Learning to Live Together: children's rights, identities and citizenship
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Assignment 3

The question of power as a barrier to child centered learning

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0. Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, United Nations 1989) recognises the right of any person under 18 to participate in decision making "in all matters affecting the child". This provision, broadly recognised as a milestone in the conception of young people as citizens in their own right, and indeed the "lynchpin" of the CRC (O'Brian 2010), is particularly relevant for the context of formal education, which shapes to a great degree the upbringing of a young person. The CRC also defines the objectives of education as "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms", "respect for the natural environment" and to bring upon "peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples". However, these ideals, broadly agreed by UN member states in numerous declarations and conventions, are far from being reality in today's world, as is a meaningful participation of children in decision-making in educational contexts and beyond (Osler and Starkey 2005).

This essay will examine the link between the lack of participation of children in schooling and the defeat of formal education to contribute to the emergence of a world where human rights and the above listed ideals of humanity are actually realised. It will argue that the question of power is the central barrier to a truly transformative learning, which has to go beyond punctual participation in order to build a emancipatory educational practice that challenges dominant power relations.

In order to do so, I will build on the thinking of French educator Marcel Lesne (1994), who proposes three "educational modes", which can be linked to three ideal types of education: Instruction, participatory learning and emancipatory practice. I will examine how these practises relate to the question of power, and how each of them hinders or facilitates the recognition of the child as a social actor in its own right. Through Vanessa Andreotti's (2012) HEADS UP checklist, I will examine barriers to participation and illustrate my thinking through an example of ethnocentrism.

1. Educational modes and participation

Marcel Lesne (1994), based on comprehensive practical experience in adult education (he was director of the French national adult education institute) proposes three distinct pedagogic "action modes" which are interesting to look at also in the context of formal education, and in particular the question of learner's participation:

1) A *transmissive, normative mode*, aiming to prepare the learner to fit in expected or predefined social roles and to reproduce the existing social and economic system. Knowledge is considered objective and cumulative. The individual is object of education; (pedagogic) power is accepted and applied.

2) A *facilitating, personal mode*, aiming to enable the learner to actively adapt to changing economic and social roles and exigencies. Knowledge is considered multifaceted and versatile. The learner is subject of education; pedagogic power is used indirectly and implicitly.

3) An *appropriative, social mode*, aiming to the emancipation of the learner to modify and produce new forms of social and economic interaction. Knowledge is considered as social

construction. The learner is agent of his/her education and of society; pedagogic power is democratic.

In the larger context of institutional power sharing with youth and children, beyond exclusively educational settings, Kirby et.al. (2003) and Landsdown (2005) propose three degrees of participation: consultative, participatory and child/youth focused self-initiated processes. Table 1 below outlines three ideal types of educational practice in relation to power. "Instruction" refers to a transmissive learning mode, which wouldn't propose any power sharing or participation, besides possibly miss-using consultation as a fig leaf to hide its authoritarian paradigm. The "participation" mode aims to embrace personalisation and punctual inclusion of learners in decision-making, but refrains from a full redistribution of power, while truly emancipatory pedagogical practise, corresponding to Lesne's *appropriative* mode and based on child/youth focused self-initiated processes, allows for a redistribution of power.

	Instruction	Participation	Emancipation
Concept of education	*transmissive, normative mode*: Education as knowledge transfer	*facilitating, personal mode*: Education as enabler of individuals	*appropriative, social mode*: Education as driver of social change and collective action
Social agenda	Fit in the system	Adapt to the system	Change the system
Power sharing	None, or fig leaf approach. Controversies are suppressed	Consultation, last word with the hierarchy. Controversies are avoided.	Democratic, all stakeholders are heard; controversies are welcome and dialogically transformed.
Initiative	Top-down by school hierarchy	School hierarchy and/or formal/informal leaders	Bottom-up and democratic. Anyone can take initiative.
Decision making	Top-down by school hierarchy	Consultation and punctual co-decision making	Equal negotiation
Learning	Reproduction of existing knowledge	Defined knowledge is adapted to individual needs and contexts	Knowledge is defined and explored collectively
Barriers for participation	Institutional: multi-fold and explicit. Political, social, historical and ethnic norms define learner's place in the school	Subtle, implicit, discursive and cultural. Depended on individuals, dynamics and situation.	Systemic: limited access to institutions based on emancipatory education,

Table 1: Educational modes and participation

2. Barriers for participation

Most, if not all, educational institutions would claim to contribute to "best interests of the child", which is a central provision of the CRC. However, neither the state of schooling, nor the state of the world can seriously be considered as reflecting young people's interest, regarding, for example, the systemic violence of schools (Harber 2004) or the selective application of the right to education (Tomasevki 2006). Putting the learners in the driving seat of their education would be the best approach to assure that their "best interest" is considered, fully in the spirit of the CRC. However, multifold barriers for meaningful participation of learners hinder the redistribution of power on different levels, depending on the educational mode, reflected in the schools values, concept, policies and practices. Andreotti's (2012) HEADS UP checklist, built on post-colonial theory and her concept of

critical global citizenship education (Andreotti 2006), provides a strong tool to analyse deeper questions of power and motivation of various actors, in particular regarding possible barriers for participation.

Pattern	Reproduction	Reflection	Barriers to participation
Hegemony *(justifying superiority and supporting domination)*	Does this school promote the idea that one group of people (e.g. teachers, or the educational hierarchy) could design and implement solutions for everyone?	Does this school invite people to think about its own limitations and insufficiencies?	Dominance, refusal of self-criticism, autoritarism
Ethnocentrism *(projecting one view as universal)*	Does this school imply that anyone who disagrees with what is proposed is immoral, ignorant or rebellious?	Does this school acknowledge that there are other logical ways of looking at the same issue?	Racism, reinforcement of cultural norms, over-emphasis of culture and supposed cultural differences
Ahistoricism *(forgetting historical legacies and complicities)*	Does this school conceive present educational challenges without reference to why it is like that and how 'we' are connected to that?	Does this school examine educational challenges through a complex historical analysis?	Historical essentialism
Depoliticisation *(disregarding power inequalities and ideological roots of analyses and proposals)*	Does this school conceive educational challenges as disconnected from power and ideology?	Does this school acknowledge its own ideological location and offer a robust analysis of power relations?	Ideological blindness, fatalism, social exclusion, reproduction of power patters
Salvationism *(framing help as the burden of the fittest)*	Does this school present children as 'in need' or as citizens to-be, and teachers as capable of leading students towards their destiny of order, progress and harmony?	Does this school acknowledge that the desire to teach others and the imposition of aspirations for singular ideas of progress and development have historically been part of the problem?	Needs-based approach to education, learners are objects and not actors in their own right
Uncomplicated solutions *(offering easy solutions that do not require systemic change)*	Does this school offer simplistic analyses and answers that do not invite people to engage with complexity or think more deeply?	Does this school offer a complex analysis of the problem acknowledging the possible adverse effects of proposed solutions?	Figleaf approach to participation, refusal of systemic analysis and changes
Paternalism *(seeking affirmation of superiority through the provision of help)*	Does this school portray learners as people who lack education, resources, civilization and who would and should be very grateful for your help?	Does this school portray learners as people who are entitled to disagree with their teachers and to legitimately want to implement different solutions to what their teachers have in mind?	Avoidance of conflict and sharing of power

Table 1: The HEADS UP checklist transposed to educational contexts and barriers to participation

In the following, I will attempt to illustrate the proposed analytical tools with a concrete example in order to understand how racism/ethnocentrism serves as a barrier to participation.

Chan (2007) describes a Canadian school that tries to embrace its multi-cultural reality through a number of activities, such as lessons around the diversity of "ethnic food", an inclusive end-of-year celebration or a "multi-cultural night". These activities might be well intended and include to a certain

degree participatory elements (e.g. students can make propositions and contributions for the multi-cultural night). However, agenda setting and final decision making on these activities remains with the hierarchy (teacher or principal), to a point that students, for example, can be excluded from the end-of-year celebration – supposed to be an inclusive event for all students – for disciplinary reasons. Chan's narrative inquiry highlights that a lack of ownership and participation by the students in these activities is due to an ethnocentric view by the hierarchy. For example, the attitude of the teacher in the food lesson is based on the assumption that students with migrant background would mostly eat "ethnic food", and that they would be willing to share information about supposedly exotic culinary practices. It omitted the fact that also "root Canadians" might eat Falafel, and migrants might eat pizza and burgers. The deception on the "multi-cultural night", which was perceived as a celebration of Chinese folklore – students of Chinese background being the most dominant ethnic minority group – reflects a lack of awareness and acceptance of the multitude of ethnicities in the school.

We can suppose that a emancipatory approach to participation, with gives the school community the say on which activities to set up, and how they would be shaped, could have resulted in different and more inclusive formats of these, and possibly other, activities. It would potentially create greater awareness of the variety of ethnic identities, but require abandoning a top-down approach to decision-making, that might contain some half-hearted participatory elements, but leave out an important part of the students.

3. Conclusion

Power can take various forms to exclude learners from participation and decision making on matters they are affected by – which includes all matters related to their schooling. Ethnocentrism, salvatorism or paternalism, among other mindsets that discourage thinking in systems and complexity, might be used consciously or unconsciously to exclude and marginalise learners. An open dialog, which puts the learners in the driving seat of their education, as required by the CRC, can challenge such ideologies and transform a learning mode of instruction into one of emancipation of children, which goes beyond punctual participation.

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