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# NOTIONS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AMONGST TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE SERBIAN AND SWISS CONTEXT<sup>35</sup>

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Bruno Leutwyler

The aim of this research was to explore the notions of cultural differences among student teachers in the Serbian and Swiss context. We ask whether or not and in what ways these notions may relate to a level of intercultural sensitivity. For theoretical framing we refer to Bennett's (1993) "Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" (DMIS). Six semi-structured interviews were carried out with student teachers in the Serbian and Swiss context and analyzed according to content analysis (Mayring 2008). Additionally, each respondent was tested by a testing tool for intercultural sensitivity, the „Intercultural Development Inventory“ (IDI) (Hammer, 2009). Our findings show that the notions of cultural differences can have a basically different orientation: Two of the respondents („type one“) reveal a view that takes both sides of the perceived cultural difference into consideration. By these respondents, cultural difference is rather sought than avoided and it is rather found to be interesting than threatening. In contrast, most of the respondents („type two“) display an „outsider's view“ onto those who are perceived as culturally different. Here, cultural difference rather seems to be avoided than sought and it appears to be uncomfortable, maybe threatening. The IDI test results (which were only revealed after thorough analysis of the sample) indicate that the respondents of „type one“ were within or in transition to an „ethnorelative“ phase of development, while the respondents of „type two“ ranged within an „ethnocentric“ phase of development. Thus, this basically different orientation in the notions of cultural differences among student teachers seems to be related to different levels of intercultural sensitivity and to different worldviews.

Keywords: cultural differences, DMIS model, Switzerland, Serbia, student teachers

## *Introduction and theoretical background*

In an increasingly globalized world, societies are facing a large number of challenges, among them, the challenge of dealing with cultural diversity. Accordingly, the educational discourse is in a constant development and search

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for the most adequate response to these challenges. Teachers, as key actors in the education field, need to be prepared effectively if they are to address cultural diversity in an appropriate way. Research has shown that the teachers' personal dispositions are crucial for performing specific tasks in teaching (e.g. Klieme & Hartig, 2008; Lipowski, 2006), however, these personal dispositions are barely investigated in relation to intercultural education and regarding teachers' notions of cultural differences and similarities.

Notions of cultural differences and similarities need to be understood within the frame of constructivism: Individuals construct their reality in a constant process of constructing and re-constructing, according to events that happen to them and that they assign meaning to (Kelly, 1955; see also Leutwyler, Petrović & Mantel, 2012).

According to Bennett (1986, 2004) this process of constructing and re-constructing takes place on different levels of sophistication and complexity. In the case of the notion of cultural differences, the levels of complexity correspond to the levels of intercultural sensitivity as described in the "developmental model of intercultural sensitivity" (DMIS). Bennett has found intercultural sensitivity to develop in stages and proposes a six-stage-model of development. Along this model, the first three stages take place within a worldview of ethnocentricity and the second three stages within a worldview of ethno relativity. Individuals with an ethnocentric worldview experience their own cultural framing as the only reference to construct their reality. The three proposed ethnocentric stages can all be seen as ways to avoid cultural differences, either by denying its existence (stage one), by raising defenses against it (stage two), or by minimizing its importance (stage three). Individuals, who move from an ethnocentric to an ethno relative worldview, realize that their cultural framing is only one organization of reality among many other possibilities and that another person with another cultural framing needs to be understood within his or her particular cultural framing. This way, the experience of difference is fundamentally altered and represents a major change in the development of intercultural sensitivity. The ethno relative stages are not ways of avoiding, but ways of seeking cultural difference (Bennett 2004, Bennett & Bennett 2001).

### ***Research questions and methodological approach***

Applying this theoretical framework to the field of intercultural education, we focus on the notions of cultural differences among student teachers. We search for patterns and ask whether or not and in what ways these notions may relate to a level of intercultural sensitivity and to an underlying worldview.

Since the research was conducted in the two countries of Switzerland and Serbia, an additional question is to ask in what ways notions of cultural differences differ between student teachers within the social contexts of these two countries.

As methodological approach, qualitative methods have been chosen and structured according to the concept of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2005). The sample consists of six participants in each country context. The Swiss sample comprises six female students preparing for primary school teaching in their fourth semester (out of six) and the Serbian sample comprises six female students preparing for English language teaching in their eighth semester (out of eight). All of them had already gained practical teaching experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all twelve participants and the transcripts of these interviews were analyzed according to the methodology of content analysis by Mayring (2008). Additionally, the participants completed the questionnaire of the “Intercultural Development Inventory” (IDI), a testing tool, which is grounded in DMIS and measures the level of intercultural sensitivity across the above mentioned model of development (Hammer, 2009). However, the test results were only uncovered after thorough analysis of the data in order to avoid an IDI test bias.

### ***Results and discussion***

We started the data analysis by comparing what was obtained in the Serbian and the Swiss sample regarding the notions of cultural differences. In both samples, cultural differences were mainly related to the following fields:

- regarding the students: to the use of language and to their visual appearance

- regarding the students' parents: e.g. to the way parents provide learning support;
- regarding the class/school community: to a cause for arguments and conflicts as well as to cultural diversity as a resource for mutual learning.

Preliminary analysis at an early stage of research shows two aspects that appear in both country contexts in a comparable way and that shall be singled out in the following lines:

Firstly, language appeared as an important issue when speaking about cultural differences. In both country contexts, when a child is not fluent in the language of instruction, it was often perceived as a deficit, as something making the teacher's work more difficult and preventing the child from being academically successful – as in the following examples:

*“Intellectually they were equal to other children, but what presented an obstacle at school was language” (Serbian sample, Interview 4).*

*“Well one thing is certainly the language, which can be constraining, if you just don't understand it” (Swiss sample, interview 5).*

Secondly, regarding the aspect of class community, some participants in both the Serbian and the Swiss sample described very thoroughly many situations of grouping and conflict between children of different cultural background (between individuals or between individuals and groups or between groups). When speaking about disadvantages of heterogeneous classes, these phenomena were often mentioned, as in the following examples:

*“Once, at the beginning of the lecture, there were no boys in the classroom and I saw through the window a group of Serbian boys who wanted to beat up one Roma boy” (Serbian sample, Interview 1).*

*“He was Albanian or so, and he has really made a group with the other Albanians and the class was no more like ,We are a class', but there were really always little groups” (Swiss sample, interview 2).*

On the other hand, there were some examples of perceiving heterogeneity as a resource, as something that can enrich and broaden the horizons – when children can learn from each other and when a teacher can learn a lot about other cultures, as well:

*“I would stress similarities, but I will, at the same time, stress differences in customs, so everybody could express herself and learn something about the culture of another person” (Serbian sample, Interview 4).*

*“Well I find it always an advantage (laughs), because you get to know different ways of thinking [...] well you really get new ideas, that maybe you wouldn’t think of, because you’re used to think into one direction [...] this diversity really is enriching” (Swiss sample, interview 2).*

Apart from these outlined aspects that appeared in the answers, further analysis showed that two different types of respondents could be identified. Two participants - subsequently referred to as “type one” – related cultural differences to an additional aspect. According to them, cultural differences appear as having different values and as a way of thinking. Both of them had a generally different way of talking about cultural differences. The data leads to the hypothesis that the explanation is to be found in their level of intercultural sensitivity:

One of these two participants emphasized that cultural difference meant to have different values. This participant describes one of her students during a school practice course who had an immigrant family background and who – according to the participant - needed to deal with different values, in fact, not only in terms of my values and their values, but rather in terms of values there and values here, which means that cultural difference appears quasi within this student as the student moves from ‘here to there’ and from ‘there to here’, and that the student will need to find a way to deal with this situation.

The other one of these two participants described cultural difference as a different way of thinking and stresses the influence of the language onto this way of thinking. This respondent doesn’t say that “they speak differently” or “they don’t know German as well as us”, but she says that everybody’s thinking is influenced by the language. Additionally, she describes the difference between



the behavior of children in a collectivistic society compared to the behavior of children in an individualistic society. Here again, she does not emphasize the difference between “us” and “them”, but she rather explains, that all children behave according to their cultural context.

Both participants of this “type one” don’t seem to have an “outsider’s” view on people who are perceived as being culturally different, but they seem to have an “overview” or a view that takes both sides of this perceived difference into consideration. Instead of asking “What is making them appear culturally different to me?”, they seemingly ask “How does someone experience cultural difference?” In both cases, difference is a rather sought than avoided and it is rather found to be interesting than threatening.

In contrast, the following statements of two other participants may be an illustration of the above mentioned “outsider’s view” – subsequently referred to as “type two”:

*“People who come from India or so. They don’t have the same work desks at home for the children. Well, they don’t provide a desk with a chair and pencil and so on. Which is quite normal to us, [...] that the child has a work desk” (Swiss sample, interview 5).*

*“Well yes, in those cultures... with this women’s role, where the woman is maybe just at home, cooks and looks after the children... these images collide [she refers to the image of a housewife not being compatible with the image of a career-oriented working woman, A.N.], probably even for the children... that is their idea of what a woman has to do. Then it is difficult... one cannot convince this child of one’s own opinion [the participant’s opinion – in the role of a teacher, A.N.], a dispute... that could also get out of hand” (Swiss sample, interview 6).*

Here, the answers reveal a different view onto cultural difference. Both of them seem to look at it from the “outside”, explaining, from their point of view, where cultural difference appears. The categories remain very broad (“from India or so”, “in those cultures”) and the perspective is related only to their own worldview (parents not providing a desk while this is “quite normal to us”; or the idea of “them” having a different understanding of a woman’s role, Patchwork. Learning Diversities | 188

which – according to her - inevitably collides with what she regards to be the right understanding of a woman’s role). In both of these interviews, terms like “weird”, “threatening”, “be afraid”, “too many foreigners” appear. Here, cultural difference appears to be uncomfortable, maybe threatening. In the IDI tests, the participants of “type one” scored in an area within or in transition to the ethnorelative phase and the participants of “type two” scored in the first stage of the ethnocentric phase.

### ***Conclusion***

Analyzing the data, common fields have been found that cultural differences have been related to, such as the use of language, the visual appearance, the students’ parents’ behavior or the effects on the class/school community. Additionally, we found indications that the notions of cultural differences can have a basically different orientation. Two of the participants (“type one”) reveal a view that takes both sides of the perceived cultural difference into consideration. Cultural difference is rather sought than avoided and it is rather found to be interesting than threatening. In contrast, most of our respondents (“type two”) display an “outsider’s” view onto those who are perceived as culturally different. From these participants’ point of view, cultural difference is rather avoided than sought and it appears to be uncomfortable, maybe threatening. Furthermore, in the IDI tests on the development of intercultural sensitivity, participants of “type one” have shown to score within or in transition to an ethno relative phase, while the participants of “type two” range within the ethnocentric phase. Thus, it seems that this basically different orientation in the notions of cultural differences can be related to the development of intercultural sensitivity. The presented research will be continued with an extended sample and the connections between notions of cultural differences and the level of intercultural sensitivity will be further scrutinized. Furthermore, the extension of the sample will allow a more differentiated comparison of the two country contexts. So far, we have gained insight that the notions of cultural differences are likely to be fundamentally different depending on the individual’s development of intercultural sensitivity.

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