
Research Reconsiderations Concerning Cultural Differences

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ABSTRACT 'Minority children' experience a lot of shifts in their cultural contexts. The author's work as a professional teacher in multicultural classes enabled her to focus on the research questions presented in this article. These questions concern the need for some minority children to achieve equal opportunities in the Norwegian educational system. The author uses her teaching practice and ethnographic notes to put forward two particular cases that illustrate the issues of her concern. Informant interviews with teachers in the same school inform the methodology. Positions outlined by Stephen May discussing degrees of essentialism in theory and practical work with children are used when discussing the cultural challenges involved in these cases. Following this, critical multiculturalism raises the question of cultural differences and of how to theorise and do research without creating culturally essentialising categories. This article alerts readers to the plight of children in shifting cultural contexts, to the challenges they are facing, and to the skills and competencies they are developing. It seeks to contribute to two current areas of debate, namely inclusive education and internationalisation.

Introduction

The issues raised in this article concerning young 'ethnic' children's *difficulties* in negotiating home and school culture have been of interest to educators in some countries for some time. In Norway, however, such matters are quite new and have only been of interest for the past five to 10 years.

After almost 20 years of teaching in the so-called 'multicultural' field of early childhood education, of which seven were as a lecturers and researchers at Oslo University College, my colleague and I decided to work as teachers in a school in inner-city Oslo (the Center School). The background of my reflections, interpretations, analyses, and deconstructions is a year of experience (2000-2001) as a teacher in the first grade of a school where 90 per

cent of the children's parents had lived for most of their lives in Asia, Africa, South America, and Southern Europe [1]. Most of the children's parents were Muslims. During this year my colleague and I took notes, wrote down episodes, and made a summary every week about what we thought were the most important events at that time. I also conducted interviews with five selected teachers during the autumn of 2001, after I had left the school.

However, as this article demonstrates, I have become highly concerned about how to conduct research on cultural differences without contributing to essentialism and stereotyped understandings. Although it is a complex 'project', I attempt in this article to put together both my questions concerning the children and my questions concerning essentialism in cultural research.

Questions of Concern

I began my research and practice with the six-year-olds by posing the following questions:

1. *Do minority children in Norway get necessary support from the adults (the 'significant others') near them to 'navigate' or 'border cross' successfully?*
2. *Are minority children given the chance to be as successfully integrated in the majority society as they want to be (or would have liked to have been if they were adults looking back at their lives)?*
3. *What do these children need? What can parents do to meet their needs? What can professionals do to meet their needs?*

I shall put forward two cases as illustrations of my concerns. These cases come from informant interviews with teachers working with minority children in their classes.

Case One

One teacher told me about her experiences teaching a controversial subject: *Kristendom med Livssynsorientering* (Christianity with religion and human ethics). Muslim parents at the Center School had been active in their resistance against the legislation that followed the presentation of the 1997 Norwegian curriculum. This curriculum no longer allowed children to take an alternative subject. Following the new legislation, children had to be present during the lesson unless parents came and took their child out of the class. This created situations where children were instructed at home by their parents not to attend the class. The solution for some of the 10-year-old children was to simply put their hands over their ears to shelter themselves from the Christian influence.

This raises the question: *What is involved for the child in a situation where the school and the parents demand totally opposite behaviours in important and sensitive matters that imply different cultural norms and values?*

Case Two

In one family the children are in five different grades. Four are girls and one is a boy. The children speak Norwegian well. The father speaks some Norwegian. The mother speaks a little Norwegian. The children often interpret for the mother and sometimes for the father. Often the girls do not attend school on days of excursions (for example, on nature excursions, trips to the theatre where children role play, or visits to a farm, etc.). When the activity is being planned the parents do not mention that the girls will not be participating in the activity. The girls seem to look forward to the excursion during the planning stage, but do not attend on the day. Afterwards, the parents and the girls explain that the girls were ill. The excuse given for their absence on such excursions is questionable as the girls are never ill when normal classroom teaching (indoors) is going on. The other students in the class also question the excuse given for their absence on excursion days. The questioning is uncomfortable for the girls as both the students and teachers believe that the girls are not telling the truth.

This raises the question: *What can the child do in handling dilemmas that involve cultural differences when parents do not openly admit that they disagree and feel uncertain about some of the teaching projects?*

In these cases the child (in the singular, because each child has her or his own thoughts, reflections, and reactions) is left in an uneasy situation, a situation that resembles the double-bind situation, which we know from psychiatry to be a dangerous situation for the mind and for mental health (Bateson, 1972). In feminist theory the Norwegian psychologist Berit Ås (1981) calls this 'a damned if you do and damned if you don't situation'. Those who have to be in such situations lose self-confidence and power, energy and position. Their agency is reduced.

The questions raised will not be answered directly, nor will they be systematically analysed for conclusions. Instead, different perspectives will be considered and related to the questions concerning the children and the research questions.

Different Perspectives on the Construction of Knowledge in the Multicultural Field in the Western World

These case studies may be analysed in various ways. May (1999) outlines different positions in the debate on multiculturalism in his article 'Critical Multiculturalism and Cultural Difference: avoiding essentialism'. His positions represent different ways of responding to cultural differences. Some of them stimulate essentialism while others do not. I will return to and name these positions later on.

In Norway [2] there is recent research on minority children and youth (Tefre, 1992; Engen, 1994; Skoug, 1994; Sand, 1996, 1997; Lien, 1996, 2002a, 2002b; Tefre et al, 1997; Pastoor, 1998; Tefre & Hauge, 1998; Djuve &

Pettersen, 1998; Østberg, 1998, 2000; Becher & Otterstad, 2000a; Jacobsen, 2001; Andersen, 2002).

These Norwegian studies focus mainly on one area of children's lives, either home life or 'life out of the home' in institutions such as preschool, daycare, kindergarten, or school. None of the studies focus on or examine *the navigation between* the different spheres. In comparison, Bhatti's British study (1999) gives very solid documentation, from a modern perspective, of the children's life both at home and at school. However, she also does not focus particularly on *the navigation* that the children must do. Nevertheless, the Norwegian research provides information about conditions for children, which served as a background for my work and study at the Center School.

When I started to research the navigation required of children in these contexts, I was overwhelmed by the problems that cultural differences must cause for some minority children. My interviews with teachers at the Center School confirmed that there are similar conditions in the town in southern Britain described by Bhatti (1999) and inner-city Oslo. Some of the similarities are that:

- girls have to do much domestic work while boys easily escape this kind of work;
- boys strongly resist domestic science in school;
- girls have to face strict moral expectations from their families and the concept of honour rests on the girls' shoulders (especially in Pakistani, Turkish, and Somali families who are Muslim);
- there are often between three and five children in one family and the housing conditions are below standard (the British standard, which, for instance, implies a toilet and bathroom in the house, a certain amount of square meters per person, etc.);
- doing homework is not easy because there is no special place to sit, parents cannot help, or other tasks have to be done to help the family;
- parents face economic and social positional demands and expectations from their family 'back home' and this has a heavy influence on their working hours in the new country;
- most parents are uncertain about what the schools expect from children and parents, and they may have trouble reading all the messages and following their children's progression.

One of the teachers in my teaching and research practice, himself being a member of a cultural minority, explained:

The parents grew up in another environment – another country. Some of them might be illiterate. Many parents cannot read Norwegian, they cannot read letters from the school or help children with homework ...
Parents may ask: 'Do you have any homework?' The children answer that they do not have any even if that is untrue.

How do the children navigate this situation? One of the teachers commented:

They try to find a loop-hole for relaxing. They relax where there are the least or less consequences.

Both in Bhatti's study (1999) and in my interviews there is evidence that there are fewer consequences for the children for not doing what they are supposed to do in school than at home.

My research suggests that for many minority children who experience great differences in cultural norms between 'life at home' and 'life out of the home' in pedagogical institutions, the adults around them do not understand how it is to be in their position. Only the children, who have to meet the expectations and demands from two cultural spheres *as children*, know about this. Parents do not know much about the 'school code' and teachers do not know much about the 'home code'. The children have to sort out most of the differences themselves and live their lives as well as they can in both spheres or worlds.

Different Positions in Teaching, Working, and Researching and their Relation to Essentialism

Post-structural theory acknowledges that explanations are partial (Rhedding-Jones, 1996). It is possible to choose different perspectives concerning interpretations or deconstructions of texts, episodes, or data. There is not only one 'truth' but several, depending on what perspective is chosen and what the focus is (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg et al, 1999). Discourses (Foucault, 1998, 1999) influence professional practice and the life we live. According to Foucault (1998), power is relational and operates through discourse. Power is thereby important in living lives, in professional work, and in gathering data for research (Brandtzæg, 2002). Following this, how will my informants and those with whom I conducted the ethnography be able to speak through my material? This is a research methodology question that is very important but one on which I cannot elaborate here. Instead, I will focus on my informants when they speak about cultural differences, and on my own writing as a researcher in critical relation to sociocultural discourses.

May (1999) outlines different positions that are currently critical issues in the transnational debate and critical consciousness concerning the field of 'multiculturalism'. I would also say that these issues are closely linked to the issues raised in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, for example by Rhedding-Jones (2001, 2002), where she carries out critical deconstructions of texts and practical examples in an attempt to demonstrate a critical practice of thinking, reading, teaching, and observing. The deconstructions challenge discourses of being 'white' and being 'other', and point to the complexities of ethnicities from a perspective of critical multiculturalism.

The positions from May (1999) that are worthy of comment regard the defence of democracy and the nation state, which implies mobilising against multiculturalism, cultural hybridity, ethnicity as habitus, and critical

multiculturalism. I will comment on the positions in relation to essentialism and the cases put forward.

The first position is the 'liberal-conservative' (May, 1999). The discourse within this position demands more assimilation than integration. Claims from minority groups for recognition of cultural differences within the modern nation state would be very small (May, 1999, p. 14). A reading of this model in relation to the cases in this study would imply that the parents are failing their children when they do not adjust to that which is common for the majority of society: the Norwegian and 'common institutions'. This implies essentialising certain common national values and interests. This position is congruent with what Kalantzis & Cope call 'cultural assimilation with traditional curriculum' (1999, p. 373).

The second position is a 'postmodern' position (May, 1999, p. 21). Here, hybridity theory and multiple shifting identities are understood to be the norm for individuals within the 'posts' of post-colonialism (as in Gandhi, 1998), postmodernism, and post-structuralism. Here, there is an opposition to universalism, traditionalism, and ideas of ethnic or cultural rootedness. May (1999, p. 21) holds that hybridity theorists, in arguing for the 'inter and in-between', are still predicated on notions of previous cultures as complex wholes. Border crossing assumes in effect that borders were there to begin with. Following May's theoretical point here, this preserves rather than overthrows an essentialist concept of culture. May (1999, p. 23) also holds that ethnic and national categories 'may be essentialized' as 'race' has been historically but 'they need not always be'. For me as a researcher this implies that it is not always possible to respond to, consider carefully, or carry out research in reality without concepts of cultural borders or categories of any kind. It is also difficult to be critical of fixed cultural borders without naming cultural borders as an essentialising element in cultural discourses. Some of the researchers in the multicultural field, for example, Homi Bhabha, have been exponents for seeking alternative theoretical explanations to traditional dichotomous conceptions of culture. An example is the 'third space', a concept for the place between cultures. In this 'space' dialogic encounters, hybridity, and the transformation of a different cultural element into a new identity and self-conception might take place (Bhabha, 1990, 1994). This is a non-essentialism working against traditional categories.

Another issue in May's critique is that a hybrid position does not necessarily imply a social or political critique of society. This critique is relevant for postmodern theories in general, but not especially for post-structuralism and post-colonialism. However, May's critique of this position implies that, from a political and pragmatic perspective, hybridity theory is not sufficient as a basis for work and research in the multicultural field. In my opinion it is important that the problems faced by minority children in their navigation between cultures are seen as problems of cultural, educational, and political character, and not as individual problems.

How can we then acknowledge group-based cultural differences – which clearly exist – while at the same time hold on to a non-essentialist conception of culture? The question is May's and is also mine. In seeking to answer it I will consider another position outlined by May, which is 'ethnicity as habitus', based on Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus. May outlines four key conceptual aspects of habitus, which are useful for understanding and working with cultural differences, identity, and power. These aspects are embodiment, the interrelationship between agency and structure, the interplay between past and present and the interrelationship between collective and individual trajectories.

Habitus is not simply ideology, attitude, or perception. It is a material form of life which is 'embodied and turned into second nature' (May, 1999, p. 28). Via habitus we can explore how members of a social group come to acquire, as a result of their socialisation, a set of embodied dispositions ('bodily hexis') or ways of viewing and living in their worlds. These embodied dispositions operate mostly on the level of the unconscious and might comprise such elements as attitudes to language, dress, diet, and customary practices. An important point in the theory of habitus as May reads Bourdieu is that 'habitus is both shaped by, and also shapes, the objective social and cultural conditions which surrounds it' (May, 1999, p. 28).

Bourdieu (1990) is apparently aiming to balance the relationship between agency and structure in such a way that neither structuralist objectivism nor subjectivism is the result. Habitus here reflects the social and cultural position in which it was constructed, while also allowing for its transformation in current circumstances. In this instance, reflection conveys a possibility for crossing borders and changing practice (Strand, 2001), so focusing on the unconscious embodied knowledge is important. This highlights the complex interplay between past and present experience, which is one important dimension of habitus. The last dimension and element of habitus is the interrelationship between individual and group mores, which also represents a tension between processes that are slowly changing and the potential for transformation and change. Ethnic habitus may be lived out implicitly as a result of historical and customary practice, but habitus does not determine individual behaviour. Bourdieu argues (see May, 1999, p. 28) that the individual has a range of strategic practices to choose from within the framework of habitus.

Bourdieu's theory is thus not essentialising cultural differences. Rather, the theory of habitus makes cultural and social differences relevant from a perspective of power relations, which involve both cultural capital and symbolic violence. Within these terms it is possible to analyse inequalities in power between dominant and subordinate groups. This is what is currently driving my reading of my research data. I am applying Bourdieu's concept of habitus in relation to culture, cultural differences, cultural competencies, ethnicity, and change. In the last part of this article I will go a bit further in

applying May's reading of Bourdieu's concept of habitus to my developing concept of multicultural competencies.

The next position on which I wish to comment is critical multiculturalism, which May discusses and advocates through his book (1999). In this case, critical multiculturalism is a kind of synthesis between the anti-racist and the multicultural positions which have represented antagonistic positions in the multicultural field during the last decade. Over the years, multicultural education has been criticised by anti-racist and radical theorists for putting too much store on curricular change, and too little on the impact of structural racism. Critical multiculturalism has at its core a passionate commitment to anti-racism, while at the same time reaching out for an identity-based cultural commitment. It engages actively with postmodern conceptions and analyses of culture and identity, while holding on to the possibility of emancipatory educational politics. A central concern is also to link educational theory, policy, and practice, thus providing both a critical and practical account of culturally pluralist forms of schooling. The discussion between the anti-racist and the multicultural positions has been political, philosophical, and methodological in its character and the 'object' of the discussion has been how to deal with cultural differences. By using mainly Australia as an example, Kalantzis & Cope (1999) give a critical overview of the major educational paradigms and how they frame the issue of diversity.

Is it Essentialising to Recognise Multicultural Qualifications or Competencies?

Four years ago a study was conducted at Oslo University College with minority early childhood education students (Becher & Otterstad, 2000b). We followed 10 students during their first term in lectures, in group work, and during in-service education. It was easy as a researcher to identify barriers in our educational system, which we now read as barriers of a cultural and racist character. We believe that these barriers would not have been there if the students had not been minority students. All the students we saw and heard experiencing barriers had some signs or symbols that made them different from the majority students: for example, hijab (scarf), skin colour, language, or clothes. When interviewing the students we became aware of the fantastic experience, knowledge, and personal resources they had, which were not being used in lectures, work in progress, or in-service education. We decided to call these resources 'multicultural competencies'. We found support for this term and its content in British research (Jackson & Nesbitt, 1993).

We also found that the classic sociologist and ethnographer Robert Park was, as early as 1928, engaged in the understanding of 'personality' and 'competencies' of the migrant. Park constructed the 'marginal man' as the successful immigrant man or woman. Special traits in personality were identified in a person who leaves a familiar context and becomes successfully established in some unknown place. In the *American Journal of Sociology* of 1928

Park argues that migration is one of the most important powers or drives to develop civilisation. The immigrant will see the new society in comparison to the society that he or she has left, and the 'old' society in comparison to the new one. This gives the potential for an expanded perspective on elements in both societies. I consider Park's theory to be a perspective on the various possibilities that a historical dialectic development means. The philosophy of Hegel also implies that cultural and societal differences must be constructed, as thesis and antithesis, if society and civilisation are to develop. The 'marginal man' contains both the thesis and the antithesis and his or her personal work is to integrate and find the synthesis of the dialectic. When immigrants act in society they have this experience and competency that others (i.e. monocultural people) do not have. When writing about the findings in our study (Becher & Otterstad, 2000b) we found it important to try to 'open up' and look seriously at the term 'multicultural competencies', and to promote more positive educational possibilities for the minority students in our educational system. At the same time, we wanted to show our university that it ignores the richness and potential of a lot of competencies by not valuing minority potential as positive and resourceful.

In short, we analysed and deconstructed the concept by analysing our interviews, observations, and ethnography from the perspectives of border crossing and cultural code switching. This is what minority students have to do between a 'minority context' and a 'majority context'.^[3] I will now link this and the two cases presented earlier to the theory of critical multiculturalism as presented by May.

In analysing the code switching and navigation of minority children as presented in the two cases, the concept of habitus is useful. The key conceptual aspects of habitus interpreted by May (1999), as described earlier, are useful in understanding and working with cultural differences and multicultural competencies. These aspects have dynamic and 'navigating' elements incorporated in them, which grasp the movement and fluidity of life from a social and cultural perspective. At the same time, the concept of habitus involves the perspective of power as cultural capital for the dominant (ethnic majority) and as symbolic violence towards subordinate groups. Whilst keeping this in mind, I will summarise the findings from our study, suggesting that the potential of habitus and the potential in the concept of multicultural competencies might go well together.

We found that the minority students (and children) have to quickly understand the culture or relevant context, activate the 'right' set of manners and norms, and choose quickly the best set of actions that correspond in the context. At the same time, they must keep their self-integrity intact by knowing who they are in this context. They have to create strategies for navigating in different situations, which means adapting themselves quickly to new situations. Through this they have the possibility of growth, of development, or of improved competencies in themselves. They also have to be creative by influencing change in the sphere in which they are participating, and to tolerate

expulsion and rejection without suffering too much 'damage'. They must be in processes where something known meets the unknown and where experience and comparison of both phenomena lead to a sort of distance. Further, they must develop the ability to take into consideration the perspectives of others and hold repertoires of norms, manners, and conventions, including religious norms and traditions. Finally, they have to identify both similarities and differences related to parallel discourses.

What Significant Reconsiderations Concerning Research with Minority Children and Cultural Differences Can Be Made?

I am aware of the complexities and challenges involved in transcultural experience – as well as of the richness and strength of the kinds of competencies which can be developed. A frame of critical multiculturalism must be part of any answer to the three questions of concern presented at the beginning of this article. In 'answering' these questions I have pointed to some perspectives, theories, and considerations that might be useful in understanding the plight of the situation of navigating children.

Critical multiculturalism recognises and incorporates the differing cultural knowledge that children bring into the classroom. Their experience and knowledge should not be misrecognised. Misrecognition implies that alternative cultural knowledge comes to be subjugated, principally through the hegemonies and misrepresentations ('*méconnaissance*' in Bourdieu's [1990] terms). If we do not make cultural differences or different cultural capital relevant in the classroom, we actually stimulate the hegemonic cultural power of the majority and thereby misrecognise the minority children. However, the attitude of teachers is of vital importance when dealing with cultural differences. A saying in Norway and Sweden among professionals and researchers in the multicultural field is: 'You should be a true anti-racist in your heart if you are going to deal with cultural differences in your pedagogical work.' This does not mean celebrating cultural differences, thus essentialising culture and cultural categories, or any sort of 'superficial pluralism' in pedagogical work (Kalantzis & Cope, 1999). This saying means that we focus on the importance of the consciousness and the attitude of the pedagogue in his or her work.

My questions related to the cases illustrated regard what the children can do and what is involved for them in handling situations that imply cultural dilemmas. In the situations described, the school and the parents had different values in their demands of the children as to what was 'right' and what was 'wrong'. The immediate solution for the children was to hold their hands over their ears and tell lies to their fellow students and teachers. These were understandable reactions to the situations they were put in. Another understandable strategy would be to seek isolation from the other children and adults at school. My point is that these strategies are destructive to the children. These strategies do not promote the development of their resources and

potential as children and as minorities. However, the responsibility of arranging for a less problematic *socialising* process lies with the parents and the professionals in the school. The educated professionals who define the cultural capital in the school have the power to initiate and maintain acceptable arrangements and adjustments so that the children do not have to face dilemmas such as those described. Here, in considering how the adults can navigate and balance the situation, May, Bourdieu and the analysis of multicultural potential and competencies might be useful.

There must be an aim to help the growth and development of both majority and minority students to engage critically with all ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including their own, and thereby avoid the emergence of essentialising categories. This will further promote minority children to achieve equal opportunities in the Norwegian educational system.

Conclusion

It seems that there are many dynamics and there is much difficult balancing to be done in the research questioning of the multicultural field. Here, May (1999), Friedman (2000), Modood (2000), Werbner (2000), and Yuval-Davis (2000) are in agreement. Nevertheless, while we are analysing, deconstructing, reconstructing, or reconceptualising these questions of research, politics, methodology, and action, a lot of children find themselves in a double-bind situation where they have to find their own way in navigating and crossing borders. Some children will go through the process to become multiculturally competent and successful and contented persons in their own eyes. However, some children do not have fair opportunities to be what they want to be. These are ethical and political dilemmas for researchers who want to de-mask repressive conditions for minority children and try to promote more social justice in their own country and in the world at large.

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Notes

- [1] I shared a classroom with my colleague, Ann Merete Otterstad. My ethnography is also her ethnography. However, the way I now present and interpret our experiences is my own responsibility.
- [2] As far as I understand, these studies are not greatly influenced by postmodern or post-structural theories, except for Østberg (1998, 2000) and Pastoor (1998). Lien has been doing ethnographic research (being an anthropologist) but is not explicitly questioning her own role as a researcher in this field.

- [3] At the present time, the distinction between 'minority' and 'majority' is important in Norway in the analysis of social life because of the extensive ethnic majority of 'Norwegians' (94 per cent). Kalantzis & Cope (1999) give a critique of the dichotomy based on Australian and US reality.

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