IRELAND'S MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS AND INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION: THE CONVERGENCE OF CULTURE AND PEDAGOGY

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Biographical Note

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KEYWORDS

Multicultural; pedagogy; Vygotsky; Bernstein; Initial Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

In the context of Ireland's changing demographics, this paper explores the importance of pedagogic research in informing both philosophies and pedagogical practices in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) which endeavours to facilitate student teachers' engagement with the teaching and learning process in Ireland's multicultural classrooms. By utilising firstly the insights provided by Lev Vygotsky, via others into the meditational role of cultural tools and his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development and, secondly, Basil Bernstein's exploration of curriculum and in particular his concept of the Pedagogic Recontextualising Field, it examines through engagement with data obtained from semi-structured interviews carried out with newly qualified teachers (NQTs) how specific pedagogic practices can be informed by this convergence of culture and curriculum. It discusses the manifestations of the tensions between theory and practice both in the college and classroom context, as experienced by the NQTs and in doing so, provides the author with valuable insights into the need for adapting her own philosophical and pedagogical practices within ITE to enhance the learning experience of the student teacher and to facilitate their future engagement with teaching and learning in the multicultural classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The challenge for those of us who endeavour to prepare student teachers to teach in Irish multicultural classrooms is to facilitate student teachers' engagement with their practices in order that they may exhibit sensitivity in relation to the identity, curricular and pedagogical challenges that face all their pupils. The magnitude of this task is evident when one considers that currently ten percent of primary pupils and seven percent of post-primary pupils are categorised as non-national (GOI, 2009).[1] Many students are new arrivals to Ireland from different cultural backgrounds, bringing with them a wide variety of mother tongues.[2] By endeavouring to facilitate cultural sensitivity in relation to their teaching practices, one would hope that as future teachers, they would ensure that pupils of varying cultural backgrounds at best partake in the optimum learning experience and at the very least are not disadvantaged. In light of this, two questions come to the fore: firstly, to what extent do we understand how varying cultural backgrounds affect the teaching and learning process; and secondly, does initial teacher education (ITE) facilite potential teachers to engage with this?

In order to answer these questions, this paper utilises the insights provided by Zembylas (2003) and others on the work of Lev Vygotsky into the meditational role of cultural tools in the development of

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1   Non-national: the legal term in Irish literature (Citizens Information Database, 2005) when referring to people often termed 'refugee', 'immigrants', 'foreigners', 'illegals', 'aliens' and 'non-Irish' and those who do not have Irish citizenship. While many in the media, education and politics have expressed their discomfort with this expression it still remains the official term.
2   The term 'culture' is used here to describe various national, regional, traditional, religious, racial, ethnic, gender related and economic dimensions of identity which is reflective of the nature of Ireland's non-national population.

the mind, with a view to enhancing our understanding of the influence of cultural backgrounds on how we learn. It then explores his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which provides a broad conceptual framework with which to examine teaching and learning practices in multicultural contexts. However, in order to examine how specific pedagogic practices can be informed by the convergence of culture and curriculum in the multicultural classroom context, this paper draws upon Basil Bernstein's exploration of curriculum and in particular his concept of the Pedagogic Recontextualising Field (PRF). From this starting point, this paper then discusses the findings of a research initiative, with twenty-seven second-level newly qualified teachers (NQTs) as they completed their first year of teaching. In doing so it examines the manifestations of tensions between theory and practice both in the college and classroom context, as experienced by the NQTs.

THE CONVERGENCE OF CULTURE AND CURRICULUM

Lev Vygotsky, during his relatively short life, wrote extensively about the relationship between cultural factors or cultural tools and the development of the mind. He was particularly concerned with higher mental functions and his theory of cultural mediation focused on exploring how cultural tools influenced how individuals conceptualise the world. Vygotsky stressed that *"individual mental functioning can be understood only by going outside the individual and examining the social and cultural processes from which one is constructed"* (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Zembylas, 2003, p. 217). Vygotsky viewed mental functioning as occurring within the context of activity or engagement with the cultural tools of ones environment, namely *"speech, symbols, physical structures such as houses, works of art and writing for example"* (Lasky, 2005, p. 902). Thus the tools which enable action move beyond the remit of representational systems (Wertsch, 1995) and constitute resources with the potential to empower, constrain, or transform action.

Furthermore, Vygotsky noted that that speech is not a direct translation of our thoughts; rather, the words we use in speech are an attempt to express our understanding or the meaning we have made (Vygotsky, 1987). In the Irish multicultural classroom, various words may have different meanings both for the children and the teacher due to the variety of lived experiences resulting in the pupils' struggle to understand both the language and the concepts they strive to convey.

This presents challenges for the teacher at a pedagogical level. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is particularly helpful in engaging in the complexity of this situation. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs within the ZPD, or in other words, in order to support a child as they attempt to grasp a concept it is necessary for a teacher or expert to support them in moving from what they know to what they do not know (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, if one is attempting to teach the concept of condensation and how it occurs, it is necessary to ensure that the child has a basic understanding of the nature of solids, liquids and gasses and what constitutes each. In the absence of this, progressing to a lesson which explores the transition between the various states would be futile and result in the memorisation of a meaningless word at best. This pedagogic challenge was of particular concern for Vygotsky (1987, p. 170, cited in Guile, 2009, p. 281) who noted that:

> *"The teacher who attempts to use this approach achieves nothing but a mindless learning of words, an empty verbalism that stimulates or imitates the presence of concepts in the child. Under these conditions, the child learns not the concept but the word, and this word is taken over by the child through memory rather than thought".*

What is needed is some form of bridging device, a means to link our understanding of one's cultural background or identity to enhanced engagement with subject matter or curriculum. One way to address this is by exploring the insights provided by Basil Bernstein and his work on curriculum (Bernstein, 1990). Bernstein was a passionate supporter of the rights of the disadvantaged and his work primarily focused on examining how educational structures and practices further disadvantaged the disadvantaged. He engaged primarily in looking at hierarchical issues of power and power associated structures such as class within educational contexts (Bernstein, 2000). His insights, when applied in the context of culturally diverse classroom, may offer us a way forward.

According to Bernstein, the practices of teachers are regulated and contained within larger educational structures and entities in that the *"what"* or subject matter they teach is defined by both the school and by the state. Bernstein (2000, p. 32) referred to the *"what"* of teaching such as physics, maths or geography as the *"instructional discourse"*. He further notes that the *"how"* of teaching constitutes a discourse of social and moral order which he refers to as the *"regulative discourse"* (2000, p. 32) which is related to theories of instruction and according to Ivinson and Duveen (2005, p. 629) *"concepts of rules, pacing, transmission, acquisition, etc., which are not socially-ideologically neutral"*. While Bernstein (2000) maintains that the regulative discourse dominates the instructional discourse in the process of constructing knowledge that is legitimised by the school and state, he maintains that the creation or enabling of a space which he refers to as the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) allows for knowledge to be remade.

According to Jacklin (2004, p. 383) this process involves the teacher engaging with the pedagogic discourse which *"is constructed through a process of selection and recontextualisation from the discourse from which the instructional content is derived (say, mathematics) and from theories of teaching and learning (such as child development theories)".*

Furthermore, Daniels (2004) stresses that this occurs where the theory of instruction utilised by the teacher does not give rise to a strong classification, for example, in relation to the role of the teacher, allowing pupils to pose the questions and to discuss their ideas within the classroom, which would cause the teacher to *"shift identity positions … with less emphasis on teacher talk"* (Bourne, 2004, p. 131-132). Similarly, weak framing in relation to pace and sequencing would require the pupils to demonstrate their understanding either orally or through the use of concrete classroom tools before moving on to the next phase of the lesson, thus passing control of the learning pace at the very least, to the pupil. Indeed Morais (2002, p. 561) notes that Bernstein viewed the importance of allowing the child to have some control in relation to the pacing of lessons *"as central to successful learning"*. However Bernstein (1999, p. 169) notes that the trend within pedagogy to *"relate institutional knowledge or vertical discourses to the everyday experience of learners or horizontal discourse, in order to make the knowledge more accessible can result in the knowledge being fragmented and segmented"* and as a result, learners are denied access to the grammar of the instructional discourse and are further disadvantaged.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE FIELD?

In order to establish the extent to which one ITE programme engaged with the cultural dimension of teaching and learning and with pedagogical practices which facilitated enhanced cultural sensitivity, the author undertook field research in May 2008, with twenty-seven female[3] NQTs as they completed their first year of teaching in second level schools. The schools were located throughout the country, in both rural and urban locations, with a diverse range of pupil enrolments and varying numbers of pupils from other cultures ranging from three pupils in one school to forty per cent of

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3   No male students graduated from the Bachelor of Education at St Angela's College in 2007 and thus there were no male NQTs in the sample.

the pupils population in another. Data was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews which explored the personal and professional narratives of the NQTs, which was subsequently transcribed and analysed.

WHAT THE RESEARCH UNCOVERED

In general the NQTs noted that it was difficult to engage with ZPD as they felt their ITE programme did not prepare them sufficiently in light of the varied cultural backgrounds of their pupils and therefore they struggled to relate both the subject content and classroom norms and practices to the lived experiences of many of their pupils. While they acknowledged that their programme engaged substantially with conceptual tools which emphasised the role of morals, rights, and identity in teaching and learning, they indicated that further input was needed in relation to practical tools or pedagogical practices which, as Vygotsky notes, links the concept to action. Similarly, while they noted that they had engaged with differentiation in light of the varied nature of the learner, their lack of previous experience of interacting with people from other cultures and their lack of understanding of the variety of lived experiences of their pupils and in many instances of the various mother tongues, proved challenging for them.

They indicated that the instructional discourse of the schools was dominant and noted that support from individual teachers, usually the resource teacher, and the underpinning ethos of the school was influential in facilitating flexibility in relation to the regulative discourse. To varying degrees they indicated that they had endeavoured to facilitate a PRF through the weak framing of pace and teacher role in particular. However for approximately half of the NQTs the task of contending with life as a NQT meant that while awareness of good practice was evident, the transfer of this into actions proved challenging.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research has served to inform a review of both the philosophical perspectives and pedagogical practices of the author. It has highlighted the need for enhanced dialogue with colleagues in order to ensure a more cohesive approach in relation to the "*what*" and the "*how*" of teaching and learning. Efforts have been made to include more references to practical tools for teaching and assessment. It has highlighted the necessity to provide further inservice for practicing teachers and school principals and the value of bringing together both inservice and preservice teachers in order to facilitate the meeting of minds and experiences. Finally the research findings have reinforced the important relationship between research and practice if we are to continue to capitalise on the opportunities and address the challenges that teaching and learning poses.

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