Questions and Perspectives in Education

Edited by
János Tibor KARLOVITZ

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How can we create an equitable classroom?

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University of Miskolc

Studies confirm that group-work contributes effectively to the knowledge acquisition of children in heterogeneous classrooms. Sharan (1995) and Slavin (1995) agree that the diversity of the pupils is an advantage both in case of learning new information, and in terms of social behaviour. Many would not agree with this statement. For them, the question is whether the heterogeneous pupil composition ensures that all children have equal access to the progress of knowledge and to the curriculum (Cohen, 1994). This paper aims to demonstrate what the equitable classroom means and why it is necessary to equally access the curriculum for both the individual and the society and how this can be accomplished during group-work in a heterogeneous pupil group.

First we have to make clear what an equitable classroom looks like, how would we know one when we see one. One of the features of an equitable classroom (Lotan, 2006) is that all students have access to quality curriculum, intellectually challenging tasks, equal status interaction with their peers, with the teachers and with the text of schools. A classroom, where the students can see each other as competent; contributing; learning; colleagues and peers, while engaging in serious content, is the ideal. They solve problems that are similar to real-life problems, they address dilemmas and they have interesting topics to talk about. The aim is that they do that democratically and equitably (Caro-Bruce et. al., 2007).

What people sometimes mistake equity for is 'friendliness'. We have to look for the answer in the group-work. We do see classrooms that use group-work that are indeed friendlier, because pupils know each other names, and they talk to one another a little bit more, but that still does not address the issue of the equal status interaction. They can be friendly but they don't necessarily see particular students as competent. Therefore they are not seen as contributing to them or contributing to the group task.

We have to look for the suitable methods which are good to treat heterogeneous classroom. One of them is *complex instruction*, which is a status treating special cooperative work. The theoretical basis for the *complex instruction* particularly comes from a theory called expectation states theory. Status characteristics (Melamed, 2011) are features where society agrees that it is better to be in the high state than in the low state. The society agrees or society knows that it is probably be better to be rich than poor. More power and prestige is related to the high status characteristics if you are the member of the majority of the society.

In classrooms, particularly elementary ones, reading ability is such a status characteristic. If we ask children to rank each other and themselves on their reading ability in classrooms, the children are able to rank themselves, where their ranking corresponded to the teacher's ranking.

Status generalization (Oldmeadow, 2006) means that we come to a situation and all we know about it is that somebody is a good reader. But the task that we have to do has nothing to do with reading – we should make a present for our friends, a model airplane with legos for example – we would still generalize from the fact that somebody is a good reader to his or her competence to building for example.

Teachers should explain to the pupils that the task requires multiple intellectual abilities, hence in order to be able to complete a particular task, they need to make sure that they understand the text; they talk about the ideas; they summarize them in ways that make sense; they can explain it; they can synthesize; they can make a visual representation of the poem that they read; or they can paint a beautiful painting out of it. This particular task requires so many different things to do, that a single person will have a hard time doing it by themselves during the lesson; so the individual will need everybody and everybody's expertise. There is no one person that is always successful at everything, which is a huge problem for the children who are always successful at everything in schools. The reason why they are always successful is that the tasks are so narrow. On these multi-dimensional, broad, rich tasks the pupils need many different ways of being smart.

Howard Gardner (2003) talks about multiple intelligences. The most important thing that he did was that he made intelligence plural. He made 'intelligences', not only one intelligence. It is important to make the pupils aware that there are different pupils of capabilities, strengths and talents that they can contribute with. That comes from school, but also from our outside experiences.

Children come to school with such rich repertoires that the teachers never take advantage of, they never mind, they never give them opportunities to show how smart they are. When the students are actually working on these tasks and they require the multiply abilities, than the teacher can go around to observe and give specific feedback to all students particularly to the students who have never before been seen by their peers as contributors or as smart. So, the teachers can change expectations by praising a student more and more. The result of this is that when a student enters a new situation, he won't automatically say that 'this person is going to be the one who will solve the problem and I can just sit back'. They'll all have to perform and do something to produce the task (Lotan, 2004).

The message that we are trying to give is counter normative for schools where everything is so narrow, it is counter normative for teachers and it is counter cultural in many ways. The teachers always aim to find the best person in everything. In case of the *complex instruction* method, it is more

about looking at the richness. The advantage is that in the end, the pupils have the reading- the writing-, and the test taking skills as well. If the teachers have a rich task and they teach the pupils higher order thinking and deep conversation skills, they will do well on the test, too.

In the equitable classroom the children have access to a quality curriculum. All the children understand that they will have an opportunity to demonstrate their smarts in different ways by different means and at different occasions. They understand that being smart can be learnt that is incremental and multi-dimensional. In an equitable classroom – and the teachers know that that's where they get the most resistance, and also probably a lack of understanding – the achievement is clustered around a narrow, acceptable mean, meaning that there are only a very few children who are just bellow and some children who are above. It's not a normal curve. The achievement in an equitable classroom is not the normal curve, because in the normal curve only 60 percent of the classroom are around the acceptable mean (Bauman et al, 2005). We talk about achievement where we demonstrate what students know, what *all students know* in this graph. A standardized test does not discriminate because we have to have a normal curve.

Complex Instruction (K. Nagy, 2012) is a program which can be used successfully in heterogeneous classroom. It is an instructional approach that allows teachers to use cooperative group-work to teach at a high level in academically diverse classroom. The goal of this instruction is to provide academic access and success for all students in heterogeneous classrooms.

The features of the program is that multiple ability curricula are designed to foster the development of higher-order thinking skills through group-work activities organized around a central concept or big idea. The tasks are open-ended, requiring students to work interdependently to solve problems. Most importantly, the tasks require a wide array of intellectual abilities so that students from diverse backgrounds and different levels of academic proficiency can make meaningful contributions to the group task.

Using special instructional strategies, the teacher trains the students to use cooperative norms and specific roles to manage their own groups. The teacher is free to observe groups carefully, to provide specific feedback, and to treat status problems which cause unequal participation among group members.

To ensure equal access to learning, teachers learn to recognize and treat status problems. In Complex Instruction Program the more the students talk and work together, the more they learn. Students, who are social isolated or students who are seen as lacking academic skills often fail to participate and thus learn less than they would if they were more active in the groups. In Complex Instruction Program teachers use status treatments to broaden students' perceptions of what it means to be smart,

and to convince students that they each have important intellectual contributions to make to the multiple ability task.

In schools where students are tracked into high and low level science courses, they have different educational experiences in terms of access to scientific materials, information and instruction. In essence, tracking denies low-tracked students' access to the knowledge and skills needed to pursue scientific careers or to become informed, productive members of an increasingly technological society.

Complex Instruction Program permits teachers to teach at a high intellectual level while reaching a wide range of students. Traditional classroom tasks use a narrow range of intellectual abilities. When asked to describe their middle grades science experiences, most students mention listening to lectures, reading textbooks, highlighting key passages and sentences and memorising information.

To develop scientific thinking skills, group activities need to incorporate a wide range of intellectual abilities. Multiply- ability group tasks a prerequisite for Complex Instruction. Students use different intellectual abilities as they rotate through the different tasks.

The multiple representations provide students with additional opportunities to access ideas and information, as well as opportunities to demonstrate multiple intellectual abilities. When such abilities are necessary to complete the tasks, more students have the opportunity to make substantial contributions to the group and to be recognised for these contributions.

The feature of group-work tasks is positive interdependence. When tasks are complex, rich and demanding, a single students will not be able to complete it in a timely fashion by himself or herself. In Complex Instruction, designing tasks that are multiple-ability and open-ended fosters interdependence.

Teachers must hold each student personally accountable for contributing to the group's success and for mastering the concepts or the big idea of the unit. Students are required to complete individual reports after the group's discussion and presentation.

Teachers must realised that when students work in groups, direct instruction is no longer practical. When instruction shifts to small groups, both teacher and student behave differently than during traditional, whole-class instruction. Teachers delegate authority to the students so that they will take responsibility for their own behaviour and learning. When teachers delegate authority, they often worry about losing control of the classroom.

Norms are written or unwritten rules for how one ought to behave. Cooperative norms control student behaviour in groups and ensure that group-work work. But following rules doesn't always come naturally for students – skill-building activities at the start of the year help develop these new behaviours students need to use.

Delegation of authority is supposed by specific student roles (facilitator, reporter, timer, materials manager...). These roles give each person in the group a task to accomplish. This reduces the probability of one person in the group doing all the work.

Delegation of authority doesn't mean that the teacher withdraws from the class or completely stays out of the action. The nature of the activities as well as the system of norms and roles relieve the teacher of the mundane tasks of classroom management. By making students responsible for their own learning, the teacher has a new role as facilitator. While the students are at learning stations, the teacher is freed up to engage students in higher-order questions, to stimulate and extend their thinking, to provide specific feedback, and to deal with problems of unequal participation. By delegating authority to the groups, teachers can do what they like to do the best: teach. In classroom where teachers delegate authority, the proportion of students talking and working together increases.

Teachers who have used cooperative learning know that students within a group do not participate equally. Unequal participation leads to unequal learning. It is a problem rooted in the students' perceptions of themselves and each other.

The classroom is a social system in which students' perceptions of themselves and their classmates dictate relative status and participation. In classrooms children are constantly evaluated by both their peers and their teacher. Teachers and students form a social ranking (status order). Social theory suggests that when students work together on a group task, those perceived as high achievers dominate the group interaction. The high-status students are more influential in group decisions, low-status students barely participate. This is called a status problem.

Status problems lead to unequal opportunities for learning. Since high-status students interact more in the group, they learn more from the tasks, since law-status students participate less, they learn less.

We confirm that group-work contributes effectively to the knowledge acquisition of children in heterogeneous classrooms. We agree with Sharan and Slavin that the diversity of the pupils is an advantage both in case of learning new information, and in terms of social behaviour. The aim of this paper was to demonstrate what the equitable classroom means and why it is necessary to equally access the curriculum for both the individual and the society. We think that if teachers do not create equitable classrooms, the democracy will not come.

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