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Collaborative dimension of learning in school: project-based learning

Habilitation thesis

Abstract

The focal idea of the thesis consists on collaborative dimension of learning in school, as a necessary feature of contemporary education and society. Main arguments are rooted in the doctoral paper *Postmodernism in education: theoretical framework and practical issues* (defended in 1999) and sociological approach of interactions and relationships in educational processes. The thesis reflects on social dimension of learning as a recurrent topic of the professional trajectory and project-based learning as its organic outcome. The focus on project approach evolves from 16 years of teaching, carrying on action research and interventions in multiethnic and disadvantaged communities, training and program evaluation.

The paper has two axis. The topical one consists on clarifying the conceptual structure of the collaborative learning from three perspectives: 1) multiple layers of identity building within classroom, school and wider social and cultural environments; 2) sociological analysis of micro and macro levels within school systems and students experience (influenced by ubiquitous learning, power structure, hidden curriculum, systems of representations and expectations, etc.) and 3) the 21st century skills, including team work and adaptive skills. Second axis consists in highlighting research results: methodological inputs within the educational research area and other contributions in the field of evaluative research and consecutive effects at the policy level.

Collaborative learning reflects a long term interest and a recently visible issue on social and educational agenda in Romania. Individualistic focus, competition, decontextualized learning, actual debates on curriculum and teacher training highlight the need for a paradigm shift. Project based learning represents an effective response to these trends and requirements. The initial support for cooperative learning methods (reflected on article and teachers guides published late 90th) turned onto the interest for more organic emerging forms of collaboration, mainly the project work. Grounded back in history (Renaissance architects and engineers), project approach is connected to progressive education in United States (John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick), European countries and worldwide. Based on the constructivist background, project approach is a student-centered pedagogy, a comprehensive instructional endeavor which consists in individually, small or larger groups in-depth extended investigation of a topic or problem, worthy of the student's interests, energy and time. It involves assessment of both process and outcomes. Project experience is worldwide seen as a valuable experience and promising alternative for the future (Markham, Katz, Belanca, Mergendoler, etc.): students are required to possess both content knowledge and the 21st century learning and dispositions demanded by employers today: critical thinking, collaborating, communicating and creative problem solving, life and career skills, such as leadership and responsibility, self direction, and social and emotional awareness, and the ability to use them across disciplines.

Project approach stimulates collaboration and requires both structure and flexibility. Preparation, completion and evaluation of projects bring ownership and relevance on the assessment process, although project' trajectory or development can be unexpectedly influenced by ubiquitous milieu. A co-authored, recently published chapter in an international volume strengths the contribution of projects assessment for individual and group empowerment and sharing learning achievements. The book *Project-based learning* (2016, Polirom) brings together both theoretical framework and practical guidelines for practitioners (working at early education, primary, secondary and higher education level). Taking into account the inquiry and collaborative dimensions of the learning process, the work highlights the crosscutting perspectives (epistemological, axiological and ontological) and provides different scenarios regarding project approach's implementation within real school practice.

The thesis is organized in 9 chapters. First four chapters highlight scientific and professional achievements connected to the key topic of the paper, interlinked with teaching, research, training and consultancy. First chapter focuses on postmodernism and identity building (within the complex architecture of micro-narratives, pluriperspectives, peripheric and minority voices, dialogic discourse, critical approach etc.). Second chapter provides an analytic investigation of the emotional and social perspectives on school learning. Recent decades brought the focus on relational, interactional and social ingredients of the learning process and a high interest on taking benefit of the results of neurosciences. These extreme perspectives conterbalance the traditional focus on the psychological approach of the individual and intellectual development. Recent awareness of how children and students learn, the impact of ICT and social media, children rights and wellbeing perspective raised many debates and challenges on the social-interactional and emotional features of learning as individuals, groups and communities. Fourth chapter turns to account the benefits and oportunities of project based learning in the field of civic education. Thesis promotes the global citizenship concept, nowadays necessary in order to overcome the national European limits of understanding social, demografic, political and economic trends all over the world. All four chaphthers reveals values and attitudes required by 21st century: solidarity, empathy, care, shared responsibility, self regulation, creativity, inquiry skills, use of ICT etc.

Evaluative research has brought to light the value of research in influencing public policies and teacher training programs. The field research, exploring at the grassroots level diverse communities, schools, teaching practices and daily routines strenghtened the focus on interactions, relationships and social contexts. The thesis sharpens three key levels: theoretical inputs connected to collaborative learning in project approach, appropriate methodological designs (with a focus on case study) and fruitful inputs into the policy efforts. Methodological inputs represent the most evident contribution of my work: based on evidence, it shows and inspire how to manage the teaching learning assessment process and how to use multiple case studies to enhance professional development and program evaluation. The most significant results of my scientific and teaching efforts are interpreted through the lens of the key concepts of the thesis and are documented with examples of the published work. Reference is made to the most recent book (*Project-based learning*), 6 articles on the same topic and different other published materials (e.g. co-editing a book on sociological perspective on contemporary education), my contribution to design and implementation of master degree programs and undergraduate courses.

From a methodological perspective, the fith chapter illustrates the use of narrative and visual materials (drawings, photos and videographic techniques). Sixth chapter reveals contributions in the filed of the evaluative research, which includes impact studies, intervention evaluation, action research. It provides examples of multiple case study using Robert Stake design. Thesis provides

examples of large scale impact evaluation coordinated and other evaluative research done in Romania, Bulgaria and Netherlands.

Last chapters reflects on the experience of team research in international and national contexts, the impact of my work on the educational landscape and my contributions for the doctoral programs in Romania and United States.

Each chapter provides links to the articles, books and research projects where I was involved as coordinator or team member. Grounded on the mentioned achievements, future paths for teaching and research will continue the focus on socio-interactional core of learning in ubiquitous environments, for diverse learners, in different educational settings and communities.

In the end there is a selection of relevant bibliographical references.