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Representing diversity in education: Student identities in contexts of learning and instruction

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this special issue is to present research that addresses issues of how diversity is represented, understood and accommodated to in educational settings. It also seeks to explore how these representations and categorizations relate to student identities and to expectations of student adaptation and performance in contexts of teaching, learning and psychological testing.

Diversity is certainly not a new phenomenon in education. Classrooms, most likely, have always been quite diverse. Even in the highly selective scribal schools in Mesopotamia some 5000 years ago when instruction was institutionalized, there were signs of a “mismatch” (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001) between the ambitions of the educators, on the one hand, and student adaptation to the activities offered, on the other hand. Students, who for some reason could not follow the instruction or live up to the expectations, were subjected to various kinds of disciplinary corrections or even expelled to maintain institutional order (Falkenstein, 1948; Kramer, 1981, p. 8). These kinds of problems seem to have existed in schools in ancient Greece, in Rome (Marrou, 1977), in medieval schools (Orme, 2006) and they have continued to be a part of schooling through the millennia. The identity of being a pupil implies subordination to specific rules and institutional norms that differ from those that apply to being a child.

In the 19th century the idea of compulsory education spread in many Western countries. Inspired by the institution of the Volksschule in Prussia in the early 19th century (Rössler, 1961), ruling elites in Europe and North America adopted ideas that public schooling could play an important role for spreading literacy and other elementary skills, and for disciplining the

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population to accept the worldly and religious authorities that were central to the emerging nation states. In the wake of this massification of education, girls and children of workers, farmers, ethnic and linguistic minorities, immigrants and others, who had previously been excluded from education, began to enter classrooms to be taught. This implied that the diversity of pupils in terms of social and cultural backgrounds in the school systems increased dramatically. Teachers had to handle the difficult problems of organizing instruction in what were often overcrowded classrooms and with students who were more or less prepared for participating in the specific institutional practices that characterize schooling.

When schooling expanded to include entire populations, the institutional traditions of how to organize teaching and learning were already in place (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000). There were classrooms, seating arrangements, lessons, the specific format of communicating referred to as lecturing, authority patterns and norms of conduct to observe, texts to be copied and memorized and so on. By and large, the established institutional format survived this rather dramatic expansion of the system. The obligations and entitlements of teachers and pupils were clearly defined and remained fairly stable, and the pupils who could not live up to the expectations were corrected through punishments of various kinds, expelled or simply dropped out of school.

The expansion of schooling triggered the interest in developing institutional strategies for handling diversity. The issue of how to deal with the “nonmainstreamers” (Deschenes et al., 2001, p. 533), who caused teachers so many problems in classrooms, attracted much attention in the late 19th and early 20th century. Various types of segregation strategies were introduced, and special classes were organized in Europe and the USA to provide instruction for children who did not fit into the normal classroom and who were “difficult to teach” (Mehan, this volume). The weak and the dull, for instance, should not be allowed to “remain a hindrance to the 90 or more per cent of normal children of the community?” as the researcher W.S. Monroe argued in 1894 (quoted in Trent, 1994, p. 147).

Today, diversity, in terms of social background, cultural and ethnic origin, language, perceived learning ability and so on, is a prominent feature of most educational settings in many societies. Intra-institutional factors of the educational system, such as the introduction of comprehensive schools, the integration of students with disabilities, and the growth of higher education to include new groups, contribute to making student populations more diverse. More general social transformations following in the footsteps of globalisation, such as migration and a changing labour market, add to the trends of increasing diversity in student populations in terms of their interests and commitments to schooling.

2. Representing diversity

An interesting element of the issue of diversity and schooling is how diversity is represented in language inside and outside institutional settings (Hjörne & Säljö, 2012). What do we mean by diversity and how do we communicate about it? Human reasoning and social action rely on categories and categorizing practices (Bowker & Star, 2000). Linguistic categories serve as mediating resources for organizing the world, for establishing similarities and differences, for ‘seeing’ in institutionally relevant manners. Hospitals, banks, insurance companies, welfare agencies and many other institutions cannot do their job unless they can make distinctions between who is sick and who is not, who is a creditworthy client and who is not, and who is entitled to specific benefits and who is not. They have to develop reasonably stable categories when engaging in practices of “people processing” (Prottas, 1979) in a diverse and ambiguous reality. These categories also form the backbone of the documentation and memory practices of institutions. Forms, patient records, client reports, data bases and so on are organized through the use of categories that reflect institutional traditions and priorities (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002).

In schooling, categories referring to intellectual ability have played an important role for deciding who is normal and who is deviant (cf. Mercer, 1973). Terms such as retarded, feeble-minded, slow, dull, handicapped, word blind, learning disabled and many more have appeared and have been perceived as relevant categorizations, each in their own time. In the wake of the development of the first intelligence tests, a range of categories connected to the idea of human abilities following the normal curve emerged. Terms such as idiot, half-idiot, quarter-idiot, imbecile, moron, mentally deficient, retarded, gifted and others were used to categorize children (and adults) at different levels of the intelligence scale (Forssman & Olow, 1961). During the past decades, neuroscience has produced a large number of categories which are used for categorizing learning difficulties and explaining school failure: ADHD, HKD, DCD, EBD, dyslexia, dyscalculia and several others.

In this context it is important to keep in mind that categories are not merely etiquettes. They are intimately tied to the use of resources in schools, preschools and other institutional settings. In many countries, a child who is diagnosed with a neuropsychiatric disorder will be entitled to various kinds of support, such as access to special education teachers and small-group teaching (Graham, 2007). At university level, a student who is diagnosed as dyslectic may be entitled to special arrangements when it comes to taking entrance tests or writing essays for exams. Thus, categories do concrete work when it comes to using institutional resources, and they provide arguments for treating persons in particular manners. In this sense, they intervene in the very fabric of power in society and form part of decisions that may be consequential for individuals and collectives. And, as is illustrated in the articles in this volume, one concrete consequence of prominent categorizing practices is that they individualize the problems and place them inside children (Mehan, 1993, this volume).

In addition, categories serve as social representations (Moscovici, 2000) that are used for communicating about social issues and identities. They are part of the public production and reproduction of knowledge and political opinion, and, in the famous words of Foucault (1972, p. 54), they “systematically form the objects of which they speak.” Children with neuropsychiatric diagnoses, for instance, did not exist until a few decades ago, but now they are well-known elements of

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