

Managing diversity in class - Reflections from action research.

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Abstract

Teaching and learning are practices that occur in the complex ecologies of individual, social, cultural settings and contexts. The “core” of job of responsible teacher is to create learning environments where students and teachers experience a positive atmosphere. Students can develop their capabilities through experiences and reflection. Thereby emotions play an important role. This paper describes an action research on teacher’s role and the construction of positive learning environments and highlights some fundamental conditions for responsible teaching. The study involves teachers from different schools - infant, primary and secondary - and its main aim is to build methods able to support the learning process of each students through teachers’ reflection practices.

Theoretical framework

Dewey (1938) argued that learning happens through a strict relation between theory and practice and therefore it is important to have concrete experiences in which it is possible both to involve and reflect; learning that comes from experience generates a process that leads to human development. Biesta (2006) underlines that students can develop their “human presence” in environments built to reach this aim. In the theory of deliberative practice, the nature of the practice activities plays a decisive role in the development of expertise (Ericsson, 2004, 2006, 2009). All these perspectives highlight the importance of the environment in the learning experience. In the pedagogical Italian perspective of Massa (1986, 1997), creating learning environments means building protected contexts in which all students can analyse their limits and capabilities, understand their mistakes and their difficulties, reflect about what they do and they feel. It is important to create an atmosphere that allows the students to challenge themselves. The aim of this learning experience is to achieve useful competences not only at school but also in daily life (e.g. the awareness to be able to recognize our limits and fragility). Education has to try to link knowledge with experience and to transform it into action (Dewey, 1938) and this happens through reflective thinking as a process of discovery.

Recently educational research has demonstrated that using reflection and problematization of the teaching and learning process within contexts where teachers work help them to examine their practice and their role deeply (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Alsop, Dippo, & Zandvliet, 2007).

Action research seems to be an appropriate methodology that helps teachers to be engaged in inquiry (Rosiek & Atkinson, 2005; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). It reinforces the awareness of teachers’ knowledge and practices in an emancipatory way. Moreover, reflection is a significant component of action research to facilitate the continuous integration of knowledge, experience and action (Schon 1983; Mills, 2003).

Object and Aims

Action research “Teacher’s role between method and quality of school’s experience” has been conducted in Cinisello Balsamo, a town near Milan, in 2011. The study involved teachers from different schools: infant, primary and secondary.

The main action research aim is to build methods able to support the learning process of each students through teachers' reflection practices. In details, the research objectives were:

- inquiring the practices used by teachers to answer to individual students' needs;
- founding new strategies or perspectives to enhance teachers' job to face the different situations that happen in class.

Methodology

The study refers to the ecological paradigm and the naturalistic epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Mortari, 2007). In its development, action research is faithful to these assumptions: a) the educational situation is complex and it needs a situated and deep understanding; b) this understanding is the first step to redesign the teachers' actions.

The research context is an institutional town group composed by a) school managers, b) teachers who work in different schools of Cinisello, c) the psychopedagogue of the Municipality, d) a Municipality officer of Cinisello. The aims of this group is to reflect on educational difficulties and forms of distress in school and to find shared strategies to face up with it.

Twenty teachers are involved in this study. They are divided in two groups and in each group there are teachers came from different levels of schools and three researchers. One researcher takes notes and shows them during each meeting. Thus, it's possible to have a step-by-step documentation and the agreement or the correction by the whole group. Each note is provided to the participants and it's the starting point for the subsequent meetings.

Six meetings of three hours each are realized, once a week. The results are shared and discussed in a final plenary meeting. Researchers facilitate the groups to discuss through a) telling their teaching practices, b) discussing some episodes of school life and teaching practices as described in "School's Diary" (Pennac, 2008).

During the meetings, teachers and researchers compare representations, meanings, emotional dynamics, educational contexts and teaching strategies that they got from these stories. Starting from the recurring words and expressions used to describe the episodes, they build some categories that represent their awareness about teaching practices and research results.

Results

Teachers become more conscious about the "core" of the job of responsible teacher that is to create supportive learning environments.

Firstly, during action research, teachers understand the importance to engage students in learning, through the dialogue in class. Students need a supportive learning environment where they can talk with teacher and other students to refine knowledge, skills, attitudes. Teachers underline the importance of non-verbal communication (glance, gesture and actions, movements and postures of the teacher's body). It produces significant effects in the student's involvement and in their learning.

Secondly, the study highlights the role of emotions and context. In order to create a supportive learning environment, teachers have to be able to recognize and manage both the learners' and their own emotions. At the same time it's important that teachers are able to use time, spaces, rules, roles, objects and new teaching instruments and procedures according to the class situations and the particular students' needs. Therefore it's necessary that teachers work as "actors" (in the scene of the learning-teaching experience) and at the same time as "directors" (in the backstage of this scene). This is a complex competence to be reached through professional experience and reflection on action. The most important result of this study is that at the

beginning of research teachers were not aware of their fundamental role of “actor” and “director” but they have recognized it during action research.

Finally, teachers need to reflect on their emotions and actions to understand their importance in the creation of supportive environment and sustainable learning. Teachers ask professional teaching training focused on the development of these pedagogical competencies. In particular they need to reflect-on-action (Schon, 1983) and to develop a strategy of process evaluation (Schein, 1987).