Differences and Inequality in Schools: The Languages of Oppressed People as Hope

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Abstract

Professionals and scholars play a relevant role with respect to the languages and discourses of the most subordinated groups, under the rubric of normality. This is analyzed in this paper, and some suggestions are also made as to how to make schools spaces of hope which support differences, help return language to the citizenship, and enable alliances of resistance to be generated, and in so doing give schools an educational and social meaning.

Keywords

Diversity, inequality, differences, language, resistance, education

There is a persistent trend in society in general and in schools in particular to think of social and cultural issues in terms of biology. This trend has been taken from functionalism and is the basis for social relations in capitalist (and neoliberal) society. It has historically justified the subordination of certain people and groups in society: women, immigrants, ethnic and racial minorities, people living in poverty... This rubric has become particularly strong when referring to what has been called 'disability'. There is rarely any questioning of the future prospects of people with disabilities in social, employment and educational terms, containing as it does that it is their ailing bodies that prevent their progress from being 'reasonable' (whether on physical, psychological, or sensory grounds). So much so that some of the most eminent theorists in *Disability Studies*, Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010), still feel compelled to make a basic statement in a

leading academic journal, namely that social exclusion is not a natural process, but is socially constructed. To give an example from Spain, in 2011 some prominent Spanish academics had to publicly question the meaning and usefulness of Special Education, because it reinforced the 'dominant perspectives of the *status quo*' (Echeita, Parrilla and Carbonell, 2011). While this is obvious, there are still painful cases in Spain (but not only), such as those of Rubén and Daniel...[1] They have all been expelled from ordinary schools during compulsory schooling under specific rulings that are in breach of their rights and against the wishes of their families. In this regard, schools are merely serving to certify and strengthen the exclusion processes of many disadvantaged children, and especially those who have been identified by some biological traits that seem to condition their social and educational prospects. In this way, professionals act as barriers that hinder inclusion (Echeita and Calderón-Almendros, 2014, Calderón-Almendros and Echeita, 2015, Calderón-Almendros and Habegger, 2017).

This has resulted from the introduction of a discourse of 'diversity' that is anything but naïve, as it has deprived people with disabilities from anything other than their valuable personal differences. When speaking of 'diversity', a particular language is eliminated and discourses, analyses and practices are taken to supposedly neutral grounds: differences are removed from the inequality that conditions them. In this way, the beautiful diversity, the value of difference can also entail poverty, misery, failure and school segregation, disadvantage and social exclusion, all of these becoming as 'natural' as biodiversity. But let us make no mistake: we are not talking about human diversity here, but about people being treated differently based on social, cultural or biological differences, with the intention of defending a certain social order.

As we have argued elsewhere (Calderón-Almendros, 2011, Calderón-Almendros, 2014, Calderón-Almendros and Ruiz-Román, 2015, 2016), normalisation is used to implement an entire logic of control that pervades educational institutions and the pathways available to disadvantaged groups. This is a network of institutions, programmes and measures from which escape is extremely difficult. They are what Foucault (1977) called 'disciplinary institutions', which make up a certain social order by using punishment and reward; within this system, each particular behaviour is normalised and distributed, or otherwise, serves as a normalising agent for the rest.

The above arguments can only lead in one direction: either we are looking in the wrong place, or we are looking at the situation in the wrong way; or maybe both. We therefore need to overcome the discourses and educational practices that are devaluing the other, mainly by depriving them of their language.

Language, power and hegemony

We are invaded by knowledge and discourses that pathologise, blame and capture the other, building a strong barrier between us and them that prevents us from understanding, getting to know and even catching a glimpse of the other. (Pérez de Lara, 2001: 296)

One of the forms of domination repeatedly found in schools is the violence exerted on students and their families by professionals imposing their view of reality, rather than accepting the perspective of the family based on their direct relationship with the child involved. As professionals, we do this by taking as a reference our own cultures (which are biased, as they do not include certain cultures and social groups), and the academic, professional, and institutional cultures (including their underlying traditions and interests). Therefore, certain cultures and practices are at a disadvantage because they are rarely present in professionals' experience. In addition, these mainstream cultures enforce projections onto the others that condemn them to personal and social cartographies derived from the prevailing stereotypes and prejudices of our professional cultures. These are sustained by highly questionable theories that are still widespread in pedagogical practices. They are prejudices because they are not based on direct knowledge, but on 'lessons' learnt over the years, such as predictions about Roma children behaving in a certain way, Moroccan children having a distinctive behaviour, and autistic students requiring a major change in the curriculum.

Families have the ability to transform this reality, quite simply because they know the child. They have no need to pre-judge, because they know their son or daughter, and their knowledge has been mediated by affection, in contrast to the 'rationalist' bias imposed by the academic, professional and institutional culture. These families have questioned the social representations that have affected their children ever since they were born. However, institutions tend to be impervious to these new languages, which could well transform

situations. The best example is the one that so many mothers complain of when their children are labelled as having specific needs for educational support, and that they must accept the psycho-pedagogical evaluation and the school's reports and opinions even if these exclude their child. Families are made to accept the discursive practice of the professional, whereby the child is reduced to being a pathology. Otherwise, for example, when a mother defends the right of her child to be schooled in an ordinary classroom despite professional advice to the contrary, her behaviour is pathologised: either she is 'blinded' by her motherly love, or is simply labelled as being 'crazy'. The power of the institution, which is based on normality as the organiser of reality, also seeks to discipline families and devalue their cultures and languages when they deviate from the standard.

In summary, institutions, and specifically, schools, steal the language and discourse from students and their families, leaving them defenceless against practices that lead people to be placed on exclusionary pathways, to reification and their social and educational death. This is common to various different groups: immigrants, impoverished population, working class students, homosexuals... All of them are defined by schools, and the language (as discourse and practice) of schools forces them to abandon their demands. Groups, one by one, are disarmed and demobilised, largely through the power of normality; their differences are transformed into identities defined by power. In this process, students are forced to conform to a dichotomous exclusionary schema: whether to camouflage themselves in the norm by denying their differences, or to become the opposite, the abnormal.

Overcoming these discourses

This whole panorama is maintained, in part, by the constructions that have been created from the universities, which have a vested interest in developing separate analyses for each of the groups (especially for people with disabilities) and dividing knowledge into disconnected and often contradictory subjects, thus limiting the ability of students to make sense of their learning and create new paths... Academia has also colonised the discourse of those who want to be teachers by imposing a set of categories. Therefore, as professionals, we need to subvert what we believed was our task, because otherwise we will continue to exclude people. We are in fact excluding!

But we can deconstruct the exclusions generated by the current order, by accepting differences over the increasingly homogenising project that has come to prevail in schools. The school governed by standards and compliance is not the only type of school imaginable. It is possible to accept conflict over order. Like the conflict that led black people to join hitherto white schools; and the conflict which led women to schools monopolised by men. It is necessary to break away from this fragmented discourse (by groups, by areas of knowledge, by differentiated and excluding theories) that continues to oppress and exclude certain people solely because of how they operate. The analyses and proposals for intervention must undo this ingrained historical segregation. Hence the value of overcoming existing theories and their rationales.

Resistant discourses, emerging narratives and hope

A new stance can be taken in respect to educational situations and relationships. This stance may be full of uncertainty, as it must challenge some of the assumptions on which pedagogical knowledge, educational relationships and the very meaning of institutions such as schools have been based. Tradition prioritises a type of pedagogical knowledge that is restricted to thematic compartmentalisation and normality, and an event can only be pedagogical if it problematises relationships, rather than questioning the other (Skliar, 2008). To this end, resistance theories make it possible to analyse, challenge and transform the representations and educational practices that name, marginalise and define difference as 'the devalued other', questioning the power relations that sustain this 'colonisation of difference' (Giroux, 1994). The problems that have been deemed to be individual by schools can be returned to the social arena. Disruptive behaviour, for example, is generated from within a given context and seeks to disrupt what Skliar calls the 'natural order of things'. School failure is not a personal matter but is the result of unbalanced relationships. Breaking away from the bureaucratic approach to teaching can restore respect for the profession and acknowledge the wisdom of ordinary people (Apple, 2013).

People have the ability to resist dominant discourses, and in fact we do. Lessons can be learnt from those often-unconscious movements that challenge the majority-based logic of schools on a regular basis. Schools can help strengthen the languages of oppressed people to grow together, because it is in those true languages and discourses that the institution can recover its humaneness. Schools can, and should, become

spaces where the struggle for democracy and social justice can take place, because, as Barton (2001) argued, the current conditions and relationships are unacceptable. There are battles being fought by children and their families for their right to education in ordinary schools. They are fighting on their own, and they are being accused by the institutions with our connivance. This is not a biological issue. Nor is it individual in nature. It is a political reality that we have allowed and sustained through our actions. And it needs to change in schools, since they should be places where support is provided for differences, alliances are established and languages are recognised.

It is necessary to stir the calm waters of segregating and homogenising schools, and this has to come from the experiences of those involved. From real experiences that are painful for the bodies and minds of people around us, even though we do not want to see them. Such as the experiences of women who end up prostituting themselves in the industrial estates of our cities; and the children who learn from their early years that they are worth less than others. These experiences cause their bodies and minds much suffering, despite our ruse to empty them from within.

Some lessons can be learnt from these experiences. Each of them illustrates a pungent experience and instances of language that has been denied or hidden or involving fear. But these discourses, drawing from differences, also enable extraordinary life and social mapping processes. In this way, they become sources of hope and encourage new alliances, by questioning the barriers that prevent the transformation of the relations of domination and the experiences of oppression. By blurring the understanding of what a school is, there are new findings such as the value of friendship, the deregulated time, the potential of art, the love of knowledge, the way to school, the silent company, uncontrolled learning, the value of life, time for simply being... School can be a privileged place for the transformation of humanity here and now. An example of this is the experience that my brother shared with me[2] about the time when his teachers wanted to send him to a special school when he was doing his compulsory secondary education. It concerns his bond with excluded classmates (probably regarded as 'bad' students by the institution, who behaved inappropriately and generally failed at school). A metaphor that made me reconsider the value of what is devalued in the institution, and opened unanticipated windows of opportunity to think differently:

I helped them to stay friends and continued to do my school work. [...] I remember that Mofli told me never to smoke joints. They seemed to be bad friends (looked rough...), but they said that from inside. I was with them because, although I had more friends, I felt lonely. Because I was spending time with other friends and they paid some attention to me, but not much. And I said: 'Now, who shall I be with?' And I met these people, who had a rough appearance but they were good people. [...] With them, having Down's syndrome didn't mean being alone. It felt as if the Down's was killing me at the time. What had the Down's done? It made me feel lonely, discouraged, glum. Having the Down's was different when I was with them. When I was with them it was as if I didn't have Down's syndrome. There I would become a policeman, and I would remove the Down's. And I (mentally) told others to support me. And I caught the Down's, I put him in jail and I was free. [...] Mofli and those guys helped me to be free. Because at first, they did not realise that I had Down's syndrome, and when they realised, they loved me, and they made me stay with them. As I was accompanied, I was freer.

(Rafael Calderón-Almendros, Interview)

Endnotes

[1] These are two of the cases recently researched by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the UN, motivated by complaints from the SOLCOM Association. The report published is categorical in its conclusions on the Educational System in Spain:

"The Committee considers that the information available reveals violations of the right to inclusive and quality education. These violations are primarily related to certain features of the education system that have been maintained despite reforms and that continue to exclude persons with disabilities — particularly those with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities or multiple disabilities —from mainstream education on the basis of assessments conducted according to the medical model of disability. This, in turn, results in educational segregation and denial of the reasonable accommodation needed to ensure the non-discriminatory inclusion of those with disabilities in the mainstream education system." (*Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2018, 6)*

In adition, SOLCOM has supported these and other people with disabilities and their families to exercise the respective legal actions against the discrimination they have experienced.

[2] This experience been fully addressed in Calderón-Almendros (2014).

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