

PEDAGOGIE

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ENHANCING CURRICULUM RELEVANCE



EDITURA UNIVERSITARĂ

Colecția PEDAGOGIE

Redactor: Gheorghe Iovan

Tehnoredactor: Ameluța Vișan

Coperta: Angelica Mălăescu

Editură recunoscută de Consiliul Național al Cercetării Științifice (C.N.C.S.)

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

Enhancing curriculum relevance / Dan Potolea, Ioan Neacșu,

Lucian Ciolan, Ileana Rusenescu. - București : Editura

Universitară, 2011

Bibliogr.

ISBN 978-606-591-228-1

I. Potolea, Dan

II. Neacșu, Ioan

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371.214

DOI: (Digital Object Identifier): 10.5682/9786065912281

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Editura Universitară

Director: Vasile Muscalu

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Distribuție: tel.: 021-315.32.47 / 319.67.27 / 0744 EDITOR / 07217 CARTE

comenzi@editurauniversitara.ro

O.P. 15, C.P. 35, București

www.editurauniversitara.ro

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The importance of curriculum theory and development in the construction of an inclusive approach to difference

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Introduction

Although it is obvious that students differ from one another in many ways, differences among students have not always deserved much attention from educational authorities, teachers and educational researchers. To a large extent, schools have been strongly influenced by a “homogeneity culture”, which has compelled teachers to “teach many students as if they were only one” (Barroso, 1998, 1999). That culture has, nonetheless, been challenged by discourses that claim attention for difference in schools. In addition, educational policy makers have taken some concrete measures that address issues of difference among the student population. Those measures have frequently been justified on the basis of their potential to reduce inequality, that is, to promote inclusion.

The academic field of curriculum theory and development has included the above-mentioned issues in its research agenda, especially by studying curriculum differentiation as a response to difference in school. In this context, curriculum differentiation has been envisaged by some authors (e.g., Roldão, 2003a; Rodrigues, 2003; Sousa, 2010) as an instrument for the promotion of inclusion and equity vis-à-vis differences between students, although “the research shows that, contrary to expectations, differentiation enhances inequalities” (Ayalon, 2006, p. 1186).

There is often a deficit of discussion on the kinds of difference that deserve to be considered when curriculum differentiation is dictated by policy makers, practiced by teachers or studied by researchers. This lack of discussion brings about a risk of simplistic and stereotyped characterisations of students, which may compromise the effectiveness of curriculum differentiation from the very beginning.

Given these concerns, in this article I intend to discuss the concept of difference and its relationship with other concepts, like diversity, heterogeneity, identity, inequality, and deviation from the norm. I will also discuss the role of curriculum theory and development vis-à-vis difference,

as compared to the role of other fields that somehow address issues of difference between students.

1. Discourses that categorise, amplify, and hide differences

Difference and identity are interdependent concepts: difference is “what marks out one identity from another” (Woodward, 1997, p. 30). The production of identities occurs at the crossroads of two processes: integration in affinity groups and assertion of distinction vis-à-vis others (Pinto, 1991). The concept of heterogeneity is more specific, for it refers not to difference in general but to difference within a population or group. The concept of inequality is also more specific, since it applies to situations in which difference entails more or less opportunities for accessing certain goods. Discussion around the concepts of diversity and difference is especially relevant in the context of this article, because of its importance for understanding processes that have traditionally been used to distinguish students and how those processes tend to make some differences more visible and obscure others.

According to Burbules (1997), the concept of difference is broader than the concept of diversity. The latter relates to categorical differences, that is, differences that can be classified in categories or taxonomies. An approach that views difference merely as diversity underlies many discourses that distinguish people according to race, gender, age, religion, and other dimensions that fit into a categorical logic. Burbules criticises this kind of approach and highlights the unstable nature of categories. When that unstable nature is not acknowledged, discourses about difference tend to reification, which hinders the perception of the dynamic nature of difference, by freezing systems of classification and thus making them static, context-independent, and deprived of the flexibility that would allow them to accommodate, at any time, any instance of difference. The same issue has been discussed in terms of identity, via criticism towards essentialist perspectives, which view identity as a static description because they do not acknowledge that it involves performativity. As Silva (2000, pp. 92-96) puts it, identity entails performativity and is thus related to the process of “becoming”, rather than to the state of “being”. The concept of performativity, developed by Butler (1993), is grounded on the acknowledgement not only of the fact that identities are transformed but also of the role that certain discursive acts play in that transformation. Thus, the propositions “the meeting is closed” and “I pronounce you husband and wife” are clearly performative, inasmuch as they are considered necessary in

order for certain facts to occur. The proposition “John is little intelligent” seems descriptive, but, as Silva (2000, p. 93) explains, may function as performative, since its repetition may end up by producing the “fact” that it was only supposed to describe.

The simplification of reality that is conveyed by reified sorting systems obscures not only the processes through which identities and differences are constructed but also the least visible aspects of that same reality. Those systems capture the most outstanding aspects of difference, to the neglect of less visible differences, which are often excluded from official discourses, although they may be significant from the standpoint of those who experience them. Indeed, many discourses about difference are focused on highly visible instances of difference (related to dimensions like race and gender, for example) and, through rhetoric that emphasises advocacy of minorities, end up by privileging the majority among the minority. This tendency can be found by a simple library search for texts about the education of immigrants in the U.S.A. If one compares, for example, the amount of available material about Chinese or Mexicans with the amount of available material about Greeks or Portuguese, one may deepen one’s awareness of how certain groups that are insistently presented as oppressed minorities may be, after all, relatively well positioned in the web of power relations, if compared to those who belong to minorities that are so small that become invisible. Quantity and visibility may also be sources of power. Certain groups have the power to assert their claims by organising social movements – like the civil rights movement that took place in the U.S.A. back in the 1960’s – or, at least, parades in big cities, which are not accessible, for example, to a few students who live in a small village. Categorical rationality may thus be combined with the power of certain lobbies to promote approaches to difference that are not fully inclusive, because they serve the specific interests of given groups. This kind of logic is evident in a study, conducted by Zine (2001), about the participation of minority groups in a debate on educational policy and inclusion in Toronto. Reacting to an official proposal focused on issues of anti-racism, an organisation called “The Antiracist and Multicultural Educators Network of Ontario”, supported by a strong pro-gay lobby, issued a document in which the above-mentioned official proposal is criticised for being “too narrow” and for disregarding “the concerns of gays and lesbians, women, the working class and the disabled” (Zine, 2001, p. 241). Zine’s study highlights that the above-mentioned debate – although evolving from a specific focus on issues of anti-racism to a more general discussion on equity – became polarised, by being held by religious communities on the

one side and by the gay community on the other side. This polarisation excluded many issues from the debate, including problems that were considered very relevant from the perspective of some immigrant families. Zine (2001) comments on this phenomenon by stating that “equity-seeking groups often see themselves as being forced to compete for limited pieces of the pie and this competition often results in the disavowal of other forms of difference” (p. 263).

But it should be noted that certain groups that express themselves in a visible and relatively free manner nowadays have not always been able to do it, which means that the visibility of certain groups varies with time and depends on the conditions under which they can or cannot assert their identities. Homosexuals, for example, are more visible and powerful nowadays (at least in the western world) than they were at times when a high level of repression directed towards them and other inhibiting circumstances favoured the concealment of homosexuality.

In categorical approaches, the least visible items tend to be ignored or to be pushed into residual categories, designated as “other” in many graphs and tables. In Portugal, the country where this text is being written, it is not difficult to find discourses focused on Gypsies or immigrants from Cape Verde, including discourses that call for educational policies and practices that make teaching adequate to the characteristics of students who belong to those groups. It is much more difficult to find expressions of such concern in regard to the “others”, to the hidden minorities.

The categorical nature of difference conceived as diversity is obvious in the following words, transcribed from the first chapter of a book on education and diversity.

Education for diversity refers to any formal teaching and learning opportunities provided for groups of students who differ in some educationally relevant way from the majority of students attending a society’s schools. For my purposes in this book, I am narrowing that definition slightly so that it applies only to students who differ on one or more dimensions of ethnicity, class, race, gender or language. (Corson, 1998, p. 1)

Corson, like many other authors, emphasises thus certain dimensions of diversity that are already quite visible. The transcribed words represent a discourse about diversity that tends to macro-analysis, for it is organised around macro-categories that hold many units, this tendency being reinforced by an explicit reference to the group of students – not to the individual student – as the entity that differs. Furthermore, by defining

education for diversity as an education directed to students who differ from the majority – which has often the same meaning as saying that those students represent deviations from the norm² – this discourse raises doubts about its more or less inclusive orientation, inasmuch as it seems to suggest the co-existence of an education for minorities and an education for the majority, rather than an education for all.

Many other texts are organised according to a categorical approach to difference. Some of them do this by deploying quite simplified frameworks, like, for example, the one that Ramsey (1998) uses to characterise the contexts in which children develop themselves and learn, which includes the following dimensions: race, social class, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and ability/disability. In other texts, we can find frameworks that consider a larger number of dimensions. For example, Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (1996) consider twelve sources of cultural identity: race, sex/gender, health, ability/disability, social class, ethnicity/nationality, religion/spirituality, geographic location, age, sexuality, language, and social status. But not even the most complete framework fully covers the multiplicity of dimensions in which difference expresses itself.³ Why not to add, for example, the dimensions “temper” and “political/ideological orientation”? If these dimensions were included, others would still be excluded, and so on. The most visible dimensions seem to have an ensured place in every characterisation; the least visible dimensions only have room in some characterisations, which does not mean that they are irrelevant for teaching, at least from the standpoint of those who feel them as meaningful. The same is true for categories within each dimension, as we have already seen.

The extent to which categorisation is specific is another problem associated to categorical approaches. In the approaches that have already

² Although the majority is not necessarily dominant and does not always hold the norm. Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (1996) remind us about the situation in South Africa during the apartheid regime and draw our attention to the cases of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and Colorado – North American states where, by the end of the twentieth century, more than 50 per cent of the school population was already composed of students who belonged to the so-called minority groups. In such cases, “minority children may find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being the majority in a world whose rules are set by a more powerful minority” (Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 1996, pp. 8- 9).

³ The predominance of a categorical logic in these texts does not necessarily mean that their authors have a fully static view of sorting systems. Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (1996) acknowledge not only that those systems are socially constructed but also that some of them, especially those that are based on stereotypes, tend to hide important differences (pp. 72-73).

been presented, there is not only inter-categories diversity. Diversity also dwells within the categories. For example, when references are made to “former emigrants” in several publications (e.g., Souta, 1997, p. 38; SCPÉM, 1998, p. 127), it should be noted that, in terms of constructing identity and difference, emigrating to Germany is different from emigrating to Canada and that, in Canada, living in Montreal is different from living in Vancouver. Dividing categories into multiple levels of sub-categories would probably be more respectful of certain specificities, but would certainly yield a very fragmented taxonomy, one that would not be helpful for those who daily deal with student diversity in schools. Furthermore, the very assumption that the construction of such taxonomy is possible must be questioned, because categories are less discrete in a taxonomy of nationalities, races or religions than they are, for example, in a biological taxonomy. The possibility of crosses between Muslims and Christians is real whereas the idea of crosses between mammals and reptiles is not plausible. But even the sorting processes that have relied on a traditionally stable biological condition – like sex – are being questioned. The emergence of transsexualism challenges the binary system that only considers males and females.

In certain domains, there is a high level of arbitrariness in the practices of categorisation/classification, which becomes especially problematic when access to special programmes and/or funding depends on those practices, as it often occurs in the context of the education of students with special educational needs (SEN). As Baker (2002) explains, the process of categorisation may easily become complex or even conflicting:

One does not have to travel far in most school districts to gain a sense of the complexities of labelling and the politics of inclusion/exclusion. Sometimes a child does not wish to be labelled for special services to save face among peers. At other times parents actively want a child to be labeled whom teachers do not perceive as having a disability at all because labeling provides access to services that parents could not obtain otherwise. On other occasions there is parental consent to labeling but not to the recommended medication. In still other instances, teachers wish to have a child labeled, but parents refuse to consent to a description of their child as, for example, emotionally disturbed. (pp. 691-692)

Even more problematic than fragmentation, border crossing, and arbitrariness, in the construction of a taxonomy of differences among students, is the multiplicity of dimensions in which difference expresses itself upon a single unit. As Burbules (1997, p. 101) puts it, “multiple

dimensions of difference are always acting simultaneously". Nobody is simply white, homosexual, or Gypsy. There are, for example, Gypsies who live in Portugal but lived in other EU countries before, which makes their classification problematic in the context of classificatory systems that include the following categories, among others: "Gypsies", "European Union", and "former emigrants" (cf. Souta, 1997, p. 38; SCPEM, 1998, p. 127). Identity is made of multiple references (Lages, 1997), and the possible over-emphasis upon certain aspects of identity or difference to the neglect of others may occur even when a single individual is considered. Therefore, in terms of curriculum management, it is interesting to observe which aspects of students' and teachers' identities are more valued or devalued in the classroom. That is why Moreira and Macedo (2002) encourage students and teachers to examine "which parts of their selves are allowed into the classrooms and the curricula and which parts are rejected for being disturbing or subversive" (p. 25).

Holding these assumptions about multiple references in terms of identity in the field of curriculum is not compatible with a full commitment to a taxonomical logic, especially if proportional representation is also a concern. This kind of concern underlies, for example, several studies on textbooks. Sleeter and Grant (1997) reviewed some of those studies and considered proportional representation as an important factor⁴ in their own analysis of 47 textbooks published in the U.S.A. between 1980 and 1988. The content of the books was categorised mainly in terms of race, gender, and disability. Even if only these three dimensions of human diversity were considered – which, as we have already seen, would be extremely limiting – an author of textbooks would have many difficulties to fulfil a commitment to proportional representation. If the author considered, for example, three racial categories, two gender categories, and four categories of disability – which would, again, be very limiting – the author would have to respect the proportions of 24 combinations of categories (e.g., black, male, deaf; white, female, blind...). The more dimensions and categories were considered the more absurd the effort of representation would become. Meanwhile, the author would probably forget the original objectives of the textbook.

In order to avoid this kind of wasteful work, it would be useful, in many situations, to invest more effort in understanding the curricular potential of the various aspects of students' identity and less effort in the distribution of students among categories. The use of identity as the key

⁴ It should be noted, however, that they strongly considered other factors as well, especially the distribution of the various groups that were represented in the textbooks among more or less dominant or socially prestigious roles.

analytical tool may even help researchers and teachers overcome some limitations of the categorical approaches, as Gee (2001) suggests:

In today's fast changing and interconnected global world, researchers in a variety of areas have come to see identity as an important analytic tool for understanding schools and society. A focus on the contextually specific ways in which people act out and recognize identities allows a more dynamic approach than the sometimes overly general and static trio of "race, class, and gender". (p. 99)

Rather than sorting out, for example, Gypsy students, it is important to investigate which experiences of concrete students from that ethnic group are sources of identity with curricular relevance. Does the nomadic tradition that characterises Gypsies have a significant influence on a given student's identity? If it does, what importance may that have when that student is supposed to learn geography or history? Certain aspects of identity gain curricular relevance inasmuch as they affect the student's relationship with the curriculum that is proposed to him or her. Furthermore, a curriculum that respects identities cannot be based on identities that are assigned externally, through previously set up sorting systems. If the student does not feel that he really belongs in the category that he was assigned to, that assignment may have been useless or counter-productive. But teachers do not always notice that students sometimes view themselves less as instances of officially set up categories than as instances of other categories. If identity can be defined as the condition of being recognised as a certain "kind of person" (Gee, 2001), we must consider possible points of discrepancy between self-assigned identities and identities assigned by others. A significant part of any student's identity probably lies on her affinity with other students with whom she shares some interests. But that affinity-identity is usually less visible from the school's standpoint than the institution-identity that results from the assignment of grades or the discourse-identity constructed through what teachers say about that student beyond official categories. Those three perspectives on identity – discursive, institutional, based on affinity – and also a "nature perspective" form a conceptual framework developed by Gee (2001), which helps us understand how certain aspects of students' identities are amplified and others are hidden in schools. In schools, many affinity-identities are ignored and other identities are discursively constructed.⁵ Understanding how the curriculum

⁵ Some authors would argue that every identity is discursively constructed. Without questioning the validity of that position, it should be acknowledged that Gee's approach has the merit of emphasising other processes of construction whose role in the production of identities cannot be undervalued.

is affected at the crossroads of these processes may contribute to a sound curriculum differentiation.

This discussion on categorical approaches does not imply their full rejection. The definition of categories and systems of categories is often necessary to organise thinking on reality. What is problematic in certain categorical approaches is not the categorical organisation itself, as a conceptual map, but the reification that is often made of the categories, which favours views of categorical systems as unquestionable and encourages school practices that deal with certain categories as if they could be isolated from the necessarily complex profiles of the students. Smith and Deemer (2000) state that, after all, it is impossible to dispense with categorisations and that criticism towards categorical approaches should, therefore, represent not a rejection of categorisations but a call for a permanent awareness of the ongoing process of construction and organisation of knowledge. In the light of these assumptions, there is no reason to deny the need to study certain categories in their specificity, as I shall discuss in the next section.

2. Specialised discourses

Various dimensions of difference that operate in educational contexts have become the objects of study of academic specialities, such as multicultural education, education of students with SEN, and gifted education. These fields have produced discourses that, notwithstanding their focus on specific aspects of difference, are sometimes extended to difference at large and in some cases are used to claim some leadership in the construction of innovative approaches to difference.

The specialisation of the study of difference has the advantage of allowing for the deepening of one's knowledge on one or more of its dimensions. But the usage that is made of that specialised knowledge often loses sight of the multidimensional nature of difference and becomes locked in categorisations that are limited to artificially isolated aspects of students' identity. When this occurs, one falls into a strictly categorical logic that may threaten inclusive education, inasmuch as it is likely to promote the idea that, for example, a blind student and any other blind student are necessarily more alike than a blind student and any non-blind student.

In the context of an analysis of special education programmes developed in the U.S.A., Meyen (1995) acknowledges that the categorical approach deserves some credit for attracting policy makers' attention to the educational needs of students with disabilities. But the definitions of the

officially created categories can be used as a justification to direct students who are “difficult to teach” to special programmes. By overstating students’ limitations and understating their abilities, one can easily include them in those categories and thus contribute to the perpetuation of their enrolment in those special programmes. Smith, Neisworth, and Hunt (1983) had already criticised categorical approaches to the education of students with SEN and proposed, alternatively, a functional approach, one that takes the assessment of what each student can or cannot do at a given time as the basis for the elaboration of adequate educational plans.

As I have stated above, specialised discourses are not limited to the specific dimensions of difference around which they have been developed. They often refer to other dimensions of difference or to difference at large and emphasise the contributions of their specific approaches to more general discussions and conceptualisations.

Thus, some authors have advocated the extension of the concept of multicultural education in order to include not only issues of ethnical and racial diversity, but also issues related to gender, social class, and SEN (Gay, 1995, p. 28). This inclusive tendency, which has affected multiculturalism at large, is not free of exclusions, as Glazer (1997) notes, referring to the North American multiculturalism:

Multiculturalism is, in its own way, a universalistic demand: All groups should be recognized. Some groups, however, have fallen below the horizon of attention, and other groups, defined by neither language nor ethnic or racial culture, have risen above it. So we find, for example, that multiculturalism is indifferent to the variety of ethnic groups of European origin but has come to encompass women and gays and lesbians. (p. 14)

This is another example of the tendency to focus attention on the most visible groups, to amplify the voice of the “majority within the minority”, and to forget minorities that are little visible. In the case that Glazer discusses, this tendency leads to awkward consequences: a field of study and social action becomes less responsive to groups that should naturally be within its scope than to groups that are supposed to be addressed by other fields. Attraction for the most visible is so strong that it pushes researchers towards the study of parts of neighbouring fields, while leaving parts of their own field unstudied.

Some feminist educational researchers have claimed the extension of feminist studies beyond gender issues. For example, De Lair and Erwin (2000) state the following, in the context of a discussion on principles for early childhood education inspired by feminism:

Feminist early childhood teachers are often a voice for the disenfranchised groups of our society, and advocate for social changes that will acknowledge and give voice to the experiences and expertise of these groups in the school, community, state, and nation. We have defined 'disenfranchised groups' as those cultures, socio-economic classes, language groups, ethnicities, and other groups who rarely have a voice in the planning of educational curricula, government policies, developmental theories, and educational research. In the USA, these include (but are not limited to) the homeless, children of gay and lesbian parents, children of the working class and poor, children of color, and recent immigrants. (p. 162)

Also queer theory is sometimes claimed to provide fundamental contributions to general discussions of difference in educational contexts. Britzman (1998) raises the following question: "Can gay and lesbian theories become relevant not just for those who identify as gay or lesbian but for those who do not?" (p. 211). The author answers this question in the affirmative and emphasises the role of queer theory in deconstructing normalcy as a guiding principle for approaching difference. She also suggests the possibility of a more ambitious project for gay and lesbian studies: the provision of "a way to rethink the very grounds of knowledge and pedagogy in education" (p. 211).

No matter how strongly approaches that are centred on certain dimensions of difference may influence general approaches to difference in school, the latter – since the former will always be more or less specialised – should be constructed in a space that is simultaneously independent of specialised discourses and open to their contribution. Curriculum theory and development – which in democratic societies searches for answers to the question "what to teach to every student?" – becomes therefore a fundamental source of discourses that are naturally open to every dimension of difference that can operate in school. Curriculum differentiation is the instrument for practicing the ideas conveyed by those discourses.

Many texts on educational theory and research cross curriculum theory and development with some specialised discourses on difference. There are texts on curriculum theory and multicultural education (Gay, 1995; Gimeno Sacristán, 1999; Leite, 2000, 2002), curriculum and gender studies (Fonseca, 2000; Louro, 2000; Munro, 1998), curriculum and SEN (Moreira & Baumel, 2002), curriculum and social class (Branch, 1996), curriculum aligned with multiple intelligences and learning styles (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2000), and so on.

None of these crossings yields, by itself, a thorough approach to difference in school, although some of them tend to produce quite integrated discourses. This is the case of some curricular proposals that have been conceived according to different learning styles and/or multiple intelligences, through which some authors and educators struggle against the traditional tendency of school to favour forms of curricular work that are based on verbal and linear communication to the detriment of forms of communication that are more compatible with the strategies that certain students prefer to use in order to manage and organise their learning (Smith, 2002). For Silver, Strong, and Perini (2000), the above-mentioned proposals maximise the exploration of natural abilities of students, unlike the traditional curriculum, which is criticised for exploring only part of those abilities:

Teachers need to create a classroom environment that allows students to process information the way they do in the world outside of school. Outside school, children tend to rely on their natural ways of learning. In school, however, we often ask students to process in only one or two ways. This significantly inhibits their ability to grasp the concepts and skills they need to learn to construct a substantial and permanent base of knowledge. Moreover, the preponderance of one or two styles and one or two intelligences in our schools prevents students from developing what Goodlad (1984) refers to as the “full range of intellectual abilities” (p. 93) demanded and valued in the worlds of work and citizenship that await them after school. (p. 47)

In a simplistic view of curriculum differentiation, it could be said that, since school exists to ensure learning, school would respect difference and promote equity by adapting the curriculum to the way each student learns best. One could also state that, if intelligence is defined as “the ability to solve problems, or to fashion products, that are valued in one or more cultural or community settings” (Gardner, 1993, p. 7), school, by adjusting the curriculum to the multiple intelligences of their students, would make every student maximise the development of his or her abilities and concomitantly bring about the best possible contribution of all the students to society. According to this perspective, curriculum differentiation would ensure equity by adapting the curriculum to different forms of processing information and transforming it into knowledge, and to different kinds of ability to solve problems and meet social expectations.

Although this perspective is, to a large extent, compatible with the concept of curriculum differentiation advocated in the present article, it tends to pay little attention to dimensions of difference that, rather than

being directly related to forms of learning and solving problems, are, above all, related to conditions under which one can learn. It is possible to characterise a given student in the light of the current typologies of intelligence and learning styles, but if that student, for example, lives in a violent and socio-economically disadvantaged home environment he or she will be affected by some dimensions of difference whose curricular responses – for the time being – can hardly be found in the theory of multiple intelligences or in theories on different learning styles, although some research has already addressed the influence of the environments where the students live on the construction of their intelligences and their learning styles. That research has favoured the emergence of some “culturally responsive” approaches (Dilworth & Brown, 2001, p. 656), although such approaches tend to fall into a categorical framework, inasmuch as they are organised around the most common ethnic categories.

As Klein (2003) notes, a strictly categorical logic is incompatible with the combination of forms of representation that usually occurs in an individual act of learning:

Contrary to LS theory, students’ learning preferences do not comprise a typology. Typologies were once popular in psychology, but have given way to more nuanced constructs because most pigeonholes do not accommodate people well. The visual/verbal typology assumes that these are opposed tendencies. Theoretical discussions most often refer to students as *either* visualizers *or* verbalizers, only incidentally acknowledging ‘mixed’ types. (p. 47)

Frequently the nature of curricular activities and materials lends itself to the combined deployment of various forms of representation in a single learning situation. Klein exemplifies this fact by referring to the learning of the Pythagorean theorem, which is neither possible by using its verbal representation only nor by using its visual representation only.

Given these and other limitations of current theories on learning styles and multiple intelligences, Klein (2003) calls for more contextual forms of inquiry into students’ multiple cognitive processes, which consider the complex interaction that occurs between the latter and different forms of curricular representation:

LS and MI theories are only two ways of construing the relationship between the multiplicity of cognitive resources and the diversity of curricular representations. Curriculum and students’ minds interact and even constitute one another. However, categories such as ‘verbal’, ‘spatial’ and so forth are too simple to conceptualize either of these forms, and certainly too simple to capture the relationships between

them. I contend instead that it is necessary to consider, activity-by-activity, how the characteristics of particular curricular representations interact with the cognitive resources of the learner. (p. 62)

An inclusive approach to difference cannot be constructed by adding crossed perspectives, like the ones mentioned above. That addition would not include dimensions of difference that have not generated and probably will not generate specialised discourses with academic visibility that take them as objects of study. For example, it is unlikely that there will be academic disciplines centred on the study of the problems of students who live far away from the school where they study, although some research about the implications of territorial inequality for education has already emerged (e.g., Warrington, 2005).

In many cases, living far away from the school may partially be a problem of rurality. But, although in countries like Australia and the U.S.A. rural education is a consolidated academic field,⁶ some authors complain about the marginal and little visible character of the reality that they study. For example, Yeo (1998), referring to the situation of rural education in the U.S.A., states the following:

Although the inner city, another marginalized zone in this society, has been the increasing focus of public and academic attention in the last few years, rural America has yielded no such efforts, thus remaining essentially invisible. The hypertextuality of urban poverty, feeding American notions of race and segregation, purposely maintains a notion of poverty that is non-White, non-male, and non-indigenous, thereby obfuscating rural poverty. (p. 32)

But it would be too simplistic to consider that the problems of the students who travel long distances between their homes and their school is just an issue of rurality, considering that nowadays “the rural world is ‘impure’, colonised by the urban world and by the global culture” (Sarmiento, 2003, p. 65). In other words, we live in a time when “the rural world and the urban areas have become increasingly mingled” (Ferrão, 2000, p. 45). The expansion of the urban world and the related predominance of the service sector in the economy make the clear distinction between those two worlds increasingly difficult, opening room

⁶ Urban education is also a consolidated field in the U.S.A, where it has been quite subject to the problems of categorical approaches. As Popkewitz (2002) notes, “the category of urban education is not applied to the children of the wealthy who live in American cities.” It is applied to children who have traditionally not succeeded in schooling – the poor and certain immigrant, ethnic and racial groups – functioning, therefore, as a “cultural space that locates the child who is different from the norms” (p. 30).

for an alternative analytical perspective, one that is based on the existence of different degrees of density, not only in terms of population but also in terms of economic and institutional activity. Among the students who make long trips to attend school there are children whose parents are farmers⁷ and work near their home but there are also children whose parents work in the service sector and also travel daily between their home in the countryside and the urban setting where they work and acquire urban cultural references, these references being added to the ones that enter the home directly through television and other media.

Studies on rural schools in some European countries have been, to a large extent, focused on the problems of small schools for the earliest stages of education. The main issues addressed by those studies are the isolation of some of those schools, the small number of students who attend them, and the consequent pressure for them to close. These problems are different from the one that specifically affects students who dwell in the countryside and attend the school in an urban centre. The situation lived by the latter represents more than a transition between the rural and the urban worlds; it also represents more than a possible construction of semi-rural or semi-urban identities. It is a situation that includes a factor unnoticed in many analyses: the many hours that many of those students spend in public transport. Assuming that “we live in a time when space, in itself, becomes less and less valuable, and mobility and speed of access become more and more valuable” (Veiga-Neto, 2002), it is important to acknowledge that there are among the student population significant differences in terms of speed of access to school. In those cases, a curricular action that is respectful of difference may require granting curricular relevance to the very experience of commuting.

In the light of the concept of curriculum differentiation held in the present article, there is no need for teachers to spend much energy classifying their students as, for example, urban, rural, and semi-rural. What is important is that they be alert to possible variations among the students in terms of rurality/urbanity, more or less associated to other factors, including the distance between the home and the school. It is also important that experiences of students related to those factors are considered, if their deployment in the process of curriculum development facilitates learning, which also applies to any aspect of the students’ experiences that may be

⁷ When I refer to this reality, I do not ignore that a phenomenon of “disjunction between the rural world and agriculture” has occurred in Europe since the last quarter of the twentieth century. As Ferrão (2000) explains, this phenomenon has been stimulated by European policies that favour the invention of “a rural world detached from agriculture” (p. 47).

relevant for the construction of a curriculum that is sensible to difference and committed to the promotion of equity.

In short, curriculum differentiation, in order to be able to respond to any kind of difference, cannot be constructed by simply transposing one or more specialised discourses to the curricular domain. It should use, when necessary, knowledge provided by those discourses on certain aspects of difference, but it should also be sensible to aspects of difference that they do not capture. Considering the existence of the latter aspects of difference and the already discussed limitations of categorical approaches, the kind of curriculum differentiation advocated here cannot be based on a taxonomy of differences or on a repertoire of responses to difference. It can be constructed by developing the ability to understand the curricular potential of every student's experiences, by finding in them, as Dewey (1997) suggests, motives for deploying the formal curriculum. It can also be constructed by developing competences that enable teachers to organise their work in order to make that logic of deployment inclusive – that is, to make it reach all the students – and continuously activated – that is, taken as a fundamental strategy of curriculum management, not as a device that sometimes is exceptionally used in a context in which the rule is to develop the curriculum according to a technical orientation, based on a uniform transmission of knowledge.

The idea that curriculum differentiation, conceptualised according to a non-categorical logic, is the prime strategy for handling difference has been advocated by Borland (2003):

I am advocating that we dispense with the concept of giftedness – and such attendant things as definitions, identification procedures, and, for the most part, pull-out programs – and focus instead on the goal of differentiating curriculum and instruction for all the diverse students in our schools. (p. 118)

Interestingly, these words were written by an author who is positioned in a specialised field – gifted education – and once believed that the main task of those who work in that field was “to discover the true nature of giftedness” (Borland, 1997, p. 18). Moving from that belief to the current position, Borland produces a discourse that, unlike the other specialised discourses that I have commented, is highly critical of the concept upon which the specialised field was constructed (giftedness), to the point of advocating the eradication of that same concept. This implies neither advocating the extinction of that specialised field nor denying the existence of differences among the student population that require from that same field the production of specialised knowledge. It implies assuming that the

best way of paying attention to those differences is to promote a curriculum differentiation that is sensible to every kind of difference:

I am suggesting that we direct our efforts toward curriculum differentiation, bypassing the divisive, perhaps intractable, problems of defining and identifying giftedness, which is, as I argue above, a multifariously problematic construct. Were we to set as our goal the creation of schools in which curriculum and instruction mirrored the diversity that is found in the human race, and were we to achieve this goal, the only legitimate aim of gifted education would be achieved. (Borland, 2003, p. 119)

This view of difference makes “differentiated curriculum and instruction the norm for all students” (Borland, 2003, p. 119), by deconstructing views about school population that take normalcy as their guiding principle and, consequently, conceive difference as deviation from the norm. This call for the deconstruction of normalcy is shared by other specialised discourses, which emerge from various academic specialities. For example, according to Britzman (1998), the refusal of “practices of normalcy” is one of the pillars of queer theory. In a more implicit way, also Gartner and Lipsky (1987) – in the context of a critical analysis of special education programmes – criticise the submission of educational action to patterns of normalcy, besides pointing out the limitations of the approaches that are exclusively based on a single dimension of difference:

There is an alternative to separate systems: a merged or unitary system. The conception of a unitary system requires a “paradigm shift,” a fundamental change in the way we think about differences among people, in the ways we choose to organize schools for their education, and in how we view the purpose of that education. It rejects the bimodal division of handicapped and nonhandicapped students, and recognizes that individuals vary – that single-characteristic definitions fail to capture the complexity of people. (p. 388)

There are reasons to believe that it is possible to practice a curriculum differentiation that responds to the legitimate concerns that are expressed through specialised discourses, by granting curriculum theory and development the major responsibility in the search for integrated responses to difference in the classroom. This does not imply a rejection of specialised discourses. They are necessary for deepening the study of the specificity of some forms of difference. But it is curriculum theory and development that can best generate useful knowledge for the construction of integrated responses, that is, responses that are compatible with the complexity of difference, which gives a unique shape to each student’s experience and profile.

3. The curriculum between the deconstruction of difference and the construction of learning upon difference

For Silva (2000), the crucial question that should guide a curricular and pedagogical strategy for handling difference should be “how are identity and difference produced?” (p. 99). This idea is corroborated by Moreira and Macedo (2002), who state the following:

We propose that curriculum be guided by a politics of identity, one that scrutinizes traditions that differentiate people, by questioning how we have been viewed, known, and treated. More specifically, we suggest that curriculum be centred on the historical dynamic of the categories through which we are divided, like culture, race, nation, social class, woman. (p. 31)

These quotations do not mention the most hidden side of the construction of identity and difference, that is, they do not raise the question of how we have not been viewed, known, and treated. A curricular action that respects difference includes not only the deconstruction of certain identities but also the recognition of others, which sometimes are only legitimated by the students who value them. This recognition should include not only identities that are considered “undesirable, disturbing or subversive” (Moreira & Macedo, 2002, p. 25) but also those that, because of their little visibility, do not even subvert, disturb, or disgust.

When we discuss the risk of these identities that are little visible being ignored in school, it is important not to reduce the issue of identity and difference to a strictly ontological perspective. Approaching identity and difference in school requires an epistemological perspective, considering that identity is expressed in the relationship between the individual and knowledge (Charlot, Bautier, & Rochex, 2000, p. 30) and that school is especially responsible for providing responses to differences that are based on the fact that there are students “differently positioned in relation to the message and the code of the dominant school culture” (Roldão, 2000, p. 125). Given these assumptions, it makes sense to raise questions like “what is preventing a given student from knowing what society, through school, wants him to know?”, “does the access of that student to the code and to the message of the dominant culture require an intermediate phase in which that message is translated into a code already known by the student?”, “how should that translation be made?”.

By responding seriously to these questions, one would respect the identity of each student, as expressed in the learning process and in the obstacles to learning, not in a record of identities and differences. School is

a learning centre, not an identification centre. So, the main focus of the discussion of identity and difference in school should not be identity and difference themselves, but how they affect the relationship of students with the knowledge valued by school, and, consequently, how they affect learning. From a curricular point of view, rather than asking where the specificity of each individual comes from, it is crucial to ask “where the specificity of each individual’s way of learning comes from” (Roldão, 2003b, p. 57). Locating this question at the centre of research on curriculum differentiation avoids, on the one hand, that discussions on identity and difference in educational contexts lose sight of the school’s central aim – the promotion of learning. On the other hand, it prevents the conceptualisation of differentiation from being reduced to the idea of response to difficulty or easiness in learning – an idea that prevails in several contexts. In the context of a research project conducted in Scotland, for example, Simpson and Ure (1994) studied differentiation practices in the light of the official definition of differentiation that was then held by the Scottish Office Education Department:

The identification of, and effective provision for a range of abilities in one classroom, such that pupils in a particular class need not study the same things at the same pace and in the same way at all times. Differentiated approaches should mean that the needs of the very able, and of children with learning difficulties, are discerned and met.

This narrow conceptualisation of differentiation as a response to different levels of supposed ability tends to move two important kinds of effort away from differentiation practices: (1) a concern for understanding the causes of the difficulties of the students who are considered less able, and (2) a reflection on the importance of students’ experiences that do not necessarily entail learning difficulties and may serve as anchors for the construction of meaningful learning.

As Alonso (2000) puts it, meaningful learning is constructed in the intersection between the representation of knowledge conveyed by the school curriculum and the representation of knowledge with which students present themselves in school:

A quality school is able to organise itself to provide each student with a curriculum that is meaningful and relevant to his or her cognitive, social, affective, motor, and biological needs. In order for that to occur, as constructivism has emphasised, it is necessary that the representation of culture and knowledge conveyed by the curriculum be connected with the students’ cultural and epistemological

representations, so that learning experiences may become functional and meaningful, that is, educative. (p. 201)

The classroom is a crucial place for making knowledge represented by the formal curriculum compatible with knowledge that results from the student's personal experience. But the efforts made at the classroom level in order to reach that compatibility will hardly promote equity if they are not, to some extent, grounded on a critical view of macro-curricular decisions. This implies acknowledging that what the students are supposed to learn – that is, the curriculum – results from a social and cultural selection. The curriculum always depends on more or less conscious choices. As Apple (1990) states, “the overt and covert knowledge found within school settings, and the principles of selection, organization, and evaluation of this knowledge, are value-governed selections from a much larger universe of possible knowledge and selection principles” (p. 45). By making their choices, curriculum decision makers who operate at the top of a given educational system do not just decide what is supposed to be learnt in that same system. They also indirectly establish different distances between what should be learnt and different students. Therefore, an inclusive curriculum differentiation requires teachers' autonomy to address the official curriculum critically, by reflecting on which students would benefit more and which students would benefit less – given the variation of their initial positions in relation to that same curriculum – if it were viewed as a prescription to be uniformly followed. Teachers' autonomy is also necessary for influencing the balance between those positions, by making the decisions that best contribute to overcome distances between the formal curriculum and each student's experiences. The curriculum is an opportunity (Walker, 2003), but it is not always an opportunity for all the students. One does not ensure equality of opportunity vis-à-vis the curriculum by decreeing free access of all to the official curriculum, for various reasons, including the fact that there are students who do not view the curriculum as an opportunity. Equality of opportunity is only possible if all the students are aware of the opportunity. Therefore, students should understand the reasons why those responsible for their education consider a given material “important enough to require them to learn it” (Walker, 2003, p. 189).

Certain differences, when expressed in school, become inequalities because the curriculum, by including certain kinds of knowledge and excluding others, gives advantage to students who already value or partially master the selected knowledge. In addition, when knowledge that is considered the most relevant is selected for the curriculum, it is usually

expected that most students will master that same knowledge at a **satisfactory** level and it is admitted that a minority will not master it, and **another** minority will master it at a high level. The majority is thus placed in **a zone of normality** and the minorities are placed in zones of abnormality.

The selective nature of the curriculum and its consequences on the **classification** of different kinds of knowledge as more or less valuable, **combined** with normalising thinking, affect approaches to difference in **ways** that have been little studied. Students whose achievement in the **curricular** areas that have traditionally been more valued is not satisfactory **tend** to obtain attention and help from teachers and other people responsible for their education, although that help is often ineffective. Those students' **problem** tends to be considered a deviation from the norm that deserves **some** corrective effort. But the case of students who succeed in those areas **and** have difficulties in areas that have traditionally been less valued tends **not** to be considered problematic. This explains the invisibility of problems **like**, for example, those of a student who succeeds in mathematics and in the **mother tongue** but is scorned by his classmates because he cannot play **football** well. In this case, the invisibility of difference probably would not **seriously** affect academic success, since the latter tends to be measured **through** the grades that the student obtains in the most valued subjects. But **it** could affect the educational success of the student, defined as the mastery of a wide range of competences, including social skills. The little visibility of the problems that a given student has in acquiring competences in the **field** of physical education and the little visibility of problems related to the **development** of competences concerning the relationship of that student **with** his classmates may, in this case, eventual threaten the student's **educational** success, despite his mastery of some subject-specific **knowledge**.

If the least visible expressions of difference are to be taken into **consideration**, students' experiences have to be surveyed, so that elements **with** curricular relevance may be extracted from them. The idea of **surveying** may cause some resistance, considering Foucault's theorisation **on** hierarchical observation, normalising judgment and the exam as **instruments** of power. The kind of hierarchical observation discussed by Foucault (1975) is modelled on the *panopticon* – the prison that was **idealised** by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century and whose **architecture** allows a single agent to see everything that occurs in the cells **without** being seen, which makes the prisoners unsure about whether or not **they** are being observed. Hierarchical observation may be combined with **the possibility** of exerting normalising judgments – the exam being pointed

out by Foucault as an instrument in which that combination operates – and thus be used to support the punishment of deviations from the norm. But the power of observation does not necessarily have to be used to punish deviations from the norm. Discarding that power may increase the invisibility of some differences and perversely make them be punished by omission. The power of observation may serve curriculum differentiation and equity if one re-thinks its usage, in order to make it more transparent and independent of the normalising rationality or, at least, grounded on a critical attitude towards that kind of rationality.

Criticism towards practices that follow a normalising rationality and value certain kinds of knowledge in the curriculum is often accompanied by calls for curricular practices that also value other kinds of knowledge. In a specially imaginative call, Baker (2002) invites readers to consider the consequences of an hypothetical reversal of the current tendencies:

Let's pretend that public schooling is not concerned purely with literacy, math, and that nebulous thing called academic achievement and that its arbitrary focus is in fact physical education. Let's extend the reversal and imagine that PE is *the* thing, the knowledge-performance that matters to how I judge you, who you can be, and what you can have. How fast *can* you run, move, slide, or roll? If I beat you, does that make you a problem? Or is the problem the notion of beating, of winning and losing, of faster and slower, of normal and abnormal in the face of rhetoric claiming respect for human diversity? (p. 698)

If the curriculum overvalued physical abilities,⁸ students with more physical aptitude would be in a position of advantage from the outset. If the curriculum overvalued the ability to orientate oneself in the dark, blind students would be in a position of advantage from the outset, and so on. There is a relative arbitrariness in the process of cultural selection that forms the curriculum – not necessarily an arbitrariness defined as absence of logic, criteria, foundation, or sense of justice, but necessarily an arbitrariness defined as impossibility of submitting the above-mentioned selection to any universal law. Being aware of that relative arbitrariness, which is socially and historically conditioned, may help us find responses to the fundamental question of curriculum studies – “what to teach?” – that are sensible of difference and take it into consideration in the educational process.

⁸ Which is not a purely imaginary situation. In the history of education there are indications that in ancient Sparta school curriculum was mostly based on physical activities, like jumping, swimming, hunting and fighting (Marques, 2001, p. 23).

It is interesting to discuss the relationship between the deconstruction of identity and difference – that is, the act of questioning the categories through which “we have been viewed, known, and treated” (Moreira & Macedo, 2002) – within curriculum studies and the efforts made in the same field with a more direct view to the construction of learning.

The above-mentioned orientation towards deconstruction is, to a large extent, inspired by the reconceptualist movement within curriculum studies, founded by Pinar (1975), who advocates a notion of curriculum as *currere*:

I propose yet another meaning of the word, one stemming from its Latin root, *currere*. The distinction is this: current usages of the term appear to me to focus on the observable, the external, the public. The study of *currere*, as the Latin infinitive suggests, involves the investigation of the nature of the individual experience of the public: of artefacts, actors, operations, of the educational journey or pilgrimage. (p. 400)

Wraga (1999) criticises reconceptualist curriculum theorists for extending curriculum inquiry to nonschool phenomena and moving away from the practical problems that teachers face in schools:

Centered on coming to terms with individual life history, frequently tied to educational or school experiences but often focused on life experience beyond schooling, such personal curriculum theorizing represents one way that reconceptualized curriculum theory devalued the primary historic mission to improve school experience for all pupils. With curriculum reconceived as the course of one’s life, virtually all phenomena qualified as the subject of curriculum theorizing. Improving the quality of education in school settings, long the priority of the curriculum field, was relinquished as personal awareness was privileged. (p. 5)

Pinar and other reconceptualists, in turn, explicitly state their commitment to moving the main focus of curriculum studies from issues of instrumental action in school to the project of “understanding curriculum” (Pinar et al., 1995). That project explicitly entails a quite indirect relationship between the work of theorists who strive to understand the curriculum and the work concretely made by teachers in elementary and secondary schools:

Such understanding might allow us to participate in school reform in ways that do not hypostatise the present, but rather, allow our labour and understandings to function as do those in psychoanalysis, to enlarge the understanding and deepen the intelligence of the participants. (Pinar, 2000)

In the light of this curriculum theory, which “exists to provoke thinking” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 8), by operating at a high level of abstraction with regard to the concrete problems of schools, difference is studied mainly in terms of how it is symbolically represented in the curriculum. By addressing, for instance, “curriculum as a racial text” (Pinar et al., 1995, pp. 315-357) and “curriculum as a gender text” (Pinar et al., 1995, pp. 358-403), the discourse on curriculum and difference is predominantly oriented towards the deconstruction of representations of certain dimensions of difference in the curriculum and beyond it. The importance of this perspective notwithstanding, there is no reason why one should not continue to study the curriculum on the basis of a more dialogical relationship between theory and practice, in the light of which inquiry into identity and difference is predominantly made not from the perspective of their symbolic representation in the curriculum but from the perspective of their influence on students’ access to the curriculum.

Final thoughts

Attention to differences among students has increased in educational policy and in educational research. Such attention has frequently been expressed through discourses that call for inclusive approaches to difference. Accordingly, some authors in the field of curriculum theory and development have conceptualised curriculum differentiation as an inclusive response to difference in schools. However, a stronger sensibility to every kind of difference that may operate in school and affect learning is needed if one takes commitment to inclusive education seriously. Otherwise some ways of being different will be neglected and, consequently, some students will not be as included in the educational process as they should, in the light of the principles of inclusive education. The risk of being affected by such deficit of inclusion is especially strong in the case of students who belong to very small and little visible minorities.

Curriculum theory and development is perhaps the only academic field that can ensure the fully inclusive approach to curriculum differentiation that I have advocated in this article. That role cannot be assigned to academic fields that are focused on specific dimensions of difference, despite the fact that sometimes those fields produce discourses about difference at large.

The degree of success of curriculum theory and development in strengthening an inclusive approach to curriculum differentiation will

depend on the way it addresses difference and identity, which need to be studied by curriculum scholars inasmuch as they affect learning.

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