Multi/Cross-Cultural Education in Need of Paradigmatic Change

Guest post by Zvi Bekerman

As an educational anthropologist, I have been involved, for many years now, in the study of inter/cross-cultural encounters. At first doing ethnographic research on, rather short educational cross-cultural encounters, and for the last fourteen years following the activities of the integrated, bilingual Palestinian-Arab and Jewish schools in Israel. After so many years of continuous research I would have expected to have more clarity about the potential of these educational efforts to sooth conflict, yet I stay ambivalent. My ambivalence and, at times, my doubts have little to do with the qualities of those involved in the educational initiatives – teachers, principals, parents, students, supervisors and more. Any dissatisfaction I may sense has little to do with the quality of individual teachers or students and much to do with the quality of the systems we all cooperatively build for these educational initiatives to inhabit. This is not to say that these initiatives, as any other educational contexts might not benefit from a more critical approach to their implemented practices and their sustaining theories, it is just to make sure we understand that what could be considered unsuccessful practices are many times adaptive moves to local and global systemic circumstances we collectively create and sustain.

In this short note I want to point at some paradigmatic issues, which I believe if not dealt with, might stand in the way of allowing educational cross-cultural or multicultural efforts to contribute, even in a small way, to the improvement of relations among communities in conflict. These paradigmatic issues have to with the failure of multi/cross-cultural education to account for the primacy of national and psychologized educational perspectives in their theoretical analyses while failing to recognize the connection between their essentialist approach to identity and culture and their larger sociopolitical context, the nation-state. Theoretically I'm aligned with what has recently come to be identified as the 'ontological turn' in philosophy and the social sciences (Escobar, 2007; Kivinen & Piiroinen, 2004; Paleček & Risjord, 2013; van Dijk & Withagen, 2014), encouraging a move from the epistemological to the ontological.

The move starts by restoring the concept of identity/culture to its historical sources, thus de-essentializing it. It then points at the nation state as the definite product of modernity; a modernity that has produced a distinct social form, radically different from that of the traditional order of the past. This modernity is characterized by very specific forms of territoriality and surveillance capabilities that monopolize effective control over social relations across definite time-space

distances and over the means of violence. The nation state can be viewed as a political socio-economic phenomenon that seeks to exercise its control over the populations comprising it by establishing a culture which is at once homogeneous, anonymous (all the members of the polity, irrespective of their personal sub-group affiliations, are called upon to uphold this culture) and universally literate (all members share the culture the state has canonized). Reflecting modern psychologized epistemologies upon which it builds its power, the nation state creates a direct and unobstructed relationship between itself and all its 'individual' citizens: not tribe, ethnic group, family or church is allowed to stand between the citizen and the State.

These moves produce new meanings which are then developed into a methodology – cultural analysis – that is to say the gaining of skills on how to read/describe the world through careful observation and recording of practical activity, which in turn allows for a shift from the individual or the socializing group as the crucial analytic unit for (educational) analysis to the processes and mechanisms of *producing* cultural contexts through social interaction. Finally, the process leads to a new articulation of major policy issues related no longer to identity/culture and its components (individual, texts, etc), but to the analysis of particular identities/cultures and how these are produced/constructed in the particular context of particular societies.

Looking at the world in this way, seriously and critically, means being open to finding new criteria through which to name categories and their phenomena. The process could be liberating in that it could bring about the understanding that identity/culture are not necessarily the right criteria through which to describe the world, its inhabitants and events; not that they do not necessarily exist or are only hegemonic constructs, but that though they are legitimate, they need not result in individual suffering.

When these elements are not accounted for in multi/cross-cultural educational efforts, they risk consolidating that same reality they intended to overcome. Multi/cross-cultural education is in urgent need of reviewing its paradigmatic foundations while problematizing the political structures which sustain the conflicts it tries to overcome.

We should not expect multi/cross-cultural educational initiatives to be able to offer solutions to longstanding and bloody conflicts that are rooted in very material unequal allocation of resources. Unfortunately, many times societies/governments find it easier to support such initiatives rather than work hard towards structural change. In my recent book, *The Promise of Integrated, Multicultural, and Bilingual Education: Inclusive Palestinian-Arab and Jewish Schools in Israel* (Oxford University Press, 2016), those interested will find the above arguments developed and expanded.

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