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"Culture" as a Construct in the Educational Discourse. Reflections from Spain¹

Abstract

In a context such as Spain, where people from different regions, countries and geographical areas coexist, educational and pedagogical debates on the concept of culture as context and culture as content often present limitations and contradictions. The aim of this chapter is to contribute to the development of knowledge in order to move towards educational practices that address cultural complexity beyond national frameworks and within diverse social contexts. The analysis is based on National discourses and previous research on educational policy and practices on cultures and cultural diversity. It highlights the need to overcome the limitations that sometimes hinder a genuine connection between policies and practices, recognising that the plurality and intersectionality of culture can be meaningfully integrated, developing new perspectives, into school education and teacher training.

Keywords: *Culture, cultural diversity, cultural complexity, education policy, education practices, teacher education*

Zusammenfassung

In einem Kontext wie Spanien, wo Menschen aus verschiedenen Regionen, Ländern und geografischen Gebieten zusammenleben, weisen pädagogische Debatten über das Konzept von Kultur als Kontext und für Kultur als Inhalt oft Einschränkungen und Widersprüche auf. Das Ziel dieses Kapitels ist es, einen Beitrag zur Wissensentwicklung zu leisten, um zu pädagogischen Praktiken zu gelangen, die sich mit kultureller Komplexität über nationale Rahmenbedingungen hinaus und innerhalb vielfältiger sozialer Kontexte befassen. Die Analyse basiert auf nationalen Diskursen und früheren Forschungen zu Bildungspolitik und -praxis im Bereich Kultur und kultureller Vielfalt. Sie unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit, die Grenzen zu überwinden, die manchmal eine echte Verbindung zwischen Politik und Praxis behindern, und erkennt an, dass die Pluralität und Intersektionalität der Kultur sinnvoll integriert werden kann, indem neue Perspektiven in die Schulbildung und Lehrerbildung entwickelt werden.

Schlüsselwörter: *Kultur, kulturelle Vielfalt, kulturelle Komplexität, Bildungspolitik, Bildungspraxis, Lehrerbildung*

Introduction

In a context such as Spain, which since the late 1990s has experienced migration from other countries (Portes and Aparicio, 2013), educational and pedagogical debates on the concept of culture as context and culture as content often present limitations and contradictions. Taking Gramsci (1971) as a reference, understanding discourses on culture is part of the culturally hegemonic forces that turn the ideology of the ruling class into an active force for shaping vulnerable groups. Spain's colonial past, like that of other European countries, has made its presence felt on numerous occasions (Beach and Dyson, 2016; Grosfoguel, 2013; Quijano, 2000). This pattern of colonial power has affected education, thus perpetuating situations of oppression that continue to this day (Quijano, 2000).

The aim of this chapter is to contribute to the development of knowledge in order to move towards educational practices that address cultural complexity beyond national frameworks and within diverse social contexts. National discourses on educational policy and research are analysed to identify both the potential and limitations of these perspectives. More specifically, the chapter explores how the plurality and intersectionality of culture can be meaningfully integrated, developing new perspectives, into school education and teacher training.

The document is structured as follows. First, culture is analysed as a political construct and its contextualisation within the education system. Next, cultural considerations as context and content in relation to pedagogy and school are discussed. Subsequently, issues of diversity, plurality and interculturality/transculturality in teaching are examined, based on research into practices in schools. Finally, perspectives and implications for teacher training are examined.

Culture as a political construct and contextualisation within the educational system

In the context of the Spanish education system, the discourse on culture took shape in the 1970s through the schooling of populations in vulnerable situations due to social or economic circumstances, which particularly af-

affected Roma children (Salinas, 2009) in separate schools. Subsequently, in the 1980s, through integration/compensation in mainstream schools (Llevot and Garreta, 2006) and, since the 1990s, the emphasis has been placed on education based on respect for cultures and on education in solidarity and cooperation. Currently, according to UNESCO (2015), Spanish legislation, through the Organic Law Modifying the Organic Law on Education (LOMLOE) of 2020, emphasises the idea of “a school for all”, which encompasses diversity, inclusive education, human rights, pluralism and democracy. However, the term “specific educational needs” is retained to identify children with special educational needs, children with various forms of disability, learning difficulties, socio-cultural disadvantages and belonging to ethnic minorities, as well as gifted pupils. Various decrees reinforce the adaptation of the curriculum only for labelled children and a common programme for other pupils, thus favouring homogenisation.

Thus, culture seems to be recognised as context, while culture as content seems to present significant limitations. More specifically, as can be seen in the following sections, these limitations arise in both discourse and practice.

Cultural considerations in relation to pedagogy and school (culture as context and as content)

Culture as a context

Spain, where there are different regions (Catalonia, Galicia, Andalusia, etc.) with a significant population density in large urban towns, as other European nations has experienced a migrant movement from other countries since the end of the 1990s (Portes and Aparicio, 2013). According to official statistics of 2020, up to 13.2% of students have foreign background, although figures vary enormously within and across different regions. This situation is currently in state education, placing new demands on the system and requiring changes in management and professionalism in terms of the preparation of current and future teachers in a context often characterised by the development of teacher-centred teaching models. Concerning management, education policies and school practices are at an intersection between inclusion and equity policies on the one hand, and competitiveness and excellence on the other (Verger et al., 2017). In this vein, while quantitative data about results in schools and institutional practices are based on competence and efficiency (OECD, 2020), ideas about equity and inclusion tend to be secondary for educational administrators.

Culture as a content

In Spain, the regulatory treatment of culture in education is presented as content per se, in a subject entitled “Education in civic and ethical values” in Secondary Education. This subject “Education in civic and ethical values” is considered as a necessary requirement both for the active and responsible exercise of democratic citizenship and for the development of students' moral autonomy and personality. This training involves mobilizing the set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as well as the values that enable stu-

dents to become aware of their personal and cultural identity, address fundamental ethical issues, and adopt an attitude consistent with the interconnected and eco-dependent nature of their lives in relation to the environment; all with the aim of being able to appreciate and apply, with independent judgment, the norms and values that govern coexistence in a free, pluralistic, just, and peaceful society. The subject deepens and develops areas of competence such as (i) self-knowledge and the development of moral autonomy; (ii) understanding the social framework of coexistence and ethical commitment to the democratic principles, values, and norms that govern it; (iii) adopting attitudes compatible with environmental sustainability based on an understanding of our interdependence and eco-dependence on the environment; (iv) more transversally, emotional education. Each of these areas of competence includes, in an integrated manner, a more theoretical level, aimed at a meaningful understanding of the most relevant concepts and issues in the subject, and a more practical or instrumental level, aimed at promoting, through critical reflection and argumentative dialogue, behaviours and attitudes in line with the ethical, civic, and eco-social values that guide coexistence. More specifically a basic knowledge entitled “Society, justice, and democracy” refers to the prevention of exploitation and violence against girls and women, shared responsibility for domestic and care tasks, interculturalism, social inclusion and respect for diversity and ethnocultural and gender identities and LGTBIQ+ rights.

In Primary Education “Education in Civic and Ethical Values”, education in values is the fundamental basis for the critical and responsible exercise of citizenship and for the comprehensive education of individuals. In the first case, it provides the tools for students to make an active and autonomous commitment to the values, principles, and norms that articulate democratic coexistence. In the second case, it contributes to the intellectual, moral, and emotional development necessary for children to engage in personal reflection on the great challenges and problems that constitute our present. This education in civic and ethical values involves mobilising the set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable students to become aware of their personal and cultural identity, reflect on ethical issues that are fundamental to coexistence, and responsibly assume the interconnected and eco-dependent nature of our existence in relation to the environment; all with the aim of appreciating and independently applying the norms and values that should govern a free, pluralistic, just, and peaceful society.

“Education in Civic and Ethical Values” in primary education includes the development of the four areas of competence already mentioned in secondary education. In relation to the basic knowledge in the section focused on the block called “Society, justice, and democracy”, the aim is for students to understand the social and cultural roots of their own identity, recognising the different structures and relationships that make up their social environment and reflecting on its normative, ethical, and emotional dimensions. To this end, it is important

for students to understand certain basic political and social concepts, to identify and explain the main characteristics of our democratic framework for coexistence, and to compare their knowledge and judgments with those of others through research and dialogue on relevant ethical issues (the human rights situation in the world, poverty, violence, effective equality and shared responsibility between women and men, respect for diversity and minorities, migration, the climate crisis, etc.), critically evaluating different ways of addressing them and justifying their own judgments in this regard.

The culture as a content is recognised across all subjects and areas too, both in primary and secondary education. The curriculum emphasises valuing Spain's cultural, social and linguistic diversity and fostering respectful attitudes toward difference (Neubauer et al., 2022).

At the national level, current education legislation (LOMLOE, 2020) recognises the role of culture as an essential dimension of the education system, mainly from two perspectives. One perspective is that of tangible and intangible heritage (art, literature, history, architecture, traditions and other cultural manifestations considered classic or representative of national heritage), promoted by various national (Merillas and Etxeberria, 2015) and international (UNESCO, 2017) organisations. The other perspective is that of social, inclusive and intercultural diversity, as referred to in the previous section.

In relation to the above, a thematic axis reflected across the curriculum is that of cultural diversity. Cultural diversity here is recognised through the different subjects (Mathematics, Social Sciences, Biology or Abroad Language, Physical Education, Music) in different regions. Through specific objectives and competences, the aim is to promote knowledge and respect for the different cultures present in Spain and in the school environment. It encourages recognition of linguistic plurality, appreciation of the cultural heritage of the regions and respect for cultural and ethnic minorities, such as the Roma population or students of foreign origin. In this regard, the LOMLOE (2020) explicitly includes the need to "promote knowledge and appreciation of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the different autonomous communities" (p. 122884) [own translation] and to work critically in the classroom on the history and culture of traditionally invisible groups. This dimension of culture is less addressed from the perspective of intercultural education mentioned above, despite it focuses on training for coexistence, the prevention of stereotypes, racism or any type of discrimination, and democratic citizenship. Recognition of linguistic diversity or appreciation of the cultural heritage of other regions outside Spain are not recognised aspects of the curriculum.

In this way, despite the incorporation of these new ideas about culture into official policy, several indicators show that schools are resistant to fundamental changes, as they continue with traditional teaching and curricula and restrict inclusion processes (e.g., Domingo et al., 2019; Echeita, 2013). In this context, culture connected with UNESCO's (2015) idea of inclusion is, indeed,

a standard category in the educational laws and policies of the Spanish regions from 2017 to 2021. This is a misunderstanding of "culture" and "cultural diversity".

An analysis of the discourses of policy makers and bureaucrats (cf. Vigo et al., 2022) on how they transfer and frame one of the current global perspectives of including cultural diversity in education reveals these limitations.

Questions of diversity, plurality, and interculturality/transculturality in teaching

A study on cultural diversity in Spain (cf. Vigo et al., 2023) allows to identify how diversity, plurality, and interculturality/transculturality in teaching is working. For example, in relation to the different languages spoken by students, a school principal explains a practice in which these languages are used as a means of strengthening students' identity and promoting cultural exchange.

"We are studying the different languages of Spain. The languages that appear in the textbook are Galician, Basque, Catalan, with the Valencian variant, in addition to Spanish as the common language. However, there are other languages that are missing. Aragonese is missing, and then we have Caló. There are Castilian words enriched by Caló, by Romani. Well, those words have been worked on. The kids have left school and asked about them at home, they've brought them in, and we've learned them as part of the normality of other languages (Headmaster, Epi)." (Vigo et al., 2023, p. 10). [own translation]

In another case, other studies showed (cf. Carrasco Macías and Coronel Llamas, 2017) the exchange of gastronomic knowledge as a recurring theme. One example is that of a teacher who uses the different foods that the pupils bring for lunch as a reference point.

"In this school, where pupils of different nationalities and cultures coexist, this situation, far from generating conflict or rejection, promotes interaction, exchange and curiosity. [...] the good thing is that everyone is also looking at what the others are having for lunch, saying things like, 'Let's see what you've ordered,' 'What have you brought?', 'What's this?', 'How is this made?', 'How do you say this?' ... I already know half of the nuts in Moroccan too [...] we share different things that we each have. Some things are the same, but others are not, and it's also good to know them [...] (Teacher, Epi2)." (Vigo et al., 2023, p. 11) [own translation]

The same teacher recognised the value of cultural identity through storytelling in her classroom. Families are invited to the classroom even though some of them do not speak Spanish. This activity helps to reinforce the culture of families and the community:

"[...] Today a family came to tell a story in the classroom and is telling it in Moroccan. Previously, the

teacher had encouraged families to do so in their own language, telling them, 'I want you to tell the stories here as you tell them to your children' [...]' (Field notes from primary school class, February 2020 Epo) [own traslation]

In this way, through this practice, as in other studies, the teacher recognises the cultures of groups other than the predominant hegemonic culture, based on the participation and recognition of families and their culture in the classroom (cf. Aguado-Odina, 2017; Aguado-Odina et al., 2017; Vigo-Arrazola and Dieste, 2017). However, these practices that recognise the value of diversity are combined with comments from the same teachers that are examples of the tensions and contradictions we experience in schools. One teacher recounts the difficulties she encounters in her classroom, referring to students from a culture other than the hegemonic one with terms such as "them", "different" and "difficult" (Teacher Epo). Thus, the representations assumed with regard to the foreign and Roma populations are manifested as if they were an external group in an education system for the middle-class, white population (Farley et al., 2021). This negative representation, under the term diversity, seems to be normalised by teachers in schools, as has also been pointed out in other studies (Franzé, 2008).

In this vein, several studies (cf. Garreta et al., 2020, 2022; Goenechea and Gallego, 2015; Torrelles et al., 2022; Vigo et al., 2022), have pointed out that, although both politicians and school teachers formally maintain inclusive and intercultural discourses, school measures are limited to managing difference, without critically integrating it into curriculum objectives and content, methodologies, or the way interpersonal relationships are built in schools.

Limitations are present in teaching practices when pedagogical approaches considering diversity, plurality and interculturality are only really considered and developed when there is an increase in the presence of vulnerable students belonging to ethnic minorities (Vigo-Arrazola et al., 2023), whether they are of Spanish or foreign nationality.

Perspectives and implications for teacher training

As mentioned above, within the Spanish regulatory framework there is a clear institutional desire to recognise different cultures and promote equity, inclusion, and attention to diversity (LOMLOE, 2020) and it is considered for teacher training in schools and in the university.

In Spain, there is a proposal from the authorities in education related to educational approaches and guidelines of the Strategic Plans for School Coexistence (PECE) in schools of the different regions. These plans include eight lines of action, evaluation and monitoring strategies, with an implementation schedule and budget distribution in relation to cultural diversity, one of the objectives is to promote equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship. This objective is based on the fact that "education and training policies should enable all citizens, re-

gardless of their personal, social, and economic circumstances, to acquire, update, and develop throughout their lives both the specific professional skills and the key competencies necessary for their employability, as well as to support lifelong learning, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue" (CNIIE, 2016, p. 8). [own traslation]

At the university, teacher education related to recognise different cultures and promote equity, inclusion, and attention to diversity needs to be reinforced in order to materialise in its development in schools. Pre-service teacher training does not genuinely contribute to manage diversity, plurality, and interculturality/transculturality in teaching (Moliner et al., 2020). As shown the study conducted by Pérez-Castejón and Vigo-Arrazola (2024), teacher training should contribute to overcoming the interpretation of inclusion as a technical issue linked to student performance and reinforce the ethical, social, or cultural dimension oriented toward social justice. Research carried out by university professors/researchers requires an approach to educational reality and joint work in analysing the interests, needs, and possibilities of schools (Márquez-Vázquez and Sánchez-Fuentes, 2024).

Previous studies (i.e., Vigo-Arrazola et al., 2019; Pérez-Castejón et al., 2025) have highlighted the importance of taking as a reference point research in and from the educational reality based on (i) the experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers; (ii) reflection on their potential from the point of view of inclusion in relation to the scientific literature on the subject; (iii) development and expansion of proposals.

In this regard, through initial teacher training, in relation to inclusive and fair sustainable educational practice, from a theoretical point of view, we start from a committed position that is committed to (i) destabilising the institutional relationships and structures that have contributed to maintaining the status quo of inequality (Harris et al., 2015); (ii) generating ways of acting to help overcome situations of oppression, marginalisation and exploitation (Earick, 2018); and (iii) creating a pedagogical relationship in initial training processes in the interests of sustainable inclusive education.

It is not just a matter of acquiring knowledge from a performative perspective (Ball, 2003). The reference point is the need to align research and innovation interests with the interests and struggles of marginalised groups (Gramsci, 1971), promoting critical dialogue that makes teaching processes at the university a dynamic and dialectical process as opposed to a static and performative perspective (Madison, 2020), considering students as capable individuals and intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971). It is about developing critical theory to interpret and illuminate action (Jordan and Yeomans, 1995). It is about creating a space of possibility (Vigo-Arrazola and Beach, 2021; Milligan, 2016) that can support rather than force commitments to educational and social transformation as an objective (Madison, 2020), based on the relationship between theory and practice.

The value of student and teacher participation in the joint design and implementation of teaching and learning processes is recognised, without losing sight of the

value of research in promoting collective reflection, the participation of individuals as intellectuals (Lather, 1997) and illuminating the actions of future teachers.

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- 2 Name of a school.

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