

# Equality of differences in Learning Communities

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(Received May 1, 2009; Accepted May 15, 2009)

**ABSTRACT:** We are currently living in a multicultural society where its members show a great social and educational potential. However, ethnic discrimination still represents a strong limitation in our societies, and more specifically in Europe. Successful experiences such as the “Learning Communities” show that an *equality of differences*, that is to say everybody’s right to live their lives in a different way, helps to improve academic performance, instrumental learning, and reduces conflicts in college classrooms as well as in communities, neighborhoods or even in the municipality.

**Keywords:** equality, difference, multiculturalism, dialogue.

**RESUMEN:** Vivimos en sociedades multiculturales cuyos miembros tienen un gran potencial social y educativo. Sin embargo, la discriminación étnica representa todavía una fuerte limitación en nuestras sociedades y, en concreto, en Europa. Experiencias de éxito como las “Comunidades de Aprendizaje” demuestran que la *igualdad de diferencias*, el igual derecho de todas las personas a vivir de forma diferente, mejora el rendimiento académico, el aprendizaje instrumental, y reduce los conflictos en el aula y en la comunidad, barrio o municipio.

**Palabras clave:** igualdad, diferencia, multiculturalismo, diálogo.

## MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES. MULTICULTURALISM AS A CHALLENGE.

Over the last decades, the migration phenomenon has notoriously increased all over the world, and in its current form it constitutes a relatively new phenomenon. North America and Europe have the highest immigration rates, but we have to bear in mind that we are talking about a global phenomenon and its impact is not only reduced to that of a specific country or territory, but that it has consequences worldwide with repercussions in both the host society and the society of origin of the migrant people.

Several authors have focused on the performance of the migration movements. For example, Saskia Sassen (1988) is focused on the labor offer system that migrants represent on a global scale; Alejandro Portes (1999) has analyzed the occupation of immigrants and their adaptation process to the North American society. However, as Suarez-Orozco (2006) has pointed out, in a world where capital flows are easier than human ones, migration is people’s answer to those changes that the globalization entails. And that would explain why these conditions are been given for people to cross borders in search of a better life. The pace of migration has accelerated over the last 20 years. Globalization, diversification, acceleration and feminization are some characteristics of the current migratory phenomenon. So for example, migrant women have turned out to

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be the global situation's key element since their presence is growing in all the regions and in the different migration flows that are currently being given.

The international phenomenon of migrations brings along with it changes in the structure of the societies. It brings some benefits for the economic system; changes to the legislation and the policies of a country as an answer of adaptation to the new situation. New cultures, new ways of living, interactions, sensations, perceptions, debates and speeches produced in the worlds of people's lives which later transform the homogeneous society into a multicultural one. This diversity represents an important challenge to the host societies and, in this sense; democracy has an important role to play in order to contribute to the social cohesion of the multicultural societies.

The challenge that the multiculturalism represents to Europe has been pointed out by authors such as Habermas (1998). In the one hand he considers that the democratic constitutional State is normatively better equipped than other political regimes at the moment of facing political integration problems and possible frictions arising from contexts, as well as the more and more varied ways of living. On the other hand, he also highlights the challenge that such diversity represents to the "old Nation-State", based on a culturally homogeneous population, which is clearly different to the population structure of the State-Nations in the current Europe.

The importance of the migration movements increases when we analyze them depending on their social meaning and impact. Castells (1998 a,b) had already emphasized that we are before a transnational revolution which is having a social impact worldwide and international migrations are one part of this restructuring process of the society. Habermas (1998, 2006) thinks about the capacity of the transnational regimes for making progress towards the development of a world internal politics without a world government. For this author, a world society in which there is an equality in the rights and a respect for the different identities in the political field is possible. So then, the objective of a higher equality should be aimed at overcoming the world society's splits and stratification, without having as a consequence a reduction in the cultural characteristics. Even though we are talking about a long-term objective, for Habermas, a key element for the overcoming of inequality is to base, from the very beginning, the final objective on the search of harmonization instead of being based on the search of equality (Habermas, 2006). On the contrary, if the tendency is a homogenization, the identities of several people and cultural groups will be negatively affected as it has already happened in certain European countries such as France with the prohibition on wearing *hijab* (or Islamic veil) in French schools<sup>1</sup>, or Belgium where the city of Antwerp outlaws employees from wearing it (El País, 2007).

The global change generated by multiculturalism in the structure of the population demands changes in all the social institutions, and more specifically, in the educational ones. As we have pointed out before, its impact transforms the ethnic, religious and cultural composition of the population of the host countries. On the one hand, there are certain systemic barriers which prevent the transformation efforts towards equality of the social structure to happen. On the other hand, the egalitarian social movements make progress at international level. By using slogans such as "Another world is possible", multitudinous experiences and manifestations in favor of peace appear all over the

world with new characteristics. It is about a new social context which has accumulated several structural barriers to the transformation and improvement of the society, but at the same time it creates elements which favor the transformation of the structures through social claims and actions carried out by social agents.

The impact that these migration movements have on these societies is reflected in both dimensions of the society, the *system* and the *lifeworld* (Habermas, 1981a,b). Thirty years ago, people's lifeworld was strongly systematized and the forms of authority were clearly lined within the different spheres of everyday life. The authority of school teachers or that of the paterfamilias, for example, represented behavior patterns that have currently changed. Nowadays these roles have taken a back seat to a better use of dialogue. Things were certainly different before, today if we want to have a discussion or make business in no matter what sphere of our lives, we need to get to an agreement with people, groups or institutions to whom we are related. This change is part of the *dialogic turn* that societies are experimenting (Flecha, Gomez and Puigvert, 2003) and in which the management of the cultural diversity plays a very important role in the social inclusion of the most vulnerable groups. School, for example, is living a change in which its traditional operation is growing weaker as a transmitter of culture and established roles. The increasing diversity, to which this institution must give an answer, is getting it apart from an educational model addressed to a homogeneous public only. This demands an effort in the construction of effective models being able to give an answer to the new social reality.

Apart from the impact on the structures, migrations have also an impact on people's lifeworld. So, for example, stereotypes usually fall on immigrants, but more specifically on those who besides being or not immigrants belong to a certain cultural group. According to the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC, 2005, 2006) the most affected by racism and the most vulnerable ones in Europe are Roma, Jewish and the Muslim communities. This reality shows the importance to include diversity in the educational practices in order to reduce the number of conflicts and achieve better coexistence. As we will see later, when looking for a real equality, the Learning Communities make a very important emphasis on the instrumental dimension of learning. Education can contribute to the overcoming of inequalities due to the ethnic group or culture. But, in order to achieve better equality it is crucial that everybody learns and acquires the necessary knowledge that will increase their professional and personal options.

Success in education, and more precisely the academic degrees, increases the possibilities of labor market incorporation. Sometimes, some official organizations hand out data displaying the existing connection between college majors and activity rates, that is to say the positive influence of higher education. For example, in 2005 Catalonia had an employment activity rate of 82.2% of people who had higher education, whereas the activity rate of people with secondary studies was 68.8%, and 42.8% was the rate for those with lower studies others than those of the secondary education. In Europe and Spain these rates were almost the same, because the employment activity rate for people who had higher education was 76.3% in Spain and 76.2% in the European Union. Also, the activity rate for people with secondary studies was 62.9% in Spain and

61.7% in the EU. For those people with inferior studies, the activity rate was 39.5% in Spain and 33.1 % in the EU (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2005).

The multicultural and more dialogic context in the current societies contributes to the development of experiences and transforming practices in the different spheres of society: educational, cultural, political or economic. To achieve better equality, not to be confused with homogeneity, between people and social groups requires alternatives with the capacity to transform into possibilities those difficulties that people who are in a situation of a social exclusion face. The educational experience in which this article is focused, that is to say the Learning Communities, makes part of the progress towards a more dialogic society, where people's voice and traditionally excluded groups are represented in the educational community and their proposals are also represented in the activities carried out inside and outside the classroom.

Before going depth into the management of the diversity that this educational experience develops, we start from one of the principles that lay the foundations for achieving success in education for all children no matter what their cultural origin is. We are talking about Flecha's concept (2000) regarding the equality of differences, one of the seven principles of dialogic learning characteristic of the educational experiences such as the Learning Communities<sup>2</sup>, and *equality is the aim, and this includes an equal right to differences. The right of all individual members to learn what they need and want to learn is defended. This principle of egalitarian dialogue implies a rejection of both ethnocentrism – which does not respect difference –and of relativism– which withholds fairness* (Flecha, 2000, p. 25). Authors from different cultures and life trajectories have deepened into this concept and they have unveiled the fundamental question that we have to face in contemporary societies:

*We consider that the question is not how to manage equality, but how to manage the difference in order to guarantee the equality among people that the democracy should pursue. For that, we propose the interaction regime that governs the dialogue to be what we call equality of the differences* (De Botton, Puigvert, Taleb, 2004, p. 140)<sup>3</sup>.

With regard to the ethnic discrimination, *lifeworld and system* are two dimensions in the same society that have a mutual link and influence. The migration movements are changing the social structures worldwide while creating new dynamics of migration at the same time. Authors such as Habermas (1998) have criticized the migratory policies based on immigration restraints and the closing of the European borders to people coming from low-income economies. But the fact that in the social structures there are exclusionary actions and also racists at a certain point, this is not independent to what is happening inside the lifeworld, nor to the practices of people in their everyday lives. We have internalized exclusionary and racist values all of our lives and all over our history, too. On the one hand, we are the result of our interactions, that is to say the result of the relationships that we keep with other people or groups. This means that we have internalized exclusionary values. However, it also means that we are able to transform ourselves and our environment if we change these interactions.

In the same way, as we will see later in the second section of the article, a school can transform itself and its environment in order to increase its level of interaction; a

higher quantity and diversity among people who participate in the education center either as a collaborator, professional or family, etc. not only does it help to break cultural stereotypes, but also it creates new references and higher expectations for students and for the school itself. Therefore, the concept that is given to the equality of differences offers the possibility to recognize ourselves as a different individual from the rest of the people who belong to the society, taking always into consideration the perspective of equality. Without this last characteristic we run the risk of falling into the concept of a society based only on the difference, and it certainly becomes a justification to the forms of discrimination of certain cultural groups.

On the one hand, this concept contributes with some elements which help us understand the way our current society is. But besides its clear explicative function, it helps us to guide our social, educational and cultural practices in order to improve people and groups' coexistence, and so get a better equality in the every-time-more-diverse societies. For example, according to some racist prejudices that we still have, western people are more participative, liberal and democratic. However, in order to fight them it is necessary to know the transformations and achievements being carried out by entities and people from different origins, cultures and ethnic groups. Concerning Arab-Muslim women, for example, there are strong prejudices that ignore all the fights that this group is carrying out sometimes under very difficult social realities where the right to equality or a legislation protecting women doesn't even exist.

We must pursue the ideal of equality, because without it there would not be any actions or practices aimed at getting a better democratization towards an equality of differences and towards a more dialogic society. This is the case of the Learning Communities.

#### ANTI-RACIST AND TRANSFORMING EDUCATION

Historically, and currently to a greater extent, education has played a decisive role in the cohesion processes of the societies, and as a consequence, in the mechanisms of participation of its members. As several authors and data state, having higher possibilities to the access to quality education reduces the potential risks of social exclusion (European Commission, 2000). Therefore, this connection between education and other areas of the society (labor market, health, participation, and housing) sets the education system as a tool that can lead to segregation or to the social equality of results and opportunities. Exclusion or inclusion will depend on the educational practices and theories implemented in the center. Besides, we have to frame this into the current challenge that the public space management represents before plural reality. We observe that our classrooms do not escape from this process. In order to offer anti racist and quality education, there is the urgent need to create an *Inclusive School* model, where the voice of the different cultures is incorporated to the academic contents as well as to the educational activities or even to the organization of the center, among others.

However, ever since the reproduction theories (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970; Baudelot and Establert, 1971; Bowles and Gintis, 1976), the existing relation between low academic performance and low socioeconomic origin - among which we find migrants and ethnic groups- had already been highlighted. Although it is quite clear that

the exclusionary educational practices fall to a greater extent on vulnerable groups, the authors of the reproduction theory do not give to the education system the possibility of transforming inequalities, become then one more institution where the existing social stratification is reproduced. As a reaction to this perspective supporting exclusionary practices, a line of investigation is being developed at the heart of the scientific community indicating how education can contribute to the overcoming of the social inequalities and it trusts in the capacity of the actor as an active agent in this transformation. This is possible as long as there are inclusory practices and theories guaranteed by the international scientific community (Beane & Apple, 1995; Beck et al., 1994; Bernstein, 1990; Flecha, 2000; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1988; Habermas, 1981; Touraine, 1997; Willis, 1981). As a consequence, since the socioeconomic level or the ethnic group are not decisive factors in school failure, high-level European researches such as the Integrated Project of the Sixth Framework Programme INCLUD-ED<sup>44</sup>, base their analysis on the search of elements and practices which favor success in education, as well as those that should be overcome because they bear segregation and exclusion.

Nevertheless, as we have already pointed out, the social structure has experienced a great change and the interactions given inside of it have also been affected. To the weakening of the main agents of socialization we also have to add the demographic diversification (Wieviorka et al., 1996). We are witnesses of the dialogic turn in our society, where the dialogue is being introduced in all the spheres of our everyday lives and that includes intimacy (Flecha, Gómez, & Puigvert, 2003). In spite of the appearance of this new framework, there is some resistance towards change. This tendency can also be found in the education centers:

*If we want students from the information society to be motivated by school learning, we will have to start first by stating that the already described scene [objectivist conception of learning] belongs now to the past. This does not mean teachers nor the education center's failure, it is a given process at several levels [...]. The education center's failure happens when it does not transform itself in order to handle the new situation (Aubert et al., 2008, p. 38)<sup>5</sup>.*

We all internalize values and the way we are, we react in a certain way according to what we internalize instead of thinking if it was the best thing to do, or if it was necessary to modify the procedure and adapt it to the new social reality. The school adaptation and transformation toward a multicultural society is a clear example of that. Affirmations such as "It's been always like that" do not represent any argument, on the contrary, they are the result of a resistance towards change and the symbol of a very strong conservatism, an attempt to keep something that makes no sense anymore and that has no social utility. That is why the role that the professionals in education play is very important, together with some other partners in education which can be either transformer or reproductive of the social order.

This increase in the cultural diversity occurring in the host societies and the new challenges that schools are facing, leads to relate immigrant and cultural-minority students' concentration to school failure and conflict. This has provoked educational measures representing high social costs at the moment of creating, for example, segregation or labeling. The practices based on superstition are those which are not based on data or

rigorous scientific theories. In education, this step from superstition to science is fundamental, because it can lead us to make a mistake in our decisions and consequently it originates serious social and educational inequalities. When the educational actions are based on rigorous theoretical perspectives, the educational practice has a positive effect on children's learning. This is one characteristic in the experience of the Learning Communities, basically referring to the management of the cultural diversity within the equality of differences principle.

If we analyze our classrooms and learning centers, we will be able to see other factors -different from those of the ethnic origin- which would explain school failure. Therefore, for example, we have to take into consideration that even though the school offers the same resources to everybody, there are unequal social situations at the moment of making use of them. The immigrant population is one of the groups with the highest risk to face a disadvantage situation in comparison with others. With the coordination of all the educational community it is possible to overcome the labeling in multicultural schools related to failure and therefore achieve an effective learning for children.

It is necessary to also take into consideration the diversification in classrooms under the value of equality. No other educational measure will be able to improve learning if it is based on a subordinate relationship of some cultures over the others, and what is more, this does not reduce the conflict (Freire, 1997). A classroom settled according to the principle of the equality of differences leads to a better learning process and, at the same time, learning becomes accessible to all children. However, with the diversification of the educational spaces, there have been different answers due to the superstition which has not managed to break school and social failure. On the one hand, an ethnocentric education model where the transmission of a dominant culture (middle class, white and masculine) distances certain groups from education opportunities. Possible solutions are assimilation or exclusion. On the other hand, the second answer makes reference to the non critical recognition of the difference. This disconnection with the principle of equality has created school itineraries where the quality in the education offered is not the same. Accepting this last perspective means to abandon the critic towards the existing inequalities, and as a consequence, assume the necessity of those.

Therefore, the third answer based on the principle of equality of differences (Flecha, 2000) means a radical change in the way the school, the center and the environment are run, and even a change in the role that the teacher plays. All the educational community participates in the learning process, in the running of the center, assessment, recreational activities, etc. All this coordination between the partners in education is focused on the strengthening of the instrumental learning dimension. We have, for example, the practice of the *interactive groups* (Elboj et al., 2002) which makes reference to the heterogeneous groups in a regular classroom where children from different education levels, socioeconomic status, cultures, etc. share the activity supported by an adult member of the educational community (relative, volunteer, practicals, etc.). The teacher plans and coordinates all the different activities carried out in the classroom. This organizational change in the classroom has several benefits. First of all, it is not necessary anymore to take the children outside the classroom with the risk of

falling into a potential labeling and the reduction of instrumental learning. In the second place, interactions become more diversified and they rise up when incorporating other adult people, different to the teacher staff, to the center. The second one reinforces some of the new competences demanded by the current society of knowledge. On the other hand, it increases learning as people currently tend to learn every time more and more in spaces different to the ones of the classroom by using several interactions. As a matter of fact, the best universities in the world, Harvard for instance, introduce the criteria of multiculturalism in their classrooms as mechanisms for learning and leadership. Finally, accelerating learning through a new organization which overcomes the obstacles avoiding accessibility, contributes to a better coexistence. A context where learning is possible, creates a certain sense towards the educational processes and therefore, it reduces stress in the center. The participation of the community helps to the improvement of quality in education by identifying the needs and the answers to the existing inequalities. This creates a higher commitment in the environment of the school that becomes more and more familiar. All of this is possible, of course, because the recognition of the differences is closely related to the children's right to same educational opportunities.

#### CONCLUSION

The migratory movements are happening all over the world, where every time less and less areas remain unaffected. The consequences of this international phenomenon, transform the ethnic, religious and cultural composition of the European populations, and thus, its social structure. The European societies have become multicultural. However, some of their institutions are still taking a culturally homogeneous population as a reference. The passive reaction of the institutions, for example that of the educational one, increases the social exclusion of those groups not matching the masculine middle-class white and western model.

In addition to this, in our societies there is still a cultural exclusion background where the prejudices affecting certain cultural groups belong. This fact demands a collective reflection process and, above all, it is necessary to carry out social actions and practices just like the ones already described in here in order to break down stereotypes. We can find some examples of this exclusionary background in different contexts of the society, and that is to say that we can find them not only in the everyday life, but also at an academical level. Regarding these last two contexts, there have been some attempts in order to link cultural diversity and conflicts, or to develop theories opposing the dialogue setting out the existence of a *clash of civilizations* (Huntington, 1996) in the current society where conflicts are unavoidable and consensus impossible. However, theories of major international scientific importance (Beck, 1994; Freire, 1997; Habermas, 1981; Touraine, 1997, among others) as well as some transnational organizations such as the European Union, make emphasis on the dialogue, coexistence and social cohesion as key elements in their analysis.

Any successful educational experience has in its bases rigorous scientific theories. In this case, we have gone in-depth on the positive impact of focusing the management of cultural diversity on the principle of equality of differences which involves the



achievement of academic success for all students, regardless their origins or cultural characteristics. Hence, together with the already described exclusionary dynamics, there are also educational experiences which help to the creation of more equal societies. This is the case of the Learning Communities, which start from the need of transforming all the educational environment (school, neighborhood, community) in order to give an answer to all people's needs. This equality includes both, the inclusion of the different voices of the people and cultures in an equal level such as the academic success for all children regardless their cultural or ethnic origin.

Overcoming and solving possible conflicts emerging from the creation of multicultural societies, where people have the possibility to coexist in an egalitarian way, is currently one of the biggest challenges. Education plays a very important role in this process of construction of new societies in which we are immersed.

### Footnotes

- 1 Loi n°2004-228 du 15 mars 2004 encadrant, en application du principe de laïcité, le port de signes ou de tenues manifestant une appartenance religieuse dans les écoles, collèges et lycées publics.
- 2 There are seven principles defined by Flecha (2000) that serve to define the dialogic learning: the egalitarian dialogue; cultural intelligence; solidarity; transformation; meaning creation; instrumental dimension; equality of differences.
- 3 Authors' translation from Spanish.
- 4 INCLUD-ED. Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion from education in Europe. INTEGRATED PROJECT Priority 7 of Sixth Framework Programme. (2006- 2011). <http://www.ub.edu/includ-ed/>
- 5 Authors' translation from Spanish.

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