

**DIVERSITY IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
CHALLENGING DIDACTICS  
IN  
TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS  
IN BRAZIL**

*Maria Inês Marcondes (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro)*  
*Maria de Lourdes Tura (Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro)*  
**BRAZIL**

### **1-Introduction**

The objective of this paper is to give indications to a curriculum designed to prepare teachers for the next decade, the results presented here were based on a research project entitled "The Teacher and the Cultural Dimensions of School Knowledge" and aiming at analyzing teachers' conceptions about the diversity in group planning and its consequences on the didactic organization of teaching work. Data was collected using 127 questionnaires and 20 interviews applied to a group of elementary schools teachers working at the public system in the city of Rio de Janeiro while attending an undergraduate Education course at a public University. It is also important to mention that the constructivist approach is dominant in this course and in the curriculum of the public schools where these teachers teach.

Our analysis indicated three aspects to be developed based on our research findings: to emphasize the political aspect of education; to establish new forms of partnership with schools having critical teachers developing successful practices; and to put into practice, during the University courses, new ways of dealing with diversity.

The information was obtained through a questionnaire and informal interviews. The questionnaire's open-ended questions were analyzed according to a classifying system (Bardin, 1979), based on criteria of semantic proximity. The close-ended questions were tabulated and analyzed through statistical treatment.

Twenty teachers were interviewed. The interview was conducted in an informal way in order to guarantee free expression about topics concerning pedagogical processes, which needed to be better developed. To facilitate the reproduction of what was commented during the interviews a tape-recorder was used with the speakers' consent and they had their individual and institutional anonymity guaranteed.

The research material as a whole is very rich. It not only includes the sociocultural aspects of the teachers' social origin but also their conceptions about teaching practice.

The schoolteachers investigated were all female and had the following characteristics: 73% were born in the city of Rio de Janeiro, 7% at the rural area of the State, and 20% outside the State of Rio de Janeiro. Data about the family background of these teachers, including their husband's professions showed they come from families with very little formal education. Concerning their teaching practice, 68% of the teachers have a 1-to-10-year range in experience.

Another study by Gatti, Esposito, and Silva (1994) about the socioeconomic profile and professional expectations of Elementary schoolteachers of Minas Gerais, São Paulo and Maranhão, presents data that confirm those collected in the investigation we conducted, specially in relation to the socioeconomic conditions of the families they come from and the teachers' social and educational ascension in relation to these conditions.

In this text, we will focus on the data collected in the interviews and the teachers' answers to the following questions: What are the advantages of working with a homogeneous class? What are the advantages of working with a heterogeneous class?

## **2- Teachers and the standardization of group planning**

The conceptions of those teachers interviewed about group planning - which include the planning of pedagogical activities, teaching methods and the new propositions for students' learning - help us understand the challenges imposed on a teacher when she has to deal with heterogeneous groups.

First we will focus on conceptions deriving from the objective of proposing a group planning aiming at reaching homogeneity.

The teachers' answers to the question about this topic have been grouped in Table 1, below, which delineates two intercrossing axes: **objects of reference** (*teacher and student / group*) and **categories of analysis** ("*equality of interests*", "*easiness in planning and in achieving goals*", "*less strain on the teacher*", "*experience exchanging*", "*there are no homogeneous groups*", and "*there are no advantages in having homogeneous groups*". These categories of analysis are based on the teachers' answers to the questionnaire using Bardin's method (1979).

TABLE 1: Advantages of Working with a Homogeneous Class

Object of Reference	Categories of Analysis						Total
	Equally of Interests	Easiness in Planning/ and in Achievement goals	Less Strain on the Teacher	Experience Exchanging	There are No homogeneous groups	There are no advantages in homogeneous groups	
Teacher	11,2%	18,3%	12,4%	-	-	0,4%	42,3%
Student/ Group	24,5%	3,6%	0,6%	5,4%	12,3%	11,3%	57,7%
Total	35,7%	21,9%	13%	5,4%	12,3%	11,7%	100%

The first surprising fact was that 15% of the teachers didn't answer this question, something that did not happen with the other questions of the questionnaire. Another outstanding fact was the great number of vague or insecure answers. These facts show the difficulty in dealing with this topic, mainly because this group of teachers is incorporating a new pedagogical discourse derived from their reading and reflections in a university classroom where they are students majoring in Education and, at the same time, they are teachers who deal with the tensions of daily school problems. These tensions are easily seen in their answers in which we can notice that these answers oscillate between the declaration of what is observed in the daily teaching practice and the positions that are often connected with the constructivist paradigm. For instance:

*"We could go on together, but I think that there aren't any homogeneous groups, there are always differences." (Q.49)(Note1)*

*" It hardly ever happens, I think a homogeneous group is something impossible to exist, but if I happened to have a homogeneous group, it would be much easier for me, because I wouldn't need to rack my brains, I would just teach according to plans prepared a few weeks or even years ago." (Q.73)*

*"From one point of view, it's easier, but the richness of the experiences is clearly seen in the differences." (Q.46)*

*"What would a homogeneous group be if each individual is an individual in his singularity?" (Q.13)*

There is also a small group of teachers (5,4%) who point out the idea of "experience exchanging", as an advantage of a homogeneous group. This is what they say:

*"We can profit more from their experience." (Q. 68)*

*"The circulation of information is possible and it happens in a situation of exchange, cooperation and complicity. The children have similar experiences for sharing with one another and the group arrangement may be made based on the criterion of specific difficulties, for example." (Q. 06)*

This idea of *"experience exchanging"* seems a contradiction with regard to what has been said in the answers concerning heterogeneous groups, since a great number of teachers agreed that *"experience exchanging"* is the greatest advantage of the heterogeneous group. Items such as *"equality of interests"* (35,7%) and *"easiness in class planning and in the achievement of the intended goals"* (21,9%) added up around almost 60%, showing that teachers believe that it is easier to work with a homogeneous class.

The answer below gives an idea of what is considered a common sense belief among these teachers:

*"It is easier to reach the intended goals, even without any exchanging, because they're very similar." (Q.)*

The teacher, overstating, speaks of no *"experience exchanging"* among the students of a group that has been organized for a homogeneous work. It is also important to say that most answers have the teacher as object of reference. They point out how the homogeneous group makes the teachers' work easier. This may be observed in a statement typical of those definitions of a generic type:

*"In terms of work, teaching a homogeneous group is much more practical and easier." (Q. 53)*

What this teacher means is that the pedagogical work according to what is proposed in the school curriculum, in the didactic organization of the pedagogical work, in the bureaucratic structure of this institution and the teacher's working conditions - should be conducted within the established patterns. Or rather, the homogeneity of the teaching practice corresponds to the teacher's adaptation, as Sacristan said (1995), including beliefs and values that establish a style of teaching and give shape to the prevailing paradigm in pedagogical practice, characterized by norms, attitudes and kinds of behavior, equality of rhythms and learning processes, and selection of the same teaching contents. This has been included in the school culture as its *"modus operandi"* and, therefore, it becomes internalized in the teaching practice. Yet, "this dreamed

homogeneity doesn't exist in the school reality and it may be the cause of much stigmatization of those students labeled as 'weak'."(Ludke/Mediano, 1992:50)

The 'weak' students are those who can't keep up with their classmates' rhythm. They are the "different students". The fact is that the students labeled as 'weak' are the ones who need a pedagogical work that meets their differences. Concerning that, a teacher said, during an interview:

*"When I first met the group, I noticed it had a potential and it had been reported to me as 'weak': "You are being given a weak group" and when I started teaching them I found they were nothing of that kind, they did have a potential. All they needed was different teaching methods. So I always tried to do something new, I always tried to create something different and not insist on those tiring and "boring" classes. I tried to arouse the interest and make them develop that interest ... they were much more intelligent than we thought they were."*

The idealization of the homogeneous group hinders the construction of a plan and of the didactic strategies that may meet the differences among the students. During an interview, a teacher, observing the pressure to keep the pedagogic work within the traditional standards, said:

*"They overestimate the content. A teacher has to teach a particular subject and has to supply the students with a lot of content, the notebooks have to be corrected, in due course .... "*

The challenge of diversity, thus, is imposed on the teachers in their educational procedures. They have difficulties in taking up this challenge though, mainly because of pressures from outside the work itself (the school principal, the students' parents, the regional board of education) as well as from the lack of parameters and methodological guidelines to implement new ideas in the pedagogical work in the classroom.

## **2-The teachers, the group planning and the diversity**

In Table 2 below, which is designed in the same way as Table 1, we may observe the classification based on the teachers' answers to the question concerning the advantages of the heterogeneous groups. The **objects of reference** found in the teachers' responses were the *teacher*/and *the student/group*. In relation to the **object of reference**, we compressed the answers into six categories of analysis: "*challenge*", "*mutual help*",

“mutual growth”, “experience exchanging”, “variety of work” and “there are no advantages”.

TABLE 2: Advantages of Working with a Heterogeneous Class

Object of Reference	Categories of Analysis						Total %
	Challenge	Mutual help	Mutual growth	Experience Exchanging	Variety of Work	There are no advantages	
Teacher	9,3%	0,8%	4,6%	3,2%	3,2%	4,7%	25,8 %
Student/ Group	1,5%	11%	12,5%	42,2%	3,1%	3,9%	74,2 %
Total %	10,8%	11,8%	17,1%	45,4%	6,3%	8,6%	100%

It should be pointed out that 8,6% of the teachers answered that “*there are no advantages in a homogeneous group*”, confirming the most traditional positions in relation to pedagogical practice. On the other hand, the “*experience exchange*”, having the *student/group* as the **object of reference**, was the category with the greatest frequency of answers (42,2%).

An important result was the tendency among these teachers to consider that a heterogeneous group presents a greater advantage to the student whereas a homogeneous group presents a greater advantage to the teacher.

At this point, it's important to note a teacher's answer concerning the heterogeneous group. She recalls the ideal of the arranged group for a homogeneous pedagogical work, and says that the advantage of this kind of group is:

*" ... all the students share the same reality. The teacher doesn't need to explain the differences. "* (Q.62)

The teacher, who “*does not need to explain the differences*”, in a way, means that she doesn't have to deal with something which is remarkable and very difficult to analyze which is more than the heterogeneity, it is the differences, not only cultural, but also socioeconomic which distinguish students, families and groups, and establish social limits and determine, according to what has been observed in the sociological research, those who will succeed at work and those who will fail.

The idea of homogeneity would bring, implicitly, the denial of the diversity since the acceptance of the diversity would include thinking about different interests, different tasks, different rhythms of work and would mean finding didactic strategies compatible with the socio-cultural differences typical of our school environment. It would also mean one would have to disregard the traditional aspects of pedagogical work. The teachers revealed, however, that despite the fact that many teachers had already incorporated, at least into their discourse, the principles of a constructivist or critical theory, in practice, this new idea has not been much used.

Thus, most teachers who were investigated in this research, regarded the idea of organizing pedagogical work according to the heterogeneity of the group as positive in relation to the students' interaction in the classroom, but they remarked that they had difficulty in incorporating this into their pedagogical work, since the school planning aiming at directing the pedagogical work to more homogeneous patterns was regarded as the easiest to implement and to achieve their goals.

The "*easiness in planning*" seems to insert the repetition of activities focusing only on a particular kind of student, the one who is then considered as the "standard student". Besides this, according to the teachers' answers, the public school itself, where some of them work and which receives mainly low-income students, have as reference for the pedagogical work the white student, coming from the middle class, and whose habits and attitudes are linked to this social class. Therefore, many public school teachers seemed to be skeptical about the development of a pedagogical work that takes into account the differences of students in the classroom and, thus, stated that the "other students", those from the middle class, are the ones who may become the good students eventually. Or, according to Sacristan's statement (1995) "when the difference or *what is not typical* of the student has social connotations, other mechanisms of resistance and rejection of the student at school arise." (p. 105).

The heterogeneity of a group should lead to the proposition of the development of a variety of work in the classroom, however, Pinto (1999: 216), supported by a study she conducted, confirms what we analyzed when she says that teachers...

*" ... They speak of the impossibility of a work of such a nature in a classroom with many students, alleging that this work maybe possible at a private school where there are fewer students, better material and teaching resources and where parents are more involved in their children's school assignments."*

These teachers' comment describes the reality of public and private schools in Brazil, which establishes a barrier between the students who benefit from the cultural and technological progress of modern society and those who have very little access to such benefits.

On the other hand, Cruz (1996) shows that the teachers themselves say they are not qualified to work with those students who attend public schools, because they are not familiar with the experiences of a low-income student. "The social and cultural diversity keeps her away because she thinks the difference is quite big."

This lack of qualification has been noticed from the teacher's initial formation. Moura (1998:216-7) obtained the following information from a research project conducted with a group of elementary schoolteachers:

*"The Teacher Educational Program only "taught" me how to deal with a particular kind of student: a clean, smart, and polite student, making me think that all the students would be like that."*

During the interviews, the teachers pointed out the great importance of their first experiences. As a rule, the "shock of reality" (Huberman, 1992) came with the actual work with groups regarded as the worst at school, especially beginners or classes with students beyond the normal age.

To deal with this situation, the teachers pointed out that the theoretical and practical knowledge they obtained at their Teacher Education Programs was not enough. They had to rely on the material provided by the school and the support of senior teachers. To overcome this initial difficulty, some teachers say that they invested in "*a greater dedication to work*", and in "*the knowledge of their students' interests and necessities*" and also in the use of "*more effective methodologies*". Besides this, they pointed out the support of other school professionals. We can notice that in a teacher's comment:

*"If I hadn't had the help of my pedagogical school advisor, I would have given up teaching."*

These comments reinforce the evidence of the precarious articulation between theory and practice in those initial Teacher Education Programs. In these courses, we are introduced to an idealized class; completely different from the one the teacher's face



when they start teaching. According to what a teacher stated above, the student is expected to be clean, smart and very polite, being a member of an "ideal and homogeneous" group. Also, according to Moura (1998), the impact experienced by the teachers when having to deal with huge heterogeneous groups, with repeating students of different ages, and quite different cognitive levels - is really appalling.

Moura (1998) concluded, thus, that heterogeneity, instead of being regarded as a positive element to the learning/teaching process, is considered a problem. Therefore, teacher's qualification emphasizing the profitable utilization of the individual differences among students, has been proved to be a fundamental necessity among the characteristics of a Teacher Education Program, so that it can contribute to the qualification of teachers for classroom reality, with intrinsically heterogeneous groups.

### **3-Final considerations**

The school was historically and traditionally designed to create consensus, homogenize rhythms, values, attitudes and a particular conception of the world. The daily relationship and the socialization in this space should provide the students with the appropriation of a particular "modus vivendi", established by uniformizations, in the evaluation of particular aspects, in return for some intended results, in expectations which are generalized and patterns which were firmly impregnated, legitimating hierarchies, granting power to some special denominations and making a certain "habitus" prevail. The situation of homogenization of meanings, only confirms this tendency, which is typical of the pedagogical "ethos".

McLaren (1995) regarded the school as a cultural homogeneity which imposes itself on other discourses, establishing as universal a particular kind of moral and ethics, a kind of aesthetics, a conception of justice and rights and a regime of truth.

The annexation of the prevailing patterns was also analyzed by McLaren (1992), in a study about school rights, showing how social mechanisms enable the introduction of students - from other cultural surroundings - into the literate universe of the school. In this process, the cultural borderlines of life at school and life in the street are clearly delineated. McLaren established, thus, the concept of the state of "street corner" and the state of "student", showing the transformation of styles of being. His analysis shows the internalization of the prevailing culture and helps to understand the extreme formality of the pedagogical procedures.

In saying that, we don't mean that the students are apprentices of a rich culture, in accordance with an ethnocentric look of an educated elite. They are also those who create senses and meanings. And also, they bring, from their cultural environment a number of rules, values, beliefs, behavior patterns, ways of getting to know the world and people, feelings and desires, which are supported by complex systems of meanings historically constructed. Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep in mind that the school's aim is homogeneity, or the "equality of treatment" according to an ideal pattern, which is frequently stated by those who establish its rules of living. Thus, the cultural differences are almost always regarded as flaws in the necessary social integration or as individual failures.

McLaren, speaks of a critical multicultural pedagogy, which aims at reconsidering the relationship between identity and difference. The preoccupation with particularities of the differences should not limit itself to evidencing them, but it should require the creation of emancipation strategies. Therefore, it's necessary to change the isolation of the school from the surrounding community and then pay attention to the different meanings and cultural senses. Also, about this topic, Perez Gomez (1997) calls our attention to the need to insert the contents and school assignments in the students' culture, where they "acquire senses which may be shared and negotiated" (p. 286). This makes the teaching and learning context meaningful, which is rather similar to the real problems students face at home and at work and is opposed to the construction of abstract tasks, which are created based on an ideal, single and linear sequence. Thus, we will be acquiring conceptual tools necessary to interpret reality and make decisions. One of those tools will be the ability to analyze the world we live in, to dialogue with the differences and insert ourselves in an emancipation process, which may accept the differences not only as arranged in a juxtaposition which keep their barriers intact, but also in an interaction which contaminates the parts and begins a process of transmission/assimilation.

According to our analysis, three important aspects need our attention when we think about planning and implementing a curriculum for the next decade. We have to:

- 1) Emphasize the political aspect of education - Education is definitively a political act according to the Brazilian educator Freire (1970). When we choose how to group our students in class, the content and the methodology of our courses attending different necessities, interests and the way we are going to evaluate our students we are being political. It is necessary to take into consideration what a teacher does in the classroom

and its social political consequences through an analysis of and reflection on the larger context of the educational process and its practices. Homogeneity and heterogeneity in planning our classes is a fundamental question. The curriculum must include a reflection on this central aspect.

2) Establish new forms of partnership with schools having critical teachers with successful practices- What kind of theoretical approaches are important for daily practices in schools? Many disciplines at the University present critical themes such as “multiculturalism” and “education for a critical citizenship”, although there are few experiences that can be adopted by teachers on how these aspects can be worked in classrooms. The curriculum must offer teaching practice opportunities and reflective supervision on this matter.

3) Put into practice during the University courses new forms of dealing and working with diversity- The great majority of the teachers investigated expected to have a homogeneous group of students, that is students with the same level of learning, same background and same interests, because teachers are used to prepare school activities aiming at an “average student”. Diversity is ignored: For instance, some Brazilian students of public schools are black or mulattos, living in slums or poor houses with mothers who work all day and lack books at home or even a special place to study. “Diversity” is an accepted theme in our University lessons but teachers do not yet feel comfortable to deal with it in schools. Teachers revealed difficulties in changing their ways to organize school activities. Although the great majority has already accepted this at the theoretical level, at the practical level it is far from being implemented. A curriculum must offer opportunity to plan not only theoretical discussions but also the implementation of practical activities with this objective.

## NOTES

(1) Q1 means Questionnaire and its number.

## References

BARDIN, L. (1979) **Análise de conteúdo**. Lisboa, Edições 70.

CRUZ, F.M.L. (1999) **Múltiplos olhares: a prática pedagógica por quem a realiza**. Trabalho apresentado na Reunião da ANPEd, Grupo de Trabalho: Formação de Professores, Caxambu.

FREIRE, P. (1970) **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**. New York: Continuum.

GATTI, B. A., ESPOSITO, Y. L. e SILVA, R. N. (1994) Características de professores (as) de Primeiro Grau no Brasil: perfil e expectativas. **Educação e Sociedade**: Campinas, n. 48, ago, p. 23-37.

GIMENO SACRISTÁN, J. (1995) Currículo e diversidade cultural. In SILVA, T. T. da e MOREIRA, A. F. (Orgs) **Territórios Contestados**. Petrópolis, Vozes, p. 82-113.

HUBERMAN, M. (1992) O ciclo de vida profissional dos professores. In: NÖVOA, A. **Vidas de professores**. Porto: Editora Porto, p. 31-61.

LÜDKE, M. e MEDIANO, Z.(1992)(Coords) **Avaliação na escola de 1º Grau: uma análise sociológica**. Campinas, Papirus.

MCLAREN, P. (1992) **Rituais na escola: em direção a uma economia política de símbolos e gestos na educação**. Petrópolis, Vozes.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1995) **Critical pedagogy and predatory culture: oppositional politics in a postmodern era**. Londres/ Nova York, Routledge.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1997) **A vida nas escolas: uma introdução à pedagogia crítica nos fundamentos da educação**. 2. ed. Porto Alegre, Artes Médicas.

MOURA, H. T.(1998) **O professor iniciante: o período inicial da carreira do professor de 1ª a 4ª série do ensino fundamental na cidade do Rio de Janeiro**. Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Mestrado em Educação.

PÉREZ GÓMEZ, A. (1997) The School: a crossroad of culture. **Curriculum Studies**, 5(3): 281-299.

PINTO, N.(1999) Erro: uma estratégia para a diferenciação do ensino. In.: ANDRÉ, M. (Org.) **Pedagogia das diferenças na sala de aula**. Campinas, SP: Papirus, p.47-80.