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“I find it odd that people have to highlight other people’s differences - even when there are none”: Experiential learning and Interculturality in teacher education

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Abstract: In this article I examine the role of experiential learning in developing interculturality in the context of teacher education in Finland. Based on narratives written by future student teachers about meaningful intercultural encounters prior to intercultural teacher training, I analyse the potential overlap between the way the students reflect on and interpret these encounters and an understanding of interculturality that concentrates on the construction of self-other, identities and social justice. The discourse analysis of the narratives shows that important intercultural learning seems to have already taken place before the course. The article ends with a discussion of the importance to start from this observation in teacher education and to provide the student teachers with theoretical tools and methods that can support them in expanding their understanding of interculturality in their job as teachers.

Keywords: informal education, student teachers, interculturality, immigration, encounters

Introduction

“The work of an intellectual is (...) to bring assumptions and things taken for granted again into question, to shake habits, ways of acting and thinking, to dispel familiarity of the accepted, to take the measure of rules and institutions (...)”

(Foucault, cited in Gordon, 2000: xxxiv).

The role of the intellectual, as suggested by Foucault above, could not be better fitted to the discussions of experiential learning and the intercultural. The latter has been central in research on education over the past few decades. Often ‘disguised’ under other words such as *multicultural*, *transcultural*, *cross-cultural* and even *global*, the notion has been often explored in formal educational contexts, with, sometimes, very little contact with the ‘real’ world. Teachers use documents such as videos, textbooks, novels and occasionally invite an ‘other’ to their class, to deal with it. In the specific context of educational mobility, experiential learning has been at the centre of attention through preparation for intercultural encounters before, during and follow-up after the sojourn (Jackson, 2014). The results of such intercultural pedagogy for stays abroad have been contradictory, depending on the paradigm and approach used (Machart, 2015).

In this paper I concentrate on intercultural learning through the experiential in informal educational settings. The context is that of international teacher education in Finland. Based on intercultural narratives written by a group of international and Finnish students starting a teacher training programme in English, my paper examines their intercultural learning prior to taking a course on intercultural pedagogy during their one-year training at a department of teacher education.

My first task is to delimitate the way the intercultural is conceptualized in this article,

especially in relation to experiential learning. The notion of the intercultural is polysemic and deserves to be defined *a minima* to make it useable in both research and practice. After having positioned my work within a specific paradigm, using critical discourse analysis (e.g. Angermuller, 2015), I examine the contributions of experiential learning, understood here as “a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skills, and value from direct experiences” (Jacobs, 1999: 51), to interculturality as presented by the students in their narratives. I am especially interested in identifying examples that seem to contribute to the paradigm adopted in this paper. The article ends on a plea for including more experiential learning within and outside classrooms in order to boost interculturality.

1. Experiential learning and interculturality

1.1. What goals for intercultural learning?

“Bring something incomprehensible into the world!”
(Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 378)

The notion of interculturality has been used in research for over 50 years. Introduced first in the field of communication, it has then spread to education, business, linguistics, health care, to name but a few (Dervin & Tournebise, 2013). The intercultural has become a wide range of ideological ‘fictions’, some of which might be counter-productive and lead to further social injustice and inequality. This is the case of purely essentialistic approaches that continue to analyse interculturality with categories that seem to belong to a different era (Maffesoli, 1993: 8): national culture, race, and ethnicity. The concept of culture itself, which has always played an important role in the intercultural, has been put into question and its power somewhat diminished over the last years (Breidenbach and Nyiri, 2006; Dervin & Machart, 2015). Discourses on culture can easily lead to create dichotomies which might emphasize the fact that some people are ‘good’ while others are ‘bad’; some are ‘civilised’ some ‘uncivilised’; and even some people are late some people respect schedules. Adrian Holliday (2010), amongst others, has shown how such elements can easily lead to moralistic judgments about the other. For instance the usual do’s and don’ts lists of cultural habits, which may look harmless, often hide decontextualized negative views about the other and sometimes, about the self. These discourses also tend to allow people to easily blame ‘their’ culture for what they do or think. Already in 1978 E. Said (ibid.: 325) wondered if the concept was “a useful one” arguing that it can easily lead to “self-congratulation”, “hostility” and “aggression”, especially in its ‘solid’, stereotypical and a-critical form. For the scholar socio-economic and politico-historical categories should outweigh culture in its differentialist form (ibid.).

Difference appears to be an element that is systematically called upon when one deals with interculturality, as if it was its only characteristic. In accordance with Jullien (2012: 29) a few researchers have now called for a move from this somewhat biased perspective because “difference is not an adventurous concept” (Jullien, 2012: 29). Emphasising difference only can lead to rather passive attitudes and experiences. Culture difference is a bias if it is not interrelated with similarity. Said argues rightly that “cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality” (1978: 349). Of course

the idea of cultural hybridity is becoming increasingly popular in intercultural education, yet, the use of the concept tends to refer mostly to a recent past.

The proposed paradigm of interculturality, which is gaining strength in global research (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2013; Holliday, 2010), places both similarities and differences to the forefront. It also agrees with Bauman and Raud (2015: 9-10) that “(...) ‘selves’ come in many shapes and colours, and so do the settings, mechanisms, procedures of their production”. This, I have theorised under the label ‘diverse diversities’: everyone, regardless of where they come from, is diverse and has to deal with their own and other’s diversities on a permanent basis (Dervin, 2015). Obviously this state of diversification is a difficult one for many individuals, who prefer to retreat into their ‘ cocoons’ to spell out their specificities before the other. To us this is what intercultural education should lead to: If I am ready to accept my *diverse diversities* maybe I can start noticing and accepting them in the other too.

The objectives of interculturality in this article are represented by:

- systematic criticality towards the concept of culture and the ideologies that hide behind it
- an emphasis on both difference and similarity/interrelations
- the recognition of ‘diverse diversities’ negotiated between and within groups and individuals (processes).

1.2. Experiential learning as an aid to interculturality

Experiential learning appears to be well fitted with the proposed approach to interculturality that takes process, fluidity and diversities as its core values. As a dynamic approach, experiential learning is “driven by the resolution of the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction” (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012: 139). This dialectics is essential to make interculturality more critical, reflexive, dialogal and transformative. Passarelli and Kolb (ibid.) propose six principles for experiential learning which will guide our analysis of intercultural encounters of the narratives about :

- “learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes”
- “all learning is re-learning”
- “learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world”
- “learning is a holistic process of adaptation”
- “learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment”
- “learning is the process of creating knowledge”.

In what follows, I discuss the relevance of these principles for interculturality. As any type of encounter, *interculturality is a fluid process*, which is dependent on interlocutors, contexts and situations and many other uncontrollable aspects such as mood, health, intertextuality, politics of identity, etc. This means that one can never be sure if it is ‘successful’ and/or ‘satisfying’ as it depends on many variables which one cannot always control. There might be, of course, milestones when e.g. one starts

feeling at ease with an individual, or relying more on what we have in common than on mere difference. But this can shift quickly, leading to stepping back into a potentially differentialist and essentialist perspective. It is important to note that no one is immune towards these phenomena and that interculturality as an ideal can never be reached fully.

This is why the second principle of *all learning is re-learning* is essential when discussing the intercultural. Knowledge, *savoir-faires*, attitudes, skills of an intercultural nature are never acquired for good but developed and re-learned, tested, examined every time one interacts with an individual or a text (in the large sense of the word: a film, a piece of art, music, etc.). Unwillingness or blindness to un-learning and re-learning can lead to over self-confidence and thus to *façade*, see failed, interculturality.

The third principle, *the resolution of conflicts*, is also a steppingstone of the intercultural. 'Intercultural correctness' has often banished conflict and disagreement in intercultural encounters. These are often viewed as mere failure (Anquetil, 2006). Experiential learning can lead intercultural interlocutors to experience these phenomena and to reflect, act, feel and think otherwise. Conflict and disagreement can help us to revise and relearn our ways of dealing with the Other.

The fourth principle of experiential learning argues that learning should involve such functions as thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving but also problem solving, decision-making and creativity. Intercultural encounters can become more fruitful when a combination of these functions is put into practice by interlocutors and helps each of them to adapt to the situation.

The next principle explains that "the dialectic processes of assimilating new experiences into existing concepts and accommodating existing concepts into new experience." In other words interactions between the interlocutors and the environment are essential. In terms of intercultural learning this means that intercultural speakers need to examine their surroundings using their knowledge of the world but also to let what s/he experiences modify them. Again this should lead to fluid, changeable and negotiable interculturality.

The final principle suggests that knowledge should be seen as something that is transactional rather than pre-existing. This is why an approach to the intercultural that relies only on recipe-like and dos and don'ts lists of cultural characteristics to be respected in order to create respectful, tolerable and 'nice' encounters can easily be defective and misleading. Learners should be sensitive to the way such knowledge is co-constructed with others in specific socio-historical contexts.

2. Data analysis

The data is derived from narratives written by future student teachers studying at a Finnish university. The programme lasts 1 year and takes place after obtaining a Bachelor's degree. Before an introductory course to intercultural education and a year-long array of intercultural tasks accompanying them during their in-service training the students were asked to write 5 short narratives about meaningful intercultural encounters. No definition of the intercultural was proposed and the

students were free to write their narratives as they wished. Following the principles of experiential learning the students were provided with the follow instructions: 1. Describe the experience and the process of encountering the other, 2. Explain what you learnt (knowledge, skills and values) (see Jacobs, 1999). 17 students took part in the experiment; 85 narratives were thus collected. One third of the students were Finnish and the rest from other countries. They all were at Master's level and were going to specialize in subject teaching (English, physics, mathematics, foreign languages, etc.). By means of critical discourse analysis and theories of enunciation (Angermuller, 2015) I have identified 46 narratives that provide evidence of intercultural learning from the aforementioned perspective: fluid approaches, and as argued by Foucault at the beginning of this article, "bringing assumptions into question", "shaking habits, ways of acting and thinking", "dispelling familiarity of the accepted". While analyzing their narratives, I was very much interested in how they related action and reflection as well as experience and abstraction. In order to respect the anonymity of the students the names of countries, places and people have been modified. The analysis is divided into four sections: Re-learning the 'usual', beyond appearances, awareness of diverse diversities, and experiential learning and social justice.

2.1. Re-learning the 'usual' and accepting the 'unusual'

In this first section a selection of narratives demonstrates that the students were able to question and re-learn the 'usual' (what they had learnt) while accepting what was presented as 'unusual' (what they did not know)(Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). In the first excerpt student 1, a foreigner, describes her arrival to the Finnish university where she was studying. On the orientation day she became acquainted with other students taking the same course. She first explains that in 'her culture' one shakes hands when one meets people for the first time, adding that this often occurs in specific contexts such as business and education (contextualization). After having shaken hands with a couple of students student 1 turns to a male student who refuses to greet her this way. She asked him why:

I shook hands with half of the students and then there was a student that did not give me the hand and I kind of insisted because I felt that it would not be fair. But then he explained to me that according to his culture he is not allowed to shake hands with a girl. I was very surprised; I could not understand why it is not allowed. I felt embarrassed from one side because I stayed there with my hand hanging in the air and on the other side because I made him feel uncomfortable and forced him to explain himself why he cannot do this certain thing. Of course, I understand that we all have our own cultural / religious restrictions but I had in my mind that this is a very usual thing. I could not imagine that there are differences between cultures in these small and simple things¹.

The student uses very subjective terms such as *fair*, *very surprised*, *embarrassed*, and *uncomfortable* to describe the event. She seems able to weigh her own feelings ("I felt embarrassed") against those of her comrade ("I made him feel uncomfortable"), and not to reject his behavior and attitude. The coda (evaluative section at the end) of the

¹ The quotes are reproduced verbatim.

narrative shows that the student is able to reflect on the event and on her flawed assumption that greeting by shaking hands, “a small and simple thing” as she puts it, is very ‘usual’.

In the second narrative, which bears similarities to the previous one, another foreign student (student 4) shares his surprise at professors being referred to by their first names in Finland – a practice that would be “inappropriate” in his country as it would show disrespect. Like the previous student he had assumed (“imagined”) that this was a universal practice in the university context:

Till then, I could not imagine a less formal relationship with the professors and I thought that everywhere is the same. So, I asked my classmate next to me to call him. It took me long time to get used to this tradition and realize that the respect is not shown in calling him by last name or names as professor or sir. This custom was so deep inside my character; it felt like it was written in my DNA because it took much time to understand the other way.

Interestingly the student uses the metaphor of the DNA to describe her incapacity to call professors by their first names. This biologization of ‘traditions’ and ‘customs’ (note that the student does not say ‘culture’) appears to be a common phenomenon in intercultural encounters (Hannerz, 1999). The repetition of temporal aspects in the excerpt (“it took me long time to...”; “it took much time to”) could show how deeply ingrained the student’s former behavior was. It is important to note here the help of others, a classmate in this excerpt, to behave in a different way and to unlearn the ‘usual’. It is difficult to say through this narrative if the student is able to use first names. He talks about ‘getting used to this tradition’ and having reflected on the fact that respect can be marked in different ways.

In some of the narratives students reflected on the influence on one’s environment on one’s habits and adaptation to a new context. In his narrative student 16 describes how a group of foreigners, who were guests in his own country and whom he was accompanying, decided to go to the sea to swim. These people had never seen the sea before and did not know anything about sea life:

After some time, around ten people from [name of foreign country deleted] team were screaming in pain. They had decided to go to the rocks and walk on them, in result, they had stepped on urchins and spines went inside their feet. We could not think that they do not know this, because for us growing up near the sea side was very natural and even a five-years-old kid might know that. Consequently, we spent that day at the hospital but fortunately they were not severely injured. It was to our surprise that people do not know the same things and of course it depends on the environment that you grow up.

Interestingly, again, the student notes how surprised she was that someone didn’t know that such accidents could happen if one is not careful. The last sentence of the narrative could show again that this allowed her to question her assumptions and to see the situation from an un-learned position. Unlike the previous student the student mentions the influence of the environment on this rather than using e.g. culture as an excuse or biologization of behaviours and attitudes (Dervin & Machart, 2015).

The final narrative, from the same student, contains what I consider to be the best example of clear reflexivity on an experience abroad in the data. The event took place during a foreign language immersion summer camp abroad where the student worked as an administrative and welfare assistant. She confesses that she was very surprised at the lack of reaction from her colleagues when a child was taken ill. She explains that the law is quite strict in this particular country and that she was not allowed to give any medicine to the children. This is how she expresses her feelings towards her colleagues' 'passivity':

When a child's temperature was reaching 38.5 and s/he was barely speaking, to them it did not seem like a big deal. At first, I found that almost cruel - making a child stay in class when they're burning up and probably cannot really participate in the lesson anyway. Then I realized that in (this country), since the weather *is* often unpredictable people probably stopped paying attention to colds that were not really life-threatening and everything else has become a part of the routine. Another example of how an environment can affect the culture. I still did not come completely to terms with the idea of ignoring a child's pain when it does not fit your standard pain threshold but at least I understood from what the idea came to be. Chances are, if I stayed there long enough, I would start to feel that that is the norm as well.

Even though she notes that she did not accept this fully the student is able to reflect on her own attitudes and beliefs, moving from her first feelings ("I found that almost cruel") to understanding. The last sentence of the narrative could demonstrate that the student is aware of the fact that one can unlearn the 'usual' and relearn learning the 'norm' as she puts it. Again she does not use any reference to a specific culture but to the environment. While in the previous narrative, the lack of experience with the sea was the emphasis, this time the climate is.

As a summary to this section, it is interesting to note that through their involvement with others and different environments, the students seem to realize that nothing is a 'given', simple or universal. They seem to have started questioning the 'usual' and, even if they don't always accept the 'unusual', their experience seems to urge them to consider them as valid alternative ways.

2.2. Beyond appearances?

In this section I examine examples of how the students seem able to be critical towards appearances and are able to decrypt what is hiding behind them. As such they show that learning is a process rather than mere outcomes and that it allows them to deal with opposed modes of adaptation to the world (see section 1.2.).

The first narrative relates to the experience of being an immigrant in a new country. Before studying in Finland student 9 had moved from her home country to another country. She comments on the differences that she witnessed especially when she met a black person (who was a classmate) for the first time. The black student became her best friend but before that she was puzzled by his attitude and 'looks'. She explains:

The classmate in question had a peculiar dislike towards studying and authority which I, unknowingly, attributed to her looks. I now, of course, realize that it

had nothing to do with anything other than her own personality but I, as then, am always learning. Back in my home country, the way a person presents themselves is often correlated to the way they behave and their attitudes in life. However later, and even more so in Finland I discovered that it is not really the case. Sometimes a person with a gazillion tattoos and piercings and a Mohawk can be the most studious person in the room while someone who looks like a "goody-two-shoes" only really is concerned with fashion and lifestyle magazines. Realizing this has also helped me to be more aware of what I pay attention to in people before I try to decide anything about them.

This narrative shows how the process of becoming critical towards one's first impressions – 'calculated impressions' in the sense that they seem to have been developed through certain beliefs in one's own surroundings – takes place. The student appears to be well aware of the path she followed: she saw the black person, made a judgment based on the appearance (lazy and boisterous) and then later realized that it was not true and that the beliefs passed onto her by her 'home country' had misguided her. She also relates this narrative to her observations in Finland where something that could appear abnormal to her (tattoos, Mohawk hairstyle, etc.) is not necessarily indicative of intelligence, hard work or mentality of a person. The student's reflexivity shows how she became aware of the process behind the shift of her beliefs and attitudes not just of the content of the shift (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012).

While the previous narrative deals with the relation between physical appearances and the mental in what follows student 3 tells the story of one of her friends in Finland who did not pay enough attention to the *other's* reality because of her own beliefs or ways of seeing the world. In the story a female student from America flirts with a male student from India. The latter started calling her 'girlfriend' even if they were not in a relation. For the American it was all about play and tease, while the Indian took it seriously and even proposed to her:

It took a while for the girl to realize that even though she had been seeing it all as a game, the guy had taken it quite seriously and was heartbroken once she rejected him. This doesn't immediately mean "don't flirt with Indians", or "American girls are way too casual about flirting", but it did teach me not to take any sort of communication at face value, and to consider if the other person has the same motives in a conversation as you do. If you suspect they don't, clarify.

The narrative indicates that the student is not trying to incriminate any of the two people. She also refers to a stereotype about American girls that she puts into question ("American girls are way too casual about flirting"). She thus seems to be following an approach to the intercultural that moves in the direction of fluidity (Abdallah-Preteille, 2013). The conclusion she draws ("it did teach me") also demonstrates that she has opted for an open and dialogal approach to interaction with others (Gillespie 2006) – a sign of criticality and openness that is suggested by the fluid perspective on interculturality proposed in this article. The experience of a close friend leads her to reflect on her own interaction with others.

In the final narrative of this section student 12 describes the process of moving from one's first impressions and feelings to a more sophisticated way of perceiving the

other. She met a girl at university who kept boasting about her country: “she had nothing but good things to say – in fact, a bit too good. She painted a picture of an ideal country where everyone has free education and healthcare, where everyone is happy and prosperous; in addition, she didn’t fail to praise their president and party leader”. This first irritated student 12 because she felt that the other student lacked criticality. But then she explains that she started thinking about how her own parents and grandparents who were from the Balkans had done exactly the same, drawing this conclusion:

But then I realized, I am not the one to judge or “enlighten” her – if she is happy, good for her. Prodding into her country’s murky affairs isn’t a topic for a conversation over a cup of coffee anyway, and the situation in her country has nothing to do with what kind of a person she is – and we ended up becoming very good friends.

By relating the way the other student behaved about her country (‘ethnocentrism’) to what she had herself experienced at home she is able to question her judgment and to extirpate the individual from the general impression that the episode gave her about people coming from the other students’ country. The intermingling of the two experiences gives the impression that the student is able to empathize with what she first found to be problematic and potentially move beyond this position.

2.3. Awareness of *diverse diversities*

One of the most important goals related to interculturality in education is that of recognizing and taking into account people’s *diverse diversities* (Dervin, 2015). As opposed to the sometimes simplistic and politically manipulated notion of diversity (Wood, 2003) its tautological form points at the complexity of each individual – not just the one who has crossed a national border as the term diversity tends to indicate e.g. the Nordic countries. Becoming aware of one plural identities – or identification, i.e. identity as a process rather than a static element (Bauman, 2004) – and the intersectional work that is happening whenever one interacts with an other, goes hand in hand with accepting, recognizing and honouring the plurality of others. In the data many narratives indicate that the students are in the process of re-learning this way of seeing individuals. The following excerpts also demonstrate that such re-learning is the result of interactions between the students, those they meet and discuss in the narratives and the environment.

In the first narrative student 4 provides a testimony of how he changed his positions in relation to people from certain parts of the world. Employed in customer service for an Asian airline company, he explains how he expected certain ‘nationalities’ to ‘perform’ and follow certain patterns – a typical essentialistic position in intercultural encounters (Abdallah-Preteille, 2013): “I was expecting unsatisfied customers from Italy to be very impulsive”. However in the narrative the student shows that he changed his mind while interacting with them. “But, surprisingly, they turned out to be talkative and a kind of relaxed. I had cases when passengers had missed their flight to [anonymized city] and had not been entitled for any reimbursement, and, still, they talked in a friendly way and even managed to tell jokes and discuss weather with me. It is really interesting how reality sometimes differs from our expectations and stereotypes”. The student then compares these Italian customers to customers from

the UK, claiming that UK customers cannot draw a line between employees as individuals and their work responsibilities and often got angry at her. She concludes:

As the result of working with representatives of Italian and UK cultures, I try not to expect anything from people of other cultures, avoid preconceived notions and just keep my mind and eyes open in order to stay as objective as possible.

When she discusses her expectations of Italian behavior, she neo-essentializes somewhat British people for being more 'Italian' than 'British'. Yet her conclusion is a good potential evidence of open-mindedness and critical interculturality.

In the next narrative diversities apply to the self. Student 4 moved from the Balkanic peninsula to Finland a few years before the beginning of her teacher training. In her narrative she discusses her own diversities, claiming that "my personality changes and adapts depending on which cultural environment I find myself in". She then attributes and opposes these somewhat stereotypical characteristics to Finns and her 'home country': *Finns*: quiet, withdrawn, unassertive, timid; *home country*: loud, hectic, open, friendly. Here is what she has to say about her double personality:

Namely, when I'm in Finland, I am a different person than when I'm in the Balkans – after having travelled back and forth many times, I have realized that. For a long time I was wondering how come I'm having so much trouble finding friends in Finland, being my open and friendly self – then I realized that my open and friendly self is Balkan Mary. As soon as the plane touches the ground in Helsinki, I turn into Finnish Ida who is much more unassertive and timid.

Of course one could question the dichotomization of Finland vs. the Balkans, and the stereotypical and imagined characteristics that go with it. Interestingly she even blames her lack of social networks in Finland on her having become Finnish (a different character from 'Balkan Mary'). But, maybe, the experiences of this double self can both lead to the student accepting her 'differences within her difference' (she is more than one when she is Finnish and similarly for her Balkan identity) and, at the same time, to reflect on others' diversities.

In this section I have discussed signs of diverse diversities that crossed some of the narratives written by the students. The way they deal with this issue might appear a bit superficial at this stage but through formal intercultural education, as suggested in this article, the students might learn to dig deeper into their own experiential learning.

2.4. Experiential learning and social justice

By experiencing certain encounters the students also seem to be aware of the fact that learning is a holistic process of adaptation, which creates knowledge again and again (see 1.2.). This last analytical section presents narratives that reveal that students have been able to reflect on interculturality as engagement against inequality and social injustice (Layne & Lipponen, 2014).

In the first narrative student 9 tells a story from her time as supply teacher in a school in Helsinki, the capital city of Finland. On one occasion she caught white Finnish

boys teasing an immigrant background child because of his 'broken Finnish'. This episode seems to have taken the student to heart. Her language is very emotional ("the situation made me sad", "I should have told the children more about how it would not have mattered if he had in fact sounded like a native-speaker", etc.). She also reflects on the fate of migrant children in Finland in the narrative and wonder "how many children with immigrant backgrounds have to put up with this daily". The student claims that the migrant child did not have any accent and explains that she finds it fascinating that people often imagine people to have certain characteristics when they fit in the label of the *other* (Bauman, 2004). Interestingly she says that she finds it "odd that people have to highlight other people's differences - even when there are none. It is also strange how preconceptions can make one see or hear things which are not really there" – thus promoting an approach to other which relies on the similarity-difference continuum rather than mere difference (Dervin, 2015).

In a similar vein but in a different context (on a beach in Helsinki), one Finnish student explains how he witnessed white Finnish kids ('no older than 11 years old') making fun of a group of immigrants, shouting at them things like "you should get a job!". The student then asks a series of questions and proposes some hypotheses, showing at the same time how perplexing the event was:

Where would they learn to talk like this? Why would they even be thinking about work and money at their age? I believe the answer must lie in their upbringing; maybe relatives or other adults. I cannot believe that children would come up with these things on their own. Some people seem to think that immigrants are living large in Finland by taking advantage of our social security system. I think it is very unfortunate that some parents pass on these kinds of prejudices to their offspring.

The influence of parents on how children see immigrants has been proven but the student misses out on other important influences of the media, discourses at school, the Internet, politicians, etc. in Finland (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013). Concluding the narrative the student seems to be ashamed of the fact that he did not intervene. But this event seems to have had an impact on his capacity – and/or will – to engage in such situations:

I regret not intervening but I guess I was just too confused by the whole situation. At least now I know how I would react the next time I found myself in the same circumstances.

However The student does not elaborate on how he would react if he witnessed this again.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to examine the influence of experiential learning on the development of interculturality. Most students demonstrated in the narratives that experiential learning can lead to interesting snapshots of interculturality, understood here as a critical and reflexive approach to self and other that moves beyond an essentialistic and culturalistic perspective (Holliday, 2010; Dervin, 2015). As such the

students showed that they are able to un- and re-learn the ‘usual’, to move beyond appearances and to look into diverse diversities and to pinpoint injustice. Without any formal intercultural training, the fact that most students were able to engage with these ideas – sometimes unstably – is a positive and encouraging point.

This represents an important message for intercultural teacher education: our student teachers do not start their studies with a ‘clean plate’ as they have already, in some cases, a long experience of interculturality and, most importantly, have reflected and been critical towards certain misconceptions about it. What intercultural teacher education could provide are theoretical and methodological tools to ‘dig deeper’ into these experiences and the ways one can interpret them (see Dervin, 2015; Layne & Lipponen, 2014). The more the students are able to develop such skills the more ready they will be to apply them to their future career as teachers involved in our heterogeneous societies.

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