Some reflections on the links between teacher education and peace education: Interrogating the ontology of normative epistemological premises

CrossMark

Zvi Bekerman [a,*], Michalinos Zembylas [b]

[a] School of Education, Melton Center, Hebrew University, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel
[b] Open University Cyprus, Cyprus

HIGHLIGHTS

- Reflections on the links between teacher education and peace education.
- Interrogating epistemological and ontological positions in education.
- Teachers able to critique the manifestations of nation-structures in everyday practices.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critique of the essentialized assumptions about identity, culture and education that are found in contemporary peace education literature and explores the implications that these assumptions have for teacher education in conflict and post-conflict societies. The authors suggest that there is a need to move away from the epistemological primacy of these assumptions toward a critical ontological, contextualized and historicized approach. The authors propose that teachers need to be educated to become 'critical design experts'.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades there has been considerable growth of peace education as a field of social education that is concerned about war, conflict, and violence and how to promote peace in the world (Burns & Aspeslagh, 1996; Danesh, 2006; Galtung, 1969; Harris & Morrison, 2003; Reardon & Cabezudo, 2002; Salomon & Nevo, 2002). It has evolved in multiple geographical sites reflecting the universal character of conflict (Burns & Aspeslagh, 2014; Magendzo, 2005; Murithi, 2009; Wintersteiner, Spajic-Vrkas, &Teutsch, 2003) and with its fast evolution it has become a concern in teacher education (Baker, Marin, & Pence, 2008; Brantmeier, 2011; Quezada & Romo, 2004). The scope of peace education has expanded in recent years and has become more inclusive of areas such as human rights education, citizenship education, multicultural education, environmental education and social justice education (Bajaj, 2008; Brantmeier, 2010; Diaz-Soto, 2005). As a field though, peace education is still in the process of forming and articulating itself as a distinct area of research and practice and as an area which aligns and fits neatly into a variety of other distinct educational fields which stress equity and fairness (Reardon, 2000).

Having conducted ethnographically-oriented anthropological work in our conflict-ridden societies (Israel and Cyprus) for the last ten years (e.g. see Bekerman, 2003, 2005, 2009; Zembylas, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2013b; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010a, 2010b, 2012) within the broad area called 'peace education', and having analyzed the role of many agents involved in this process (teachers, students, parents, administrators, and ministry officials), we reached a moment in which we asked ourselves if there was something special or relevant to be said about teacher education and its relation to peace education. This questioning has led to the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +972 2 5882120; fax: +972 2 5322211.
E-mail addresses: mszviman@mscc.huji.ac.il, zvi.bekerman@mail.huji.ac.il (Z. Bekerman), m.zembylas@ouc.ac.cy (M. Zembylas).

following dilemma: Is there something unique to be said about the relationship between peace education and teacher education in conflict and post-conflict societies such as the ones we come from[1]? Or is the issue simply about 'adding' the dimension of peace education to what is already known about teacher education theories and practices?

Our ethnographically-oriented anthropological analysis has turned our attention to the essentialized assumptions that are made about identity, culture and education in conflict-ridden societies and the implications of these assumptions for peace and transformation. Over the years, we have come to realize the problems that result from the normative epistemological assumptions, stances and practices that are used to justify these essentialized ways of knowing about identity, culture and education and their naturalization in nation-state structures. Paying attention to things that exist or can be said to exist in our contextualized and historicized studies has helped us understand the value of critically assessing the ontological position inherent in normative premises about identity, culture and education. The purpose of this paper, then, is to outline this journey and argue for the importance of examining what we perceive of as existence and how we can know, while describing and analyzing the consequences of this examination for the relationship between peace education and teacher education. Eventually, our goal is to create some openings for a debate that, we believe, is long overdue; that is, what does it mean for teacher education to take critically into consideration the historicized and contextual nuances of conflict and peace? This is a question which should resonate in much more than just peace education or teacher education matters for it is central to much of the educational enterprise as such.

To justify the value and implications of our argument to critically assess the ontological position inherent in normative premises about identity, culture and education, we clarify first the concepts of 'ontology' and 'epistemology' and how they are applied in this paper. Then we develop our argument in three steps. First, we outline the lessons we have learned from our long-term ethnographic research with teachers in the conflict societies we studied. Then we critique the normative epistemological assumptions made in peace education and teacher education programs and argue that these assumptions often reproduce conflict and prevent transformation. Finally, we argue that to break this cycle of reproduction we need to interrogate the ontological position of normative premises upon which knowledge judgments are made; to explain what this means in practice for teacher education, we propose that teachers need to be educated to become 'critical design experts'.

2. Conceptual framework

Nation-state structures are complex and changing them is not easy. If what we are considering as change is not a revolutionary attempt but a modest, realistic and evolutionary move, then the changes we need to consider should be restricted and have a generous regard for practice, while taking place at several levels—teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers. Therefore, we propose that we start from analyzing the details of everyday

conduct in schools and how those details often reflect and/or reproduce larger social structures. Without a basic understanding of what gets done in everyday educational activities, we believe that very little can be done to change the taken-for-granted assumptions that have been identified so far. Details are the ones that allow us to understand the ways in which the macro-level picture (e.g. educational policy)—that is, the details which are abstracted from their historicized context—come to get organized at the micro-level of everyday teachers' practices. Turning our attention to details helps us understand the very nature of the world and its existence as opposed to adopting a normative position that already assumes what we can know about the world and how we can know it; the former position is known in philosophy as 'ontology' and the latter as 'epistemology'. Next we describe what we mean by these two terms and consider briefly how they are applied in this paper.

First of all, we need to acknowledge that an in-depth discussion of the philosophical concepts of epistemology and ontology would take us far beyond the scope of this paper; it is impossible to do justice to the enormous literature that exists concerning these concepts and their implications for research and theory in different disciplines. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is sufficient to define ontology and epistemology as well as their implications for our analysis here. Importantly, we want to use these concepts at two different levels: as both ways of acting and ways of inquiring about social practices. It will soon be clarified what is meant by that.

Generally speaking, *ontology* is the study of being (the word derives from the Greek for 'existence') and deals with questions concerning what things exist or can be said to exist. The key issue is whether there is something 'real out there' that is independent of our knowledge of it (Hay, 2006). For example, are there essential differences between racial or ethnic identities that exist in all contexts and at all times? An essentialist or foundationalist ontological position would say 'yes', whereas an anti-foundationalist position would emphasize the social construction of these phenomena. *Epistemology*, on the other hand, is the study of knowledge (the word derives from the Greek for 'knowledge') and reflects one's view of what we can know about the world and how we can know it (Audi, 2010). The key issue here is whether an observer can identify 'real' or 'objective' knowledge and if so, how. Evidently, this takes us back to ontology; if, for example, one adopts an anti-foundationalist position, then the assumption is that there is not a 'real' world out there which exists independently from the meaning we ascribe to it. Given that epistemology is concerned with standards for deciding what we know (or do not know) and whether these claims are justified, there is always a normative element in epistemology (Audi, 2013), that is, there is no such thing as a 'normative free state'. Needless to say, the idea that any knowing implies some sort of normative position is questionable by some. It needs to be clear though that our concern here is not normativity per se, but the particular normative presuppositions that we identify in relation to peace education. What normative epistemological presuppositions do, according to Audi, is that they reduce concepts (e.g. identity, culture) to naturalistic ones and thus they do not leave much room for distinguishing how different kinds of acting render practices ambiguous, variable and unsettled. For example, a normative epistemological position on identity or culture, such as the one outlined next in the paper, 'naturalizes' identity and culture and assumes that we can derive proofs about those from a sweeping historical account of society as a story of continuity and unity.

Clearly, then, ontology and epistemology are related; one's ontological position affects one's epistemological position because the study of knowledge assumes that objects exist (Hay, 2006). Whether we like it or not, and whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, we make ontological assumptions, or we 'do' ontology in

---