Community of Inquiry: Research-Based Learning for Inclusive Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article establishes a connection between research-based learning and the development of inclusive practices in teacher education with a special focus on pre-service teachers’ ways of talking in philosophical dialogues with children. Adopting an interactionist point of view on learning as a co-constructive process and a processual understanding of inclusion and exclusion on the classroom level, the fundamental importance of conversational practices to learning is carved out and then exemplified using transcripts from a teacher education project. Building on this analysis, inclusive conversational practices are identified. Moreover, it is shown how joint reflection and peer feedback in teacher education courses lead to changes in pre-service teachers’ conversational practices. These findings lead to reflections on how research-based learning in teacher education can contribute to inclusive education by looking at habitual ways of talking in class.

KEYWORDS

Classroom Interaction, Inclusive Education, Interactionist Learning Theory, Philosophizing with Children, Research-Based Learning, Teacher Education

INTRODUCTION

In Germany, the primary school is the place in the educational system with the most diverse learners. Relevant dimensions of diversity in the German primary school include disability, cultural background, religion, class and gender, but also individual biographies, as it has the objective to mediate between the children’s out-of-school experiences and the demands of the school system. With an ongoing diversification of the conditions of growing up, primary school teachers who are able to work with children’s diversity in constructive ways are more important than ever.

One omnipresent medium for learning in the classroom are the teachers’ conversational practices. Following an understanding of inclusion/exclusion as a dynamic process, facilitating meaningful participation in classroom interaction for every student is crucial to the idea of learning in groups of diverse learners. This requires teachers to reflect on their habitual ways of talking, which might exclude students who do not speak the dominant language well enough, use another register and so on. Not taking into account one’s own conversational habits can lead to repeated experiences of exclusion from meaningful interaction and learning for some children.
This paper takes a closer look at how ways of talking contribute to or subtract from inclusive education. After a discussion of the relationship between inclusive practice and classroom interaction, a teacher education project is highlighted that focuses on pre-service teachers’ ways of talking in philosophical dialogues with children. Using data from the project, conversational practices that initiate collective reasoning and learning processes are identified, and it is shown how such practices can be refined through reflection.

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES AND TEACHER EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Definitions of Inclusive Education and Inclusive Practice

In order to clarify what is meant by inclusive practice in this paper, it is necessary to take a look at how an interactionist understanding of inclusion/exclusion relates to the theoretical discussion. A narrow definition of inclusion focuses on the idea of educating students with and without disabilities together (Sapon-Shevin, 2013, p. 57). This way of defining inclusive education has been criticized for limiting the potential of the inclusive idea in two regards: First, it primarily addresses school structures, but does not deal with classroom interaction; second, it has been argued from a social justice perspective that inclusion should incorporate additional dimensions of diversity such as ethnicity, class or language (Sapon-Shevin, 2013, p. 58). In Vislie’s (2003, p. 21) wider definition, the idea of inclusive education is applied to thinking about the quality of teaching taking place in all forms and levels of schooling and addresses the teaching profession as well as academic pedagogy as a whole. It encourages a radical shift in thinking: from adapting pre-existing structures, curricula and teaching practices to students labeled as deviating from the norm to developing structures, curricula and practices that reach out to all students and their individual needs.

In their influential Index for Inclusion, Booth and Ainscow (2002) adhere to a wider definition of inclusion, when they define it as concerned with “the education of all children and young people” (p. 1) and propose a framework for inclusive school development that consists of three dimensions. They differentiate between inclusive cultures, policies and practices. Inclusive practices are characterized as such (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, p. 7):

*Lessons are made responsive to student diversity. Students are encouraged to be actively involved in all aspects of their education, which draws on their knowledge and experience outside school. Staff identify material resources and resources within each other, students, parents/carers and local communities which can be mobilized to support learning and participation.*

Practices are regarded as inclusive, if they allow students to actively participate in their learning processes by drawing on what they have already learned and experienced. Student diversity is not seen as a deficit, but as a starting point for individual learning processes and the teacher’s role is a supportive and caring one. Although the Index for Inclusion is geared towards development on the level of schools, the concept of inclusive practice encourages not only schools, but also individual teachers to ask how far their teaching practices foster meaningful learning processes for every student, which can be a useful tool for professional reflection.

This paper does not focus on inclusion as a whole, but on processes of inclusion/exclusion based on the learners’ congruence to norms and demands inherent in classroom interaction. Meaningful participation in classroom interaction is a crucial prerequisite for learning, but as research in the tradition of Bernstein (1996) and Bourdieu and Passeroin (1977) has repeatedly shown, it depends on the learners’ ability to employ certain speaking practices, which can become a major obstacle for less privileged learners (Martín Rojo 2010; Williams, 2016). If teachers are not aware of this, certain learners repeatedly make experiences of not being able to participate, which can lead to exclusion
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