Chapter 11
The Role of Social Cognitive Flexibility in Effective Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In response to teachers' uncertainty and helplessness facing some types of cross-domain educational situations (CDESs), such as aggressive or impolite behavior, lack of interest, slow understanding, or drop in performance, the social cognitive flexibility (SCF) approach proposes an alternative way of considering teaching which focus not on the pupil as a problem but on the problematic nature of the situation. In this chapter, the two-phase SCF competence is theorized and illustrated by applied research and analyzed in close relation with teachers' perception of zone of action, theirs inclusive behaviors and epistemic inclusion in order to provide teachers with effective, tested, and concrete tools. SCF procedures are easy to implement, follow and routinize in the daily practice and they allow teachers master the cross-domain problems, foresee them, and even transform them into learning sequences. A training SCF program for future teachers is presented as well as some avenues for research.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing mobility and globalization in contemporary societies tend to intensify the heterogeneity of populations, and this includes the education of pupils and the communications with their parents. On the other hand, the problems of unemployment have increased the skepticism of new generations of teenagers toward the value of learning. In this context, teachers' traditional methods and approaches seem insufficient. Although professionals may be competent in their respective fields, they are often helpless when faced with a new population of pupils and can have difficulties in identifying the source of the pupils' demotivation, drop in performance, ostracism, verbal violence, and aggressive behavior.

One way to assess these problematic learning situations is to focus on students' behavior in order to capture the social and cultural factors that play a role in their school careers (Ogbu & Davis, 2003). Less attention, however, has been devoted

to the study of teachers' attitudes and behaviors in shaping students' experience of school. Most approaches in the domain of multicultural education try to respond to the increasing cultural diversity of the school population by emphasizing the development of a socially cohesive democratic community as well as mutual cultural enrichment. Indeed, if the implementation of multicultural education can contribute to prejudice reduction and the development of citizenship at the school level, one of its main goals should be to increase the academic achievement of students from different cultural backgrounds and low-status groups. However, such a project can also be detrimental to the targeted populations because it risks defining them according to essentialist categories, emphasizing issues of cultural in/compatibility, and categorizing presumed group members in stereotypical and irretrievable terms. While this risk is especially present within an international climate where problems related to contact between the cultures and cultural integration are intertwined with issues such as unruly behavior, low performance, dropping out of school, or even delinquency, it rests on very general mechanisms that have been identified by social psychological research (Sanchez-Mazas, 2014).

Adopting a social psychological perspective, our approach aims to question the biases and shortcomings that are most common in people's perceptions and interpretations of social situations, as well as the biases that affect teachers' practices—in particular, their responses to the problematic and potentially conflictual situations they have to deal with in multicultural school settings. Drawing upon classical and recent research, we address these shortcomings both as unavoidable mechanisms likely to be activated in most social and school situations and as manageable and, to some extent, controllable processes. Hence, this perspective's central notion—social cognitive flexibility—refers to the ability not to suppress these mechanisms but to overcome their overwhelming determination within the school experience.

Certainly, an alternative way of dealing with contemporary school problems is to adopt a more individualistic approach that can adjust to singular needs and styles. The risk with this approach is however that group dynamics and students' social identity concerns can be overlooked, and, in the case of highly problematic school situations, specialists need to be employed. Indeed, teachers are not officially required to be involved in their pupils' problems or reflect on how to resolve a specific educational situation, transform it into a learning one, and foresee any potential problems. The multiplication of employees involved in the social and psychological services at school and the possibility of a principal's intervention in the class contribute to the construction of the implicit rules for sharing roles and functions. Hence, it is not surprising that teachers often hand off difficulties to the principal or social/psychological services with the aim of restoring calm and good learning conditions. This kind of practice creates the habit of not getting involved (Mechi, 2014) and using only coercive methods to improve situations. Yet, the consequences of non-resolved problematic situations can be detrimental to both pupils (bad reputation, broken school career, unfulfilled potential; Croizet & Leyens, 2003) and teachers (burnout, occupational exhaustion, and feelings of incompetence or helplessness; Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003). This makes research into new theoretical models and the elaboration of new tools all the more urgent.

In this chapter, we propose a conceptualization of the SCF as a teacher's competence that can be developed through vocational training. This conceptualization strongly derives from our knowledge of social-psychological mechanisms that prevent understanding and appraisal of educational situations. The first section of the chapter will therefore be concerned with the major impediments to information processing identified in socio-cognitive research. These represent different biases in social perception and spontaneous responses to school situations that impinge upon

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