Collaborative Learning and Change of Mentality in Romanian School

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Abstract

Mentalities are forms of knowledge of reality which manifests a high resistance to change, but also great power in influencing relationships with others. The study demonstrates that there is an ameliorative link between collaborative learning and works mentality. Analysis of this connection had two planes converged: on one hand the techniques of working groups help to harmonize attitudes and behaviours of students from ethnic and religious differences, and on the other hand by developing collaborative attitude of the students can reduce resistance to change. Thus, by using collaborative strategies, we can to prevent than to correct. These are components of education which concerns contemporary world issues.

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1. Introduction

In the present day society which is dominated by the excessive technicism, by the avalanche of information and globalization, the idea of stability and tradition has overlapped the idea of mentality, and it motivates the collective behavior. Thereby, even a greater attention is being given to mentalities, these being analyzed from the historic, philosophic and psychological perspective. Even though they remain a “vague and confusing concept” (Martin, H., 1998 : 5), a “well used etiquette” (Martin, H., 2001 : 228), the mentalities represent all the forms of sensibility specific to an individual, and also to a collectivity and which make up their particular way of thinking and feeling (convictions and believes, prejudices and mental stereotypes, intellectual aptitudes, life style).

The term mentality knows today a variety of meanings, each of which justifies or encourages a certain attitude. Of course, it has also a pejorative meaning when it refers to what is beyond the normality of facts and feelings. This broadening of its meanings is explained by means of its strong emotional charge and by its social essence.

The study of mentality has the incontestable merit of humanizing the world because it succeeds to pinpoint the role of the mental representations in the people’s lives, because “it shows the affective connections between the present and the past”. The same conclusion is reached more or less by Michel Vovelle in his study from the year

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1982 in which by associating to the mentalities all the forms of cultural expression, he sees himself forced to start from the unconscious level of the collective sensibility, which is found in the attitudes, the behaviors and the everyday collective (unconscious) representations like for instance the popular culture. The author also admits the existence of some archaic remains of mentality which appear in critical situations or during crisis. They represent attitudinal typologies, the emotional behaviors which can be seen in a community and the mentalities, fulfill in the same time the need for cultural specificity.

They appear because of a solidified awareness, during a long period of time, they develop as reactions to a stimulus, and manifest themselves by means of representations, gestures, attitudes and behaviors which are generated sometimes by stereotypes and prejudices.

Apparently the mentalities are immutable but, in reality, they can be changed; the fastness and the consistency of this process depend on the formal or random educational activities. If through mentality one can know the thoughts and feelings of humans, their vision upon life, then it results that mentality can be “educated” even if its effects can be seen only after a longer period of time. The need for such an intervention upon the mentalities of a collectivity is even more important if they influence the relationships between the others, especially the inter-community dialogue, established on the criterion of differences..

2. Research hypothesis and objectives:

Starting from the fact that mentalities represent attitudinal, behavioral and affective models, met at the level of the collectivity, we think that they are especially produced and transmitted by means of the instructive – educative activities. Also, in order to create changes in mentality, the best means of intervention are found in the educational field, especially if they involve the idea of a collective collaboration.

Our proposal is based on the conviction that learning through cooperation is the best way to shape the mental perspectives of an individual or of the whole collectivity. Thus, we are focusing on the following objectives:

- to understand the importance of subordinating some learning through cooperation strategies, by means of whose application we may assure the base and the directions for changes in mentality or, on the contrary, the increase of its solidity
- to understand the importance of learning through cooperation in order to be ready for the changes in mentality;
- to identify some learning through cooperation strategies that by means of their social and intellectual valences contribute to the shaping of the perspective of understanding life in general;
- to emphasize the competences that were developed by means of learning through cooperation and that have become the base for the changes in mentality..

3. Research Methodology

The study will pinpoint, under the theoretical aspect, as a conclusion, the importance of the strategies based on learning through cooperation for the manifestation of the mentality facts. Our observations have been gathered from the seminar activities which took place for the pedagogical and methodological disciplines and have taken into consideration both the experience of the students who are preparing to become teachers and also the instructive-educative aspects specific for the pre-university learning. After our discussions the next conclusion was reached that the vast majority of students do not see on a long term the effects of the school activities and that for them, education is resumed to acting upon the physical, affective and behavioral structure of every individual according to the curriculum.

We have established as premises for the seminar activities, three directions of understanding the individual in rapport to the educational act:

1. the student has his own expectations on what regards his intellectual, affective and behavioral development;
2. integrativity is a condition for developing the personality of the student; its social dimension is extremely important. So, the social group, as a learning environment, mediates the fundamental cognitive changes at the level of each member;
3. the climate of the social group as a learning community, influences the perceptions of all those involved in the educational act by reflecting the motivational aspects and the capacity to discuss them together and to analyze critically the ideas.

In the Romanian scientific environment, focusing the preoccupations on the mentalities is relatively a new approach, this is why their connection with the instructive-educative actions has been neglected. Even in the case of our students, this rapport was not part of the attention given for their training during the seminar activities, because the results of this rapport are hard to be established, due to the tendency to link education to its immediate effects over the development of the individual. But, after studying some vast subjects connected to this problematic the students have started to understand the rapport from the following perspectives:

- looking at the historic level, there were given enough examples in time by which the collective actions in the spirit of education have generated reactions linked either to the attempt to maintain the inherited type to relate to the environment and to the others, or to adopt new challenges, which also meant to change them;

- looking at the experience level, the students have analyzed some practical examples, no matter the space or time, through which the educative activity acted upon the vision and the behaviors of individuals that were part of a collectivity. What is interesting is that the emotional, intellectual and the interaction aspects could not be separated any more;

- at the social level, from the moral-civic and ideological perspective, the durability of these mentality facts was assured by the degree of social cohesion and by the co-participation to the life of the community.

In order to do so, teachers use in the process of teaching-learning-evaluating, a series of student oriented strategies such as Learning through cooperation. It represents a set of training strategies which engages small teams of students in order to promote the interaction between colleagues when approaching study subjects. Learning through cooperation takes place when pupils work together, sometimes in pairs, other times in small groups, in order to solve a problem, to explore a new theme or to create new ideas, more specifically to meet a common objective. These are a few methods (Caciuc V. T., 2009):

**Mosaic 1** is a method that promotes learning by cooperating with other students. It presupposes the following steps: 1) making up the initial groups – about 4-5 members each, which receive a number from 1-4/5; 2) the teacher divides the text into 4 or 5 sections (as many as the number of groups made); 3) making up the groups of „experts” and solving the tasks – all the students that have received the number 1 will make up a group, those that have number 2, another and so on and so forth; each „experts” group has to study a certain section of the text, they each have to discuss the ideas expressed in that section, to understand the text, in order to later on be capable to teach it to their colleagues, thus deciding, after the group’s debates and discussions, which are the main ideas of the text and which is the best way to teach them to their colleagues so as to make them better understand that section; 4) all the students go back to the initial groups and they all have to teach the others what they have found out about each section of the text (the best way to teach a new information is by means of reciprocal teaching).

**The graphic organizers** are learning techniques which facilitate the processing of the material beyond its physical and linguistic characteristics reaching its semantic level (Dulamă, E. M., 2002, p 161). During the graphic organization, the students have to identify concepts, to analyze and compare ideas, to style content, to structure, restructure or to synthesize the information of the text according to some criteria. Thus, using tables – the incomplete table (a table made up of two columns: the one from the left is filled up with the requests or the criteria according to which the information must be organized; the one from the right is filled up with the information from the text which answers the requests from the other column); the table of consequences (it is made up of three columns: the first one from the left is filled up with the questions or the criteria according to which the information must be organized; the one from the right is filled up with the information from the text which answers the requests from the other column); the table of concepts (useful for comparing two or more concepts; the upper part of the table contains the characteristics according to which the comparison is made and on the left, the concepts which are being compared) etc. – allows students to structure information according to some criteria or categories, to analyze and
then to compare by understanding the deeper meaning of the things they have to learn. The processing of information by means of criteria established by the teacher together with his students or exclusively by the students becomes an active and thorough learning experience which is most often followed by positive effects and results both at the level of school performance and the personal level.

The strategies of reading scientific texts (SRST) are ways of making scientific texts – which are more difficult to understand because of their unfamiliar content, their complicated structure and their specific scientific language – more accessible. The fact that often students have to learn for their final exam from books which are written by their teachers in a higher scientific language makes students encounter major problems in learning because they do not know how to process and to work with such a category of texts. The effects of using such materials which are not adapted to students’ needs are negative, including: discouragement, de-motivation, mechanical and reproductive learning which is motivated by the approaching exam or even the refuse to learn from such books and to use only the notes which were taken during classes and which are too schematic, thus resulting a poor specialized language. In order to avoid such problems, reading strategies used for learning are required. They are structured into three categories: strategies which are used before reading (making up a purpose or a reason to read – the teacher, together with his students, or even only the student, establishes why it is important to read a certain material by trying to answer the questions: How will this paper help me? What should I find in this book?; looking at the book as a whole – going through the reading material by title, subtitles, chapters, subchapters, etc. with the purpose of identifying different characteristics: the dimension, the structure, the presentation mode, the density of information, the bibliography, the footnotes, the way in which the author highlights the important information (by means of underlining, of coloring, of putting into a box, etc.), what is interesting and useful for reaching one’s own purpose; evoking one’s own previous knowledge regarding the content of the paper/book – the reader’s motivation or self-motivation to read a book on a topic with whom he is familiar); strategies used during reading (the analysis and interpretation of the material – the analysis on titles, legends, graphics, diagrams, maps, etc. and the interpretation of the content of the graphic material for which one needs to read the text, to activate one’s prior knowledge and to correlate it with the new information; the complete reading of the text in order to get familiar with the content and to spot the messages; the selective re-reading of the text in order to understand the meaning of the relevant and hard parts of the text; the identification of words, expressions or of misunderstood passages – to look up in dictionaries the meaning of new words or expressions and to re-read the contextual passages, but to replace in the text, the unknown words with known synonyms, to reformulate the hard passages; the highlighting of key-concepts, of classifications, of essential ideas, of important paragraphs by means of the underline, the colors and boxes or by means of different signs used for different types of annotations: question marks for unclear ideas, vertical serpentine lines for confused passages, etc.; the making up of some suppositions about the author: regarding his purpose, intentions, vision, beliefs, prejudices, the social context in which he wrote, the references; the making up of some logic schemes for the studied material – the identification of key-concepts, of the cause-effect and problem-solutions relationships, of classifications, of examples, etc. or the rebuilding of the logic schemes if they need additions, corrections or deletions of information); strategies which are used after reading (to compare the original with its schematic representation, to render the information verbally or mentally using familiar words; to re-read those passages that have not been learnt well enough, either from the text or from the logic scheme; to add some examples, arguments, counterarguments, personal opinions, some references, etc. in the scheme; to solve the exercises and the problems, to answer the questions at the end of the text) (Dulamă, M. E., 2002: 59-61).

The debate method: an organized exchange of information, ideas, proposals, opinions etc.; stages: introducing the debate/ the actual debate/ conclusions; variants: group debate, the debate seminar, the “round table” type of debate, Philips 6/6 (dividing the class in groups of six pupils, whom will debate a certain problem for 6 minutes); the debate allow students to acquire knowledge, to state personal opinions, to develop cooperation skills, creativity, and a critic sense, and stimulates spontaneity.

Learning through discovery: it is a continuation of problem solving which presupposes the reconstruction of all the stages involved in the elaboration of knowledge through the student’s effort; forms: independent discovery and guided discovery; variants: discovery through analogy, inductive/deductive discovery. Learning through discovery
results in a lasting knowledge acquired by the students and in the development of motivation. It presupposes initiating the students in investigative activities in which they are asked to formulate hypothesis to concrete situations, to document themselves in that particular area of expertise, making an experiment, interpreting the data, to formulate conclusions and to present them in different forms (written, oral, graphic). This can be accomplished in the following ways: inductive (from the concrete to the general), deductive (from the general to the particular), transductive (through the analogy between systems and their components).

The project – research theme, stimulates the students to investigate on a certain theme regarding the environment, to elaborate scientific papers for certain symposiums, circles or scientific communication sessions. The project, either individual or group project, offers opportunities for health education.

Reciprocal teaching – if teaching is the best and the most effective way of learning, than the students who are asked to play the role of a teacher, have the possibility to (re)learn what they already thought they knew. This method can be applied in groups of 4-7 members and it consists of: 1) all the participants have a copy of the same text; 2) all the participants read the first paragraph, and one of them (which was appointed before) summarizes it; 3) than he asks a question about the paragraph and asks the others to answer; 4) at the request of his colleagues or out of his own initiative, the one that „teaches” has to explain the things that seem unclear to his colleagues; 5) together, the students try to predict what will happen in the next paragraph that they will all read and which will be taught by another colleague, member of the same group. The steps are repeated until the whole text/ material is finished.

This technique allows students to experiment with the idea of being a teacher by helping the others learn and assimilate/understand a text/ material. Thus the students are given the possibility to become teachers, a situation in which they can train and practice some skills which are specific to the teaching career, like the ones concerning communication, the interrelations, transmitting knowledge, the active listening, making up questions, imposing oneself.

4. Conclusions

Learning through cooperation contributes to the development of proactive skills that support the changes in mentality. Among the most obvious, we name: the desire to get informed on what concerns the different public aspects, the cooperation with others in order to find out the solutions, the interpretation of the information in a critical and responsible manner, talking about the past from different perspectives, making some statements and generating some conclusions, the development of the feeling that one is part of a group, the acceptance of the different opinions by talking openly with others, the wish to understand the other’s perspective, both at the cognitive level and at the emotional one, knowing the different human communities and accepting their existence. These capacities are built up in time, no matter the disciplines that one has studied and the school year in which one is. A certainty remains the fact that by obtaining these skills the pupils and students will manifest o broader openness towards plurality and dialogue. Thus, mentality does not continue to play the role of an ethnic filter, but it will become only a momentarily possibility for a young person to relate to his own environment.

References