Supporting Graduate Students toward "A Pedagogy of Hope": Resisting and Redefining Traditional Notions of Disability

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Abstract: This article describes the process by which faculty at Ghent University enculturate graduate students into a Disability Studies in Education (DSE) perspective within a culture that actively supports segregation of students with disabilities. Our curriculum centers around "a pedagogy of hope"—a way of thinking and working in which problems, solutions, and roles are defined differently from the traditional models of disability. To illustrate this work, we present five key incidents (real-life vignettes) that have occurred within the day-to-day interactions with the students and analyze the significance of these incidents in regard to student growth. We conclude with a discussion of ten basic elements of DSE that are central to research, teaching, and action.

Key Words: disability studies, education, inclusion

Introduction

At Ghent University in Belgium, the faculty of Educational Sciences exposes graduate students[1] to concepts, research evidence, and examples of good practice as established within the field of Disability Studies in Education (DSE). Promoting a DSE perspective might be considered radical in a country with a public educational system that excludes students with disabilities—as evidenced in Belgium's *nine* different types of special schools for those students. Moreover, *The World Report on Disability* (2011) indicates that Belgium sends more children with special needs to special schools than any other country in Europe. Thus, the Educational Sciences program prepares students to work within contexts (e.g., special schools or traditional service delivery models) where colleagues may have an intense link with the individual/medical model of disability (Van Hove et al., 2008).

Our process for enculturating students into a DSE perspective can be considered a work in progress. Resistance to change from an old-fashioned special education expert position to a human rights perspective seems to be the central challenge. Extra emphasis is given to helping our students make this shift because we live in a European region where thinking about education has become increasingly focused upon "instrumental rationality." For example, we observe ongoing and proliferating discussions about student and teacher "competencies." The function of higher education appears to be as the provider of intellectual capital for the knowledge economy (Allen, Ramaekers, & Van Der Velden, 2005), and students are increasingly seen as future employees for the labour market.

In this article, we rely upon the method of key incidents (Emerson, 2004) to illustrate *how* we encourage "a pedagogy of hope" (Freire, 2004) in resisting and redefining traditional notions of disability. Emerson (2004) defines key incidents as rich descriptions of people and interactions as they exist and unfold in their native habitats. To illustrate our process at the university, we describe five key incidents (represented as vignettes within text boxes) that

occurred during our interactions with students and analyze their significance to student growth.

Educational Practices Linked to a Pedagogy of Hope

Freire (2004) describes *hope* as follows:

> "Hope is necessary but is not enough. Hope is an ontological need; it demands an anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be." (pp. 2-3)

We describe the pedagogy of hope for our educational practices (Van Hove et al., 2008) as a way of thinking and working in which:

- *Problems are defined differently.* No longer are the impairments of the children we work with seen as the main problem or obstacle. Instead, within a process of "conscientization" (Freire, 2000), students learn to see and analyze obstacles in attitudes, school culture, the training of experts, and discriminatory practices.

- *Solutions are defined differently*. We introduce students to the idea that we do not need detached and objective professionals with standard solutions. Instead, we expect students to strive toward becoming *companions,* who support solutions that are built via dialogical action and reflection.

- *Roles are defined differently.* Children with labels and their families are no longer docile acceptors of "what is there" (Freire, 2004). Instead, problems are perceived as challenges to overcome. Students are challenged to act as allies with children, parents, and teachers to concretize the ultimate dream of children with labels and their parents: to participate in society.

Key Incident One

Problematization: Students live in a culture that initiates and socializes them to become experts for "the Others."

We recently received the correspondence below from one of our students in the Educational Sciences program.
…Yesterday I got information about my practice period concerning the topic of "inclusive education." I am asked to give support to a boy who will not attend school any more from September on. His support team has prepared an alternative program for him. They asked me to give support on Mondays when he will go to work in a farm for old horses. They expect me to help him when he is taking care for the horses. I don't want to be too critical but…I don't think what they have asked me to do can be seen as "real inclusive education." I really want to learn new things in my practice period and I already got the opportunity to guide children within "hippotherapy" while I was working in a psychiatric hospital for

children. So I'm writing you this mail to check if this new task can be seen as a valuable project.

To understand this student's perspective, we turn to a Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) to help us identify specific discursive techniques within the communication, such as:

- *(Subject) positions*. "Positioning" refers to communicative strategies used to assign the self or others to positions. It is a speaker's moral and personal attributes that shape how "what is said" may be understood (Wells, 2011).

- *Technologies of power and self*. These technologies can be seen as methods used by people to have an impact on how they will be perceived by others and themselves.

It is worth noting that this student is a Belgian citizen in a country where children are raised with "regimes of truth" such as: special children are better off in special schools; adults with disabilities live together in residential facilities; and citizens should feel a kind of pity for persons with disabilities. In light of these "truth(s)," our students typically are initiated and socialized to become "experts." From an expert position, people act as if they know what the (one and only) norm is. We see this student as running the risk to colonize (Pfeiffer, 2001) the life of the boy in question by making comparisons that can be described as "(only) understandable from a empirical-analytical perspective" (Skrtic, 1995; Gabel and Peters, 2004)—i.e., working with horses from a job coaching perspective is compared (incorrectly) to hippotherapy. Being outside the classroom (because this student is brought into a practice period experience) is seen as incompatible with inclusive education. Our student appears to be trapped by the idea that there is only one standard situation, forgetting that a lot of youngsters *without* impairments also have periods of practice within their curriculum.

Key Incident Two

Problematization: Students may struggle to understand disability within a human rights perspective.

We take you to a class discussion within one of our courses: "Diversity and Inclusion in Pedagogical Settings." Let's listen to a discussion in a student group within our course while they are asked to position themselves personally in relation to phenomena, such as diversity, disability, inclusion/exclusion.

Student 1: …from my perspective inclusion has to do with parents who do not accept the handicap of their children…

Student 2: …don't you feel ashamed to take this position?

Student 3: …PRESUME WE FOLLOW STUDENT 1's POINT OF VIEW. THIS WOULD MEAN THAT I AM NOT ALLOWED TO FOLLOW THIS COURSE … AND FOR ME FOLLOWING THIS COURSE IS ESSENTIAL BECAUSE I WANT TO GET ENOUGH

BACKGROUND TO CRITIZISE INCLUSION FOR DEAF STUDENTS WHO USE SIGN LANGUAGE. INCLUSION AS IT IS ORGANISED NOW WILL KILL OUR DEAF CULTURE. DEAF CHILDREN AND YOUNGSTERS WILL GET ISOLATED WITHIN SCHOOLS THAT ARE DEFINITELY ORGANISED AS PLACES FOR HEARING PERSONS….[2]

This key incident shows that some of our students still live with the idea that the ultimate alternative - bringing children/persons with disabilities into a parallel system of special schools and special services is the one and only solution. So from this perspective, parents and children who do not follow this path and make a choice for inclusive education are seen as not accepting the burden of the "handicap" of their family member (Ferguson, 2001).

Even the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (not known in disability studies circles as a particularly progressive instrument) tries to put the notions of health and disability in a new light. It mainstreams the experience of disability and recognizes it as a universal human experience. Furthermore, ICF takes into account the social aspects of disability and does not see disability only as a medical or biological dysfunction. By including contextual factors (in which environmental factors are listed), ICF recognizes the impact of the environment upon a person's functioning.

In this light, participation becomes a crucial and central concept and a human right – as stated in the UN-Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as ratified by Belgium in July 2009. Instead of thinking about exclusion and parallel systems, this human rights perspective forces our students to think about support systems for full participation and reasonable accommodations. If we return to the key incident, we see that some students persist in giving time and energy to old discussions while losing track with interesting new challenges like: how do we preserve the Deaf Culture when we promote inclusive education?

Key Incident Three

Problematization: How do we place central issues like personal position and perspectives on the agenda?

Join us in a conversation with a student that occurred after we invited parents to the classroom to talk about their decision to choose inclusive education…

…one of the students asked if she could ask a question in private (she was upset, I could see tears in her eyes.) "My parents chose years ago to bring my brother with a disability to a special school. Does the discussion we have here in this course prove that my parents made the wrong decision? How do I talk with my mother (who is very interested in what we learn here at the university) about inclusion? I don't want her to feel guilty….

This key incident can be analyzed from different perspectives. On the one hand, it shows that each topic we study is (also) understood through our life stories. Although our students are following courses and training sessions, the way their parents and their family dealt with

challenges in the past stays as a very important frame of reference. On the other hand, we know that siblings of persons with disabilities often see themselves (and have made explicit or implicit promises to their parents about it) as the next generation of care givers for their brother or sister (Vanhoutteghem & Van Hove, 2012). Universities that conceive of themselves as houses full of science and objectivity must learn to deal with very personal stories that students bring into the courses.

Key Incident Four

Problematization: How can we encourage students to cross borders?

Consider this example of crossing borders…
Martin is a young man with a label of developmental delay. His parents brought him from kindergarten to a regular school believing in the talents of their son and in the power of bringing children of the same neighborhood together in the same school. Martin is now in his last years of secondary school and listens very carefully to stories in the press. He heard that the Government makes a promise to send more students abroad to enjoy international experiences. In the professional training center where he is enrolled, not many opportunities seem to exist to enjoy such an international experience…. But in coalition between his parents and one of our teaching staff members a great idea was born. Martin shared an information moment for our university students who were thinking about having a practice period abroad. He got the opportunity to present himself and his dreams. He asked if he could join one of our students (for a short period) while they went abroad and presented himself as a man who could cook great meals…. Some weeks later Martin had "a deal": one of our students travelling to Manchester for a semester there will be Martin's guide and roommate.

Within our university classrooms, *students are deliberately challenged* within co-teaching moments we organize with parents (from the Parents for Inclusion movement) and with self-advocates (from Our New Future). With these first actions, we hope to be able to challenge dominant assumptions and positions. In these lectures and workshops with the so-called clients of the care and school system, students are asked to work toward crossing borders. We start from the assumption that individuals have to admit that there *are* barriers that divide them, but they can also learn that these barriers can be crossed to work together in promoting social change.

Key Incident Five

Problematization: How can we help students develop a critical eye for representations of people with disabilities?

Aren't we all students first? Here we provide opportunities for duos to work together.
Last year, a group of students was asked to build portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) of students with special needs studying in higher education institutions. They were asked to build a dialogue with a colleague who needed reasonable accommodations to

study in a university or university college. In each duo, they had to negotiate which medium (e.g. film, poster, slide show, storytelling) was preferred. They learned that their work would be used by the Expert Center on Studying with Special Needs in Higher Education. They were asked to discuss with their colleague how he/she preferred to be represented. Some of them were taken to the social networks in which their colleagues were active.

We introduced portraiture exercises to confront our students with the way representations of persons with disabilities are constructed. Within their lives, our students are permanently confronted with media representations of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. While building a portrait together with someone with a label, students' everyday representations are questioned, criticized and eventually rejected. Within the process of building a portrait together we hope our students learn to balance their experiences with the lived experiences of their colleagues with a disability.

From Problematization to a Frame of Reference for Practice

We have learned through the years that *it is necessary to work with students starting from a stable and clear frame of reference.* Therefore we combine the theoretical basics of Disability Studies in Education as articulated in the book series of Danforth and Gabel (e.g. Connor, 2008; Danforth, 2009; Danforth and Gabel, 2006; Gabel, 2005; Gabel and Danforth, 2008; Smith, 2010; Valente, 2011) with the early ideas of Giroux (1983; 1988; 1990; 1992) and the work of Demetrion (2001). Before going to practice in the field and while they are doing their practica[3] our students attend lectures and study basic texts from the field of Disability Studies (Van Hove, 2009). We call attention to the following basic elements of Disability Studies that can be seen as central in research, teaching, and action:

1. Participation is essential.

For persons with disabilities, it is not enough to be present. Participation is more than presence. We should think about belonging and about active involvement in whatever is going on (Biklen, 1992). Disability Studies invites us to become careful and active listeners (Rinaldi, 2005) to what people with disabilities want and how they want to participate. It makes us think about ways we can/should support people with disabilities to enhance their participation and opportunities to participate. Following the adoption of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), inclusion and participation are seen as essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of strategies that seek to bring about a genuine equalization of opportunity. In addition we are interested in the barriers to participation for people with disabilities.

2. Disability Studies turns around talents, dreams, and desires of people with labels.

For years, we focused solely on what people with disabilities are "not good at" and what they are not *allowed* to do. Professionals have traditionally behaved like managerial ticking boxes (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). It is a challenge for our students not to fall into this trap. We want to explore *explicitly* talents, dreams, desires and plans. We need to handle any questions that need negotiations with other people closely involved. How can we understand who the child

and his/her potentiality actually is? How can we support this child and his/her parents and family on their journey?

3.   With Disability Studies, we join the human rights discourse.

The UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities ratified by Belgium in 2009 is an important guide for the way we support and encourage people. We are not in the position to say what is "reachable" (Barton and Oliver, 1997). Inclusive education and living are part of a human rights approach to social relations and conditions. The intentions and values involved relate to a vision of the whole society of which education is a part. Issues of social justice, equity and choice are central to the demands for inclusive education. Inclusive education is concerned with the well-being of all pupils, and schools should be welcoming institutions.

4. Persons with disabilities have their own voices and their stories must come first.

A crucial feature of disabled people has been the extent to which their voices have been excluded. Overcoming disabling barriers will include listening to the voice of disabled people and their organizations, especially as they struggle for choice, rights and participation (Clough & Barton, 1995). The voices of family members (or of other persons close to persons with disabilities) cannot be regarded as a substitute for the voices of people with disabilities themselves. The person with disabilities always comes first, is listened to, is offered opportunities for communication, and is not excluded because of traditional ways of thinking e.g., "he is looking for attention," or "she does not understand very well what is happening.")

5.   Families, natural networks, and actions in society should come first.

Disability Studies recognizes the important role that family members play in the lives of many persons with disabilities. Scholarship in this area includes research into the views and experiences of family members. Embedding the individual in a web of relationships ensures greater opportunities for shared identity formation with multiple social partners (Ferguson, 2003). Murray and Penman (1996) are very clear in what they think about segregated and so-called specialized systems: for us the concept of segregation is completely unjustifiable – it is morally offensive – and contradicts any notion of civil liberties and human rights. Whoever it is done to, wherever it appears, the discrimination is damaging for our children, for our families, and for our communities. We do not want our children to be sent to segregated schools and any other form of segregated provision. We do not want our children and families to be damaged in this way. Our communities should not be impoverished by the loss of our children.

6. People with a professional role must recognize their position and give it a place in their relationships with others.

We do not believe in professional attitude that is based on objectivity and detachment, people have to take each other's expertise and experiences seriously. To us, modest relations (Goodley & Van Hove, 2005) are the central motive. Assumptions about normality and the reproduction of structural differences are disclosed and mirrored in these modest relationships. In view of this choice and following Paulo Freire, we cannot stay (in research and practice) neutral. This leads to communal activism and resistance in order to further a longed for social change (Freire, 2004). It is a living engagement; it applies to resources of our creative imagination in an

attempt which is as much to disclose something about ourselves as it is to disclose something about them. It is an engagement that tries to find a way of being open to them and a way of learning from them and which, having tried once, will return and try again renewing, renewing, renewing (Campbell, as cited in Davis, 1998). In this perspective our pedagogical work becomes a combination of a political act, a creative act, and an act of knowing (Gadotti, 1998).

7. We believe in the strengths of reflective practitioners.

Reflective practice is an approach to practice that involves: (i) asking questions to get beneath the surface of the situations we encounter to ensure that we have more than a superficial grasp (Murray & Kujundzic, 2005), and (ii) takes account of wider social and political processes that disadvantage marginalized groups of people and reinforce patterns of discrimination and oppression (Mullaly, 2002). A person who constructively queries critical situations, organizations, and structures, begins to see and work toward creating a better world for all citizens.

8. Disability Studies is not afraid of contradictions.

Dilemmas are revealed as fundamentally born out of a culture that produces more than one possible ideal world. Social beings are confronted by and deal with dilemmatic situations as a condition of their humanity (Billig et al., 1988). It must be possible to think about and to search for various entrances within the same challenge. Pedagogues are not plumbers who immediately need to solve the problem. Complexity is the norm and we have to take different options into account.

9. It is important to consider disability from a historical and comparative perspective.

We must ask how were phenomena that we know now constructed in the past? How do people who live in different cultures tackle phenomena we live with? From such analyses, much can be learned. The field of (special) education is full of histories that define and classify individuals according to specific concepts and along specific lines. These not only mark the individual development of those who are subjected to these procedures but also open up possibilities for them to become agents of their own realities.

10. Disability Studies goes hand in hand with action.

We cannot be bystanders with our hands in our pockets and wait. We have to act together with people with disabilities and their families.

Conclusion

Our DSE curriculum offers students *short confrontations with practice situations* while being coached by one of our staff members. These experiences are designed to bring students to the idea that schools and care organizations can be viewed as political and cultural sites as well as institutions of instruction or care. Students are asked to build experiences from the perspective that we cannot ignore difference. Difference in a Deleuzian perspective (Davies & Gannon, 2009) can become a productive force—accepting difference on the one hand and finding ways to articulate shared goals and values on the other hand. Empowerment means more than self-

confirmation. It also refers to the process by which students are able to interrogate and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming, rather than merely serving the wider social order.

In the final year of the Masters trajectory, some students follow a disability studies path concerning their practice period (one semester) and for their master thesis project. In the spirit of Giroux, we encourage our students to align their practice period and their research project with like-minded social workers, community activists, parent groups, and others across disciplines and roles for the purpose of working toward the vision of a transformed society and reasonable accommodations. Students really need these allies to work with/through tensions of power, knowledge, and ethics as they play themselves out in the institutions of schooling and other social arenas.

Within this one semester practice period, we bring students together in little communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). With coaching and support from one of our staff members, we motivate them to learn from each other. We also want them to discover that the same processes of power, of labeling, of ignoring the voice of certain people, of bringing standard solutions to very personal questions can be observed and challenged in different settings and to different groups.

We hope that at the end of the day our students become reflective practitioners. We would like to see them as transformative intellectuals linking their academic work with an emancipatory vision. Seen from this perspective, critical reflection and action become part of a fundamental social project that is embedded in a human rights discourse. The responsibility of the transformative intellectual is to create oppositional public spheres to challenge the hegemonization of dominant institutions with their discourses and practices. We encourage them to participate in the creation of oppositional counter-spaces that challenge any totalizing influence of institutions.

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Endnotes

[1]Our students get a Master Diploma in Educational Sciences. In the future most of them will work as team coaches within institutions and services (such as special schools, services for early intervention, services for supported living or supported employment). Some will give direct support to children or adults with a label, e.g., through projects of inclusive education or personal budgets.

[2]This quote from a Deaf student is written down as it was translated through a sign interpreter for the hearing students

[3]Within their 5-year training period, our students have to observe basic pedagogical practices in their third year of Bachelors in schools, (special) services for children with disabilities for one month. They co-coach pedagogical processes in their last year of Masters training for 6 months.