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Teacher Education for Cultural Diversity and Inclusion: An action research case-study

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Abstract

In this paper, it is set forth an action research case study, rooted in the principles of Multicultural Education and Teacher Education for Cultural Diversity and Inclusion. The study was developed in a Portuguese Public Secondary School with a cultural and social diverse school population, namely, immigrant students and those of the 2nd and 3rd generations of immigrant families from Portuguese-speaking African countries. The research was focused on a process of inservice teachers training and aimed teachers’ professional development for cultural diversity and inclusion. The research data analysis (interviews, field notes, teachers’ portfolios and reports of critical reflection) emphasised new conceptions on multicultural and inclusive education, changes in pedagogical practices, teachers’ reflexivity, students’ attitudes and behaviours, and school organisation.

Key-words: Inservice teacher education; Teacher professional development; Action research; Cultural diversity; Inclusion.

Theoretical Approach & Research

The Portuguese public school population has changed in the last forty years and the migrants and refugees streaming into UE28 demand unquestionable and immediate changes in educational policies, in school, in curriculum and in teacher education.

Towards the multiple and fast changes, the rhetoric of public education policies was renewed in order to think school as a place of excellence to educate citizens who know how to deal with different diversities and valuing the other as unique, different and similar at the same time (Freire, 1993).

However, the truth is that, due to political indifference and/or failure in international and national policies and/or lack of action, The EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2008) alerts for global educational disparities, which threaten efforts to achieve international development goals, and underlines the need of governments to give priority to equity and social justice.

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1 This paper is based on the doctoral thesis of the first author, supervised by the second author.
2 The participation of the first author, in 2016 AERA Annual Meeting, under the title, “Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies”, held on April 8th–April 12th, in Washington, DC., was sponsored by 2016 AERA International Travel Award and the Luso-American Development Foundation.
Undoubtedly, the UE28 member states have been encouraged to adapt education policies to the diversity and the inclusion of diverse school publics. However the question is - Have teachers been prepared to teach culturally and linguistically diverse school populations? And schools? Regarding the implications of this situation in teacher education, it is internationally recognised the need to prepare teachers for cultural diversity and social justice, offering immigrant students equal opportunities and enabling an effective inclusion in democratic societies (Zeichner, 2009; Gay, 2010; Nieto, 2009; Banks, 2004; Diaz-Aguado, 2000).

If teachers are considered key tools as educational agents of change, then, it will be crucial teacher education articulate, strictly, multicultural theory with practice, so that teachers can develop critical thinking, be aware of the close relationship between sociological and educational events, and develop consistent, reflexive attitudes and professional knowledge to adapt schooling to diverse learners (Diaz-Aguado, 2000).

However, teacher education research has evidenced the increasing gap between the theory of multicultural education and its practice (Cochran-Smith, Davis & Fries, 2004) and set out the need to link the results of the different researches with the characteristics of the contexts in which they take place.

Considering the relevance of this theme and the scarce Portuguese research in this field, it was carried out a study, based on an international literature review on teacher education for diversity (Zeichner, 1993); culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995); culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010); teacher education for social justice (Gorski, 2009; Zeichner, 2009); and highly qualified teacher education for the new majority (Nieto, 2005).

In this context, we pursued a study whose research questions were the following:

-How teachers’ involvement in a training process through collaborative action research enables changes in their conceptions on education and teaching, facing cultural diversity and practicum? What reflections in their professional development? What reflections on students’ development?

The study aimed to perceive the perspectives of teachers about cultural diversity and the educational responses given by school to that diversity, to build knowledge about the processes and changes resulting from action research on training and on teachers’ professional development, concerning this thematic.

Methods

The action research study case was the chosen research strategy. The study lasted about three years in the field.
The research was carried out in a public Secondary School with a significant immigrant population in the outskirts of Lisbon. The spotlight of this research was both training and teachers’ professional development for the inclusion of immigrant students and those of the 2nd and 3rd generations of immigrant families.

The study integrated two stages. The former constituted the stage of diagnosis and planning for the latter, the stage of intervention.

The first stage included interviews to teachers, field notes through participant observation and school organisational and pedagogical document analysis. It was intended to map the perspectives of teachers and school responses to the challenges posed by the cultural diversity of the students.

The second stage came out the diagnosis stage, in which a collaborative action research project was drawn in cycles of research, reflection and action, aiming to contribute for the development of new pedagogical practices and reflective attitudes of teachers towards cultural diversity. The strategy of action research was used at two levels: As a form of training research and teachers' action research on their pedagogical practices. The training process was focused on a group of fourteen multidisciplinary, voluntary teachers. Therefore, the method crossed dimensions of research, training and educational action, interrelating, complementing and reinforcing each other mutually.

The Collaborative Action research-Training Process
Objectives, design and organisation of the formative process

The collaborative action research-training process emerged from a cross-cutting review of literature and the results achieved in the initial diagnosis stage, regarding inservice teacher training needs and desires to face daily work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Therefore, the collaborative action research training project encompassed two complementary lines of action: i. to develop teachers’ cultural acceptance and conscientisation to work effectively in culturally diverse classrooms and that consisted in the development of a wider cultural acceptance and their own awareness through the knowledge acquisition on cultures and in the effort to identify and eliminate their own prejudices and stereotypes; ii. to promote strategies and methodologies of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching through joint decision-making.

The project was set in a collaborative action research methodology, according to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), cyclic and self-reflective spiral, developed in a continuous set of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Figure 1).
The collaborative action research training process lasted 90 hours (30h presence sessions + 60h autonomous work) and was organised as follows:

- **12 hours of theoretical-practical component** - The first part of the sessions were theoretical and the second practical, integrating readings, analysis, reflection and debate on scientific texts directly related with multicultural education issues and action research methodology;

- **18h hours of practical component** - were developed in a collaborative context for the pursuit of planning activities, development of strategies and activities and construction of teaching materials for the different curriculum areas. Teachers worked in small groups and with the enlarged group, articulating interdisciplinary and cross-cutting contents and activities with School Educational Project, Class Curricular Projects and School Annual Activity Plan, suiting students’ cultural diversity;

- **60 hours autonomous work** - During the training process, the participant teachers worked individually and/or collaboratively and developed cyclic processes of action research on their practices, aiming the introduction of changes, namely, through the construction and application of pedagogical and didactic materials. All these processes and their results were brought to the enlarged group to provide a shared critical reflection, as well as, registered both collaboratively and/or individually in portfolios and reports of critical reflection.
Initial diagnosis

In the initial stage of the project, seven individual interviews were conducted, in depth, with teachers considered key informants on the subject under study as they played teaching, coordinating and directing roles. Documentary analysis was also carried out to macro and micro educational and pedagogical key documents. The researcher in the field still used ethnographic observation, writing down a field diary. From the analysis and triangulation of these data an initial diagnosis was done, in which among different aspects the following were highlighted: a critical view either of the macro system [e.g. inadequate legislation and curricula; and lack of central and regional inservice teacher education for cultural and linguistic diversity] or the micro system [e.g. school management, Portuguese department and class council constraints; school pedagogical and organizational documents (School Educational Project, Class Curricular Projects and School Annual Activity Plans) recognised cultural diversity at school, but did not outline educational lines of action or priorities, matching students’ cultural and linguistic diversity; dissonance in Portuguese as Second or Foreign language methodological approaches; traditional pedagogical and didactic teaching practices, tending to monocultural and homogenising ‘standard- culture’; school culture or climate of individualism, isolation and balkanisation, resulting in interpersonal relations with lack of openness and proximity among teachers and active listening towards students]. These aspects and reflections were crucial for preparing the study 2nd stage.

Collaborative action research projects

The objectives, strategies and methodologies of the training process were shared with teachers/trainees, as well as, its importance for teachers’ professional development focused on the potentialities of the epistemology of practice through reflection and research. Teachers developed collaborative action research projects (e.g. Rice from Heaven - A multicultural/intercultural and multidisciplinary approach; Saga of Sophia Mello Breyner Andresen and Hans’s diaspora; Identity/Diversity; Poetry, Gastronomy and Multiculturalism; Art and Multiculturalism; and Multicultural Literacy).

In the last meeting of the formative training process, the different action research projects were presented by teachers/trainees to the enlarged group, in which they discussed and debated ideas on the objectives, topics, activities, strategies, materials and students’ receptivity. Enabling the reader to visualise, how collaborative action research projects were interlinked within a group of multidisciplinary teachers and different classes of the same grade, we present
the diagram of the project - Rice from Heaven - A multicultural/intercultural and multidisciplinary approach (Figure 2).

Teachers/trainees (Rosário, Ana, Carolina and Raquel) developed a project of collaborative action research from the book *Rice from Heaven* by José Rodrigues Miguéis, in basic education classes of 7th grade (class A and B).

Rosário was teaching Portuguese Language and Civic Education (7th grade-class A); Ana, French Language (7th grade-class A); Carolina, Visual Education (7th grade-class A); Raquel, Portuguese Language (7th grade-class B) and Project Area (7th grade-class A).

The 7th grade classes A and B integrated twenty-eight students each one. Most of them were Portuguese but others were of Moldovan, Russian, Romanian, Brazilian, Cape Verdean and Angolan nationality. Thus, these four teachers worked in team, built and shared materials with a common goal “to share and disseminate other cultures for greater acceptance of the Other, of others, of what is different among their realities and their ‘worlds’ “(in teacher/trainee Rosario’s portfolio).

Figure 2. Collaborative action research project - Rice from Heaven - A multicultural/intercultural and multidisciplinary approach (Pacheco, 2015, p. 411).

Teachers/trainees Rosário and Raquel planned the Portuguese language lessons (7th grade-class A) together. The literary and journalistic text was introduced by the narrative, *Rice from

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and planned as follows: they started with a warming-up activity, projecting PowerPoints with ads of New York, bridging the gap between the journalistic and the literary text and placing the students, where the story is developed. Then, the students listened to “Bernadette” and “Annarella” recordings and completed a pre-reading worksheet. Afterwards, they made a reading comprehension exercise on *Rice from Heaven*. Finally, Rosário’s students carried out a project group work under the title “Interviewing an emigrant or immigrant” and Raquel’s “Where do you come from?”. Raquel also developed a debate on the topic “A world of differences”, in which students commented images and debated ideas.

In what concerns Civic Education (7th grade-class A), Rosário’s students played the game, *Take a step forward*, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, discussed and debated ideas on social, cultural and gender inequalities and social justice. In Project Area (7th grade-class B), Raquel organised the team group activity “Rice Recipe Cookbook”, held in the school library, in which students surfed the Web, looking for traditional rice recipes of different countries. At the end of this activity all recipes were collected in a small brochure and disseminated in the school community.

Teacher/trainee Ana’s French lesson, *En Famille*, (7th grade-class A) was planned closely with her peers. She included contents on international dishes from different countries: France (the country whose language students were learning); United States (the country where the main character of story *Rice from Heaven* worked); Moldova and Russia (countries of origin of some students). In the 1st stage, Ana presented some PowerPoints with images of dishes of different countries. In the 2nd stage, she introduced the partitive articles and the imperative form. Afterwards, she distributed two gap filling exercise worksheets with different country recipes, “Crepe à la façon créole” and “Plov”. In the 3rd stage, students also completed a verb form exercise on a typical rice recipe, cooked by Russians, Moldovans and Ukrainians. This recipe was presented by a Moldovan student, later, in teacher/trainee Rosario’s Project Area class.

Teacher/trainee Carolina planned two lessons in Visual Education (7th grade-class A), adapting and combining the theme with the story *Rice from Heaven* under the issue “Subway Stations in Russia, Moldova, the United States and France”. In the 1st lesson, she presented a PowerPoint on different country subway stations, placing students within the activities they would develop.

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4. The story’s main character is a nameless subway cleaning worker, immigrant in New York, who worked hard, enclosed in the darkness of the subway, out of touch with the reality of the ‘uptown’, where people wasted rice at weddings. For him, the rice, falling down from street ventilators, came straight from heaven, and was given by the Creator, to feed his family of “six or seven children” (in teacher/trainee Rosario’s portfolio).


6. Annarella Sanchéz is a Cuban dancer who lives in Portugal for 10 years. She founded the Ballet and Dance School - Annarella Academy - Leiria (Portugal). In this recording, she talks about her experience as immigrant and the diaspora. Retrieved from: http://academiaannarella.com/site/
Afterwards, students began observational drawings, used charcoal technique and for the illustration the watercolour painting technique. In the 2nd lesson, Carolina asked two students in class to speak about their Russian and Moldavian cultural and architectural heritage. Regardless the nature of the projects, the teachers/trainees researched autonomously brought ideas, opinions and concerns which were shared, debated and reflected together in the training group, what promoted collaborative and/or individual engagements. These processes were alternated with the projects developed by teachers as a team, teachers and students in the classrooms, analysis and reflections within the collective training group and the trainer/researcher, and accompanied by narratives and reflections written by the teachers/trainees and the trainer/researcher, as well. Next section presents the results of the systematisation of these texts content analysis and their triangulation with the initial diagnosis data and those of the training process.

Results

To understand the impacts of the collaborative action research-training process in the professional development of this group of teachers, the information comprised in teachers’ portfolios and critical reflection reports was analysed. Briefly, the analysis of teachers’ texts and records evidenced that teachers considered the training method linked up strictly theory with practice, generated synergies of participation, collaboration and joint reflection, and promoted the acquisition of new ideas and perspectives within multicultural and inclusive education, resulting into an asset for the consolidation of pedagogical and practical skills. On the other hand, changes on teachers’ pedagogical practices, teachers’ reflexivity, students’ attitudes and behaviour, and school organisation are highlighted, too.

Changes in teachers’ pedagogical practices
Concerning, the changes in teachers’ pedagogical practices, teachers pointed out that the training process challenged them to the development of multicultural pedagogical and didactic practices. They started planning activities, adapting curricular contents, strategies and teaching materials to the cultural diversity of students, and doing it in collaboration with their peers, what also introduced an interdisciplinary perspective in curriculum management.

Changes in teachers’ reflexivity
The changes in teachers’ reflexivity are supported by the analysis of the levels of reflexivity based on the theoretical framework of Habermas (1982). A grid of analysis of the portfolios and reports of critical reflection per teacher was drawn, containing the levels of reflexivity (technical, practical and emancipatory) and the moments of reflection (initial, intermediate and final). Among the fourteen teachers: i. Ten registered reflections framed in the technical level
(Initial Reflections); ii. Fourteen registered reflections framed in the practical level (Initial, Intermediate and/or Final Reflections); iii. Seven registered reflections framed in the emancipatory level (only in Final Reflections). It was intended to highlight changes in the levels of reflexivity of these teachers in a diachronic perspective. Significant changes in the capacity of reflection were found. Although the practical level seemed to be the one that touched teachers in this process, since they all mirrored, in the intermediate moments of reflection, concerns of contextualising their practices in order to respond to the specific needs of students, some reflected such concerns in their final reflection, and other reached the emancipatory level at the end of the process.

**Changes in students’ attitudes and behaviours**

Teachers also highlighted that the changes introduced in their pedagogical practices resulted in significant and positive changes in students’ attitudes and behaviours, evidencing impacts in the development of cultural and multicultural awareness, ability to communicate with others, responsibility and solidarity, and higher levels of participation and involvement in classroom activities and tasks.

**Changes in school organisation**

The changes in school organisation occurred later, when of the release of the new School Educational Project, in comparison with the previous one. It started to include a collaborative component within teachers’ schedules. We dare to say the action research training process boosted these changes, when it is known that one of the teachers/trainees was the team leader, responsible for drafting the new School Educational Project.

**Conclusions**

In general, the triangulation of the different sources of data allowed the following conclusions:

In the first part of the study, cultural diversity is recognized as a core value for everyone. Nevertheless, teachers stressed that the puzzled answers given by the macrostructure had impact on the microstructure where organizational and pedagogical obstacles were faced, as the lack of a culture of collaboration, an effective Portuguese teaching-learning process for immigrant students, and offer of inservice teacher education for inclusive cultural and linguistic diversity.

In the second part of the study, the results of the training process through participated action research emphasised new conceptions of teachers about cultural diversity and education, integrating pedagogical and didactic strategies and activities of cultural relevant and responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010). Besides changes in teachers’ practices, the research evidenced changes in teachers’ reflexivity, students’ attitudes and behaviours and in school organisation, as well.
Scientific Significance

The results of this study reveal and evidence the potentialities of collaborative action research in teachers’ professional development and the significant changes and transformation it might operate in diverse socio-cultural contexts even in adverse school organisational ones.

References


