

Students Social Interactions and Learning in a Multicultural School

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ABSTRACT

This study attempt to find out students` interaction in a multicultural school and how this interaction is related to learning processes. The interactions were analysed with respect to studensts experiences at school with other students. The study revealed that interaction by ollaboration is positive to knowledge aquisition, building social skills and emotional support. This in turn gives motivation for learning at the school.

Keywords: Norway, social interaction, learning, multicultural education

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BAKGROUND

Schools are becoming more and more of multicultural and require curriculum that reflects the needs of all students. According to Galtung (1981) school is a part of society, and any change of the school system is a change of the society. The entire school environment can also be a vehicle of change, and not just individual classes, learning materials, or teaching strategies. Multicultural education in this sense adopts multicultural oriented teaching practices, texts and curricula Hoffman (1996), where social interaction serves as a vehicle of change in humans within a multicultural school set up.

Therefore, as Wang (2010) pointed out, interactions plays an important role in learning. Yang (1999;) talks about motivation to learn being abroad. Other reserchers such as (Allen, 2010 ; Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Liu, 2010; Magnan & Back, 2007; Wang, 2010; Wilkinson, 1998), pointed out that, students social interactions promote social comptence, knowledge aquisition and inter-cultural understanding.

Bank & Banks (2001) puts multicultural schools in a framework of curriculum which states that multicultural education embodies the practices schools employ to generate overall cultural sensitivity through diversified curricula, instructional practices, and textual materials. The practices of schools should therefore reflect culture, humans and the environment as basic principles in understanding students of diverse ethnic background, and how these students relate to each other. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2004, 2010) and Philpott et al. (2011) suggested that collaboration forsters learning and the aquisition of social competence.

Aims of the study:

The aims of this study are:

- I. To examine students` social interaction in learning process.
- II. To explore the benefits of social interactions in learning process.

Research Questions

- How do the students interact with each other?
- What are the benefits of students` interactions?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Socialisation theory is chosen to analyse the experiences of the students at the school. Social learning theory states that learning is a cognitive process which takes place in a social context, either through

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direct teaching or observation, a vicarious reinforcement. Bandura meant that people learn by observing others through modelling in a social set up, without which learning will be impossible (Bandura, 1977).

According to Hoem (2000), the school is a socialisation system and teaching and learning are socialising processes. Learning how to become human and to behave in ways that accord with the general expectations of others (in short, to be socialised) is a process that begins at birth and continues throughout our life. Thus, students and teachers at the college never stop learning how to behave, mainly because the society in which they live-and their relationship to each other is always changing and they are continually faced with learning how to behave in new and different situations. When starting to look at the socialisation process, therefore, I can begin by identifying two basic types of socialisation; primary and secondary socialisation.

Primary socialisation occurs between the individual and those people in their life with whom they have primary relationships. A primary relationship is one in which the individual has a close, personal, face-to-face relationship with the people responsible for the socialisation process such as the parent. Secondary relationship is one in which the individual does not have a close, personal, relationship with the people responsible for the socialisation process, such as the teacher (Hoem 2000). From my understanding of secondary socialisation it occurs between the individual and those people in their life with whom they have secondary relationships. The interesting thing about both primary and secondary socialisation is that, they both involve social interaction with people.

Although, for the sake of theoretical clarity, I've separated these two concepts, in reality they invariably co-exist in our lives (except, perhaps, for the very early years in our society when young babies have few, if any, secondary relationships). This idea is important to note because it is evident that when primary and secondary relationships exist at the same time, it is possible that:

- a. Conflict may occur between the demands of primary and secondary socialisation.
- b. The nature of our primary relationships will influence in some way, the nature of our secondary relationships.

For most of the students, the first primary relationship they form though is with their parent(s) or guardians- the people who are charged with the initial socialisation process. However, as the students stay longer at the college, they also start to form primary attachments with friends, teachers and, eventually, with other adults (because they get close contact with these people).

When we think about agencies of secondary socialisation we can talk about education. Agents of socialisation here, will consequently be teachers, school administration and other personnel at the college.

In some cases, such as school and teachers, we are in daily, face-to-face contact with the people who are socialising us without ever developing a primary attachment to them. What I mean by this is that, in modern societies, the vast majority of people that we meet will be strangers to us-and to relate to them in the same way we relate to people we love and for whom we have affection would not be possible or desirable. We have, therefore, to learn how to deal with people in terms of what they can do for us and what we can do for them in particular situations (that is, instrumentally).

According to Berger (1984) socialisation is a long life process whereby individuals are initiated into the meanings of the culture and learn to accept the tasks, roles and identities that make up its social structure; socialisation among other things solves the problem of how one generation passes its world on to the next generation. (Berger 1984). Thus, I will use socialisation theory when analysing the way experiences are passed from old students to the new students in the school.

The theoretical framework above is closely linked to the choice of qualitative research methods used in this study in that the approach used embodied some understanding of the people interviewed taking into account their cultural backgrounds, individual considerations which has to do with self and identity and the research activity itself.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The methodology used in this research is qualitative, most appropriate for this study because it describes individuals' experiences (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990). Participants were made up of 10 students and five teachers in an international school in Bergen. Data collection involved informal

interviews, group discussion, participant observation and ordinary conversation. Mears (2009) noted that interviews give deep insight into enquiries involving cross cultural understanding.

Notes and audio-tape recording were taken as an aid to both the interviews and data analysis. Normal conversation was used to cross check the validity of the data. The individual interviews comprised of two broad questions that asked for information related to participants` background and the nature of their social interaction. I used tape recorder in individual and group interviews. The quality of the methods used could be explained from different angle whereby the informants have been central to the analysis of the information in this research (Cicourel, 1964)

To enable me analyse the data collected original sentences were rephrased, giving me more possibilities of meanings (Kvale 1997). The analyses of my data took the form of dialogue with the informants, by asking possible meanings of what they said. In this attempt informants answer to questions and the stories they told were contextualised, coded or categorised as well as the use of multiple methods strategy to give meanings to the story of the informants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding of students` social interaction and learning is presented and answers the research questions. Four themes emerged while analysing data; collaboration, emotional support, knowledge acquisition and social competence. I will look into how these students interact and see how they influence each other during their interaction. This research process has involved a lot of intimacy between the students and the researcher, where the students try to give fair, honest and balanced account of their social and academic life. Interactions of the students will be related to the themes that emerged.

Collaboration

The first major finding that interactions involves collaboration where students language proficiency improved drastically echoes previous research Philpott et al. (2011) Taiwanese students in the USA benefited from cultural interactions in language learning. Teaching and learning as mentioned involve interactions throughout, mostly in a form of collaboration and other learning processes. All the learning processes involve dialogue in a one way or the other. The critical role of dialogue in collaborative classroom has been stressed through this this paper as interaction. The collaborative classroom is alive with two way communication. A major mode of communication is dialogue, which in a collaborative classroom is thinking made public. What I observed the teachers did was to maintain this dialogue among students.

Considering examples of interactions in collaborative groups, students discussed their approaches to solving a particular problem, explained their reasoning, and defend their work. A student had this to say:

“In my interaction with other students what I understood about this was that, hearing one student’s logic prompts the other students to consider alternative interpretation. Students are thus challenged to re-examine their own reasoning. When three students in a group ask a fourth student to explain and support her ideas, that is, to make her thinking public, she frequently examines and develops her concepts for herself as she talks”

A second student added: “When one student has an insight about how to solve a difficult problem, the others in the group learn how to use a new thinking strategy sooner than if they had worked on their own. Thus, students engaged in interaction often exceed what they can accomplish by working independently....we learn social skills and some of us learn both English and Norwegian very well”.

This findings is similar to previous studies by Mastropieri and Scruggs (2004, 2010) and Philpott et al. (2011) who found collaboration by interaction to play a significant role in learning. Collaborative teachers maintain the same sort of high-level talk and interaction when a whole class engages discussion. They avoid recitation, which consists primarily of reviewing, drilling, and quizzing; i.e., asking questions to which the answer is known by the teacher and there is only one right answer. In true discussion, students talk to each other as well as to the teacher, entertaining a variety of points of view, and grapple with questions that have no right or wrong answers. Sometimes both students and the teacher change their minds about an idea. In sum, interactions in whole group discussion mirror what goes on in small groups.

As the students said, they interact with each other in the classroom and outside the classroom. In both cases as they mentioned they interact for support, for knowledge and for fun. In which every way they interact and for whatever the purpose of their interaction is, it is linked to learning processes which the majority of them are interested in.

Emotional Support

The second major finding was emotional support. Most first year students and few second year students said that they interact for friendship and to gain support. As one of them commented “tough to interact in the beginning as a first year student but one gets to know people as time goes by and then establishes strong friendship”.

Observations I made in the dinning- hall showed a trend of separate groupings with Africans, Scandinavians and other minor groupings. Naturally, this was a clear sign of showing sense of belongingness. Common cultural background in the beginning was very necessary for some sense of security in the initial stages of adaptation in a community perhaps foreign to a particular group of people. Asked how the students interact and what it feels like to interact with others, the students noted that interaction occurs everywhere and every time both in the classroom and outside the classroom. They see each other most in the dinning- room, where they meet in bigger groups and they decide to sit anywhere of their choice. As I eat my meals with them in the dinning- hall and from the way I understood both from conversing with them and personal experience I had in the dinning- hall, each dinning time they changed places (tables) and this had to do with who they really wanted to talk to at a particular time.

This again depended on what they had to talk about. In that sense students interaction with each other may either be planned or unplanned, in that some come and sit anywhere at the dinning-table and have normal talk while others planned it. In my interviews with them I tried to involve as many first year students as second year students.

Asking the students how it is to interact, the first year students mentioned that it was difficult with interaction in the beginning especially during their first few weeks in the school. According to the students most of them were first lost and did not know where and how to start whereas the second years had no problems at all interacting. In general first and second year student s interacted for many reasons, including academics, fun, security, having more friends, social purposes as well as religious reasons.

When asked the question: “Why do you interact? The first year students response show a high need for both support and security. It would therefore, appear that the first year students were nervous when they first came and as such they needed more contact with each other and with the second years. This first time of theirs was trying to find their feet and aclamatise themselves with the environment. The first year students said however that interaction for the purpose of security diminished with time, thus putting more emphasis on social, academic and other reasons. As one first year student summed it up.

”The first time I came to this school I was so lost in the environment that I felt like I had no place in it.....”But now I feel so free that when I see an African or American I see him or her as a brother or sister.”

”Right now it is as if we are the same family sharing the same values and expectations”

Knowledge Acquisition

The students said that, their interaction in the school is always related to learning something new and the learning processes that is involved. To sum up what they said: “We interact for curiosity, knowledge, to listen to different points of view.” This supports the findings of (Allen, 2010 ; Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Liu, 2010), which found Taiwanese students to learn English language at an advanced rate in USA through inter-cultural learning environment. It was cncluded that the students were motivated to learn new language by interacting with other students Magnan & Back (2007) and Wang, 2010; Wilkinson (1998).

My first day at the college, I observed that the students were very curious about me. Most of them took the initiative to approach me and asked me what I was about with respect, and whether they could do anything to help me. Findings revealed that students` interactions at the college had some quest for more knowledge. Asking the students whether interaction with other students is a special

need, a large number of them said that they were really shocked when they came to the school. According to the students they were selected from their countries as best students brought into the college in Norway, so most of them were really carrying that pride with them feeling that they were so good. However, when they came and met other students that notion of being the "best" in "my" country did not work.

In a real sense they found out that the diverse nature of the student population carried along with it diverse forms of knowledge. In a nut shell being the best from ones country does not imply that one is best everywhere. The interesting thing according to the students is that in any subject in the class there is always somebody better than what one thought one was and they still realised that they knew nothing. This notion is also a driving force for more interaction, because of the need to learn more. The students said that they always learn something new from each other. As one student said : "In this school if you don't interact you miss a lot"

Asking the students how their social interaction is related to the processes of learning, one of the students said:

"In this school we cooperate, collaborate and do a lot of projects" Another student added that "We help each other and learning goes on everywhere on this campus and if you don't get involved with others you lose, we have a lot of home -work, honestly there is high learning time in this college and we acquire knowledge through interaction".

According to the students one has to get in touch so as to cope with the pace of learning and assignment. Specifically, high learning time, regular homework and frequent student assessment and feedback are common learning processes. How these learning processes are related to students` interaction is observed at the informal level. In learning process students are engaged in collaboration, cooperation, projects and focus projects, where nothing is In but superimposed on them.

Social Competence

In the Norwegian class for beginners the teacher engaged students in different ways in a form of engagement learning. Students did projects with a realistic focus, and that required some new techniques for teaching/learning. The teacher played the guitar and sang a song with the students even though it was not a music class. In the initial stage, it seemed to me as if it was a show just because I was in the class. The idea to me was that of doing a project for an "outside" customer though it was in the classroom. This was a bit difficult for the students in the beginning perhaps because they were fresh or that the subject was difficult or both. After 30 minutes it became a little easier since they can identify themselves with it. Some students found it much easier and were contributing much in the class but I got to find out that those students were of German origin, so again the ease with which the German students took to learn the Norwegian language had to do with the connection in terms of linguistics between the two languages. In this sense both the data collection techniques and the interpretative data analysis going both back and forward wondering over many ways to give meaning to what I observed and what I was told became useful. I got to realise later that the teacher was a musician and was supposed to teach music after some months in the school.

I found that doing projects provides a higher level of satisfaction to students than working on artificial problems since they can see the outcomes/impact on their academic performances. Finally, the results of their efforts may bring them professional recognition or awards which are ultimately much more motivating than grades.

The students concluded that the virtual classroom environment resulted in better mastery of course materials, greater student satisfaction, and a higher level of student-reported learning than traditional classroom experiences. It may be worth noting that the focus of engaging students and not necessarily following the traditional methods of teaching is more meaningful and portrays a real-world learning activities which is consistent with a more general trend in education.

For the majority of the students interaction with others forces them to clarify and verbalise their points. This presupposes that interactions among the students help develop their communicative skills, and thereby facilitating understanding. The high extent to which the students would like to interact with each other both in group work and in pairs supposes that interaction and for that matter doing things together increases the motivation of the students to learn.

Observing the students in the class both in my role as a passive observer and a participant, I realised that the teacher used different strategies to help the students interact with each other. The teacher for example started the class with a warm up exercise whereby students stood up

Asked how they manage with so many activities outside their academic work, the students pointed out that out of the numerous activities they select two activities and remain with them for both of their two years at the college.

The first year of the programme the students said, is used to learn skills related to the activity chosen, while the second year is used to apply those skills while performing some service in the community. It was observed that the second year students after mastering their social skills act as role models and activity leaders for the first year students who might lack skills in most of the extra-curricular activities at the college. In this way I feel the first year students are initiated into the meanings of the school culture and also learn how to accept the tasks at the college. Thus, the first year students are socialised into the social environment of the college by the commitment of the older students by playing meaningful roles as members of the school community.

Most of the students pointed out that, life in the school would have been meaningless if the academic life was not linked with the extra-curricular activity. To them social interactions both organised and unorganised forms make the school system a whole. The two complement each other and are inextricably interwoven.

When asked to express their feelings and experiences about their interaction in the school, where extra-curricular activity is a requirement, the following were some of the utterances:

”For me being in this school is like being in the world in a seteverything happens here....There is no barrier for interaction or talking to somebody be it social, religious or academic I am just a free person here”. Another student has this to say:

”I came to this school because I want to meet other people know their culture and learn from them. I have been chosen by my country as the ambassador of my country to the world I have to have more contact talk to people and get to understand them”

The above expressions, reflect the general fact that the school in itself has created the congenial environment for interaction, and the students are aware of that and as such have taken it upon themselves as part of their duty to utilise this opportunity to learn and to understand each other. The implications of the findings in this paper supports the fact that social interactions play a significant role in learning.

CONCLUSIONS

What this research has revealed most prominently is that, social interactions is positive in learning processes in a multicultural school environment, and that teaching and learning do not take place in a vacuum, but are integral part of cultural and individual identities of those being taught and those who teach. Rather than teaching in a multicultural school being a model of the western education, there should be a balance where consideration of the cultural background of the students play a role in the entire teaching and learning processes as well as the administration of the school.

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