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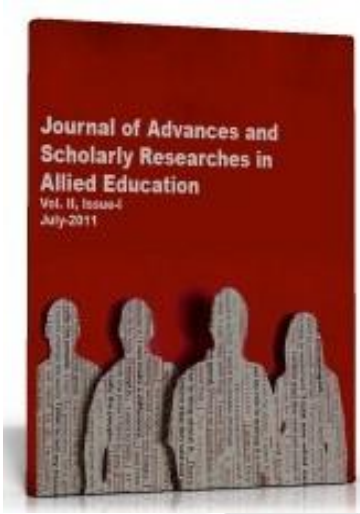
Aspects of Individual and Categorical Differences in relation to their gender, subject and Locality



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INTRODUCTION

Education is conceived as a powerful agency, which is instrumental in bringing about the desired changes in the social and cultural life of nation. The whole process of education is shaped and moulded by the human personality called the teacher who plays a pivotal role in any system of education.

The Kothari Commission on Education (1964-66) has emphasized the role of school and teacher in shaping the future of the nation. The shape will undoubtely depend on what goes in the classroom and how it goes on. This places a greater responsibility on the shoulders of the teacher as nation builders.

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In the contemporary world, the teacher's role is undergoing vast changes. Education has been envisioned as a process of all round development with a considerable emphasis on the emotional and personal spheres of the child as well.

An effective teacher must have a positive attitude towards teaching as a profession and dedication to teaching. Attitude is an important aspect in quality teaching. An attitude is an important concept to understand human behaviour. It defines outward and visible postures and human beliefs. Attitudes determine what each individual will see, hear, think and do. They are rooted in experience and do not become automatic routine conduct. Attitude means the individuals prevailing tendencies to respond favourably or unfavourably to an object, person or group of people, institutions or events. Attitudes can be positive (values) or negative (prejudice). People's attitudes towards their profession have an effect on their performance. This case is also valid for the profession of teaching.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The sample includes surveys of 174 elementary education majors and 59 English and mathematics majors intending to teach secondary school, as well as interviews with a randomly selected subset of this group; 62 students took part in baseline interviews which included discussion of learner diversity and its consequences for teaching. Whereas the questionnaire was designed to analyze teachers' knowledge and beliefs about subject matter, teaching and learning, learners, the contexts of learning, and learning to teach; the structured, open-ended interview (typically lasting 1 1/2 to 3 hours) was created to explore teachers' assumptions, understandings, and ideas in relation to these teaching domains. Of our questionnaire respondents 96 percent are white and more than 85 percent are female. (In the "intensive" or interview group, 92 percent are white and 82 percent are female.) The questionnaire and interview approached diversity in different ways. Items on the questionnaire tended to ask students to show the extent of their agreement/disagreement with statements about specific aspects of learner diversity (such as language or handicapping condition) and the significance for teaching practice or learner outcomes, or with statements about the value

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of different teaching practices aimed at responding to learner diversity (such as ability grouping). The interview questions, in contrast, began with a general question about what differences among students teachers need to consider. Only after often lengthy discussion about categories generated by the interviewee (and the implications of these categories) did the interviewer introduce and ask about specific categories (i.e., gender, ethnicity, culture, language, handicaps, and social class), specific subject matter contexts (the teaching and learning of math and writing) and the notion (to be considered and explored by the respondent) that some students are particularly difficult to teach.

The interviews were transcribed and then studied for patterns. Since I view this as a heuristic and exploratory study, I deliberately avoided prior specification of coding categories, but rather looked for emergent categories in the transcripts. Codes emerged from this reading of the interviews, and they were then compared across interviews, with similarities and differences noted. Pattern coding (Miles and Huberman, 1984) was used to identify emergent themes. While I examined the entire sequence of responses about diversity by an interviewee as a unit, I distinguished between those categories generated by the interviewee and those discussed in response to a probe. Through multiple readings an effort was made to look for disconfirming as well as confirming evidence for the themes and hypotheses which grew out of these patterns.

Across the five sites studied, in the most general terms, these respondents affirmed the importance of equality in education and rejected certain differences (particularly gender) as important to teachers or as aspects of human diversity that should influence teaching. They did, however, identify family background, motivation, student attitudes and ability as differences that are important for teachers to consider (see Table 1 below). Prospective teachers' conceptions of diversity appear to draw chiefly on an "individual difference" orientation to teaching and society. While our respondents did introduce "categorical differences" frequently into the discussion, they did so because of the close link they saw between patterns of social differentiation and individual attitudes.

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Although there was great consensus on the importance of equality and the relative significance of family and motivation, there was also evidence of disagreement in the views of these prospective teachers on specific educational questions related to teaching practices (see Table 2 below). In their interviews (and in their responses to questionnaire items), these future teachers displayed un sureness and a tendency to discuss diversity in simple ways and in terms that highlight enduring dilemmas in schooling. Their difficulties were greatest when they had to think or talk contextually or ground their claims about difference and fairness in a classroom situation. Clearly, few had either a contextualized or a pedagogical orientation to diversity. Prospective teachers talked about diversity as closely associated with issues of fairness and equal treatment, yet when operationalizing the concepts, they sometimes justified unequal treatment. Four patterns are of particular interest to this discussion: (a) the linkage between diversity and fairness, (b) the dominance of individual an categorical differences in prospective teachers' views of diversity, (c) implicit models of teaching, and (d) difficulties and dilemmas in dealing with diversity.

DIVERSITY AND FAIRNESS

Resonating strongly throughout the questionnaire and interview responses is the theme of fairness. When asked to respond to a variety of differences among students, these prospective teachers often prefaced their remarks or wove into the body of their comments a claim about the necessity for fairness. Just over 95 percent of questionnaire respondents agreed in some way that every student should be given an equal chance to speak in class. In interviews they asserted that "all children have a right to, you know, the same privileges" (Leslie), and that even when school policies make distinctions among students (those in English as a second language classes and those not, for example), different students should be treated "as equally as possible" (Lori). Chiefly, our respondents suggested that treating students equally is essential. They held out liberal goals of providing students "all the same opportunities" (Julia) and "reaching everyone" (Lucille). Many students appeared to hold an implicit framework of equity and fairness which entails minimizing differences or treating different learners the same.

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Boys and girls are different. But in schoolwork, really I don't think you can say, okay, boys are better in math and girls are better in, you know, sewing I don't think that's fair [italics added]. You know, everybody is there to do the same amount of work and the same kind of work. (Shelley) Shelley voiced a commonly held view in arguing that "you should recognize it [difference, in this case, social class] but you shouldn't treat it differently."

For some this version of equity even meant an almost deliberate denial of certain differences. Three categorical differences in particular elicited this response. While 37 percent of respondents made the point of rejecting the importance of gender as a difference teachers should consider, race and social class were sometimes included, though less often. A strong normative element was present in many of these comments, with some students claiming that gender "shouldn't make any difference" (Jesse) or that, despite past significance, "I'm hoping it won't [matter] anymore" (Molly). Another explained that "I don't even like to recognize" gender and social class.

For respondents taking this view, considering gender (and, to a lesser extent, race and class) was a form of "preference or special attention. Girls and boys, I mean, there shouldn't be that much difference," argued Leslie, an elementary education major. Significantly, this rejection of "preference" was regularly associated with categorical differences; concerns about "preferences" did not seem to be present in talk about individual differences. Associated with this implicit connection between difference and fairness is the assumption that teachers can and should meet individual needs. Of survey respondents 70 percent agreed with the view that teachers can teach in ways that accommodate the individual interests and abilities of their students, while only 6 percent of interviewees raised any reservations about the limitations of individualizing instruction and teachers' ability to meet individual needs.

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CONCLUSION

Discussion of fairness does not preclude recognizing diversity. In fact, when asked to talk about what they see as important types of differences, students were quick to produce verbal lists. A clear pattern emerged, despite the uniqueness of each student's list. Students called on the "individual difference" and "categorical difference" perspectives more frequently than other approaches to diversity. In describing diversity, interviewees regularly started their lists with one of two types of differences. Interview responses were divided almost evenly between those that began with psychological differences and those that focused initially on home background. A very common listing of important differences included a combination of the two. Psychological differences appeared in many forms: most commonly as variation in motivation, interests, attitudes, personality, learning style and pace, and developmental stage.

Background factors most often included family background, and also frequently involved social class, race, and prior educational experience. When discussing family background, interviewees used the terms family, family environment, family life, home environment, parents, and upbringing. In some cases these discussions suggested that family background stood as a proxy for class (and, less often, race and culture), while at other times it was described as associated with but not equivalent to these.

Regardless of the term used, background was justified as significant for its effect on children's attitudes and motivation. In other words, social, categorical differences were translated into an individual, psychological category.

THREE ASPECTS OF INDIVIDUAL AND CATEGORICAL DIFFERENCES

With respect to these orientations to individual and categorical differences, three aspects will be dealt with, specifically the salience of motivation, questions about the neutrality of differences, and a hierarchical view of differentiation.

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SALIENCE OF MOTIVATION

One of the strongest themes to emerge in these interviews is the central place prospective teachers give to motivation. When asked about differences, about things that make teaching hard, and about differences that affect the teaching and learning of specific subject matter, these respondents regularly brought up motivation. Motivation was associated with family, socioeconomic class, race, culture, and developmental stage of the learner, and was chiefly portrayed as the result of out-of-school factors. It was student motivation alone (regardless of what prompted it) that stood out as the single most important learner characteristic that would affect the ease or difficulty of teaching students. This finding is striking in its uniformity across interviews which often were otherwise very different. It speaks to an implicit approach to teaching which rests heavily on personality and psychological factors, rather than content or context.

Diversity: Neutral Phenomenon or Education Problem?

In addition to considering what differences "count," we should also consider why they matter and how they affect the teaching and learning situation envisioned by these prospective teachers. In one sense, students conveyed the impression that differences are a natural part of social reality, that differences are common and in some way neutral. "Every class is different" (Lance) and "each child is different" (Louise) were familiar themes. It was in part because of this neutrality of difference that respondents argued that the teacher must treat all students equally and, many argued, individually. Yet at the same time, an underlying theme in these interviews treats difference as a problem.

The viewing of difference in psychological terms was much more often discussed in a neutral fashion, while comments about differences in background more often contained hints of problems. In fact, while the interviewers were careful to use neutral language (such as asking about differences among students that teachers might consider), respondents often used words like "problems" or "barrier" as they discussed categorical differences. Even in rejecting the importance

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of gender, race, or class, the respondents implied that "difference" is a problem and thus left themselves little room to consider differences as offering opportunities. It was rare to find the student who, as one did, viewed diversity as a positive resource: "You can use someone of a different background as a resource, can use a Vietnamese refugee to talk about [his/her] experience, and recognize differences, because they do exist, and use those as advantages" (Martin). Instead, the majority of our respondents, once they got past claiming the uniqueness of all individuals, often spent the rest of their remarks characterizing a hierarchy of social differentiation.

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