

Centro de Estudos Sociais, Universidade de Coimbra

Summary report

WP 14 - Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals

Introduction to the concept

The term **transformative intellectual** was coined by Henry Giroux (1988). It means that teachers possess the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to question, understand, interrogate and eventually act as change agents of structural inequities in their place of employment. Critical pedagogy aims to combine a 'language of critique' with a 'language of possibility' and, therefore, it highlights various steps in education which go from the search for more and more information, illuminated by the interpretation and critique of information, to the transformation of society, in a process of knowledge appropriation and application. The teacher as a 'transformative intellectual' is committed to help students be knowledgeable, critical and brave enough to find out new and more just ways for their communities, that is, to develop into active citizens and engage in social change. The combination of a language of critique with a language of possibility turns education into a form of cultural politics in that it attempts the development of a new ethics that fits the multicultural fabric of our societies and generates intercultural dialogue.

Critical Pedagogy is a pedagogy of action that aims to an informed transformation of society through a praxis involving the articulation between theory and practice, thinking and doing. In other words, critical action is an informed, reflective, engaged and creative practice. Freire was most enthusiastic about the productive arm of education, "to know is a transitive verb, a verb that expresses action", which means that to learn is to produce and to think entails acting (Freire, 1998: 91). According to Giroux, praxis "represents the transition from critical thought to reflective intervention in the world" (Giroux, 1981: 117). However, by emphasising the active side of learning and knowing critical pedagogues do not mean that teachers should be activists in their classroom trying to indoctrinate their students into one dogma, ideology or one-sided perspective. Freire himself was clear on this aspects and called pedagogues' attention for the difference between "authentic praxis" and "pure activism" (Freire 1970: 52). Nevertheless, in order to be emancipatory and transformative, pedagogical practice needs to be explicitly political and show ethical concerns. Although theory is foundational to transformative practice, only critical thinking driven by a quest for self and social transformation make teachers critically aware of their role as 'transformative intellectuals'. The development of critical cultural awareness becomes central, specially when dealing with the intercultural dimension of citizenship education (Guilherme, 2002). The intercultural critical teacher of the future will therefore be aware not only of the linguistic and cultural diversity in their classroom, use it as an asset for their educational practice and the search for and creation of knowledge but also be engaged in the exercise of a new citizenship agency and the construction of the emergent intercultural democratic societies.

Methodology

This Work Package aims to analyse the data gathered within the empirical study from the perspective of the transformative intellectual concept, i.e., to examine the extent to which the interviewed teachers are prepared to go

beyond the role of transmitting knowledge and identifying difference in their teaching practices. Specifically, whether they question the status quo as far as the subject matter and their social contexts are concerned. Moreover, if they teach their students to be critically aware of the acquired skills and knowledge, and, more importantly, whether the educators include this kind of transformative knowledge, and agency among their objectives.

The data was organised into the following five broad categories, as they were defined at the 5th Transnational meeting (Madeira, 2007), then each was divided into subcategories to reflect the findings in the national context.

A. The teachers' construction and reproduction of knowledge

Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Declaration of the Rights of the Child are the main guiding documents for most interviewed teachers. Their ideas, however, are taken aboard to construct models as different as acculturation and integration.

The majority of the interviewees speak of the importance of educating their students for living in Europe, and some outreach even to the "citizen of the world". Some primary teachers choose to focus on the country's past, with the view of tracing the development of the Portuguese national identity to the present, others state the fact that the process of integration should imply certain accommodation from both communities involved. Some secondary school teachers view the concept of racism as equivalent to any kind of discrimination. One of the interviewed middle school teachers in Coimbra considers interculturality on two levels of interaction: the internal/micro level of different social realities and the external, at country level. There are secondary teachers who help their students examine the reality of their contexts while being aware of the existence of economic and sociopolitical pressures.

As far as approaches to curriculum are concerned, a great range of opinions can be observed: from mentioning citizenship-related and intercultural issues while dealing with conflicts and disobedience in the classroom to constructing the curriculum around those issues. Most of the teachers, though, view those as topics to be discussed, addressed mainly at the Civic Education and Project Area classes by middle school teachers. There is a common idea that some subject teachers are privileged as far as citizenship and intercultural education are concerned, given the fact that these issues are included in the syllabi (Languages, History and Geography). In contrast, there are teachers who argue for an interdisciplinary approach in discussing these issues, and admit to doing so at their classes.

Most of the interviewees "invite" new discourses into their classrooms, asking students from different cultural backgrounds to relate their experiences in the countries of origin, which range from celebrations and personal narratives to dissimilar religious and teaching/learning cultural practices. Sometimes the invitation is extended to people perceived as experts (on multiculturalism, religion, arts, etc.) inside or outside school (NGOs, universities, churches). Others try to make the different cultures present in their school visible by organising multicultural parties, putting up multilingual signs, world maps which register their presence, interviewing those students for school magazines. A few teachers encourage their students to search for new discourses (planning intercultural encounters, questioning the present state of things).

Some of the respondents are reluctant to discuss such topics as religion, slavery or sexual education within citizenship education, especially in multicultural classes, as they consider them to be personal options of life, too private matters. Besides, teachers avoid addressing these issues as they are apprehensive of the reaction of their students' parents. One teacher even complained of the gradual loss of teacher authority within the school community. Other teachers admit they tend to present citizenship and intercultural curriculum from the perspective of their own personal experience and moral values.

B. Teaching/Learning as a transformative process

An overwhelming majority of teachers see learning and teaching as a transformative process, however, just a few express their awareness of learning themselves from their students or even having to reconsider their own approach and values in order to attend to their students' opinions.

Most interviewees stress that they value bringing up good citizens, responsible and active adults able to interact with people from different cultures being respectful of each other's differences, over preparing excellent students. The teachers' ambition is focused on encouraging independent critical thought and providing students with tools rather than giving ready-to-use knowledge: "We are giving them fishing rods; they have to go fishing by themselves".

Most teachers claim to use dialogue as their main strategy, which can be organised in various forms, e.g. group and project work on citizenship and intercultural issues, open debate or class assembly. The dialogue forms can range from those completely organised and monitored by the teacher to student-run ones. Some secondary and middle school teachers adopt a more thought-provoking stand, staging thematic sketches, planning visits to NGOs, psychiatric hospitals, prisons and centres of different religious confessions.

A vast majority of teachers use text-based resources (provocative quotations, lyrics, Internet, posters, and newspaper / magazine articles) to trigger discussion. In addition, many interviewees refer to films and TV news reports. A few teachers rely on ready-made materials, like course books or worksheets created by other people (other teachers at the school, course authors, etc). for the specific subject of Civic Education. Those who do, usually select the materials which can be adapted to their students' contexts.

The most common strategy of initiating change in their students' attitudes is usually placing them into the other's perspective. Primary teachers usually say "do not do to others what you wouldn't like yourself to be done to you". Middle and secondary school teachers use different techniques, e.g. role-play, making the student present the arguments of their opponents. There are teachers who invite their students to plan and present performances outside school, like thematic art exhibitions for people of weak sight, concerts for Roma communities.

C. Teachers' commitment to transform society

The interviewees generally state their mission as aiming to transform society, even if to restrict its scope to their students and their parents.

Overall, the teachers interviewed in Coimbra describe their schools and classrooms as being socio-economically rather than ethnically heterogeneous. The teachers in Lisbon usually name various ethnic and immigrant group representatives and tend to focus less on social heterogeneity. On the other hand, there are teachers who claim each and every classroom is heterogeneous (“they are not photocopies of each other”), therefore calling for an individualised approach to their students. Students’ characteristics may vary from “cruel”, “immature” to “open” and “attentive”. Students from ethnic and immigrant backgrounds are usually described in terms of (1) their learning progress given the degree of the Portuguese language control, and (2) relations with the rest of the class and the teacher. Some cultural groups are reported to perform better than others (Eastern Europeans, EU nationals, and Brazilians), whereas others are claimed to have difficulties in understanding citizenship and intercultural issues (Roma children, and, to some extent, students of African origin).

Even though some teachers feel left to their own devices as they state the lack of parental involvement in the school and class activities, there are several other teachers, both in Coimbra and Lisbon, who feel supported and encouraged by the cooperation among teachers within the school and between the school and NGOs.

There is little active political participation among Portuguese teachers. The most common participation is in charity and solidarity actions, with different degrees of teacher involvement: from getting their students to participate (e.g. through school magazines) to organising those actions. Some teachers take part themselves and engage other teachers and students in various national and transnational projects (school exchange, e-twinning, theatre groups). Other teachers stress the importance of an interdisciplinary effort, which could translate into cooperation between teachers of different subjects within the school and between the school and other organisations (NGOs, town halls, cultural associations)

The teachers feel to be in a privileged position as agents of change in the society, in order to construct a multicultural society without conflicts. Nevertheless, the majority of the interviewees do not go beyond calling for respect for cultural and social differences, as well as integration of ethnic minorities through providing an adequate access to the Portuguese language and culture. Only one of the respondents thinks that it is important to teach students to learn lessons from conflicts.

Some teachers suggest that the success of integration depends solely on the effort ethnic minorities make to acquire knowledge of the Portuguese culture and is directly linked to their readiness to accept the rules and conventions of the host society. In contrast, other teachers stress that teaching/learning process should be truly intercultural and democratic, that is, constructed in a dialogue and negotiation, and with active participation of students and their parents.

D. Teacher Education

As far as intercultural dimension of citizenship education is concerned, the interviewees consider that some **pre-service** teacher preparation courses deal with it to more extent, like university degrees in Philosophy, Geography, History and Social Sciences, Arts, and Languages. Other ones may include one of its aspects (environmental or sexual education within the course of Biology

and Natural Sciences). Primary teachers report having taken some optional courses where those issues were discussed.

By contrast, an overall lack of **in-service** preparation oriented towards intercultural and citizenship education can be observed. Just a few teacher interviewees were able to find taught courses. The majority attended discrete actions promoted by different organisations, such as teacher associations (usually related to a specific subject area), teacher unions, teacher development centres, social solidarity organisations and NGOs. The teachers therefore have to rely on their personal experiences, e.g. reflecting back upon their living abroad or working in NGOs. In some school settings a teacher support groups were organised to develop resources and practices regarding intercultural and citizenship education.

While most teachers stress the need for teacher resources (discussion materials, documentaries, etc.) and technical support, a few refer the necessity of expert help either in conflict management or in dealing with diversity at school. Whereas many interviewees would prefer practical preparation emerging from problems encountered in their actual classrooms, others opt for the preparation based upon theoretical aspects.

The key idea of teacher preparation, according to the interviewed teachers, should be construction of a consistent teacher practice both across the country and within the school setting.

E. Teacher's Assessment

According to the interviewees, the role of intercultural educator may vary from transmitting an expert knowledge about different cultures to their students to triggering change among students while inviting them to question their own culture from the perspective of the acquired knowledge.

Furthermore, the teacher has to be aware of the specific needs of different communities within the context as well as promote intercultural encounters, however shocking they might be. The teachers themselves have to be open to change, that is, need to be prepared to reconsider their own views if there is evidence to their incorrectness.

An intercultural educator should promote and gather intercultural initiatives and construct articulated action between different organisations apart from school. Some teachers say that the school itself has to be reorganised to allow for more flexibility and openness towards other cultures.

References:

- Freire, P (1971) *Educação como Prática da Liberdade*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
Freire, P. (1998) *Teachers as Cultural Workers*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
Giroux, H. (1981) *Ideology, Culture and the Process of Schooling*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
Giroux, H. (1988) *Teachers as Intellectuals*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
Guilherme, M. (2002) *Critical Citizens for an Intercultural World: Foreign Language as Cultural Politics*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.