

Teachers' perceptions of values-oriented dialogic communication in a multicultural learning environment

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Summary

The multicultural learning environment is value-laden (Banks, 1995) and requires focus on both values clarification (Kirschenbaum, 1977, 2013), i.e. the ability to notice and be aware of everyday norms and attitudes and the skills to discuss values and value choices and dialogic communication, i.e. the orientation of mutual communication and relationships, which value listening and understanding (Phillipson & Wegerif, 2016). In the multicultural learning environment, the teacher is a principal agent who leads the process of values clarification and values-oriented dialogic communication (hereinafter VODC).

VODC is based on dialogic communication, i.e. communication where it is important to listen to each other carefully, offer argumentation on one's views and seek compromises. Dialogue makes it possible to notice the values of others, the reasons for their formation and the preconditions that influence the framework of certain topics. It not only creates opportunities for exchanging ideas but also influences students' personalities and identities (Escobar, 2009; Taylor & Kent, 2014). The classroom as a micro-public place needs space and format to implement the principles of dialogic communication for VODC (Englund, 2006; Hoel, 2001; Escobar, 2009; Taylor & Kent, 2014), in which listening and reasoning situations develop together with a whole range of interpersonal communication skills and habits (Phillipson & Wegerif, 2016) that the school can develop. All these skills help to increase society's capacity for reasoning, which in turn is essential for the quality of democracy itself.

To support and initiate VODC in the multicultural learning environment, The Centre for Ethics at the University of Tartu has developed a methodological tool for in-classroom values clarification. The game "Discovering Values" (2012) helps students discover, discuss and share their values on various topics, including cultural differences and migration-related value choices.

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This research aimed to analyse the possibilities of values-oriented dialogic communication (VODC) in a multicultural learning environment, based on the experience of Estonian teachers who have experience in both VODC management and teaching in a multicultural classroom. In the article, we also looked at the experience of using one of the methodological tools that enables values clarification of students in a multicultural learning environment, the student game “Discovering of Values”.

Study design and method

The study focused on the teachers who participated in the University of Tartu’s Centre for Ethics learning programme for values-based classrooms in a multicultural setting. Nine interviews were conducted to outline teachers’ perceptions of VODC in the multicultural learning environment. The teachers’ names were made pseudonymous by coding. Additional information was added to describe teachers’ work experiences (e.g. length of career, subject field, experience as a classroom teacher, school location, experience in multicultural learning environments).

Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Overall 569 segments were derived. The coded segments included examples of perspectives of VODC and practices. As a result of the analysis, three important topics differed from the point of view of VODC: situations, conditions, techniques and tools.

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the results cannot be generalised to the Estonian teaching staff, and since, to our knowledge, this is the first time this subject has been researched, we felt justified to open the topic based on the understandings and experiences of a small group of teachers. Secondly, it can be assumed that there are more teachers in the sample for whom value communication in the classroom is a priority as the teachers have previously gone through relevant training of in-classroom values communication. The study partly focused on the student game “Discovering Values”, in which all three researchers have taken part in its development. Therefore, one might also question the answers given by the interviewees, albeit many of them were naturally critical. One of the interviewees did not have personal experience of using the game, although he had participated in the relevant training.

Nevertheless, the analysis does answer questions about how teachers themselves perceive VODC in the multicultural classroom and what methods they use to facilitate dialogue between students of different languages and cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Results

Students with different cultural identities and cultural experiences, who meet in a common learning environment, need VODC that helps them to understand cultural practices, behaviours and values of themselves and others. Our empirical analysis confirms that dialogue and dialogic communication skills (e.g., listening) and attitudes (e.g., openness) are the most appropriate means for VODC in the multicultural learning environment (Phillipson & Wegerif, 2016; Englund, 2006).

The need for VODC in the multicultural learning environment depends on the situation. As a result of the analysis inspired by Torop (2012), four types of situations of intercultural communication emerged, all differing in duration (regular vs. short-term) and complexity (explicit vs. implicit). For example, the situations where information about cultural differences was shared or learned were perceived as less complex, but situations laden with values and attitudes related to students' cultural experiences in the private sphere were perceived by teachers as more complex. Thus, the typologies also differ in terms of which situations are more demanding of the teacher, i.e. more time-consuming and longer-lasting, and require more knowledge and skills from the teacher as the head of the VODC.

According to teachers, the VODC needs, above all, a safe environment, trust between students and teachers, specific communication skills and equal openness between all parties. These conditions become especially important in situations where students' cultural differences or memory are not explicit, and the teacher perceives his/her activities as in possible conflict with family values. Teachers admit it takes both willingness to actively and empathetically listen to students, skills to moderate students' views and in-classroom group processes, prior and personal knowledge and contact with people from different cultural and language backgrounds to feel proficient as the principal agents of VODC.

Teachers need different tools and methods for VODC. The analysis shows that the student game "Discovering Values" (2012) is a universal tool that allows students to discuss very different and sometimes sensitive topics both independently and with the teacher. The game both presupposes and supports the communication skills necessary for both deliberative communication (Englund, 2006) and dialogical communication (Phillipson & Wegerif, 2016): for example, speaking one to one, listening to others, and the courage to present one's arguments. At the same time, it allows the teacher to notice the lack of the same skills and attitudes. Teachers also pointed out the need to support the development of students' autonomous opinions and their formulation, which are characteristic of the process of valuing (Kirschenbaum, 1977). In other words, before

dialogue, students need to support a deep reflection of values and autonomy to have their say.

By using close reading, it was possible to highlight the practices and aspects that teachers were aware of, which often manifested themselves as additional comments, such as various aspects that create uncertainty for teachers in situations concerning the VODC and identity. In some cases, uncertainty is based on a lack of information, in another classroom format and power relations, and in a third case, fear of interfering in family matters or values. The analysis showed that VODC is one of the many challenges for teachers in a multicultural learning environment. At the same time, it is precisely the communicative aspects that often leave attitudes based on false assumptions untouched. It is therefore important that teachers have the opportunity to reflect in depth on VODC in different situations and conditions, as well as on the tools used in these situations and conditions.

Keywords: multiculturalism, values education, values clarification, dialogic communication, intercultural education