

Humanising Pedagogies: Giving Voice to Migrant Learners

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Abstract: Post-apartheid South Africa is a fairly new democracy, characterized by diversity, as well as issues plaguing equity and transformation, such as racism and unemployment. Increasingly, South Africa is also playing host to growing numbers of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, to whom we are obliged to provide refuge. Despite the often dangerous and seemingly insurmountable journeys to cross South Africa's borders, one of the first goals in settling in the host country is education for the migrant or refugee child. Teachers however, are often at a loss with how to manage these newcomers in their classrooms. The children struggle to prosper in South African classrooms, given the diversity that exists, that they may not be fluent in English, a major language of teaching and learning in the country, or in one of the African languages. This paper argues for the urgency to pay heed to the needs of the migrant child, by describing a framework that involves humanizing pedagogy through the use of dialogue and reflexivity, the nature of language used, and teacher strategies. The work provides considerations for teacher trainees who are preparing to teach these children.

Keywords: Migrant learners, Humanism, African languages

Introduction

Post-apartheid South Africa's educational arena is still a battleground, and realities of the country's legacy of disempowerment are evident (Zinn & Rodgers, 2016). South Africa is also home to increasing numbers of migrants and refugees, for whom the country is obliged to provide protection (Refugees Act of 1998). While in previous years migration was prompted by war and strife in home countries, more recently, families make the journey seeking better economic and educational prospects. A fundamental concern is the education of the migrant child. Continuing levels of migration in the country are therefore changing the face of our schools, and teachers are called upon to negotiate the differences these changes bring. This is not an easy task. For pre-service teachers, these concerns are steeped in issues of justice and humanisation. Most often students are exposed to theoretical input on justice, yet are unable to put this into practice in the classroom.

Fataar (2016: 16) aptly describes the dissonance of today's youth when he says "Young people now inhabit a complex and shifting world. They are not denizens of one place. Instead they transact their school going in the light of a number of spaces in and across the city. They are confronted by, and work productively with, a diversity of cultural materials and culturally dissonant schooling experiences as they move in and out of the multiple spaces of their lives... Young people are always already thinking, adapting, and generating knowledge – always doing headwork." This view is particularly apt for the migrant child, thus schools cannot afford to ignore issues that enhance the diversity of our classrooms. Such a view is steeped in social justice. Inevitably, as teachers we need to do more than teach. We need to consider multiple complexities and disconnects around language, culture, and identity, which contribute extensively to dehumanizing experiences in the classroom. Humanising pedagogy provides a sound basis for addressing these dissonances.

In this paper, and against a backdrop of challenges faced by teachers in increasingly diverse classrooms, I make a case for adopting a humanizing pedagogy in the South African classroom. I consider a framework that incorporates the dialogue and reflexivity, the nature of language use, and teacher strategies which I believe will assist pre-service teachers cope with their diverse classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Humanising Pedagogy

Humanizing pedagogy grew out of Freire's critical pedagogy. As expounded by Bartolome (1994), educators must embrace pedagogy that values students' existing knowledge, culture, and life experiences. According to Freire (1970: 51) a humanizing pedagogy is a method of instruction that ceases to be an instrument through which teachers can manipulate students, instead, expresses the consciousness of students themselves. Freire (1970) continues that "revolutionary teachers", not reactionary ones, establish a permanent relationship with students from different cultures and languages. Revolutionary teachers practice a humanizing pedagogy. Bartolome (1994: 248) continues that humanizing pedagogy values students' background knowledge, culture, and life experiences, and creates learning contexts where power is shared by teachers and students. Mutual humanization, according to Freire (2003), or re-humanisation, is vital to address a dehumanizing legacy. The dehumanising legacy is not uncommon in the South African context. For Zinn & Rogers (2012: 76) "the legacy of dehumanization has been absorbed, wittingly and unwittingly into relationships within educational arenas which mirror and depict hierarchies of power, cultures of compliance, fear, as well as suppression and loss of voice".

To continue, for Zinn, Adam, Kurup & du Plessis (2016: 73), "a humanizing pedagogy (has) to develop a kind of pedagogical agency, enabling learning to occur, for the knowledge to be fully owned by, and thus empowering, the learner. It (needs) to take into account who the learner (is), and where she or he (is) coming from in terms of their prior knowledge and assets – for example background, languages, contextual, and experiential knowledge – as key aspects of practicing a humanizing pedagogy." This calls on teachers to "interrogate, and change their biased beliefs, and fragmented views" (Bartolome, 1994: 174). Humanising pedagogy promotes respect, trusting relations between teachers and students. To illustrate, Franquiz and Salazar (2004) designed a framework for academic resilience with their Chicana/o students constituting respect (*respeto*), mutual trust (*confianza*), verbal teachings (*consejos*), exemplary model (*buen ejemplo*). Salazar and Franquiz (2008: 186) later unpacked these as follows:

Buen ejemplo (exemplary model): includes relationships with caring adults to encourage student success, and acting in exemplary ways;

Confianza (mutual trust): develops when students feel valued, trustworthy. Building trust and fostering an ethic of care must serve as a foundation for building academic skills;

Consejos (verbal teachings): these are a means through which knowledge is produced and negotiated;
Respecto (respect): agent for youth to embrace trust, verbal teachings and exemplary people in their lives.

Salazar and Franquiz' (2008) framework serve as useful considerations for practice in the diverse classroom. I would like to expand the framework, to add deliberations I consider vital in the South African classroom to enable pre-service (and in-fact in-service) teachers to address the needs of migrant (and other) children. These include dialogue and reflexivity, the nature of language use and teacher strategies

Considerations for Inclusion in Teacher Education Programmes

My recommendation for teacher education programmes is that we consider how to prepare students to mediate the following in the classroom, through the lens of a humanizing pedagogy:

Dialogue and Reflexivity

A humanizing pedagogy calls for a dialogic approach between teachers and students. South African schools are currently tasked to consider how best to prepare learners to work in a context of diversity, as well as in a context of continuing segregation and inequality. The need to deliberate on people's understandings, and the need to involve dialogue (Erasmus 2006), has never been more urgent, in fact the time has come to demand, rather than just deliberate. Crucial dialogues about diversity, life experiences and justice must be used to examine children's understandings and interactions, however talking about justice necessitates talking about the past, which learners might find extremely discomfiting or troublesome. Thus Roux & Becker (2016) emphasise the role of

dialogue as humanising praxis. They propose two interrelated conditions for dialogue as humanising praxis in education: first, the acknowledgement of situated selves and second, the ontological need for, and right, to voice. The need for situated selves and voice is crucial for migrant children. Migrant children need to have their voices heard, which gives them agency in the teaching-learning process.

However, dialogue, to a large extent, also involves self-reflection or reflexivity. Reflexivity involves engaging with reflections on the self or an institution (Giddens 1991) and is a crucial component in any drive for transformation. Without critical reflexive dialogue, these learners will not engage in more prolific thinking about societal issues. As its goal, a dialogic approach must develop critical consciousness. For Freire (1970: 17) this means learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against oppressive elements of reality. Humanising teachers are those who engage in praxis, reflection and action on the world in order to transform it.

Reflexivity can also be defined as a process in which researchers and teachers engage in self-aware meta-analysis (Finlay 2002, 209 in Zinn et al 2016: 76). This implies the ability to reflect, or to look inwards. According to Zinn et al (2016: 76) the “connection between the self, a humanizing pedagogy, and the necessary component of critical consciousness is enabled by reflexivity”. This too requires dialogue. Schwandt (1997: 135 in Waghid 2002) refers to reflexivity as two different ideas informing qualitative inquiry: the process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases and preferences; and a critical examination of how one’s views serve as resources for “generating particular constructions of meaning in particular contexts”. Reflexive action involves examining one’s personal and theoretical dispositions, and serves an emancipatory purpose.

Schools are currently inundated with constraints in education such as standardised tests, burdened curricula, and restrictive policies. Educational scholars call on schools to move away from one-size-fits-all paradigms and instead focus on humane approaches such a humanizing pedagogy involving dialogue and reflexivity.

Nature of Language Use

The nature of language as currently used in schools can be considered dehumanizing on several levels, despite very proactive language policies that revere the mother tongue on paper. Dehumanising practices include robbing students of their heritage languages. It is naive to think that migrant students will have access to their heritage languages in the classroom, but the existence of these languages must be recognized. Achievement is habitually seen in terms of languages used and their proficiency. Far too often we focus on food and festivals in the name of acknowledging students’ backgrounds- this is not enough. These are quite superficial; the issue of language is vital. Childs (2016) , for instance, explores the (potential) dehumanising nature of language use in many South African classrooms in her work. She highlights the disconnect between the dominant language of the classroom and the home language of the learner, by examining the potential of translanguaging in multilingual classrooms. South Africa’s language policy recognises 11 official languages, yet English most often serves as the medium of teaching and learning. She concludes that translanguaging practices are inherently humanising, affording teachers and learners opportunities to participate as social, thinking, transforming individuals.

Teacher Strategies

Teaching methods should be seen as a means to humanize education and promote academic success for students who have been historically underserved by schools. Sayed et al (2015) emphasise the importance of contextually relevant pedagogical strategies that address diversity, reconciliation, and promote social cohesion. They highlight the importance of teachers' pedagogic strategies in mediating inequalities and continuities within the education system and society they operate within. They further encourage teacher educators to pay special attention to the moulding of student teachers' dispositions towards effecting change within social and educational systems. Ultimately, the authors argue, initial teacher education programmes need to prepare teachers as agents of social change and cohesion in South Africa.

Conclusion

Teachers are often at a loss with how to manage, not just migrant newcomers in their classrooms, but learners from diverse backgrounds in general. The children struggle to prosper in South African classrooms, given the diversity that exists, as well as that they may not be fluent in English, a major language of teaching and learning in the country, or in one of the African languages. This paper made a case for the urgency to pay heed to the needs of the migrant child, by describing a framework that involves humanizing pedagogy through the use of dialogue and reflexivity, the nature of language used, and teacher strategies. The work provided considerations for teacher trainees who are preparing to teach these children. The need is for them to be nurtured to manage dissonant spaces.

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