



## **Diverse Classrooms – Diverse Society Preparing our Students for Diverse Society through Intercultural Education, Cooperative Learning and Complex Instruction**

**Guðrún Pétursdóttir<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*Our classrooms, workplaces and society in general is multicultural, even without ethnic diversity. We all have different cultures. Our backgrounds differ in terms of parental education, religion, socio economic status, household, family form, etc. Additionally, they differ in values, attitudes, lifestyles, abilities/disabilities, and ethnicity or nationality. Ethnicity or nationality is therefore only one of the factors that make our classrooms diverse and thus influence our student's culture. The settlement of immigrants has added new "minorities" to the community in Europe and accentuated the pre-existing social and cultural pluralism. This fact also means that our workplaces are multicultural – diverse in the broadest sense of the concept "culture". Co-workers and clients may or may not differ in ethnicity, again they will still be diverse and this diversity must be seen as advantageous rather than problematic. Job advertisements consistently point to the skillset that includes working with diverse groups. The task for the educator then becomes that of preparing students for the social diversity of their future workplaces, also providing an environment that will produce active minds and critical citizens trained in key competencies and social skills alongside academic and vocational subjects. Critical and creative thinking skills, problem solving, independent working and related skills must become the platform for all learning.*

*There are two main questions that we need to consider in this context:*

- 1. First we need to consider the why question. Why should a teacher consider changing their teaching style? How has society changed to call for different educational approaches?*
- 2. The second question is the how question. This is the question that I have heard most often whilst giving training on intercultural education. How do we reach the aims of intercultural education in our classrooms? How can we organize our teaching in order to reach those aims? Are some methods more likely to work than others?*

### **Why do we need to make changes?**

This question is very important when we discuss education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with student and in-service teachers. Why should teachers change their way of teaching if they do not see any obvious reason for changing it? We can probably introduce as many methods and materials as we want, but if a teacher does not see the advantage of those methods for their students and themselves, they will not achieve the desired outcome. The attitude of the teacher is key.

Most educationalists agree that education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more about learning new skills and competences than collecting information and remembering facts. However the question is which competences we see as important in our diverse and intercultural societies. Which competences do we need to train and equip our students with in order to prepare them for life in a pluralistic workplace and society and to become active and critical citizens? Which competences increase their employability?

When I ask students or participants on European training courses to identify the competences that they see as most important in order to live and thrive in modern, diverse society, I normally get more or less the same list of competences, no matter if the participants are Icelandic teachers or student teachers or international groups of in-service teachers of all school levels and subjects from all over Europe. Broadly, the list always contains all or most of the following: communication skills, cooperation skills / team work / being able to work with a diverse group, open mindedness / anti prejudice / non judgemental, creative thinking, flexibility and adaptability, critical thinking, language skills, conflict management / negotiation skills, initiative and independent working.

---

<sup>1</sup> InterCultural Iceland, Iceland



Giving students real job advertisements to analyse and then asking them to identify which three competences are most frequently requested results in the following; almost all advertisements ask for good communication skills, secondly they ask for cooperation skills (being able to work in a team) and thirdly they ask for initiative and flexibility. Obviously there is also some knowledge or experience required but the request for social competences surprises the learners. This activity can provide motivation to engage in co-operative working in class where there may be initial resistance.

Being an active citizen is not only about work or employability. It's also about being an active participant in creating a just and equitable society with citizens who actively speak out for equal rights and opportunities for the non-dominant groups and value and respect diversity rather than passively tolerating it. It isn't enough to tell our students that diversity is a positive thing, they need to find out through positive experience in their everyday life.

In contemporary society, where millions of „facts“ are just one mouse click away the ability to select, prove and use those facts may be lost in a system that still focuses on learning for an exam. With the abundance of information available the skills to identify bias, sort fact from fiction and to build a network of trusted sources becomes more important than recall of a set of pre ordained facts decided upon by committees and beauracratc structures.

With regard to social equity it is important to consider the connection between intercultural education and cooperative learning when it comes to helping students to become open minded, anti-racist citizens, inarguably a very important aim in contemporary society. Research completed in 2013 about every-day discrimination showed that 93% of people, participating in the study, with migrant background, living in Iceland, had experienced some form of hidden, everyday discrimination, see article:

[http://www.ici.is/assets/Everyday\\_discrimination\\_in\\_Iceland.pdf](http://www.ici.is/assets/Everyday_discrimination_in_Iceland.pdf)

Alvarez (2010) defines everyday racism as hidden, everyday forms of discrimination, examples include being ignored, isolated, made fun of, embarrassed, or being in some way treated differently than the majority group. So this is about everyday behaviour towards minority groups in society and obviously this kind of behaviour is dangerous as it becomes an accepted structure by the dominant group.

So what needs to change so that peoples everyday interaction is based on respect and equity and not based on stereotypes, discrimination and racism. It is clear that the power structures in society are much more solid than something that can be changed during a couple of hours during class but my belief is, that the individuals who maintain those structures can and must take responsibility to make changes over time in their own society and this must start in the classroom as well as in the family.

The competences that need to be trained in order to work against the underlying attitudes of superiority, and the maintainence of existing powerstructures are diverse. One of the most important competences that needs to be trained and supported is the ability to think critically, to question „facts“, to research where information come from, to understand there may be a range of perspectives etc. This is especially important in the information society where social media, memes, wikipedia etc are our students sometimes main source of information. It is essential that they learn to differentiate and that they have the thinking skills to draw conclusions instead automatic acceptance of what an authority figure says.

Does traditional teaching give our learners the opportunity to interact, cooperate, question, compromise, understand... in other words; are we teaching them to live with others?

### **How do we teach in order to train student's key competences and reach the aims of intercultural education?**

If we think how traditional didactic pedagogy prepares learners for "real life" we see that there is a skill gap and a failure to increasing our student's communication, cooperation or conflict solving competences. As Elisabeth Cohen says: *"We actually teach these skills in kindergarten and sometimes in the first 4-5 classes but then most of the teachers start working more and more the traditional way where the teacher speaks, the pupils listen and memorize. In high school it's the same. When those pupils graduate we want them to know these skills again to be able to function at multicultural/diverse workplaces."* (E.Cohen, 1997)

There is no single teaching method that suits all students all the time. The answer lies in diverse teaching methods and approaches. Approaches where the student is active, interaction and communication takes place and where there is *structure* that increases the possibility for every student



to contribute and have access to the learning process, are best suited to activate students, train their social skills, give them the opportunity to learn in a creative way.

Cooperative learning methods, using activities and games, exploring controversial problems in the classroom are all approaches that have shown to be useful to reach those aims.

Teachers may have bad memories from their own school years or as teachers from group work experience that went wrong. Cooperative learning is always group work but group work is not always cooperative. Group work tasks can be a prescription for inequitable distribution of the workload. Cooperative learning resolves this inequity. With group work tasks, the teacher assigns a task to a group and leaves it to the group to determine how to structure their work. In unstructured groups, it is likely that the status ordering within the class will allow some students to take over while others contribute little or are even kept away from the task. In contrast, cooperative learning tasks are carefully structured.

To ensure cooperation in a group, it must be very structured and certain principles must be followed. If poorly managed and structured, group work can be worse than individual work for some students, who, for example suffer from anxiety or fear of failure or are in the process of learning the language of instruction. They may possibly hate group work because they don't know for certain what will happen (they can make a reliable prediction during a traditional lesson). So *structure* is the key word. The more structured the work is, the more the groups can work independently, there will be more interdependence and support from group members and insecure students will actually know what will happen and that they will have support from other group members.

Clearly, explanations of the depth of Cooperative Structures, cannot be contained in this paper, however, the fact is that no other educational approach has been as well researched as cooperative learning.

Change is both necessary and difficult. Teachers have been students in the past and have survived and prospered from a traditional system. This may lead to a form of educational reproduction with some teachers being resistant to changing from traditional methods. However, most teachers can see further than their own experience and understand that for other students this system doesn't work but it can still stand in their way to understand the diverse group of learners they have in their classroom.

Learners have been taught a range of norms and values for traditional classrooms and mostly understand the forms of behaviour considered positive. They may resist moving from a predictable situation – particularly those who achieve high grades. But these are only a portion of all our learners and those who 'fail' represent a considerable waste of potential and an individual loss of self-esteem where educational failure is extrapolated to their wider life.

## Conclusion

There is a direct connection between intercultural education, anti-racist education and well structured, creative cooperative learning methods. Creating equity, mutual respect and preparing our students for both diverse society and labour market requires new approaches in teaching. Traditional methods which served largely homogenous societies with obedient conforming manual workers no longer provide a good fit. In fact, they create a gap between the skills our learners get and those they need. This calls for changes. Creative cooperative learning methods mean that learners must be prepared to work together, that teachers need to hold compatible attitudes with these new pedagogic arrangements which include not only classroom approaches but more diverse and creative assessments, changes in power structures and relationships. Thus, change needs to come at all levels of the education system including national examination boards, training institutions, governing bodies and inspecting bodies.

## References:

- [1] Batelaan, Pieter (ed.) Towards an equitable classroom. Cooperative Learning in Intercultural Education in Europe. International Association for Intercultural Education. Hilversum 1998
- [2] Banks, James A. and Manks, Cherry A. Mcgee. (Ed.) Multicultural education. Issues and perspectives. Wiley, USA 2004
- [3] Cohen, Elizabeth G. Designing Groupwork. Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom. Teachers College Press, New York 1994
- [4] Cohen, Elizabeth G., Lotan, Rachel A. (ed) Working for equity in heterogeneous classrooms. Sociological Theory in Practice. Teachers College Press . New York 1997.



- [5] Joanne W. Putnam (Editor), Cooperative Learning and Strategies for Inclusion: Celebrating
- [6] Kagan Spencer. Cooperative Learning. Kagan. 1994
- [7] Pétusdóttir, Guðrún – InterCultural education – better education for everyone?  
<http://www.ici.is/en/articles/intercultural-education-better-education-for-everyone/>
- [8] Pétursdóttir, Guðrún – Research on everyday discrimination in Iceland -  
<http://www.ici.is/en/articles/research-on-every-day-discrimination-in-iceland>
- [9] Sierens, Sven (ed.) Us, Them, Ours. Points for attention in designing interculturallly sound learning materials. Centre for intercultural education. Ghent, Belgium 2000.
- [10] Tony Wagner. The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need - and What We Can Do About it. Basic books 2009
- [11] Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century "Learning: The Treasure within", UNESCO Publishing, 1996, 1998, 266 p.