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Reflecting on the Other: Critical perspectives of novice teachers on pedagogy and teacher pupil-relationships in particular geo-political contexts

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Background

The data for this paper arises from a postgraduate student exchange programme (jointly funded by the EU and the Turkish government) between three Universities in Turkey and Leicester University, England (UK). The programme was designed to promote civil society dialogue in the context of Turkey's candidature for accession to the EU through explorations of participants' understandings of citizenship, Citizenship Education and attitudes towards students' voices in schools in England and Turkey.

Research Questions

This study investigated the views of Turkish and British university students studying Education and training to be teachers about their understandings of European and national identities, their views on pedagogy and on Citizenship education in particular. This paper focuses on trainee teachers' views of pedagogy through their experiences of schooling in the other's country.

When novice teachers critically reflect on the pedagogic practices of the Other in particular contexts, they also confront their own practices and values. Such deliberations are part of their journey of endlessly developing and (re)shaping their professional identity. It usually affirms their current values in practice since this helps to confirm their developing identities as teachers. However novice teachers' views are also influenced by the public discourses around pedagogical practices (Wilkins, 2005) and by the experiences they had as students at school (Busher, 2005), as well as by the cultural milieu they inhabit (Bourdieu, 1990).

Methods

During the exchange programme Turkish and British student teachers' perspectives on Citizenship Education and notions of citizenship of their own countries and of Europe were collected using a questionnaire and focus group interviews. The interview schedule was drawn up partly to complement issues investigated through the questionnaire and partly from participants' responses to the questionnaire, and the resultant qualitative data was analysed thematically.

Frame

The construction of personal identity can be exclusive, not 'the other' (Ross, 2000). However, where people inhabit more than one world, whether of overlapping groups in a school or local community, or belonging to more than one national community, they seem able to accommodate this. In a study of young people's (18-25 years) attitudes of European identity and citizenship in England, Spain and France, Edey (2003) found that people were broadly comfortable with the notion of multiple identities, but that 'home' is a 'primary locator of belonging'.

Schools are both a site and a conduit for struggle (Foucault, 1976) in which people, such as teachers and students (re)construct their identities through time (Giddens, 1991). The project of the self is central to the development of personal agency (Giddens, 1991) that is displayed in people's negotiations with others and with social systems/structures. The student teachers in the exchange programme were on the cusp of becoming income-earning teachers and tested their constructed professional identities when visiting schools in each other's countries.

The construction of identity is affected by the social and political contexts in which it takes place. Schools are sites in which national policies and local perspectives intersect as people struggle to construct implementable educational policies and practices (Riley & Docking, 2002) that reflect particular but contested values (Starratt, 2007). The importance of schools and schooling in shaping social constructions, such as society's views on identity, pluralism and social cohesion, has been increasingly acknowledged by both national governments within Europe and by the EU (Dale & Robertson, 2009) concerned with the observed decline in civic engagement and in participatory politics, especially by young people (Citizenship Foundation, 1997), in the second half of the twentieth century.

Participants in this exchange programme were aware of complex structural changes in the global economy, and the impact of globalization and regionalization at national and European levels (Dale & Robertson, 2009). Turkey is a candidate for membership of the EU. People in Britain and Turkey face the fears of world climate change and the near collapse of the world economic order that has enshrined Western dominance for decades. Further, the expansion of the EU eastward since the collapse of Communism has brought in to EU membership states with different historical 'social models', and different economic conditions, democratic structures and traditions of civil society, from those of the founding states of Western Europe.

Research findings

Findings from the study show participants reflecting critically on their understandings of pedagogy in their own policy and cultural contexts in the light of practice by the other. Their responses to practice by the other is ambivalent, both acknowledging its success but also noting what they perceive as its weaknesses. Some also raise epistemological questions about the quality of knowing that they experienced when visiting schools in each other's countries.

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