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UNDERSTANDING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: FROM CONCEPTUAL AND CURRICULAR OBJECTS TO COMPETENCE ACTIONS OF TEACHERS AND SOCIAL WORKERS WORKING WITH MIGRANT CHILDREN

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1 INTRODUCTION

Movement is intrinsic to the globe. In recent years, Europe has witnessed increasing flows of people migrating from one country to another both voluntarily and when forced to do so. Migration is touching numbers of children as we write, and this has – and should have – serious consequences for educational models and social protection practices. Teaching, learning and providing protection have evolved from closed to open processes, which demand greater organisational skills and new models. The European Commission (2017) recommends that (1) the education system is made more responsive to the changing nature of basic

skills required in the modern world, e.g. the growing importance of ICT technologies and multilingualism; (2) the teaching force turns modern technologies into an asset, learns how to operate in a multicultural environment; (3) schools become more participatory by getting parents, the local community and other stakeholders more closely involved.

As shown in various national, international as well as more local endeavors (see e.g. Sirius PERAE 2018), intercultural education is considered extraordinarily important in Europe, but not widely practiced (Janta & Harte 2016). With respect to the recommendations by EC, the current research and innovation project **Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a Way of Upgrading Policies of Participation**¹ (Child-up 2019 - 2022) project aims: (1) to provide schools, social services, reception centres, education and mediation agencies, as well as policy makers, with knowledge about dialogic methods that can support professionals working with children, thus (2) combining innovation with well-proven traditions and flexible quality standards, and (3) enhancing the understanding of how to contribute to excellent participative learning and integration as well as high quality education and protection.

The project involves partners from seven EU countries, Finland among them. In this article, we investigate different multicultural professional contexts, everyday working places. As Child-up is interested in how to enhance the active participation of children with a migration background, we look into the role of professionals in supporting this as shown in literature and a central education policy document, the National Core Curriculum of Basic Education (2014, henceforth NCCBE). To understand how multiculturalism is interpreted by professionals and what kind of sensitivity and interaction are needed when working in such

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contexts, especially with children, we use the notion of intercultural competence.

In literature, intercultural competence is at times divided into different factors that professionals must possess and manage in the contexts of intercultural interaction, for instance skills, actions, sensitivity, communication, and/or cultural intelligence (see e.g. Arasaratnam & Doerfe 2005; Segura-Robles & Parra-Gonzalez 2019). In other words, the notion of multicultural contexts refers to the co-presence and/or interaction of people with different cultural backgrounds, and 'intercultural competence' points to the skills of mediating and interacting in multicultural contexts. When it comes to teachers and social workers working with children, they must adapt these skills into their educational and pedagogical approaches, applied autonomously by individual teachers in Finland. Social workers working within schools with pupils, or with clients with a migration background in organizations co-operating with schools, are facing the need of intercultural competence as part of their profession as well. However, they, too are autonomous agents in acquiring and using the competence. Co-operating with one another in school contexts, both teachers and social workers are expected to follow the principles of the national core curricula.

NCCBE (2014) points out key objectives that pupils must meet at the end of basic education. They include, among other goals, growing as culturally competent citizens who value, respect and understand cultural diversity while constructing their own cultural identities by being active participants in their own cultures and communities. Despite this, there are no national requirements or recommendations on what teachers or social workers should know or manage from the perspective of intercultural competence.

In this article, we describe the role and meaning of intercultural competence in the contexts of education and social work

in Finland. The article centres on three key actors: a) teachers, b) NCCBE, and c) social work in supporting pupils in need of additional guidance, including (but not limited to) pupils with a migrant background.

2 TEACHERS AND MULTICULTURALISM IN SCHOOLS

In Finland, the literature on intercultural training and multicultural pedagogic practices dates only as far as the turn of the 21st century. Back then, teachers' multicultural professionalism was seen to include knowledge about how migrant students' background affect their learning and interaction, as well as knowledge about learning difficulties and mental health problems (Talib 1999). Matinheikki-Kokko (1999) stressed the importance of experience for teachers to achieve a personal touch on diversity. Soon, this personal touch was turning inwards: for example, Paavola and Talib (2005, 80) emphasized teachers' need to engage in personal thought processes and growth while working in a multicultural context to act consciously and succeed in building intercultural competence.

More recent writing around teachers' intercultural competence and education in multicultural contexts stresses sensitivity towards language and culture, and to diversity within these in situated contexts and in individual encounters (e.g. Malinen 2019; Paksuniemi et al. 2019; Pollari & Koppinen 2011). Rissanen (2019) underlines the contextual nature of competence by preferring the plural term intercultural competences. Jokikokko (2005) has shown how teachers themselves also interpret intercultural competence as different ways of orienting: these include (1) an ethical orientation including values, interpersonal characteristics and basic orientation towards other people and the world; (2) efficiency orientation including organizational skills and ability to

act in various roles and situations; and (3) pedagogical orientation including intercultural pedagogical competences.

For the aims of the Child-up project, Paavola's (2018) findings are especially relevant. In her study on two pre-schools in the Helsinki region, she shows that both teachers and parents perceive teachers' intercultural competence as one factor contributing to top-quality pre-school teaching. We wish to add there is no reason why this correlation should not apply in other educational stages. In Paavola's data, teachers' intercultural competence was linked with

- positive attitude towards diversity
- motivation to participate in further education
- commitment to shared values
- experience of membership in a community characterised by diversity
- seamless co-operation among team members
- dynamic nature of education and adapting to pupils' needs and skills
and
- managerial support.

Although Paavola's research was carried out in pre-primary level, it surely has linkages to good-quality teaching in more advanced levels (see Virta, Räsänen & Tuittu 2011). The following section describes the role of multiculturalism in Finnish school curricula, which shows that quality teaching, as described above, at least partly follows from careful and insightful curricular work.

3 MULTICULTURALISM IN THE CURRICULUM

The Finnish NCCBE (2014) is very explicit in taking a stance on pupils' cultural competence and cultural identity construction throughout the document, including value base, mission, transversal competencies and subject-specific aims. In other words, the document norm obligates teachers and social workers who work with pupils to foster pupils' skills and growth as culturally competent and active participants and as world citizens in diverse multicultural contexts. Understanding that teachers and social workers are facing both the everyday need and the NCCBE requirements, it is relevant to view their intercultural competence through what is described as the perspective of pupils' aims in NCCBE. Therefore, even though it is a norm-setting document, the competence objectives are not self-evident for the teachers' nor the social workers' professional acquirements in schools. If they are objectives of education, they must also be considered competencies of the educators.

The values of NCCBE include several points explicitly refer to cultural competence:

- Cultural diversity is seen as richness in the context of education.
- Teaching enhances pupils' own cultural identity and their growth as active participants in their own cultures in their own communities.
- Education enhances pupils' interest towards other cultures and strengthens pupils' receptiveness towards cultural diversity.
- School is seen as a context that consists of people with diverse backgrounds.

- Learning takes place in co-operation with and crossing the boundaries of different languages, cultures, religions and life philosophies and respects them in all interaction. (NCCBE, 2014, 15 - 16.)

The cultural mission of the core curriculum is to foster multifarious cultural competence of pupils and to support their cultural identity and cultural capital construction. Teaching aims at increasing the understanding of cultural diversity and at helping pupils to outline different cultures in time from history to present day and the future as a continuum in which everyone can act as agents (ibid., 18). Importantly, the curriculum emphasizes supporting every pupil's cultural identity in many ways; pupils need guidance in their growth towards knowing, recognizing and respecting everyone's right for their own language and culture in Finnish society (ibid., 86).

In addition to the value base and the mission, there are several objectives concerning cultural competence for the pupils to master, for teacher to teach and for the social worker to value. They are described both in the subject-specific objectives for pupils of different ages and as transversal competencies that transcend the lines between different subjects.

One of the transversal competencies, labelled cultural competence, interaction and expression, aims at educating pupils for facing the world as diverse from cultural, linguistic, religious and philosophical perspectives, and views life in general as multidimensional. The aim here is to enhance pupils' competence to meet and respect human rights also from different cultural aspects. It fosters understanding of cultural diversity as a resource and of the interlinkages and influences of cultures, religions and different philosophies in society and in everyday life. Teaching should consistently aim at increasing respect and trust among people and societies. (ibid., 21, 100.)

As to subject-specific objectives, NCCBE mentions cultural competencies especially in connection with L1 language (mother tongue) and literature, L2 language (first foreign language), religion and philosophy of life, visual arts and environmental education.

Although the Finnish education system lays great emphasis on the national curricular framework, some of the aims are decided upon at the local level, in education provider-specific curriculum (NCCBE 2014, 88 for the cultural aspects). This means that even though the national core curriculum presents the values and mission of basic education, the decision as to how to manage them is made in a regional or local curriculum and eventually by individual teachers. Here, also different acts play a role for organizing major structural and practical efforts for supporting migrants and language minorities.

Applying the national curriculum, then, is a process at different levels, which may lead to emphasizing some aims and aspects of the national core curriculum over others. Thus, cultural competence is an issue that may also be addressed with different volume in different regions or even in different schools or classrooms. From the perspective of promoting children's participation and growth towards awareness of and respect for cultural diversity, cultural competence needs conscious attention at different levels of decision-making, from interpreting the national core curriculum at the local level to the classroom practices implemented by an individual teacher and interpreted as intercultural competencies by pupils, parents, and outsiders.

All in all, NCCBE objectives call for various intercultural competencies among teachers and social workers (see the next section) who work in educational contexts with children from culturally diverse backgrounds. With respect to Paavola's (2018) findings presented at the end of section 2, we see intercultural

competence as a meta-skill. This leads to a critical question: to what extent is it possible to teach cultural competence for the pupils if the teacher feels his/her own intercultural competence is insufficient or, what is more, if s/he is not interested in cultures and/or interaction in the first place?

4 SOCIAL WORKERS WITH MULTICULTURAL CLIENTS

Social work in Finland was perhaps quicker than education to respond to multiculturalism. It was, after all, social workers who were first faced with immigrants transporting to Finland for humanitarian reasons in the 1970s and again in the early 1990s (see e.g. Turtiainen 2016). In today's Finland, ethnic and cultural diversity, multilingualism and pluralism among the clients of social work is all but exceptional. However, as Metteri et al. (2016) point out, Finnish social workers have seldom received multicultural training and it is still not well established as a field in social work education. They also show there is an international debate on what multicultural education should exactly include. They themselves argue for a holistic take on social workers' intercultural learning in their everyday practice where, first, the values and ethics of social work are taken seriously; second, the customers are allowed to speak out (about their perceptions and interpretations); third, working in close co-operation with interpreters and using plain language is a norm; and, four, 'general knowledge' about a foreign culture, which in itself is alright, does not overrule the interaction with the individual client.

Aligning with Metteri et al., Katisko (2016) equates the ethics and principles of social work with those of intercultural competence: respect for difference, and promotion of equality and human rights. More specifically, Katisko emphasizes that the "bedrock

of client-based social work is the interactional relationship between the social worker and the client. For this reason, one part of intercultural competence is the ability to communicate with a client from a different cultural background in a way that fosters trust and respect within the client.”

This ability to communicate to foster trust and respect is helpful in all types of interaction. In the context of social work with migrants, Anis (2017, 328) argues this necessitates cultural sensitivity – social worker’s consciousness of his/her own values and attitudes on the one hand, and ability to recognize and understand the possibly different kinds of values and cultural meanings of their clients on the other, as these are reflected in and contribute to interaction. Anis reminds that a sensitive social worker also sees diversity between clients and is aware of the everyday challenges that may occur in a new country.

Anis (ibid.) emphasizes that social workers need to understand what it means for individuals and families to move from one country to another. It is crucial to understand the processes that belong to arriving in a new country, cultural contradictions that may rise, and client’s individual life situation upon arrival. The material conditions and multiple power dimensions are also part of clients’ life in the new home country. The social worker should have competence to understand and analyze all these different aspects.

There is thus more to social work with immigrants than knowledge about the laws that guide and frame migrants’ lives in their new home country (for example, in Finland, Act (L 17.6.2011/ 746) as well as the fact that all minors in Finland are subjected to Child Welfare Act independent of their background). However, having this knowledge is crucial to implement social work in an ideal way (Satka 2007). As it happens, idealism often escapes reality, which is why reflexivity, evaluation of one’s actions by oneself

and colleagues and other practitioners, is highly important in the profession of social workers.

As to social work among migrant children, a social worker is a professional who may support children to overcome difficult situations that may take place in school (see Zechner & Tiilikka 2020, 72) or elsewhere. Here, social workers' knowledge about the Finnish social and health service system is vital to guide the clients towards receiving the support needed from among public or private services or third-sector organizations. The challenge is that sufficient support services for migrant children and their families are not available in all parts of Finland (see Anis 2017, 330).

In their review of the development of intercultural sensitivity in Finnish educational contexts, Holm, Kuusisto and Rissanen et al. (2019) point out that, although official documents have acknowledged multiculturalism as an underlying value in teaching for years, its' practical implementation remains insufficient. As argued by Anis above (see also Pösö 2015), the same holds true in the context of social work in Finland.

5 TOWARDS INTERCULTURAL MULTIPROFESSIONALISM THROUGH REFLEXIVITY

In Finland, education is guaranteed for all regardless of gender, social class or place of residence, with the aim of producing well-being and equality. The role of teachers and social workers is significant in providing education and support for all, following the premises of inclusion. The need for specific intercultural competence and cultural mediation in teaching and social work in school and other educational contexts, is self-evident.

If intercultural competence is a meta-skill that fosters teachers' and social workers' intercultural competence in the contexts of education and social work among children with a migration background, it is worth making the professionals' reflections about it visible and valued for professional and identity development. There are some openings with respect to reflexivity and intercultural competence, such as viewing the concept of reflexivity in intercultural education as a mechanism which mediates between intercultural experiences and individual behaviour among students (Blair 2020). As a concept, reflexivity has a long-term history both in teacher training and social work education in Finland (see e.g. Jyrkiäinen & Jyrkiäinen 2020; Satka 2007) and increasingly focuses on these aspects of professional development.

We suggest multi-professional discussions about intercultural competence in co-operation with teachers and social workers in order to strengthen the understanding of pupils' daily life and the objectives of NCCBE. This may be useful during teacher training and social work education, but importantly also in in-service training targeted at both professions.

Future directions in Child-up research include increasing understanding about professionals' intercultural competencies through analysing a noteworthy set of interview data in combination with the findings of an earlier, quantitative research phase. By way of conclusion, we point out that training for intercultural competence ('multicultural training') is not equally available in all study programmes or professions, but there are differences for example between teachers, social workers and interpreters. This should be addressed in more detail, as they all need the skills in working with the same clients.

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