of young people's life in the Danish society. Examples of this are teachers who emphasize that all the children belong to the same age group, which means that they have similar reactions to different situations. You might say that the teachers aim to support the construction of a 'youth culture' amongst the children that goes across religious and national distinctions.

Another approach is teachers who choose to stress the cultural differences and give priority to teaching the students that in spite of the cultural and religious differences they all are legitimate members of the society. A number of teachers point out how they encourage the students to both present their various religious or cultural backgrounds to each other and also encourage the students to bring in various religious and cultural perspectives in common discussion of a given issue. Dialogue and common discussions are the preferred methods when teachers aim to promote the values of differences. The interviews stress a general aim to create a safe space for interreligious and intercultural dialogue among the students. Teachers often perceive intercultural educational processes as something that involves an element of conflict. They explain how it is a task of the teacher to establish a space for dialogue facilitated by an adult, so that '*the cultures*' can '*confront*' each other with differences and problems.

According to the interviews a purpose of the intercultural exchanges is to let the students share knowledge of various perspectives and traditions to widen the students' horizons. Further, this is stressed as a question of the teacher's recognition of the students and their various cultural backgrounds as well as the creation of an inclusive atmosphere in the classroom.

Teacher education

To sum up a general understanding among teachers stresses 'culture' as something specific, distinct and demarcated and students are constructed as carriers of specific cultures – belonging to 'one or the other culture'. Teachers try to challenge the chain of equivalence that binds intercultural issues to integration and problems (the deficiency perspective), but they do not have a language that enables them to establish a new including cultural horizon for all children in the classroom.

At the same time diversity is given priority when teachers conceptualize their daily practice within intercultural citizenship education. Teachers aim to bring a variety of positions to discussions in the classroom in order to encourage the students to reflect on the cultural and religious diversities. It is a general understanding among teachers of both primary and secondary school that intercultural understanding and dialogue should be given weight. However, the teachers do generally not use the concepts of intercultural and multicultural education and confusion and insecurity are expressed regarding the definition and understanding of the intercultural dimension of education.

From Freire's emancipatory perspective the teachers do generally not explicitly define their role as cultural workers i.e. as empowering minorities and changing structures of power. However, aiming to challenge the negative stereotyping of children with a minority background, the cultural divisions in the classroom are contested by the teachers.

Teachers perceive themselves as cultural workers mainly in the sense of being mediators between different cultural or religious positions; they take up cultural or religious issues which they sense occupy the students, they elaborate on situated knowledge in the classroom or draw on issues presented in the media for common discussions in the class to introduce various perspectives on a given theme. Teachers aim to create a space for intercultural dialogue under their guidance. In this case minority groups in the class are understood to be representing larger communities, though the form of these larger communities is not explicitly defined.

Most of the teachers do not refer to education or in service training within the field of intercultural education and only a few of the teachers have participated in working groups of some kind regarding intercultural issues. Rather, teachers draw on personal experience and situated knowledge in the classroom when intercultural issues are taken up. Further, it was underlined by teachers participating in the group interviews that this was an interesting opportunity to discuss these issues, as they seldom have time to share these experiences with their colleagues.

There seems to be a need for additional educational input which introduces a conceptual framework which could help both students and teachers to transcend the horizons (discursive and non-discursive) of their experiences with intercultural issues and help the teachers to reflect on the intercultural dimension of their teaching practice. This could take the form of teacher training courses, lectures or working groups which could provide space for exchange of experiences within intercultural education. This will be discussed further in the summary of WP 14, *Teachers as transformative intellectuals*.

References

Byram, Michal (2006): Developing a Concept of Intercultural Citizenship, i Alred, Geof, Byram, Mike & Fleming, Mike (2006): *Education for Intercultural Citizenship – Concepts and Comparisons*, Languages for Intercultural Communication and Education 13, Multilingual Matters Ltd., Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto

Freire, Paolo (1998): *Teachers as Cultural Workers – Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, Westview Press, Colorado/ Oxford

Grant, Carl A, & Sachs, Judyth M. (1995): Multicultural Education and Postmodernism: Movements Toward a Dialogue, chap. 4 in *Critical Multiculturalism – Uncommon Voices in a Common Struggle*, Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series, Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey

Spindler, George & Spindler, Lousie (2000): The Processes of Culture and Person: Cultural Therapy and Culturally Diverse Schools, chap. 17 in *Fifty Years of Anthropology and Education 1950-2000 – A Spindler Anthology*, Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.