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Religious Diversity and Education in Europe

Thor-André Skrefsrud

The Intercultural Dialogue

Preparing Teachers for Diversity

WAXMANN

Religious Diversity and Education in Europe

edited by

Cok Bakker, Jenny Berglund, Gerdien Bertram-Troost, Hans-Günter Heimbrock, Julia Ipgrave, Robert Jackson, Geir Skeie, Wolfram Weisse

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Thor-André Skrefsrud

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Preface

This book is about an issue that we all encounter in our daily lives – in different ways and in different contexts – *the intercultural dialogue*. In an interconnected world the strange and the stranger are no longer only at a distance. The stranger is often the neighbour – the person next door – which brings questions of communication, understanding and interpretation to the forefront of our minds and bodies. What is an intercultural dialogue? How can cultural differences be dealt with? When does communication create community?

In this study I reflect upon these issues from my position as a teacher educator working with prospective and in-service teachers at Hedmark University of Applied Sciences in Norway. To have the opportunity to discuss questions of cultural and religious change with bachelor and master students has inspired the thoughts developed in this book. Moreover, doing research in schools together with committed teachers and being able to learn from their work, has led me to reflect more thoroughly on what it means to connect the curriculum to the everyday lives of students in ways that may help the students to reclaim the classroom as a dialogical and transformative space. It has also made me see more clearly that hybridisation of individual and collective identities indeed affect us all. A pedagogy that is aware of what it really means to have an affirming view on students' complex backgrounds is thus a pedagogy that all students will benefit from. These insights have been particularly significant in the development of the lines of thought in this book.

This book is based on my PhD at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology entitled *Å være lærer i interkulturell kontekst* (Being a Teacher in Intercultural Contexts). I wish to acknowledge students, teachers and colleagues for valuable discussions and comments. Research time, translation and proofreading were made possible through financial support from the Research Council of Norway and Hedmark University of Applied Sciences.

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Chapter One
Intercultural Dialogue and Its Relevance for Teacher Education

Introduction

Like the rest of Europe, the Norwegian society has become highly diverse also with regard to cultural complexity. Driven by the ever increasing processes of globalisation and changing patterns of migration, many schools and classrooms are now characterised by "super-diversity", in which variables like cultural and linguistic background, religious affiliation, migration history and socio-economic status interact and highly influence the composition of students (Vertovec, 2007; Meissner & Vertovec, 2015; Creese, 2009). In these changing conditions, schools need committed teachers who are able to respond appropriately to the variety of needs in a diverse student population. Intercultural competence has therefore been and remains central to both national and international educational policies (OECD, 2014; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Cochran-Smith, 2013; Taguma, Shewbridge, Huttova & Hoffmann, 2009; Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2013).

According to Villegas & Lucas (2002, p. 20), teachers' intercultural competence includes an affirming view of students from different backgrounds and the ability to design a pedagogy that builds on the students' cultural and linguistic resources. Teacher education is thus given the task of educating teachers who see themselves as capable of bringing about equitable change in the educational system and have the knowledge and capacity to enable children to live peacefully together, regardless of cultural, linguistic or religious backgrounds (Bartolo & Smyth, 2009, p. 124).

Nevertheless, despite broad political attention towards these issues it is necessary to continuously examine governmental policies on cultural diversity (Apple, 1990; Burbules, 2000; Engen, 2011; Pinar et al., 1995). Is the increasing linguistic, cultural and religious complexity in schools understood as something that affects all subjects and has ramifications for all sides of teachers' professional work? Or are issues of diversity treated separately without truly permeating the content of input, assessment, teaching approaches or other areas of professional teacher practice. Or are they even nullified as governments in many countries put more and more effort into high-stake testing, increased control and accountability programs? In other words; what does it look like, the space between rhetoric and reality?

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The Scope

The present book addresses these questions by drawing attention to the concept of *intercultural dialogue*. As education should embrace diversity in a dialogical way, and teachers should be able to promote, develop and facilitate dialogue in their teaching, the concept seems to be a key to the understanding of what intercultural teacher competence in diverse classrooms might be. The Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* makes this connection as it emphasises that "teacher-training curricula need to teach educational strategies and working methods to prepare teachers to manage the new situations arising from diversity" (CoE, 2008, p. 32) and relates this need to intercultural dialogue: "Educators at all levels play an essential role in fostering intercultural dialogue and in preparing future generations for dialogue" (ibid.). The purpose of this book is thus to shed light on intercultural dialogue as a key competence for teachers working in continuously changing and diverse classrooms.

Moreover, I relate the discussion to teacher education. Although politicians and policymakers across Europe see issues of diversity as a core challenge for contemporary teacher education (OECD, 2014) and most teacher education programs report the incorporation of diversity issues into the curriculum (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012), scholars claim that there has been little change with regard to how prospective teachers are prepared and that teacher education programmes are still not sufficiently designed to promote the value of diversity (Cochran-Smith, Davis & Fries, 2004, p. 965). As a field of research, teacher education thus needs more studies that may help to clarify underlying assumptions and sort out discrepancies between intentions and real politics (ibid., p. 965). By focusing on notions of intercultural dialogue in the National Curriculum Regulation for teacher education (chapter 5), I hope to make a contribution to ending this lack of research. What is happening to perspectives on diversity in light of governmental efforts to professionalise teacher education and initiate curriculum changes?

The Concept of Intercultural Dialogue

Traditionally, the concept of intercultural dialogue refers to a constructive and positive interaction between persons or groups which are culturally different from each other (Burbules, 2000; CoE, 2008). Linguistically, the first part of the term – intercultural – calls attention to the communication that takes places between persons or cultures. The second part – dialogue – refers to a transforming discourse between parties holding differing views (ibid.). This explains what is considered to be the positive aspect of the concept; that an intercultural dialogue constructs something new in the form of new insight, new knowledge and new perspectives.

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In reference to Geir Skeie's work (2009), we can distinguish between dialogue on the following different levels and in different forms:

a) Dialogue as an encounter between people from different cultures, religious faiths or philosophies of life
b) Dialogue as communication, discussions and negotiations between representatives of certain cultures
c) Dialogue as a certain type of discourse characterised by a particular normative framework
d) Dialogue as a particular way of viewing pedagogy – dialogical pedagogy

Throughout the book all of these perspectives are thematised in some form or another, although I do not elaborate specifically on any of them. Instead, the intention is to explore some basic assumptions for the understanding of intercultural dialogue, which may in turn have relevance for how these perspectives are understood.

Furthermore, this clarification highlights another aspect of my approach to the issue, namely the focus on cultural differences. Obviously, to even speak of intercultural dialogue at all confirms the assumption that cultural differences do exist, and that it is possible to communicate and relate to one another despite these differences. Cultural differences are thus central to any understanding of the concept. Do cultural differences represent a problem that may be solved by an intercultural dialogue? Or can differences be handled in more positive ways, giving them a constructive role in the intercultural encounter?

Moreover, the concept of intercultural dialogue is explored within the framework of what Mieke Bal (2002) refers to as "travelling concepts". For Bal, concepts are not fixed and simple as if their meanings were clear-cut and common as those of any other word. Instead concepts travel "between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities" (Bal, 2002, p. 3). As a consequence, any concept, also intercultural dialogue, is flexible and must be studied with regard to its changeability. The analytical approach of this book is thus to identify some of the main stops on the travel route of intercultural dialogue, that is to look at theoretical contexts which may be relevant for understanding the concept.

Structure of the Argument

In the three following chapters (chapter 2, 3 and 4) I explore the concept of dialogue in conversation with cultural theory, theories on religion and theoretical perspectives on social interaction. In chapter 2 I introduce what I refer to as *a transcultural perspective*, which seeks to articulate today's altered cultural constitution

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in contrast to conventional views on cultural formations. In Chapter 3 the concept of transculturality is further elaborated through a trans-religious perspective on the understanding of religion as a dimension of culture. Chapter 4 continues the discussion by examining the ethical side of dialogue, its argumentative side and finally the significance that distance might have for the understanding of dialogical interaction. On this basis the book proposes an interpretation which highlights the concept of intercultural dialogue as a creative and dynamic encounter that allows the participants to meet each other both in distance and nearness. Dialogue emphasises the ability and the will to search for a deeper understanding of oneself and others, while allowing participants to preserve their otherness.

In chapter 5 I turn to the government-initiated curriculum framework for teacher education in Norway and discuss the preconditions for intercultural dialogue in educational policies, using the National Curriculum Regulations for Teacher Education (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2003) as an analytical example. This is an interesting document given its focus on the recognition and acknowledgement of cultural complexity in society and schools (Eritsland, 2003; Engen, 2011). For the first time, teacher competence in diverse classrooms was put on the agenda in such a distinct way and to such an extent. As today, the Ministry of Education sent a clear message to all teacher education programmes. In order to be prepared to offer high-quality education for a growing diverse school population, prospective teachers should be increasingly open to the disparate needs of students in all aspects of their pre-service development. However, as the analysis indicates, there are reasons to question to what extent the school authorities really were able – or willing – to make issues of diversity permeate all aspects of teacher preparation. The analytical example thus illustrates how easy it is to take culture for granted, and – despite good will and the best intentions – design educational programmes where success is possible mainly through adopting the mainstream.

In chapter 6, which is the last chapter, I bring the main threads of the book together in an argument for an intercultural dialogue that favours existence and openness over essence and control and has its power in its weakness. Understood in a transcultural perspective, the intercultural dialogue opens for an exploration of the other's thoughts, ideas and perceptions, not in order to control otherness, but to learn more about oneself and the other. Hopefully this way of understanding may come to stand the test of welcoming the other, "not only in our thoughts but also into our own presence, not only in terms abstract knowledge but also in terms of personal encounter" (Schweitzer, 2009, p. 39).

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Why Should We Reflect on Intercultural Dialogue in Education?

Before I present my theoretical discussion partners and the methodological approach, one could ask why there is a reason to reflect on intercultural dialogue. And why should we relate the discussion to teacher education and teacher proficiency?

Emancipatory Rhetoric

While it may seem obvious that any educational program either in school or in teacher education would take an interest in intercultural dialogue, the professional field is calling for greater critical reflection (Ellsworth, 1989; Kögler, 1996; Jones, 1999; Burbules, 2000; Gressgård, 2010; Heimbrock, 2009a). Nicholas Burbules (2000) points out how the idealisation of dialogue in the public debate is paradoxically in danger of concealing cultural hegemonies and allowing discriminatory practices to continue. According to Burbules, the ideal of dialogue has "exerted a kind of hegemonic dominance that belies its emancipatory rhetoric, its apparent openness to difference and its stress on equality and reciprocity" (p. 251). References to the virtues of dialogue such as equality, interaction and cooperation evoke almost entirely positive connotations in the public sphere, which in turn makes the concept virtually unassailable without seeming irrational and negative to the values that the concept represents. Paradoxically, those types of dialogue that try to be most open about their premises and implicit commitments may for that very reason be the hardest to resist and critically address, Burbules concludes (2000, p. 271). The idealisation of intercultural dialogue thus runs the risk of ignoring perspectives and practices which on a deeper level separate themselves from dialogical ideals such as openness, communication, interaction, reciprocity and respect.

Hans-Günter Heimbrock (2009a, p. 83) addresses a similar call for reflection as he points out the key role that dialogue plays in a European educational context, having an impact on a number of different projects, from international student exchange to the development of specific methods of dialogue. For example, intercultural dialogue is highly profiled in all of the European school systems, which is documented in the European REDCo-project (Skeie, 2009, p. 267). The work undertaken by the Council of Europe on intercultural dialogue also illustrates the significance of the concept in a European context (CoE, 2008; CoE, 2013). As Heimbrock points out, however, to "agree to the inevitability of dialogue, and to start educational projects does not lead automatically to successful and continuous dialogues" (2009a, p. 84). Moreover "enthusiastic efforts do not carry always suitable means of dialogue, nor do they provide a sufficient reflection on the basis and the goals of dialogue" (ibid.).

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Following Heimbrock it is necessary to academically challenge the concept of dialogue in order to identify the blind spots and try to see beyond the rhetoric. Failure to do so means that "dialogues" might continue without critical examinations and thus run the risk of concealing undesired practices behind the ideal of an open and inclusive intercultural dialogue.

Monocultural Education

This call for critical reflection is particularly relevant in light of a national identity policy which aims to restrict diversity within the borders of the national state, a way of constructing reality which has traditions in many European countries including Norway (Anderson, 1991; Horst, 2006; Gitz-Johansen, 2009).

Even though contemporary Norwegian policies on education highlight cultural diversity as an additive value to the cultural, social and economic capital of the Norwegian society, the history of education rather involves *assimilation* understood as a process whereby groups and/or individuals gradually adapt to the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture. This was due to the nation-building process, which in Norway started in the 1850s with the "The Modern Breakthrough" and lasted until just after the post-war era (Engen, 2010). Norway was striving towards cultural liberation from Denmark and political liberation from Sweden, whereby the comprehensive school was given a key role in implementing and spreading a nationalistic programme in order to establish a common national identity constructed from a selected set of motives (Engen, 2003). The construction of the Norwegian nation therefore became an early example of what Anderson (1991) describes as an "imagined community".

Although the period of nation-building may be characterised as a golden age in modern Norwegian history, there was definitely also a downside to nation-building. Due to their position in the local communities, teachers became a tool in the implementation of a policy of assimilation which excluded a number of local cultures from the national project. For the Sami people, lessons in the Sami language were forbidden. Teachers were also instructed to ensure that Sami students did not communicate with one another in their native language during school playtime (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996; Engen, 2003). Assimilation was difficult and in some cases, such as with the Romani people, quite dramatic (Moen, 2009). Other groups, such as the Forest Finns and the Kven people, were also subject to cultural and political measures (Niemi, 2003). Common to all of these groups, and a number of other students, was that their cultural identities were never considered a part of a common school culture.

The policy of assimilation during this period was not unique to Norway (Gabbacia, 2002). Yet, it lasted for quite a long time, compared with similar nation-building

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