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Resilience and Intercultural Education on Secondary School: A Comparative Study in Mexico and Germany

Abstract

This paper presents one product of a research report about the promotion of resilience in the school setting in two public secondary schools, located in Mexico and Germany, and its relation with the pupils' multiculturalism. The paper focuses on the need of the results' analysis to identify the school actors' perceptions of the promotion of resilience at the secondary school, in contexts where pupils' cultural characteristics are highly diverse. The theoretical guidelines are linked to resilience research, especially research focusing on resilience in schools, as well as to studies on intercultural education. A mixed method was used; it is a dual comparison in two geographical, economic, political and cultural different national contexts, where the analysis unit was "the school". Research was conducted with secondary schools' principals, including the teaching staff, from both schools and with a first graders group on Telesecundaria 42, in Hidalgo, Mexico, and one group of the same grade from a Realschule in NRW, Germany. The results provide significant data that show a strong nexus between students' and teachers' perceptions of resilience development at the school. This article focuses on resilience promoting factors. It was concluded that positive emotional relationships between students and teachers build resilience and decrease risks of failure and dropout.

Keywords: resilience, intercultural education, secondary school

Introduction

Since the last decade of the twentieth century the world community has witnessed the multiple effects of economic and technological globalization. These effects have allowed the free movement of goods and knowledge on the planet as well as the mobility and flow of people and cultures all over the world. Hence an inescapable multicultural mosaic has emerged, which has become subject of the political agenda of most nations.

Diverse studies have pointed out the effects of this global era in school, saying it is a space in which different views, traditions, preferences, languages, expectations, knowledge and skills of students and teachers come together every day (Tenti, 2000). The place par excellence oriented to serve the youth is secondary school, school for teenagers. Since late last century, this educational level has become mandatory and final stage of basic education in Mexico and in most of the Western countries that share the goal that entire population reaches a minimum schooling of 10 to 13 school years (Sourrouille & Lopez, 2012).

Teens attending Mexican and German secondary school live, directly or indirectly, the effects of native and non-native migration, respectively, and they must be able to reconcile several strange codes and cultural values, different linguistic patterns, attend a standardized curriculum that does not consider the

different rhythms and styles of learning, nor its physical, motor and cognitive skills or maturation levels. This places them at a risk situation, because the circumstances of schooling are not favourable. Thus, inside the homogeneous school the heterogeneous students live insecurity processes, incomprehension, rejection and academic difficulties, which can become stressors and promoters of failure and dropout, both in Mexican (Canales & Dimas, 2010; Hernandez & Cabrera, 2014) and German secondary school (Ertl, 2006; Faas, 2008).

Therefore it is important to examine promotion resilience in secondary school. Working from this approach favors the identification and promotion of students' strengths, as well as the development of processes to face and successfully cope with diverse vital difficulties (Henderson & Milstein, 2007), as those faced in school settings.

The overall goal of this study was to analyze the actors' perceptions of the resilience promotion in the secondary school in a national context where students' cultural traits are highly diverse. The approach is based on intercultural education discourses.

This article presents an overview of two school actors' (i.e., students and professors) perceptions of the risk decrease and resilience promotion in a Mexican and a German secondary school.

Resilience and intercultural education

The use of the resilience concept in social sciences within the context of human sciences occurred in the 70s in the Anglo-Saxon world. Resilience approach emerged from efforts to understand the causes of Psychopathology; studies showed that there was a group of infants who did not develop psychological problems despite researchers had predicted so (Masten, 2001; Grotberg, 2006). The first step was to assume that those children were positively adapted because they were "invulnerable" (Koupernik, quoted by Rutter, 1991; Garcia-Vega & Domínguez, 2013); that is, they could "resist" adversity. The second step was to propose the concept of resilience instead of "invulnerability" because resilience can be promoted, while invulnerability is considered an intrinsic individual's feature (Rutter, 1991; Garcia-Vega & Domínguez, 2013).

However, conceptions about resilience can be grouped into two poles. On the one hand, resilience is linked to the idea of resistance to trauma and the ability to overcome it, resilience is closer to an existential dynamics. From this view, authors insist that resilience is not a state, but a dynamic process that begins with contact with the other – educator, family, friends, etc. (Martinez & Vazquez-Bronfman, 2006).

Therefore, resilience as a process expands its potential to explain and promote critical, proactive and autonomous personalities, while opening the individual to the social sphere. At the same time, the concept of resilience as "capacity", that just some people would have, has turned into "process" that we all can develop. Thus, resilience "refers both to individuals in particular and school or family groups being able to minimize and overcome the harmful effects of adversity and disadvantaged contexts and sociocultural deprivation" (Uriarte, 2006, p. 13).

Closely related to the above-named idea, in the last three decades the perspective of "intercultural education" has been mentioned in academic speeches

and recommendations of international organizations, such as UNESCO, aiming to promote the emergence of societies tending to justice and equity (Jablonska, 2010). Thus, some European countries, such as Germany, that had developed educational proposals for care to immigrant populations who joined school spaces in the second half of the twentieth century, in the context of the post-war period and the technological revolution, changed by the mid-nineties their discourses to include the intercultural education view (Directorate General for the Internal Policies of the Union, 2008). According to Velasco (2010), this did not happen in Mexico, because even though in the 90s an intercultural bias was introduced in education, it was only aimed at the field of indigenous education, which turned from “bicultural bilingual education” (Spanish-Native Mexican Language) to “intercultural bilingual” (Spanish-Native Mexican Language, again). Thus, even though since 1992 national multiculturalism was constitutionally recognized, it was with the publication of the National Education Program 2001-2006 (PNE 2001-2006) that the interest of introducing a cultural bias to public education into all school modalities and levels in order to give positive recognition to different cultures.

The study

Method

A mixed method with contributions of comparative education was used. A dual comparison was designed in geographically, economically, politically and culturally very different national contexts, but sharing similarities (Manzon, 2007). The unit of analysis is “school”. It is a static comparison. Considering that it is oriented to the analysis of relations between contexts and educational synchronous processes, a cross section of the phenomenon was performed.

The selected sample was a convenience sample (Parreira, 2014). The comparison was made in a secondary school located in Hidalgo, Mexico, and a secondary school located in NRW, Germany, during the 2014-2015 school year. Differentiating, comparative criteria and relevant data for comparison criteria were established (macro and micro contextual aspects), as well as analysis categories within them.

The study was conducted with school head teachers, with a group of 13 teachers in Mexico and 11 teachers in Germany, and one 7th grade group with 23 students in Mexico and one with 24 students in Germany.

Assessment tools

In order to obtain the required information, the following techniques were chosen: document review and analysis; two different questionnaires about resilience in school with Likert-type answers were administered: one for teachers and a simplified version for students adapted from Henderson and Milstein’s proposal (2007). School principals were interviewed.

Both questionnaires were previously tested and validated; a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.90 was obtained.

This paper is a report of students’ and teachers’ perceptions of the three factors that build resilience in the school.

Results

Both questionnaires gather data about six factors (Henderson & Milstein, 2007) that promote resilience in school, which are:

1. Improving pro-social relations.
2. Setting firm and clear limits.
3. Teaching “skills for life”.
4. Providing support and care.
5. Establishing and transmitting high expectations.
6. Providing participation opportunities.

Those factors are grouped in two categories: the first three factors help to “decrease risks within the environment”, while the three remaining factors contribute to “build resilience in the environment”.

Questionnaire for teachers was made up of 36 items, six items per each factor. Two items are designed to explore the perception of students’ activities in school, other two items explore the relationships among school staff, and the last two items include the familiar context with the school.

Questionnaire for pupils was made up of 12 items, two items per each factor. It explores exclusively their perception of activities and relationships among other students.

Both questionnaires had 4 possible answers per item:

1. We are alright in this area.
2. We have made great progresses in this area.
3. We are starting to work in this area.
4. We have done nothing in this area.

For data analysis, answers in each factor were examined. According to the three factors that develop resilience within the environment, students’ data show the next results.

For Mexico, regarding the factor “providing support and care”, 56.6% of the students chose option 1, 30.4% chose option 2, and 13% chose answer 3. For Germany, percentages were 12.5%, 62.5%, and 20.8%, respectively, and 4.2% chose option 4.

In regard to factor “establishing and transmitting high expectations”, 21.7% of the Mexican students chose option 1, 73.9% chose answer 2, and 4.3% chose answer 3. For Germany, percentages were 45.8%, 50%, and 4.2%, respectively.

In regard to the third factor “providing participation opportunities”, 47.8% of the Mexican students chose option 1, 39.1% chose option 2, 8.7% chose option 3, and 4.3% answered with 4. For Germany, percentages were 8.3%, 50%, 37.5%, and 4.2%, respectively.

For teacher, the results in the same three factors were as follows. For the factor “providing support and care”, 61.5% of the Mexican teachers chose option 2 and 38.5% chose answer 3. For German teachers, percentages were 54.5% and 45.5%, respectively.

For Mexico, regarding the factor “establishing and transmitting high expectations”, 46.2% of the teachers chose option 2 and 53.8% chose option 3. For Germany, percentages were 36.4% and 54.5%, respectively, and 9.1% chose option 4.

In regard to the third factor “providing participation opportunities”, 69.2% of the Mexican teachers chose option 2, 15.4% chose option 3, and 15.4% chose option 4. For Germany, percentages were 54.5%, 18.2%, and 18.2%, respectively, and 9.1% chose option 1.

Data analysis for grouped factors showed the next results.

For Mexico, regarding the category “build resilience in the environment”, 65.2% of the students chose option 1, 26.1% chose option 2, and 8.7% chose option 3. For Mexican teachers, 61.5% chose option 2, 30.8% chose option 3, and 7.7% chose option 4.

For Germany, regarding the same category, 33.3% of the students chose option 1, 45.8% chose option 2, 16.7% chose option 3, and 4.2% chose option 4. For teachers, 45.5% chose option 2, 36.4% chose option 3, and 18.2% chose option 4.

Conclusion

After conducting data analysis, we can say that there is a close and strong nexus between students’ and teachers’ perception of the three factors that build resilience in the school in both analysis units.

This is important, since one of the specific goals of this study was to analyze and contrast the school actors’ perceptions of the promotion of resilience at school. According to Manciaux (2013), school has a prominent and privileged place as it is recognized by the community members. The school environment is the second source of security after the home and sometimes it is the only one.

We found that, although the Mexican school has more adverse conditions related to the socio economic, political and social conditions of the country, students and teachers report higher scores than the German analysis unit, especially in the factor of “providing support and care”. Data show a difference greater than 40 percentage points between the answers of Mexican and German students regarding this factor. In contrast, only a difference of 7 percentage points between the answers of Mexican and German teachers were identified; however, the same trend was observed. According to Henderson and Milstein (2007), the factor “providing support and care” is the most important aspect for the promotion of resilience in school and, moreover, it is a pillar in its building.

Therefore, it is important to note that even when discourses and policies on intercultural education are more advanced in the German context, the establishment of trust and care between students and teachers, such as those reported in the Mexican analysis unit, may contribute more effectively to the generation of school spaces that promote resilience.

Perhaps this is the biggest challenge in working with teenagers in social vulnerability: recognize them as a group, with their own needs and, thus, be able to see how the context can provide the necessary conditions for their development.

Finally, we consider important to notice that these results are maintained in the line of research that have linked intercultural perspective with the theoretical approach of resilience within school spaces. Thus, some research has been interested in investigating the relationship between immigration processes and resilience in school students in a European context from the perspective of multiculturalism; meanwhile, Martinez and Vasquez-Bronfman (2006) have incorporated this approach to working with children exiles in countries like France and Spain.

It is concluded that positive emotional relationships between students and teachers build resilience and reduce the risks of failure and dropout.

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