Difficult classroom as effect of multi-literacy in the field

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Abstract

This article investigates the difficult or problem classroom and aims at delineating the Romanian experience as effect of the multi-literacy of situated pedagogical scientific discourse. Our proposal is a qualitative research by interview according to the following purposes: describing the problem class and constructing the communication map in difficult class. To conclude, the measure that should be imposed by the next educative politics is the training of the trainers with the goal of giving them strategies and techniques in order to be prepared to deal with inappropriate behaviours and situations that might arise in the classroom.

1. Introduction

This article investigates the cognitive representation about difficult or problem classrooms in Romania today, taking into account the fact that this subject has produced conflicting findings as a result of different epistemological limitations: transnational traffic of ideas, multimodality, multi-literacy, various metrics of class, etc. Because all the special epistemologies are going through changes generated by transactions and borrowings from other areas, it is worth starting off with a few general ideas that are the base of this study. The contemporary epistemic research shows that the educational sociology is a well-developed domain which has its own scientific theories necessary to the understanding of the educational reality, the leap from traditional epistemology to the modern one being done in...
a specific manner. Thus, the majority of the professional studies go through the point of view according to which the educational sociology contains a number of essential theories developed over time, but each of which can generate distinct patterns of interpretation. This critical exegesis lays the ground for the modern epistemology of the educational sociology according to which the isolated theories are left behind in favor of a new interpretative model, that of the “stratified theories” (R. Collins, 2007).

There are many points of view regarding the status of the domain nowadays, but not all of them are necessarily polar: according to A. Sadovnik (2007), the educational sociology is a crossroads, while R. Collins believes that the educational sociology should be understood as a whole made of layers of functional theories in conflict. Given the complexity of the specialized epistemology, it is worth mentioning that we are rallying on the point of view which confirms the layered model according to which the theories of the educational sociology, being so different from each other, are fueling interpretations of the data collected in different researches that generate ambiguities. In fact this study points out another incongruity from the point of view of the theoretical basis, according with the notes of a lot of specialized modern epistemologies, not just the one of the educational sociology: the thematic overlap. We are talking about subjects or themes common to more than one science which are exemplary researched but which benefit from investigation methods, interpretation techniques and conclusions which function unilaterally. The class of students is relevant to this since we identify countless multidimensional-funded studies: research according to the principal psychological theories, research focused on its functioning as a social primary group, ethnographic investigation, case studies, x-rays starting from the hypothesis of the class functioning as a micro-society and its placement, behavioral analysis, communication networks in the classroom, semiotic and linguistic analysis. These various research perspectives prove the importance of studying it, but, at the same time, they point out the fluctuations and the dynamics of the group of students. This explains our decision of using more ways of investigation to diagnose or categorize the classroom. In other words, any way of investigation used on this subject combines theories, principles and strategies that belong to different domains: the sociology of education, the psychology of education, the management of the classroom, educative communication, linguistics and semiotics, legal research (for example, juvenile crimes), etc.

Another highly important and overwhelming key point for our research is, just like everywhere in Eastern Europe, the contemporary history, in our case of Romania, just that of education. The transition from communism to democracy in Romania generated the appearance of a transition period that had different outcomes in different domains. The educational system was particularly affected: the old curriculum was dropped, the main lines of political education were rethought, legislation was changed, the training of the trainers was changed and new instruction techniques were adopted. Despite all these steps focused on reforming the educational system we notice that the educational system faces disorders which affect its stability: aggression, trouble students, classes difficult to handle, students facing the teachers, and so on. At least a few times a month the Romanian press shows conflicts of a certain degree that arises in the classroom.

These are the arguments for which the current study identifies the main problems of a class labeled as “troublesome” and those of the “ideal” class of students in Romania. Beyond these particularities that have increased the complexity of the steps of investigation arises another difficulty within the Romanian context. The changes in social life, the influence of mass-media, the permanent highs and lows of the values in Romania and in the Romanian school, the economic condition of education in Romania generate changes in the cohesion of the group, fluctuations of the classroom’s dynamic, just like the impossibility of exactly catching the map of communication in the classroom. In the stage of participative observation that allowed for this research to be conducted we found out that, in the classes that were under observation from the urban environment, the map of communication is changing from one month to the other, which denotes uncertainty in the values and relationships.

To these collected data we add more, which in the last five years refer to the increase of in the number of the unwanted behaviors in the classroom: inappropriate behaviors, difficult to explain attitudes, delinquent acts, drug use, an increase in the verbal and physical aggression etc. Given that the resolution models cannot be imported or ignored, and given that there is a tendency to ignore this difficult problem from the point of view of the adolescent crisis, we are offering a “recipe” that will give a new investigative insight: the goal of our paper is to investigate the cognitive representation that the teachers and the soon-to-be teachers have on the “problem class”. Large numbers of deviations from the rules generate the apparition of some problems signaled by the teachers that teach in the urban
environment, by the Romanian press, as well as by the students that undergo the stage of pedagogical practice. We could assume from this that the problem-class is becoming a constant in the schools of Romania.

2. Method, results and discussion

This paper offers empirical researches conducted within the University of Bucharest (Romania). The research investigated a target population of 70 people from which 50 senior students and 20 professors from different fields who participated in a program of training trainers. The research was accomplished by an interview that had set itself two objectives:

1) The delimitation of the “problem class” concept in today’s Romania according to the individual experiences of the population investigated

2) Identifying the main types of relationships that describe the “map of communication” in the problem class.

The participants were asked to answer by writing down two questions, as follows: a) a description of the problem class, and b) constructing a map of communication within this problem class. Given the fact that after 1989 an influx of theories invaded Romania and a lot of instructional strategies were adopted, many resolution models were imported and new values were forced upon the school without taking into account the traditional values, we considered that a comparative analysis is standing out, one of the results obtained in Romania with the cognitive representation of the problem class according to the research done in the western countries. Recession, the particularities of the Romanian society, the constant changes of the fundamental politics in the educational domain are solid arguments that do not allow a conversion or a direct comparison of the result, this is why we consider this research to be useful to mediate a comparative analysis according to what was mentioned above.

According to the rationale of the paper, the theoretical framework and research methodology we discuss as follows the results. In the international literature in the field we can identify different categories of the class of students: the successful class, the unsuccessful class, the permissive class, the ideal class, the problem class, small class size and large class size, etc., while the indigenous discourses in the field of educational psychology or the domain of the class management specify only characteristics of the classroom in general. Therefore, we consider that the investigative step is unique given the fact that there is no previous Romanian research based on creating the concept of the problem class.

We also mention that this paper is based on an empirical research which valued both the authentic experiences of the people investigated, as well as their theoretical acquisitions regarding the problems of communication within the class of students. The first question of the interview asked the investigated subjects to identify the definitive notes of the problem class. The semiotic and linguistic analysis on one side, the analysis of the main discourse categories on the other, and the analysis of the problem class from the perspective of psychology as well, allow the formulation of the comments that will follow. The students’ answers show two types of experiences: they are elaborate descriptions of the problem class from an inside perspective (the class in which the students studied was considered at some point to be a problem class) and it is also portrayed from outside the class (there are reports based on institutional problems – some of the investigated subjects declare that in some educational institutions where they had been studying there was a problem class).

From the point of view of the actors that had studied in a problem class the main elements is the lack of interest towards studying, discipline problems and lack of communication between students, and between students and teachers as well. The references of the target population are direct, offering well-delimited particularities and using a rough around the edges technical language, sometimes including metaphors. We give as an example of this aspect with the next discursive elements: “…within the students of this class there was always one who never cared about the classes, was not paying attention, was bold and he was disturbing the class by picking on the other students in a lot of ways…The students started paying attention to him; the disturbed one were talking about his misbehavior so everybody was talking to everybody.” Another subject states: “In a problem class the kind of which I encountered there is a fairly large number of students who misbehave from the point of view of discipline, as well that of studying (most of them don’t study at all). In the problem classes I remember of there were also some successful students….“(14). Another good answer is the next one: “In middle school, our class was considered by some of the teachers as a problem one, meaning that there was a major lack of interest regarding studying from the students…
We were told that we are a fish without a body: the head was represented by the few students who were studying and the rest of us were the tail –there was no medium level. Regarding the discipline, there were problems sometimes, usually because of one person corrupting the others, drawing their attention on himself from the lesson.” (1). Most of the investigated subjects, 80% of them, describe the problem class either starting from describing the concept of the problem class, or point of a certain number of definitive features.

The collected definitions are in the category of the explanation-definition, the explanation amplifying the characteristics of the class of students which could be a reference to different existent theories in the specialized literature: “a problem class is that in which the students don’t get along with each other or with the teachers” (21); “a problem class is one where the communication between the students and the teachers is missing” (11); “a problem class is made out of problem students” (18); “a problem class is one that lacks a common purpose, where the interests of the students don’t match those of the teachers, where the communication network is interrupted” (3). These definitions are accompanied by comments regarding the teachers who try to manage the day-by-day situations in the problem class. This way, extremely though claims are inserted: “in the last few years, the Romanian school has been facing a difficult problem, that of bullying. Those who were once a role model, teachers and head teachers, are now losing this quality because of the students who don’t present the will to study anymore or whose home education is missing” (24); statements: “The teachers face all the time problems that overwhelm them. In high school there was also a middle school class in which the students were very violent” (3); objective claims: “…..the students are not paying attention to the teacher’s explanations, they misbehave, are rebellious, and end up putting the teacher in embarrassing situations” (11). The reason behind those deviations from the normal behavior of the students is argued from the point of view of the cohesion of such a group: “The students were not united…. each group was very intolerant with the members of other groups. This is why inevitable and constant fights between them arose all the time, the minor conflicts escalated to major ones and there was no peaceful agreement” (25); “many of these students had formed a group and were united in everything they were doing” (22); the existence of such small groups are a problem in the class, a conflict could break out at any given time” (11); “after the classes the students were parts of neighborhood gangs which were often times brought inside the school to “deal” with other students…” (5).

The essential feature of the problem class from the point of view of the students who studied in such a class and as well as that of those who indirectly knew the problem class is the lack of interest towards studying. This aspect is formulated differently in the answers of the investigated people: “the lack of interest of the students towards the educational process (they don’t gain the knowledge, they refuse to cooperate with the teacher, they don’t do their homework)” (4); “the problem class of my school…was made of children who were not inclined to study” (5); “the bad marks of the students” (6); “the poor efficiency at studying as a result of an increasingly small interest to know and absorb new information” (13) “students…who don’t study” (18); “students…weak from the point of view of their grades”(17,12). The abundance of discipline problems in the class is another feature of the problem class. If most of class management studies consider that the solution to the existent problems from the discipline perspective is an obsolete approach, the collected data deny this approach. It is possible that the theories of the different specialized studies might not have been adapted to the axiological Romanian dominants. This is why we suggest a correlation of the explanations – understanding that mark the theoretical studies of the educational psychology with the explanation – exemplification generated by the empirical discursiveness on the problems of the class of students in Romania. The inappropriate language used by the students of the problem class, as well as the lack of interest are definitive notes of the problem class.

The perspective of the interviewed teachers on the problem class repaint the portrait of the problem class. Even though, generally, the descriptions are alike, the discourse structured by the teachers point out another hierarchy of the identified categories of discourse. The problem class is characterized firstly by the lack of interest of the students. This result matches-the statistics offered by the line ministry in the last two years which warned about the high number of motivated and not motivated skipped classes recorded during the school year in Romania. A questionnaire investigation could be done in order to get data about what the students that skip classes do during the time destined to study. Similar to the answers given by the students, the interviewed teachers think that the gaps in the discipline management of the problem class are on the second place as importance. This aspect could explain the high number of atypical cases that arise in the Romanian schools and which are taken in by the local media. Paradoxically, these media releases fuel new atypical behavior of the students in the problem class as long as both
the teachers and the students that were interviewed advance through the causal explanations. The third theory that was identified after analyzing the answers given by the teachers is the lack of communication in the problem class. The fact that one of the roles of the teacher – as a specialized teacher, as a manager and as a head-teacher – is to communicate explains this result. The second item of the interview asked the students to draw the map of communication in the problem class. The analysis of the data collected based on this item show the fact that a non-answer has been recorded, identifying 16 verbal discourses, 6 answers of symbolic nature and 4 answers in which the written verbal facts were intertwined with iconic-symbolic elements (schemes, drawings, etc.). The most of the verbal answers insert in the communication map concepts which attest destruction of the communication: “incident”, “conflicts”, “tensions”, “divisions”, “arguments”. We therefore see a metaphorical image of communication in the problem class as it is narrated by a participant in the investigation: “the communication map in this class should be looked at as a battle between the group of students which are very upset and disoriented, who felt like their territory is under attack, and the others, “the attackers” (19).

The iconic-symbolic images are focused around the teacher; most of the times, the students or the communicative relationships gravitating around him. In fact, all this visual semiotic is soaked in positive expectations: maps, schemes, drawings model the way in which the communication within the class should be accomplished, and not how the communication is altered in the problem class. It is possible that the senior students put themselves in the shoes of the teacher and projected their own solutions. This aspect is shown in the answers which give both oral descriptions and iconic-symbolic images. Given the fact that the resolution model to be adopted in the problem class is dependent on the Romanian practices, we considered that a similar investigation on the existent cognitive representation about the successful class might offer new theoretic-reflexive and practical landmarks.

The collected data do not match the principal dilemmatic types from the specialized literature (the affection dilemma – affective neutrality, the specificity dilemma – complexity, dilemma universalism – particularism, the quality dilemma – results, the inside orientation dilemma – orientation towards the group) because the written semiotics and the visual one point out the weak role expectancies regarding the teacher. Even though these expectations are shown in a more important way in some interviews, they more likely denote a competition for power between the teacher and the student, rather than stipulating the requirements regarding the role of the teacher. It is possible that the interdependency between the ethos and the axiology of the society, on one hand the role expectations, on the other, being more powerful than the classical theories described it. It is probably a reflex of the social movement that happened in the past two years in Romania. Another interpretative dimension of the data could reflexively infer from the point of view of the class management. We wonder whether the existent tendencies in the domain would combine with the approach of the class of students as a micro-society in today’s Romania: controlling the behavior of the students in class, influencing their behavior, negotiating and respecting a set of rules, promoting a positive behavior, promoting a way based on the student in which the management of the class is understood as a way of preparing the student for the outside world?

3. Conclusions

From the point of view of the communication, the student class is a space in which the power is manifested. Unlike the conclusions of the international studies which mark the relationship of power between the teacher and those under his authority, the communication map in the Romanian class points out two distinct spaces in which the power is divided between the misbehaving students and the other students of the class, the students that get disturbed. Even though the teacher is present in the semiotics of the collected data, he does not play the main role. We interpret this data from the point of view of a new domain, the one of moral communication: we are talking about a moral transaction that takes place in the classroom, all the social actors, no matter what status they have, being on equal footing.

On the other hand, given the recent history of Romania, as well as agreeing with the hypothesis according to which the class is a social micro-cosmos, the results of the study could be reviewed once again by the critics from the perspective of the bi-univocity of the relationship between the system of values of the Romanian society and the ethos of the Romanian school. Such a “wording” should be based on a network made up of roughly 80 schools and benefit from proper finances. From the methodological point of view, given that all the interviewed subjects answered to the interview that served as a basis for investigating the problem class we concluded that the
investigated subject is an authentic one. The measure that should be imposed by the next educative politics is the training of the trainers with the goal of giving them strategies and techniques and thus get them prepared to deal with inappropriate behaviors and situations that might arise in the classroom. To conclude with, the high difficulty of treating this subject in Romania requires in the near future, new similar investigative ways adopted at the level of the whole educational system, according to more than one epistemological and methodological alternatives. Because of the stratified theories from the literature in the field and because of the transition from communism to democracy the Romanian classroom is affected.

The linguistic and semiotic analysis of the data collected reveals the existence of very diversified discourse elements. Beyond the interpretative analysis the results could be viewed by a critical lecture (from the vantage point of educational sociology) that infers the existence of two contradictory subcultures: the teacher’s view and the student’s needs. As classroom management the classroom might be a way for preparing the student for society: the purpose of this paper was not to come to a new solution - it is not a diagnosis- but to offer the possibility to conclude about a real problem: adopting the proactive classroom management within Romanian classrooms. This high difficulty of treating the cognitive representation about classroom imposes a new approach according to diverse epistemological and methodological alternatives.

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