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Citizenship education and the multicultural dimension: strategies for the secondary classroom

Tözün Issa
London Metropolitan University (UK)

Introduction

This paper looks at some of the teaching strategies used to tackle inter-ethnic tensions in a multicultural secondary school in North London. The study focuses on a class of 13 year olds (year 8) who come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The school actively promotes its multicultural ethos and its commitment to equal opportunities; however in practice 'multiculturalism' appears to signify more than the tolerance by the 'main' majority culture – the monolingual English speaking culture – to the existing minority 'other' cultures within the school. Looking closely at the student activities during class and break times reveals a different picture: there appear to be tensions and power relationships not just among the 'main' and the 'other' groups but between different 'other' groups as well. Each group constantly tries to establish their dominance over others. The teachers, who are very much aware of the situation, plan and implement programmes of teaching specifically to tackle this problem. This paper discusses how these strategies play a useful part in diffusing some of these tensions.

Methodology

The study is based on observation of classroom activities, student interactions in and out of classrooms, and interviews with key people in the school, the subject teacher as well the students.

School programmes on citizenship education

There are many examples of citizenship education across the world. Some of these are aimed at promoting respect for others and citizenship awareness. These programmes have various titles such as character education, education for citizenship, and teaching for democracy. Some of these explore the effects of citizenship education programmes that specifically look at teachers' own assessment of citizenship issues in schools (Adalbjarnardottir, 2001). Some focus on moral and social competence and skills, others on community involvement and political activity (Holden, 1999; Yates and Youniss, 1999). However, there are very few that explore some of these in relation to inter-ethnic tensions and with specific reference to teaching strategies.

Similarly some studies are interested in exploring the interaction in the classroom as a reflection of what is going on in the wider community (ven Lier, 1988). Others look at interaction as micro-level activities that essentially reflect macro-level influences from the outside, which as argued help 'understand what happens between people' (Holliday, 1994: p14).

The school and its surrounding communities

Forest Academy secondary school with its 700 students reflects the cultural and ethnic diversity of its surrounding area. There are over 40 languages spoken in the school. The main language groups are Turkish, Bengali, Arabic, Spanish and African languages such

as Twi, Ga, Akan, Amharic, Lugand, Swahili, Bemba, Ibo. The multicultural ethos of the school is reflected in its posters and the displays around it. Welcome signs, positive reference to other cultures and other faiths can be seen clearly. The schools' ethos statement clearly advocates its commitment to equal opportunities and excellence:

> All users of the site share a clear moral sense of purpose which includes high expectations of personal integrity and respect for other people as individuals regardless of their age, ability, mobility, race, religion, gender, sex orientations or any other attribute or characteristic.

This position is reflected in various school policies. The school has an equal opportunities policy, anti racist policy and the commitment to equality and diversity is openly endorsed in all relevant documentation.

Talking to the members of staff echoes this commitment. The actions of staff in and out of class appear to support the school's ethos. When I asked about possible issues within various groups the responses were generally varied. The members of the senior management team appeared to approach the issue as one of peer group conflict while the teaching staff looked at the inter-ethnic dimension and actively acknowledged the need to tackle it at the wider school level, firstly through the ownership of all staff and secondly with the involvement of the wider school community. My conversations with tutors confirmed that there are specific issues relating to inter-ethnic interaction during classes and there were traceable patterns from year 7 (age 11) up to year 11 (age 16+) particularly relating to 'The use of racist language specifically aimed at one's own culture and religion'.

The teaching staff commented that the conflict and segregation in the classrooms were applied more to 'black' and 'white' groups and reported on situations where these were clearly visible during their sessions. They also reported on various potential conflict situations between Black and Turkish students where they commented on the black students' intolerance towards the use of Turkish in the class. A frequently heard comment was 'Stop using your language'

However my conversations with a group of year 8 (13 year old) students revealed that there were other forces at work.

The 'sweets' versus the 'safes'

I started the discussion by asking the students if they had any experiences of problems between 'groups' of students in the school. I went on to explain what I meant by 'groups' by giving examples of students from African or West Indian backgrounds or students who speak other languages.

Their immediate reaction was to say that racist language was used but only during problems between two rival groups they described as 'safe' and 'sweet'. Through our puzzled looks they explained the typical characteristics of them. Sweets they described as representing the 'whites' while safes represented 'the other'. It was made clear by the teachers that 'white' represented white working class and 'other' included the large majority of West African, Afro-Caribbean and other groups such as Turkish, Bangladeshi, Spanish and so on. In response to our curiosity the students went on to describe distinct aspects of each group from the dress code with reference to specific brand of clothing, shoes worn and types of music listened to by each group. When I asked about the

problems between the two groups the students acknowledged that this usually started in school but developed into a broader conflict – sometimes physical fights – outside it.

The discussions also revealed the point made about the Turkish students earlier, that they seemed to have aligned themselves with safes, the group representing all 'other' groups. Although it was agreed that this constituted a potential risk to the inter-ethnic equilibrium in the classroom, the Turkish students' reaction – or non-reaction – to certain racist tendencies towards them appeared to support the point that there were other power relationships at work in the school. Therefore, their response supported a move which can be described as both tactical as well as necessary for survival.

This appeared to support the point that there was a delicate balance of power within the school and the relative calm observed in the school was largely attributed to the efforts of individual teachers who incorporated the aspects of such conflict into their teaching

Citizenship education: a way forward to resolving conflict in the classroom

In this section I report on my classroom observations and subsequent conversations with teachers.

Lesson 1: Tsunami disaster
Class 7

Learning intentions:

- to look at Tsunami's 'natural' impact
- to look at Tsunami's 'human' impact

This was a highly interactive lesson. Using an interactive whiteboard, the teacher, Mr. Corkett, described very skilfully the natural impact of the disaster, exploring very thoroughly its 'how' and the 'what' elements. His presentation included a map supported by visual effects, pictures and eyewitness accounts of the disaster. The children described by the teacher as 'usually very high' were very interested in the presentation and this helped the general behaviour in the class. The lesson progressed from the 'natural' dimension to the 'human' dimension. Mr. Corkett explained the natural consequences of the disaster, followed by the human suffering as the result of it. The teacher's appropriate questioning strategies helped children to focus on specific issues. He referred to Sri Lanka as being in the middle of political turmoil as well being hit by affects of the disaster:

> Mr. Corkett   If you were living there (Sri Lanka) and your village is hit by the disaster, you may not get the supplies to you because of the war.

The teacher referred to the immediate consequences of the disaster, pointing at the enormous hardship faced by people.

> Mr. Corkett   In some places you had one toilet to 1000 people. Can you imagine that? Out of the six countries affected, only one country can really afford to pay for it.

Action points raised by the teacher then followed the prompts and questions: 'You have now seen what has happened and heard the eye-witness accounts of its impact and

suffering on the people. What can we do to help? The students came forward with suggestions:

Student 1	We can do a non-uniform day and donate the money to the victims
Student 2	We should keep talking about these things all the time not just when something like that happens.
Student 3	Our country can do more to help. We can start a campaign in our schools and organise events to raise money.

The brainstorming was followed by a series of tasks for the students, who were given worksheets with a map of the affected areas. First they were asked to complete a word puzzle with the key words to be identified. They were instructed to highlight the countries affected. Students were then asked to think about the following questions:

Why are the numbers of people killed by the tragedy likely to get worse? (Think of three reasons).

What kind of help/aid is needed? (Think of four things).

What can we do here? (Be realistic).

The plenary session generated a lot of suggestions from the students about helping the victims as well as facts about the disaster. Mr. Corkett then skilfully summarised the focus points of the lesson and which provided further discussion about raising awareness on 'helping each other'. The emphasis appeared to have shifted from 'you' (singular) to 'we'.

Lesson 2: Designing your Utopian citizenship

Learning Intentions

Students will be able to

- imagine and create an ideal community for themselves

- reflect on the needs of others by reflecting on theirs.

This was the first in the series of sessions that Mr. Corkett has organised. The main aim was to develop students' reflective thinking by getting them to think about their own needs in a utopian society in which there would be 'others'.

The teacher opened up the discussion by asking the students to reflect on their own communities. This was not difficult as each group referred to their cultural practices e.g. wedding parties, hip-hop artists, Bollywood etc. The brainstorming helped other students who couldn't quite participate to have a clear idea about what was required. Mr. Corkett then emphasised the importance of these practices by reflecting on how they were a way of life for these communities. This served two useful purposes: by highlighting these the teacher

- openly declared the value he placed on cultural practices from children's own communities.

- put such practices in historical, sociological and logical contexts.

The activities set for the students were then based on their ideal community relating to their current experiences i.e. how would they create a society in Utopia. The questions the teacher asked were:

> If you were to create your ideal multi-cultural community, what would it look like?

> What would you like to have as a citizen to serve all your needs?

The students were asked to describe their ideal community by colourful illustrations and key vocabulary, which appeared to motivate everyone in the class. The first session, although far from being perfect, looked promising. Much to our relief nobody described a community made up solely of their own 'group' but did not say much about the other groups either. During the plenary students showed more reflection as Mr. Corkett started to ask more open- ended and analytical questions as the students talked about their individual work. These were 'What about…? 'What happens as if…? questions which did not always require straightforward answers. They were to stimulate children's thinking. Mr. Corkett organised subsequent sessions based on similar themes. When we had a chance to sit and talk about the sessions Mr. Corkett confirmed the progress made in the students' thinking and how much he felt it helped to diffuse some of the tensions in the classroom.

> These kids are very responsive towards their own communities. They mostly carry the stereo-typical ideas about other cultures and bring them into the classroom. It is only by approaching the issues calmly and sensitively that I feel I managed to get them to be more reflective about their own cultures and subsequently on others.

Mr. Corkett also commented on the improved behaviour of some the students. He talked about a situation in class when he kept a group of black boys in for being disruptive during a lesson.

> Student (talking to others) – Hey can you all see what is happening here? (Implying that all who were kept back were black)

> Mr. Corkett (responding calmly but promptly) – What are you implying? That I kept you in because you are all black? No Errol! It's because you were all disrupting MY class.

However, Mr. Corkett added that the only way to move forward in this situation is to have a clear planned whole-school approach where similar issues would be tackled in all subject areas and not just in citizenship education.

Conclusions

Twenty-first century 'multicultural' schools are more complex and dynamic than was perceived previously. There is more to the majority versus minority phenomenon. As shown in this study of a multicultural secondary school in inner London, potential conflict situations between 'white' and 'other' students may manifest in more complex and interrelated groups. The membership of such groups is no longer determined by the traditional 'colour' boundaries, and one's own 'coolness' or 'safeness' as well as other defined attributes, play a significant part. As such conflict stations persist, various groups

devise their own strategies to survive within the system while trying to maintain their distinct cultural identities.

This paper shows that these complexities and potentially explosive situations can be diffused through effective classroom practice.

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