



# Conceptualising teachers' understanding of the immigrant learner

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines teachers' accounts of their experiences with Portuguese children and adolescents in British schools. Specifically, teachers' accounts of "bright" students and students' "needs" are examined to investigate understandings of their immigrant students. Valsiner's conceptualisation of the psychological construction of difference as a process that is socio-culturally constituted and value-laden and Hermans and Kempen's notion of "contact zones" are used as a conceptual framework. The analysis shows that processes of "normalisation" and "stigmatisation" underline the interpretation of differences. The "bright" Portuguese student becomes assimilated to the category British – the difference is eliminated. The student with difficulties, "not-bright", become assimilated to the category other – the difference is valued as a "deficiency" (e.g. special needs). Teachers acting within different contact zones provided alternative representations, and in particular, those from immigrant background take into account the cultural dimension in their conceptualisation of the immigrant learner.

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding trajectories of development and learning of children of immigration is a priority in our current world. The large-scale of travelling and migration across countries and continents has created many challenges for families, schools and other institutions in modern societies. Teachers and parents often educated in relatively monolingual and homogeneous cultures have to engage with the schooling of children, who have different languages and cultures at home and at school. This is a task that many parents and many teachers feel unprepared and uncertain about how to carry out (Abreu & Cline, 2005; Abreu & Elbers, 2005; Civil & Andrade, 2002; Cline et al., 2002; O'Toole & Abreu, 2005).

The presence of immigrant learners in many classrooms challenges mainstream teaching practices (Gorgorió & Planas, 2001; Gorgorió, Planas, & Vilella, 2002; Pastoor, 2005). Teachers are confronted with a learner who is "different" linguistically, socially and culturally. As dialogical beings (Hermans & Kempen, 1998) teachers respond to these situations. How teachers respond to cultural diversity is an area under-investigated, but one which is increasingly gaining attention. So far, the available studies often provide evidence of teachers' difficulties in working in culturally diverse classrooms, which is attributed to lack of knowledge, skill and motivation to cope with the challenges of cultural diversity (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003). Studies have also shown that teachers' attitudes and views on multicultural education impact on the way they respond and organise their classroom practices and interactions. For example, in studies with teachers in England, Abreu and

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her colleagues (Abreu, 2005; Cline et al., 2002) found a great divide on teachers' views on the significance of the student's cultural identity in their school learning. This divide included teachers who "play down cultural differences" on the basis of universal (and culture free) constructions of human development and understanding of "equity" as treating "everybody as equals". This was the dominant representation, in the sense that was shared by the majority of participants, but also in the sense that the institutional structures facilitated drawing on this view. Often teachers referred to their professional training, the National Curriculum and the teaching materials as constraining their practices in multiethnic classrooms (Cline et al., 2002). Teachers, who "accept cultural differences" as an important dimension in students' school learning were of a minority in these studies. Interestingly, they were the teachers who could resource their views drawing on their own personal experiences of being a member of a different ethnic group or immigrant origin.

Thus there is some indication that the ways teachers are responding to cultural diversity may relate to their own life trajectories. But, there is something puzzling in the dominant response of the "playing down of cultural differences", as often this "mismatch" and "conflict" with the expectations and experiences of students and parents. Cultural differences are often perceived by an immigrant student and by the parent as an important dimension of the student's learning. But why does a teacher play this down? Here we would like to take a step back and investigate the processes that underline teachers' construction of their understanding of the "immigrant" learner. We will examine teachers' accounts of their experiences with Portuguese children and adolescents in British schools (Abreu & Lambert, 2003) that focused on the academic development of their Portuguese students. Our aim is to shed light on underlying representations and processes in teachers' understandings of their immigrant students.

Two main conceptual ideas from current cultural psychology will be used as a framework for the analysis of teachers' understanding of immigrant learners. The first idea informing the analysis is Valsiner's conceptualisation of the psychological construction of difference as a process that is socio-culturally constituted and value-laden (Valsiner, 2000). The second idea comes from Hermans and Kempen (1998) who introduced the notion of "contact zones" between cultures to explain the multiplicity of human experience in the current climate of globalisation. By contact zones Hermans and Kempen mean the zones where people meet (physically or virtually). The focus on contact zones informs questions such as "How do the meanings and practices of the contacting partners change as a result of their communication, understandings and misunderstandings and conflict and power differences in these contact zones?" (p. 1117). In a certain way the notion of contact zone can be seen as an elaboration and extension of Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). One difference is that Vygotsky introduced the concept to explain the cultural transmission of knowledge, while Hermans and Kempen wish to emphasise the cultural production of new knowledge. The other difference is that Vygotsky's emphasis was on negotiating understanding of knowledge tools, while Hermans and Kempen also emphasise negotiating values and power differences. Combining these conceptual ideas enables us to explore teachers' accounts of differences with reference to existing dominant social representations of the immigrant learner and also with reference to their experiences in contact zones. The concept of contact zone will highlight the situated nature of teachers' constructions of the difference. Comparing teachers who operate in different cultural contact zones, will enable us to examine constructions of the immigrant learner that emerge from particular histories of contact.

## 2. The psychological construction of difference

Construction of differences, according to Valsiner (2000), is a basic cultural-psychological process. In his view,

Our psychological system is set up to make distinctions within the field in which we are constantly existing. Human distinctions are overdetermined by meaning – both pre-emptively (my personal meaning system pre-sets my attention to create some distinctions and overlook the possibility of creating others), and in conjunction with the distinction (a perceptual distinction becomes meaningfully interpreted). Each interpretation is value-laden – beginning from the value of the given distinction itself. Furthermore, the value-laden nature of interpretations is action-prescriptive. (pp. 90–92)

Valsiner's view enables us to hypothesize that teachers working with immigrant students would actively engage in meaning making processes as an attempt to understand differences between their British students and their immigrant students. Secondly, Valsiner's argument is that the socio-cultural basis of individual meaning making processes will predispose the individual to pay attention to some distinctions and overlook others. Recognition of the socio-cultural basis suggests that teachers who are members of particular schooling histories, traditions and practices may be predisposed to certain constructions of the difference. Furthermore, the constructions of the other that emerge from what is constructed as sameness and what is constructed as different are value-laden (Valsiner, 2000).

The notion that the psychological construction of differences is socio-culturally based and value-laden is not new. For instance, it is a central notion in social representations' theories (Moscovici, 2000). In order to understand the world around them people draw on social representations, such as social representations of what is an intelligent person (Mugny & Carugati, 1989), what is a mad person (Jodelet, 1991), what is a person from a particular cultural and/or ethnic group (Howarth, 2002). These images that people form serve as categories to position the other, and thus can be seen as defining social identities (Duveen, 2001). They become part of one's social reality (Howarth, 2006), and mediate how one perceives, interprets and categorizes their social world, and also mediate what one does in the social world. For example, the image of what is an intelligent person, serves not only to categorize oneself and others as more or less intelligent, but it also impacts

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