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From monocultural to intercultural educational research

Pirjo Lahdenperä

ABSTRACT In this article, the author looks at the Swedish educational system and the consequences that the Swedish multicultural society has had for this system. The author especially focuses on the consequences that multiculturalism has for research into educational issues and how research itself needs to become intercultural.

There are already many so-called multiethnic or multicultural schools in Sweden, i.e. an increasing number of schools that have or will have students from various cultural backgrounds. Such schools are multicultural and multiethnic because their students are. These schools can function as ordinary Swedish schools without defining themselves as, or functioning as, multicultural or multiethnic schools. Evaluations from a number of multicultural classes show that teachers, despite the students’ diverse backgrounds, often taught classes as if the students were all ethnically Swedish. Some research, for example by Ladenperä (1997), has shown that a class consisting of a number of multicultural students is often defined by the teachers as a class with many immigrants. This perspective assumes a monocultural perspective, where “Swedishness” forms the basis, norm and goal for teaching.

If one defines a school as multiethnic and multicultural in its activities, one should reasonably assume the existence of appropriate educational content, working methods and a different type of organization, which uses the students’ different cultures and languages as a starting point instead of solely depending on Swedish. The various aspects of school activities, such as teaching, evaluation assessment and grading, operations and curriculum, educational materials etc., should reflect the multicultural composition of the student body. The development of activities from monocultural to multicultural is as yet a fairly unexplored area. Research on the role of the teacher should go hand in hand with multicultural school development. Consequently, there is clear potential (and a challenge for school research) to develop the knowledge area that we might call “Learning and the teacher’s role in multiethnic schools and classrooms”.

From Immigrant Research to Intercultural Research

There is extensive international and Swedish research on ethnic relations with a focus on so-called immigrants and minorities. Intergroup attitudes between various
Swedish communities or between Swedes and immigrants have also generated considerable research. It has been important for social planning purposes to gain knowledge about immigrants, which, according to Markku Peura (1988, 1991) has led to the situation that immigrant research receives legitimacy, economic support and status in Sweden. But the Swedish state, Swedish society, Swedish schools and the Swedes themselves have not been part of this research tradition. The fact that so little research takes place on ethnic relations, in which the focus is on the majority society and its institutions, might be due to the fact that few researchers come from immigrant backgrounds or represent the country’s ethnic or linguistic minorities. Of course, this influences one’s choice regarding research interest and perspective. Peura further maintains that the majority—unlike the minorities—is characterized by privileges that include access to education, resources and important contacts within the world of research.

The problems associated with immigrant research do not only relate to the circumstance that immigrants or minorities constitute the object of different types of mappings and investigations, but also that the reference point for the results and conclusions uses monocultural Sweden as the measurement instrument. “Swedishness” constitutes the starting point, and the norms, values of Sweden are beyond evaluation. The monocultural perspective—this might relate to the identity formation of minority children, the control of language, school success or the practical–pedagogical work in the school—is usually the standard against which everything is measured in today’s school research.

The main report of the commission on language and cultural heritage, entitled “Different origins—solidarity in Sweden”, officially introduced the concept of intercultural teaching in Sweden many years ago. The use of the term intercultural teaching was recommended to express a new attitude between Swedes and immigrants in school and education. The same report (SOU, 1983:57, p. 157) proposed that intercultural teaching be introduced as a desired approach in all teacher training. When the concept intercultural was introduced during the 1980s, it dealt primarily with so-called immigrant knowledge. The purpose was to gain an understanding of immigrants and minorities and to thereby create a conflict-free coexistence between different ethnic groups in Sweden (Batelaan et al., 1992; Ladenperä, 1995).

There are many different ways in which we can define the term “intercultural”, depending on the context. However, “intercultural” commonly refers to an interaction process with mutual contacts between persons from different cultural backgrounds. In general, the presence of individuals from various cultural backgrounds points to the existence of intercultural connections to different ethnic cultures. In communication theory (Lundberg, 1991), it is the quality of cultural encounters that determines whether an interaction is intercultural, i.e. encounters where different actors are conscious that their own cultures place limitations on communication, and thus influence the possibilities for an open and equal relationship. Communication and interaction can stimulate individuals to reconsider and widen their own cultural horizon.

In my dissertation “Immigrant background or school difficulties?” (Ladenperä,
I investigated teachers’ attitudes towards students from immigrant backgrounds and indicated what I considered to be characteristics for an intercultural attitude. In the construction of an intercultural attitude, I envisioned a shift of focus—from the students’ immigrant backgrounds and ethnicity to the teachers’ consciousness of their own cultural backgrounds. It also implies a knowledge of how one’s own culture and ethnicity affect a person from another ethnic background. An intercultural attitude, moreover, creates more equal relations between actors, where none of the actors have the power to define the other’s culture and ethnicity. An intercultural attitude can even be expressed in the way in which problems involving cultural conflicts are defined, or in descriptions of cultural differences and cultural conflicts. This can take place, for example, in school, in the classroom, among the teachers or between the teacher’s and student’s culture.

The dissertation provides an example of intercultural research. I have not studied how multicultural children feel or what difficulties they encounter in school, but instead I have investigated how interpersonal relations are shaped in the teachers’ accounts of the student and the kinds of perceptions and assumptions that these are built on. In this process, I touched upon the interethnic patterns of interaction between the teacher and the student, or among the students themselves.

Changing Ethnocentrism and Monocultural Viewpoints

One’s choice of research approaches and methods is, among other things, dependent on how the research problem and the purposes of the research are formulated, as well as what kind of knowledge is sought. When studying the thinking, ideas, postures, evaluations and attitudes in an intercultural perspective between different actors, the social constructionist approach is a very fruitful one. Adopting this approach also allows us to explore these aspects as relational and as interpersonal phenomena.

Social Constructionism, Context and Culture

Many researchers (for example Pearce, 1989, 1994; Shotter, 1993; Gergen, 1985, 1989) who adhere to a social constructionist approach also adhere to a communicational-theoretical approach and method in their research. This is because both (the communicational-theoretical as well as the social-constructionist) focus on communication and interaction between people.

The social-constructionist view of communication presupposes that people interpret and create their social realities. Language is the key instrument that allows us to create the reality we live in and to coordinate our actions with others. This implies that meaning is created and given by the interaction that takes place between people. The interpretation of an event or experience for a person depends on the context in which she or he finds herself or himself. Thus, meaning also depends on social circumstances, evaluations, criteria, interests, attitudes and social practices. Social reality is created, ordered and given meaning with linguistic tools (for example, terms, concepts, categories, etc.). They are culturally bound to the extent that they
are defined in a specific cultural context, where meaning is created and given. Culture is a part of our social world and represents the context for our conversations, of which we are the products.

When one applies the above social–constructionist theory to the concept culture (as an analytical tool), it can, in my view, be described or analyzed or studied from seven different points of view:

1. cultural artefacts, i.e. different cultural products and depictions, such as cuisine, art, architecture, music, costumes and dance;
2. repeated patterns of behavior, such as different types of practices, traditions, rituals, celebrations, how one maps out one’s day, etc.;
3. collective religious conceptions and belief systems, i.e. different conceptions, values, virtues, opinion systems, norms and evaluations, what is right and wrong;
4. our thinking, i.e. the way to think, abstractions, concepts, categories, metaphors, memory functions, etc. are culturally bound as well as;
5. emotions, i.e. frames of mind and emotional expressions and feelings;
6. the way to communicate and relate to one’s surroundings, such as family relations and the relationship between the sexes, are dependent on the surrounding society and culture in the above-mentioned social–constructionist perspective.
7. self concept, how one constructs one’s personal picture as a person, is also culturally bound.

Contrasting Culture

People who form an integral part of one and the same ethnic culture tend to perceive phenomena in a similar way. “To take something for granted” and “to see something as normal” are embraced by people sharing cultural horizons according to Pearce (1994). Therefore, all culturally bound perceptions and conceptions can be regarded as more or less ethnocentric. Individuals who share these conceptions and evaluations do not generally perceive them as ethnocentric but as obvious. In order to make clear these ethnocentric conceptions and evaluations, such individuals must be confronted with other ways of perceiving and evaluating the phenomenon in question.

In order to elucidate these ethnocentric or culturally bound conceptions (the way to think, evaluate, express oneself emotionally, etc.), different research approaches use varying methods. Grönfors (1982) points to the anthropologist’s way of studying “foreign” cultures, and the importance that the researcher places on “immersion”, which implies that the researcher must live in the culture, which is to be studied, without losing one’s own cultural frame of reference and evaluations. What is common to different research approaches is that the researcher is placed in a culturally contrasting perspective. The “immersion” consists of making use of the researcher’s competence in a special way. Immersion allows the researcher to grasp the underlying thoughts and contextual agreements that are valid in the culture in question.
Intercultural Educational Research

There are a great number of pedagogical and didactical problems that affect learning and the teacher’s work in multiethnic schools and classes. Teachers who are active in multicultural schools have, via their daily activities, acquired practical knowledge about how one works in such schools. To make hidden knowledge or so-called unconscious teacher competence more visible in multicultural teaching requires a special type of school research. In such research, an outside researcher/teacher trainer participates and analyzes the activities in the class and also the teaching process. I consider the following research areas to be central for the development of knowledge in the practical-educational work that takes place in a multicultural/multiethnic school:

1. To develop knowledge on the teaching and the organization of the learning processes in multiethnic/multicultural schools and education.
2. To develop both interdisciplinary and subject-specific, multicultural and intercultural curricula and work procedures in schools.
3. To develop further the level of cooperation between the schools and the teachers, on the one hand, and the students’ parents and the community, on the other hand.

In addition to these practical educational areas, it is crucial to study how the teacher’s role changes when working in a multicultural environment. However, it can be quite draining to cooperate with mother-tongue teachers and parents from different ethnic cultures. Likewise, the teacher can end up in different types of role conflicts, in which students and parents expect a different type of pedagogy compared with, for example, what the national curriculum recommends.

Intercultural Action Research

Since the pedagogical and didactical problems that occur in multiethnic schools are thoroughly socially constructed and contextual, it is an advantage that the research takes place in the situation where it is experienced. Heterogeneity in the project with respect to insider versus outsider status, ethnic background, professional experience etc. is an asset in the research process. “Researchers” come into the situation with a variety of views and experiences. This pertains to various aspects of the research process: the theories employed, the hypotheses, the interpretation of research results or their research attitude. Teachers come with cultural competence concerning the school and its curriculum, the methods employed and special teaching problems that might have been experienced. Heterogeneity provides the possibility of “complementary asymmetrical positions” (Boman & Rodell Olgac, 1999), where the researcher and the teacher combine their different competencies and perspectives jointly to create a picture of the school and the work in the classroom.

If different contrasting views are combined, intercultural research offers further
possibilities to make clear culturally bound assumptions of learning and teaching, as well as the teacher’s work and role. This is made easier if the teacher and the researcher have different cultural competencies and ethnic backgrounds. The prerequisite for such intercultural work is that there is an opportunity to discuss culturally bound aspects and that they occur in an open and permissible climate, where no one judges or evaluates the other’s work. It can be difficult to attain such relations between a teacher in the field and a teacher trainer or evaluator, since it is usually the task of teacher trainers to judge and evaluate the teachers and their work. To invoke other perspectives and “cultural restraint” through role-playing exercises can be a possible way to generate joint productive research work.

Furthermore, it is my opinion that it is not only possible to learn theoretically (i.e. cognitively) how to become conscious of one’s own cultural conceptions and limitations. Ethnocentric conceptions and evaluations must be confronted with other ideas, and they need to be emotionally processed. This is also time consuming. Consequently, if a research project claims to be called intercultural, this implies that actors from different ethnic and cultural perspectives need to participate, as well as having both majority and minority perspectives present. The characteristics of the research objects (for example, focusing on multicultural children or intercultural learning) do not make the research intercultural. An intercultural teaching process is demanded in those situations where different phenomena are viewed from different cultural viewpoints and perspectives and confronted with them. Therefore, it is an advantage if the research group consists of different ethnicities so that an intercultural learning process can begin. This learning process makes it possible to deal with different culture-bound conceptions, the reconstruction of one’s old belief systems and practices, as well as the creation of something new.

In sum, intercultural research can be described as research which studies different phenomena from interethnic, intercultural viewpoints, and where different cultural perspectives (for example majority and minority perspectives) meet and complement each other. A multicultural society, in which schools will work interculturally, challenges the established research practice and imposes new demands. The task of intercultural pedagogical research, among other things, is to make visible the ethnocentric and monocultural ideas and evaluations in schools and in education. The aim is to bring about changes in one’s outlook and the process of interaction, as well as in the monocultural way of tackling the “problem”. But no individual research approach can study this complex multicultural system on its own. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scholarly research attempts are needed that illuminate the school and the educational system from different points of view.

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