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Preservice Teacher Training for Diversity: A Research Project Based on an Intercultural Course

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This article discusses the exploratory stage of a research project addressing concerns of preservice M.Ed students in France regarding issues related to diversity by examining how an intercultural course can contribute to the shaping of their understanding of diversity. The criteria retained to analyse how the course can potentially participate in this shaping is discussed and illustrated with a sample Personal Experience Description. This PED shows how the course can give students the theoretical background needed to frame past experiences. The promising preliminary results will enrich the main phase of this project.

Key words: Preservice teacher education, diversity, interculturality, reflexive practitioner

Este artículo trata sobre un proyecto de investigación lanzado en respuesta a las preocupaciones de estudiantes de Master en Educación para el Profesorado en Francia con respecto a los problemas relacionados con la diversidad, analizando cómo un curso sobre la interculturalidad puede contribuir a formar su comprensión de la diversidad. Los criterios del análisis se discuten y se ilustran con un ejemplo de la Descripción Personal de una Experiencia, mostrando cómo el curso puede dar a los estudiantes el fondo teórico necesario para enmarcar una experiencia anterior. Los resultados preliminares son prometedores y enriquecerán la fase principal del proyecto.

Palabras clave: Formación inicial de profesores, diversidad, interculturalidad, agente reflexivo

Introduction

Cultural diversity has been a prevailing theme in discussions about education over the past decade in Western Europe (Meunier, 2013; Zimenkova, 2011). Educators are concerned about how to adequately address needs among learners from different backgrounds, such as those who speak languages other than the

school language at home. In addition to active educational practitioners who are in constant contact with a wide variety of learners, preservice educators are apprehensive about their ability to successfully navigate diversity in an educational context.

This paper discusses a research project, DiPerLang, *Diversités des personnes et des langues (Diversity of Persons and Languages)*, whose aim is to provide French preservice Master of Education (M.Ed.) students with the opportunity to develop theoretical knowledge surrounding issues related to diversity through an intercultural course, and to apply this theoretical knowledge by developing pedagogical resources and carrying out workshops with school children. More specifically, this project seeks to address the following questions:

1. How do M.Ed students understand “diversity of languages and people”? How is this understanding (re)shaped in the context of an intercultural course?
2. How do these students apply this understanding
 - a. to the development of pedagogical resources targeting school children, and
 - b. when carrying out workshops based on these resources?
 - c. How is such understanding (re)shaped during transmission?

The main purposes of DiPerLang are threefold: To expose students through an intercultural course to the theoretical background necessary to address diversity in their future role as educators, including the opportunity to practically apply these concepts to a real-life teaching situation; to observe and analyze how students appropriate concepts related to diversity and how this understanding is transmitted to school children; and to contribute to the discussion about what teacher training should look like in the early 21st century. This commitment to quality teacher training is reflected in the interventional research paradigm adopted, where “the researcher is not only the observer of a phenomenon, but intervenes in the action, in the research and the training of the participants” (Duchesne & Leurebourg, 2012, p.3).

This paper focuses on the exploratory stage of DiPerLang, beginning with an outline of the theoretical framework adopted, followed by a brief description of the participants. The two-phase methodology consisting of an intercultural course and the development of pedagogical resources is then described, followed by a preliminary analysis of a short written production by the participants. The paper closes with a discussion of the advantages of the adopted approach to diversity education, future developments of the DiPerLang project, and diversity education in teacher training in general.

Diversities and Interculturality: Theoretical Framework

As noted by Carton (2011), most understandings of interculturality center around two major conceptions of culture. In the first set of approaches, culture is seen as that which is common to a group of people. This is what is generally

understood when someone refers to “French culture” or “American Culture”. This type of approach effectively reduces a person to a handful of characteristics, related to their supposed culture, and neglects the processes of person-to-person negotiation of meaning and understanding inherent to human interaction. Culture and language frequently go hand in hand in visions of culture stemming from this type of approach.

In the second set of approaches, the vision of culture moves beyond labels and considers an “individual as involved in a network of relationships which are in constant evolution and specific to that person” (Carton 2011, p.14). This is reflected in Abdallah-Preteuille (2004)’s foregrounding of the inter- part of interculturality as opposed to culture. By rejecting a static notion of culture, these approaches take into consideration the constant evolution of personal identities and pluralities through encounters and interactions in a variety of contexts. The resulting vision is that of an individual as diverse.

The approach to diversity adopted by the DiPerLang project opposes views of culture which overlook a basic fact about human interaction, succinctly captured by Wikan (2002): “Cultures don’t meet. People do”. Identity is seen as complex, fluid and constantly shifting. Every individual participates in a variety of “discourse systems” (Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2012) and is constantly navigating and managing diversity, even if using only one language. The way a linguistic message is delivered in an academic setting and a social setting can differ drastically, just as the way persons identify themselves in diverse situations can also differ.

Language and what is said about language plays an active role in the construction and perpetuation of social realities, and contributes to the symbolic power of a language variety (Bourdieu, 1992). Qualifying a given way of using a linguistic code, such as an accent, as desirable attributes more symbolic power to that language variety and, by extension, to the speakers who use it. At the same time, such recognition reinforces negative beliefs, or what Blanchet (2016) calls glottophobia – negative discrimination of people based on the use of linguistic forms deemed as inferior – towards speakers of other varieties. In short, attitudes surrounding language diversity in a social situation can contribute to the development and perpetuation of unjustified treatment of people based on the way they use language in a given context.

The omnipresence of language norms in the classroom context makes judgements regarding language frequent. One way for educators to take into account the diversity present in schools, is by developing an understanding of the various factors at play. With an adequate theoretical framework, they will be able to identify and question insidious ideologies and consider the universality of diversity and the diversities of each individual. The DiPerLang project, in addition to exposing M.Ed students to the theoretical background which can assist them in understanding diversity as interaction, evolution, shifting and change, also offers them the

opportunity to transmit a more accurate understanding of these notions to school children.

Methodology

Context and Participants

All of the participants were enrolled in the second-year of an M. Ed. at the École Supérieure d'Enseignement et d'Éducation (*Lorraine Institute of Education*), in France, in one of two programs: The Teaching and Accompanied Practice program (TAP) preparing them for a teaching career in the public primary school system, or the Instructional Design program (ID), for students pursuing a career in education outside the school system.

The exploratory phase of the Dipeplang project (2016-2017 academic year) involved 24 TAP students and 21 ID students. All participants took an intercultural course given by one of the researchers (Lemoine-Bresson), a one semester mandatory course (27 hours) for the ID students, and a full-year optional course (64 hours) for the TAP group.

The exploratory stage of this project took place in two phases, the first one consisting of the Intercultural course and the second one the creation of pedagogical material. All of the participants took part in the first phase, and only 29 took part in the second phase.

The Intercultural course contents for Phase 1 were derived from three main bodies of work: The instructor's doctoral thesis (Lemoine, 2014), Dervin (2016)'s "methodological toolbox" and European Council resources (see http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/LangEduc/LE_PlatformIntro_en.asp).

Theoretical references included, among others, Abdallah-Preteille, Dervin, Wikan, Machart, Leyens, and Liddicoat. The course was divided into three modules, each dealing with different aspects of interculturality:

1. The evolution and shifting of identities: the role of attribution of characteristics, the myth of homogeneity, essentialism (culturalism, differentialism, etc.);
2. The use of culture as an excuse, as an argument in favor of, as a fortress, as a strategy, as power (focusing on the notions of difference and diversity);
3. The multifaceted role of Inter-: interactions with self and others, intersubjective, interrelations, negotiations, agreement, disagreement.

During Phase 2, the students created pedagogical material to run workshops with schoolchildren dealing with diversity of people and languages. Throughout the stages of conception, preparation and running of the activities, they provided written feedback on their experience by critically reflecting on their teaching practice. In this paper, only the results of the first analysis of the personal texts from phase one will be considered.

Preliminary Results: Personal Experience Descriptions

In the Personal Experience Description (PED) activity, participants were asked to describe a personal experience with the Other and to interpret the experience using theoretical notions from the Intercultural course and formulating questions that arise from the situation. Through the PEDs it is possible to gain an appreciation of how the students' understanding of diversity of persons and languages is shaped and reshaped through interaction with the course in mind.

Criteria retained for analysis

As the activity was part of a summative evaluation, students' responses reflected this situation, in particular with respect to appealing to the instructor's expectations. Nevertheless, the PEDs ranged greatly in terms of context and the vision of interculturality depicted. The choice of the encounter and its description and interpretation provided insights into the students' understanding of the Other and what qualifies as an intercultural experience.

Description

One of the first elements analyzed was the students' position as either encountering the Other, in the role as the Other, or as an observer (Rabatel, 2007). The elements used to contextualize the experience, including the physical location, as well as the criteria used to construct and differentiate between the self and the Other were considered, especially since the importance of context for apprehending interactions was emphasized during the intercultural course. Another key element was the identification of the intercultural issue at stake, which demonstrates an understanding of how such issues arise. Special attention was paid to whether or not the student referred to a specific vision of the norm present in the situation described. Voices external to the experience but which contributed to the creation of attitudes, such as "I had been told that..." (Deronne, 2011) were also taken into account.

Not all PEDs contained elements corresponding to all these criteria, nor to the criteria retained concerning the analytical part of the writing activity. Just as the use of various elements to construct the PED was taken into account in the analysis of these texts, the absence of elements was also considered.

Interpretation

In the second part of the activity the students were asked to interpret their PED. The reshaping of student understanding through interaction with the course material was considered through the use of terms for the theoretical notions covered in class. Contradictions in the text or the misuse of terms were also taken into account in the analysis. By deconstructing their experience through naming and questioning the obvious and beliefs taken for granted, factors contributing to the intercultural issue at stake can be accounted for. A potential influence of the course can also be observed through the questioning of various attitudes, experiences and visions. The table below summarizes the criteria retained for the analysis of the interpretation part of the activity:

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Interpretation present: yes/no2. Use of terms covered in class used3. Naming and questioning the obvious4. Theoretical notions present5. Questions asked |
|---|

Relationship between the description and interpretation

The third dimension taken into account was the presence or absence of a link between the description and the interpretation to establish the coherence between these two parts. The taking of a moral stance was also considered.

Sample PED and analysis

In order to demonstrate the applicability and the interest of the three-part analysis of the PEDs, the following sample PED, translated from French, will be considered:

My personal experience goes back to when I was still a psychology student (in the last year of my bachelor's degree), and we had a Polish or Russian (from a Slavic country) student in our class. She was a little bit older than I was and was already a nurse in her home country. What I am questioning are the thoughts, the representations that I had towards this foreign student.

First of all, I positioned myself in a hierarchical and folkloric manner: indeed, I differentiated between "her" and "us" (French psychology students), and as well, her accent seemed very "exotic".

I focused on her difficulties in written French: she didn't write very well in French and so she wasn't integrated and wouldn't succeed in her studies, according *to me*. I didn't try to find out if she was a critical thinker or if what she wrote was relevant, especially seeing as how she

had made it to the 3rd year of the degree program just like me. There was no real sharing between her and I. I didn't try to get to know her more. I literally excluded her from our group, whereas her nursing experience would have most likely enriched my "cultural and intellectual background.

As can be seen, the student's encounter with the Other takes place in the context of a university class in a recent past. The student describes herself and the Other using the criteria of nationality, profession, and age: a French psychology student, and an older Slavic nurse. The intercultural issue is that of inclusion/exclusion, attributed to a vision of a norm – the Other's lack of mastery of the French language.

Terms used in the intercultural course are present, notably "folkloric," "hierarchical," "us and them", and "positioning oneself." The obvious is named, the fact that "she didn't write well" and "had an exotic accent" were equated with a perceived inability to achieve success or to be a full-fledged member of the student group. The theoretical notions present include those from the course used, moving beyond a homogenous vision of a group (in this case, foreign students not completely mastering French) to understanding individuals in their own personal complexity (a trained nurse with experience and a 3rd year psychology student, etc.).

The description of the experience serves the interpretation leading to the realization that the student allowed the vision of the linguistic norms to obstruct her view of the Other as a person, as a critical thinker, as a nurse with experience. Through the deconstruction and reconstruction of the situation, the student is able to question herself. The intercultural course has given the student the theoretical background and words necessary to reframe this past experience and to glean insight from it.

Discussion

The preliminary analysis of these PEDs gives insight into students' understanding of the Other and how they define an intercultural experience. Developing the ability to identify an intercultural issue and to account for the contributing factors allow students a means to reframe a past experience, as well as the tools necessary to frame future encounters. Some of the PEDs show that students are still negotiating their understanding of the relevant theoretical concepts, underlining the need to allocate sufficient course hours to intercultural courses and promoting the relevance of these courses to pre-service educators. Some students, in their interpretation of their experience, also indicate their desire to transfer this type of critical thinking to their own pupils. This reinforces the applicability of future educators developing a theoretical background in notions concerning diversity.

The analysis of the processes of creating pedagogical resources developed in the second phase of the exploratory stage of this project, and of transferring

knowledge to school children, will provide additional insight into the (re)shaping of students' understanding of issues surrounding diversity and will aid in the preparation of the main phase of the project.

The latter, scheduled to take place during the 2017-2018 academic year, will enable the development of a more thorough analysis of the transformation of notions, by taking into account personal factors potentially influencing this process, such as past teaching, volunteer or educational experiences.

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