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The discursive construction of learning in a multiethnic school: perspectives from non-immigrant students

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This paper provides data from individual interviews conducted with 15 and 16 year-old non-immigrant students from a highly multiethnic secondary urban school in Barcelona, Spain. In this school, mixed classrooms (immigrant and local) and small linguistically heterogeneous working groups are frequent in the mathematics lessons. The focus is on the non-immigrant students’ perspectives on the notion of learning. Findings show that these students interpret certain whole-class and small-group interactions among local and immigrant students as not constitutive of learning. In particular, I explore some of the meanings associated with the representation of the multiethnic classroom as a conflictive place for learning.

The multiethnic classroom as constructed discourse

Discourses are social relationships where the meanings within these relationships are used to construct representations and new meanings (Gee, 1999; Mercer, 2002). Different groups develop different meanings in their construction and support for certain representations of social relationships by means of different recurrent discursive patterns (Chronaki, 2005; Lareau & McNamara-Horvat, 1999). By doing so, they actively construct a version of these relationships and, by being active, these constructions inevitably have social implications. In this paper, I explore some of the discursive actions and reflections developed by a group of non-immigrant students and associated with the representation of the multiethnic classroom as a conflictive place for learning. The approach can be seen both as an analysis of cases represented *Department de Didàctica de la Matemàtica i les Ciències Experimentals, Facultat de Ciències de l’Educació, E-G5, D-134, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, 08193, Barcelona, Spain. Email: Nuria.Planas@uab.es

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by some non-immigrant students and as an instance of another research problem, that of the multiethnic classroom, which is itself a case (Khisty & Chval, 2002).

In the context of the study, Barcelona, Catalonia, North-Eastern Spain, conflict and lack of opportunities are dominant modes of discourse which are partially responsible for the reproduction of the multiethnic classroom as a place where learning is seriously constrained (Planas & Civil, 2002; Planas & Gorgorió, 2004; Planas, 2005). Many in the middle-class white Catalan population view the growth of the number of immigrants and disadvantaged as a factor that may worsen their social and economic life conditions. Increasing anti-immigrant feelings have entered mainstream school and classroom cultures to the extent that arguments and practices in favour of segregation are common. The larger social discourse (Over, 1998) may be interpreted as forming the basis through which the link between conflict and multi-ethnic classrooms is mostly maintained and legitimated. However, there is still a need to better understand the arguments and valorisations that some local students use when they are asked to explain and argue their perspectives on the learning conditions in a school system with immigrants.

Conceptualising the multiethnic classroom as a constructed discourse places a particular and broadly accepted representation of this classroom—linked to conflict and lack of opportunities—as the discursive influence from which other representations are constructed. The meanings for the multiethnic classroom constructed by local students derive from pre-existing discursive modes which are dominant in these students’ cultures of reference, which in turn tend to be the dominant cultures. In the case of immigrant students, their meanings for the multiethnic classroom have as an influence the discursive modes provided by their groups of reference and the representations maintained by the dominant cultures. However, dominant representations within social systems are not so much the direct cause of particular forms of behaviour. They are drawn upon by individuals through whose actions social meanings are often reproduced in a tacit and unacknowledged way (Skeggs, 2004).

These considerations leave room for agency (Zipin, 1998). Both individuals and groups are agents who draw upon their own representations through their interactions with other individuals and groups (Lerman & Zevenbergen, 2004; Wenger, 1998). The articulation of group and individual identities is then dialogically framed by the dominant modes of discourse and the particular set of experiences. Forman and Ansell (2002) point to the problematic relationships between larger social (pedagogic) discourses and particular experiences. It can happen, for instance, that certain experiences lead to the acquisition of empathy for others’ cultural behaviours and meanings while current discourses prevent from this empathy by encouraging discomfort. Civil and Andrade (2002) and Civil, Planas and Quintos (2005) have documented cases of students’ and parents’ participation in multiethnic settings where discomfort was being promoted by different groups and institutions. These students and parents could have chosen not to participate and ‘leave’ an uncomfortable situation, but instead they accepted reflecting upon the possibilities of interculturality.

Social identities of individuals and groups have an influence on their processes of representing the world and experiencing agency (Mehan, Hubbard & Villanueva,
Social identities, expressed in the form of social positioning, carry with them expectations concerning how this world should be and representations about how it actually is. Here, expectations may be seen as a way of deciding which elements of representations are to be modified in order to achieve a more 'desirable' world. The different representations of the multiethnic classroom are, therefore, constructed around the idea of change. Any social positioning leads to a distinction between the proper elements within a representation and the non desirable elements whose modification is recommended or expected. The dominant representation of the multiethnic classroom points to this discourse of change –there are many elements to be changed in order to facilitate learning. On some occasions (see Civil & Planas, 2004, for more details on this issue), this discourse is extended to the extreme that the continuity of this type of classroom is seriously questioned by many significant groups and institutions.

**Method and context**

Twelve 15 and 16 year-old non-immigrant students (seven girls and five boys) from a classroom in a public high-school in Barcelona, Spain, were interviewed. They all had been born and raised in this city. The high-school was largely Moroccan (60%) and, in particular, 14 of the 28 students in the classroom were immigrants (seven Moroccan, three Dominican, two Pakistani and two Bangladeshi), nine of them being first generation immigrants. The school district is one of the least economically advanced in the urban area of the city. Here, an immigrant is an individual who is a first or a second generation immigrant (there are hardly cases of third generation immigrants). An individual who has been born in the country but whose family is neither Catalan nor Spanish is still considered to be an immigrant in the school context because s/he is supposed to regularly attend ‘community schools’ where the textbooks are the same as in their country of origin and the teaching takes place in her/his mother language. Immigrant children are not obliged to attend ‘community schools’, but most of them claim to enjoy attending them in the evening, especially in the case of the Muslim students.

All local students easily accepted participating in the study and being interviewed. Each individual interview was audio-taped and transcripts of the interviews were prepared. The school year had started at the beginning of September and the students were interviewed in October and November, when they had already shared lessons with their immigrant peers. Interviews were conducted in person, at one room of the school, and lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. They were developed either in Catalan or Spanish. Many of them expressed concern that their responses remained confidential. The access to the students was facilitated by their mathematics teacher who was also their tutor. He was Catalan, had taught in several different schools in urban settings over the past ten years and had collaborated with me in a previous research where he had been observed in his classroom. Moreover, he had voluntarily accepted his school destination and said to be satisfied with conducting a highly multiethnic mathematics classroom.
We intentionally selected a multiethnic classroom whose teacher promoted whole class discussions, who had the students’ desks arranged in small linguistically heterogeneous groups, and who was willing to propose to the students some reform-oriented aspects such as open and interactive tasks in a problem solving environment. Students had been engaged with routine mathematics in the recent past and were unfamiliar with problem solving dynamics. Furthermore, all immigrant students in this classroom had a rather good competence in at least one of the official languages—Catalan and Spanish—, though they used other languages at home and with peers from their linguistic group. The conditions concerning the classroom dynamics and the language competence were initially thought as a way to guarantee the possibility of communication among the students, and to avoid arguments about language miscommunication and isolation.

Until 2001, in Catalan public schools, first generation immigrant students were put together in special classes with students with mental and physical illness during the period of learning the official languages. Recently, a distinction has been established between students ‘with language problems’ and ‘with physical or/and mental disabilities’. The first and the second group, however, still have the same teachers and tend to work on the same adapted curricula in most schools. The placement of immigrants in special classes is considered a way to help them adjust to the norms and forms of behaviour within the local school system. Being a candidate for special education has to do then with the distance to the legitimate norms in the regular classroom. In our school, segregation is also a common practice in the different areas except for mathematics. In the case of mathematics, the school decided not to separate first generation immigrants in order to promote a certain coexistence and interchange among groups. The choice of mathematics was initially justified in terms of the cultural neutrality of this school subject (see Powell & Frankenstein, 1997, for arguments against this discourse on mathematics).

I used an interview guide as the basis of my questions. This guide was intended to accomplish diverse goals: 1) to develop a biographical sketch of each student, paying special attention to the school trajectory (e.g., getting good marks) and the current life situation (e.g., sharing home with people other than the parents); 2) to explore their experience of the teaching and learning of mathematics (e.g., being used to classroom environments with group work); 3) to explore their experience of the teaching and learning of mathematics in their current multiethnic classroom (e.g., being used to sharing group work with immigrant peers); and 4) to identify the learning barriers and opportunities that they linked with the multiethnic classroom (e.g., looking for specific patterns of relationships). The employment of open-ended questions such as ‘How do you collaborate with your immigrant peers?’, provided students with an active role in the research process. This format afforded them the opportunity to formulate their own answers, to seek clarifications from my comments and questions, and to pursue themes that they felt as relevant and had not been directly introduced.

In the first stage of the analysis, to facilitate discussion of the findings, I grouped the local students’ responses to points 2 and 3 under parallel broad headings such as
The discursive construction of learning in a multiethnic school

‘Motives for participation in the mathematics classroom’ and ‘Motives for participation in the multiethnic mathematics classroom’. Following transcription of the interviews and looking at the broad headings, I organized data related to point 4 by means of two initial broad headings, ‘Being helped and helper’ and ‘Learning local and immigrant practices’. It appeared that local students often felt as though they were in difficult situations where they had to choose between two or more alternatives. The explanations and answers given to points 2 and 3 were based on a range of very different contents and beliefs (one student was especially concerned with favouritism which resulted, in her words, in certain privileges for immigrant students, another student emphasized the need to provide common knowledge for everybody, etc.). The experience of two main dilemmas (see next section) was, however, common to all local students. These two patterns discovered provide an understanding of the local students’ learning in the context of a multiethnic classroom.

Results

During the interviews, local students rarely talked about experiences of explicit tensions in their relationship with immigrant students. However, important tensions between both groups of students were differently suggested. In previous research (see, for example, Planas & Civil, 2002) learning has been conceptualised in a way that requires communication and exchange. The data here shows a generalized resistance to either adopt or discuss alternative practices and meanings with the group of immigrant students. This resistance hampers a situation that has the potential to be a rich learning process in terms of communication and exchange. The attention paid to the immigrant students’ explanations, the interest in listening to them, and the immigrant students’ right to talk have many limitations from the point of view of the local students’ learning. Conversations between local and immigrant students typically occur in situations that the former do not consider to be legitimate academic situations. Although just by having the conversations, some sort of learning about other practices has to be occurring, even if local students do not make those practices part of their repertoire, the potential is undermined by the local students’ dismissal of their immigrant peers’ contributions.

The inter-group interactions –speaking and listening together– neither resolve nor reduce the resistance towards the immigrants’ practices and knowledge. In general, listening and speaking to the immigrants is primarily thought of by local students as a caring practice, rather than as a central activity in the construction of knowledge. It is not the presence of inter-group differences that makes interaction necessary but a certain assumed ideal about when and how the immigrants’ voices are to be heard in the classroom. Immigrants are not expected to intervene in deciding which are the correct strategies when solving a mathematical problem or which are the arguments and counterarguments needed when explaining it. Local students recognise immigrant students as participants of the classroom, but they do not expect them to play a significant role in determining how the mathematical practice evolves. Listening and speaking to immigrants is seen as an activity distinct from listening and speaking
to either the teacher or the other local students. This distinction is itself a matter for analysis and it is also an indicator of inter-group tensions.

In the interviews, local students place limits on what the immigrant students in their classroom may do and, in particular, on what they may do in relation to the construction of the legitimate academic discourse. Only a few local students give indirect justification for establishing these limits. They base their reasons on the lack of language and normative competence attributed to the immigrants, although all the immigrants in their class have a good competence in one of the official languages. Different local students attribute different categories of participation to the immigrant group or to particular immigrant students. On some occasions, private conversations with immigrant students may be seen as appropriate, while on other occasions these students may be allowed to talk to a wider audience or not to talk at all. This way of (not) dealing with the tensions of the multiethnic classroom is possible because, as many local students say, most immigrants assume a role of ‘easily accepting’ the others’ arguments and ‘easily agreeing’ when local students ‘reject their arguments and their participation’.

The interviews not only point to the perception of inter-group differences but also to the perception of a certain relatedness. Local and immigrant students have in common the experience of having previously been mathematical learners. Local students recognise that immigrants were used to doing mathematics in their former schools and that some of them were probably good at mathematics. On some occasions, they even suggest the value of the mathematical meanings that immigrants introduce. Nevertheless, the connections between what is valuable and what is useful are rather complicated. Local students do not consider the immigrants’ mathematical meanings useful in the local context and, therefore, they do not allow for the possibility of a joint mathematical practice. By limiting the immigrant students’ contributions to those that work within the practices that the local setting is expected to accept, the local students are contributing to how the immigrants construct their roles as members of the current classroom. This fact makes the inter-group relationships a matter of agency for the local students.

The local students’ resistance to learn from and with the immigrants can be illustrated by exploring two emerging dilemmas: 1) social responsibility vs. mathematical learning and 2) novel information vs. mathematical knowledge. I introduce instances of conversation to show how a confrontational type of discourse plays an important role during the interviews. This is discourse in which local students question or reject aspects of their immigrant peers’ ways of thinking and doing the mathematical task.

**Social responsibility vs. mathematical learning**

From the local students’ point of view, learning in multiethnic mathematics classrooms requires extra effort. The most recurrent dilemma in these students’ discourses centres upon the role of social responsibility in the classroom. Most of them suggest a distinction between ‘helping the immigrants’ and ‘doing
The discursive construction of learning in a multiethnic school

Local students accept helping the immigrant students willingly and, at the same time, they see this help as a rather negative influence on their own learning. On the one hand, most local students refer to their role as mediators in the classroom: they view the immigrants as members who need help and they view themselves as members who can give help. Membership in the classroom community gives the immigrants the right to understand the teacher’s demands, and local students are expected to mediate in this process of understanding. On the other hand, taking responsibility for the level of understanding of immigrants is regarded as a supplementary effort by most local students. When the local students realize their own learning might be ‘suffering’, most of them only take care of their immigrant peers after they are sure they have learned what they need to. Only two local male students, Eduard and Marc, say to give priority to helping the immigrants at the expense of their own needs, though they also express a certain resistance. Eduard, a low achiever in mathematics, says:

I always work with Imram, he helps me with the mathematics and I help him with the language. They really need it. Sometimes Imram makes small changes in the words and big changes in the wording, and then the others do not understand him. Then I explain what he means. I don’t mind helping him but sometimes I help him much more with the language than he helps me with the maths. Sometimes it is a kind of wasting my time.

When Eduard says that Imram makes small changes in the words and big changes in the wording, he is talking about a first generation Pakistani boy who arrived six years before, speaks Catalan and Spanish rather fluently and has only some difficulties when pronouncing certain words. The teacher explained that Eduard and Imram were in the same working group and most times Eduard did not agree with Imram’s ideas. As members of the same working group they were expected to bring up common proposals in the whole class discussion. The teacher also explained that Imram did not expect Eduard to help him with the language and he often got a bit nervous when realizing that Eduard did not reformulate his arguments properly. When ‘explaining what Imram means’, Eduard did not merely improve his peer’s use of the grammar and the vocabulary but partially modified his meanings.

Marc, a high achiever, refers to the idea of helping immigrant students with the language as an action that prevents the preferred work methodology, that is, small groups from functioning:

Most times we work in small groups, and this is quite a problem for us, at least for me, though I try. We are mixed groups. But you know, what immigrants say they do and what they actually do is not always the same. It is very difficult to talk about maths with them, it is difficult to complete the tasks, though I try (…). I look directly at their notebooks. Sometimes they have interesting comments there, but they are so slow with the language...

Mireia, a female high achiever local student, also emphasizes the idea of helping immigrants. She views her immigrant peers as in-transition learners who have priorities other than learning local mathematical practices:
They are experiencing troubling times, and they can hardly concentrate on maths. So, I don’t really think we learn mathematics with them but help them. They go to those schools in the evening and they are a bit confused about how things work in this school (...). Sometimes by helping them we can also get a bit confused! (...). I would ask your question a little bit differently, if you ask me what I think about being with immigrant students, I would tell you that I usually don’t mind.

Mireia talks about ‘getting a bit confused’ when she helps her immigrant peers. She is the only local student who refers to the classroom norms and the influence of the community schools on the immigrants’ behaviours. The other local students talk about helping immigrants with the language and they do not refer to helping them in the process of correctly adjusting to the (established) classroom norms. In general, local students do not talk about ‘being obliged’ to help the immigrant students with the language, and the classroom norms in the case of Mireia. Their comments rather suggest the feeling of ‘having an obligation’. Eduard and Marc do not seem to help Imram and other immigrant students because it is sensible to do so but because it is the right thing to do (‘They really need it’, ‘This is quite a problem for us (...)’), though I try’), regardless the consequences that this help may entail for them (‘It’s a kind of wasting my time’, ‘It is difficult to complete the tasks’). What local students disagree about, however, is where the limits of their obligations towards immigrants are to be drawn. Eduard and Marc give nearly unconditional help to their immigrant peers, even at the cost of their own learning, as they themselves experience it. On the other hand, Maria, a low achiever female student, says to feel released from her responsibility to help Nadia, a Moroccan female immigrant student, when the task is so difficult that she needs to concentrate herself:

To learn mathematics with immigrant students? To tell you the truth, it’s very tiring... they need lots of help. I try to help them as much as I can, but when I need to concentrate on the task, they must wait for my help.

From Maria’s perspective, the help given to immigrants can become excessive under certain circumstances. Social responsibility towards immigrants needs to be protected from becoming an obstacle to individual processes of learning. Although Maria thinks that this help should not be absolute, she experiences the ideas of ‘concentrating on the task’ and ‘helping the immigrants’ as contradictory. When I asked Maria to specify which types of help immigrants needed, she began by slightly suggesting the idea of norms but she finally talked about the language: ‘They are not used to... well, their families come from other countries and they speak other languages at home’. In general, classroom social relationships involve some ideals of communication and solidarity as well as language ideologies. Students interact on a regular basis as established by these ideals and ideologies. But, from the local students’ perspectives, communication and solidarity are not associated with the mathematical activity but with some kind of classroom social structure. The social interaction that defines the accepted social behaviour need not necessarily be supported by an interaction at a ‘mathematics-learning’ level. In this context, both social responsibility and learning cannot easily co-exist.
The discursive construction of learning in a multiethnic school

Novel information vs. mathematical knowledge

The second dilemma refers to what is to be learned. Local students are aware that they are in contact with groups from different school backgrounds and mathematical knowledge. They pay attention to the immigrant students’ explanations and they say they would be interested in learning more about the immigrants’ past school practices if both the immigrants’ and the local school practices could be learned simultaneously. None of the reasons put forward by the local students, when talking about what contents are not to be learned, express contempt for their immigrant peers or their knowledge. It is not that they just do not like being with immigrant students or that these students’ ideas make them feel uncomfortable, nor are the immigrants’ mathematical practices completely rejected. The local students’ preferences are argued in terms of what are the appropriate meanings in the local context. Laia, a high achiever female student, says:

Funny things happen with them. You cannot anticipate what they will do or say! Last week Afzal solved an equation by drawing a kind of diagram. It was interesting, though I missed some details because I was still finishing the task… I often wonder if he feels out of place with our maths… we cannot learn everything, our maths are already too much!

Pau, a low achiever male student, was also interested in the immigrants’ former school practices. But, in his opinion, a further exploration of these practices would take place at the expense of exploring the local ones that, in turn, cannot be questioned (‘Our maths are what they are’). In general, low achievers are more reluctant to explore immigrants’ practices, while high achievers tend to express a certain interest. Both Laia and Pau see the immigrants’ mathematical practices as novel practices that may provide information that help to better understand the local practices. In the case of Pau, however, it is not clear to what extent the immigrants’ practices are valued:

They use to make sense of the situations suggested by the mathematical tasks… maybe some did it that way before. Their comments help us to make sense of the situations before starting to solve the problems, but, anyway, we cannot always start making sense of it like they do. Our maths are what they are. And theirs… they are fine, but sometimes they just don’t fit in.

When asked about learning mathematics with immigrant students, Maria referred to the existence of central knowledge. She made a clear distinction between the local and the immigrants’ mathematical practices, and suggested incompatibility and a type of opposition. For Maria, learning more ways of subtracting can be a cause for not achieving very much academically. She links her own learning opportunities to the limitation of the immigrants’ interventions:

When the teacher asks ‘who knows?’, some of them know (…) We are not in the classroom to learn their mathematics but to learn ours. That’s what the exams are about and, you know, I have some difficulties with exams. What was the question? If I like to learn mathematics with immigrants… It does not make a difference. I’m not expected to learn Murshed’s way of subtracting.
Maria talked about the benefits, in terms of assessment, of paying more attention to local practices. It is suggested by many local students’ discourses that the academic benefit derived from adjusting to the local practices is higher than the possible academic benefit from learning novel and alternative practices. None of them talks in terms of the benefits for their learning process. Sergi, a low achiever male student, explicitly refers to the idea of benefits. He feels the need to filter the information he learns from the immigrants:

*I learn from what others say and do, but you see, in the case of the immigrants you must be very careful for your own benefit. They learned some mathematics differently and you must know what to learn from them (...) Most of them easily learn our ways, they have many opportunities and they take them.*

Laia, Pau, Maria and Sergi assume that they are not the ones responsible for reducing the distance between their knowledge and that of the immigrants. For them, it is the immigrant students, the ones that are ‘different’, who need to develop the strategies to move forward. On one hand, most local students interpret the immigrants’ mathematical knowledge as being important, though different from theirs. On the other hand, they have chosen not to learn further details about Murshed’s subtraction or Afzal’s method for solving an equation ‘for their own benefit’. They use knowledge from immigrant students’ in order to make sense of the situations suggested by the statements of certain mathematical problems, but this knowledge is considered anecdotal information instead of (potential) knowledge from where to construct academic meanings. During the interviews, it was not our intention to explore whether the local students contemplated the possibility and/or desirability of integrating the information given by the immigrants with what they thought of as mathematical knowledge. I did not talk about the advantages of such integration either. Only one student, Sergi, referred to lost opportunities when making the ‘choice’ not to integrate different meanings:

*There is a Chinese girl… she was in my class last year. One day, she drew part of a circle with her compass and then she said that she had drawn an angle. The teacher said it was okay because the angle has nothing to do with the directions of the two intersecting lines but with the idea of amplitude. That girl, she was always listening to us… I often think that she must have many other examples, like the one about the angle… but I’m not going to use the compass when drawing an angle.*

The year before, Sergi had widened his notion of angle by listening to an immigrant student, and he was aware of having learned from this student. However, Sergi’s comment suggests a basic choice situation. He gives up access to some novel meanings in order to gain access to other meanings that are more highly valued in the local context. From this perspective, the lost opportunities in making a choice and the opportunities gained somehow balance each other. In this case, when partially solving the dilemma ‘novel information vs. mathematical knowledge’, there are the general concepts relating to benefits and costs underlying Sergi’s option. He believes that the local mathematical practices are more appropriate than the immigrants’. Most local students seem to have learned to distinguish between an academic
dimension, represented by the local school knowledge, and an informal dimension represented by the immigrants' knowledge, related on many occasions to community schools and their influence on immigrants' actions. This finding suggests the capacity of the classroom culture to initiate and maintain the distinction between the two dimensions.

Conclusion

Data shows that local students contribute to the representation of the multiethnic classroom as a conflictive place for learning. While some local students may rationalise their opinions and be able to articulate discursively the reasons for their rejection of this classroom, they are not necessarily aware of the implications of their behaviour. In this paper I have developed a first analysis confined to the exploration of the local students' perspectives. I have not discerned here the relationships between the students' actions and the classroom structure. In particular, during the interviews there was not any intention of constructing new forms of discourse as a means towards establishing non-conflict as a social norm in the understanding of the multiethnic classroom. In future papers, there is a need for a move to a second analysis that seeks ways in which certain behaviours permeate the classroom social life and the modes of discourse. It must be examined to what extent local students have a role in the creation of learning conditions in their classrooms and in the reduction of learning opportunities. The study of other multiethnic classrooms, in different social, geographical and school contexts, will have to contribute to explore inter-group tensions.

Most local students point to recurrent patterns in linguistic constructions such as terms ('tiring', 'difficult', 'funny', 'careful', 'too much', etc.), phrases ('It is a kind of wasting my time', 'This is quite a problem for us', 'They are so slow with the language', 'They just don’t fit in', etc.) or metaphors ('They experience troubling times') which may be interpreted as a rejection of their immigrant peers as co-learners. Data show practices and beliefs which deny local students the opportunity to speak and collaborate with their immigrant peers. There is no dialogue between local and immigrant students. The immigrants' classroom practices are not used as a starting point for a reflection on the local practices and its meanings because they are not seen as legitimate practices in the local context. The tendency to favour some sorts of reflections over others is often based on pre-existing representations and prejudices rather than on concrete classroom experiences. Many arguments, for instance, point to the language problem though it is not the case in the classroom. Moreover, it occurs that some local students provide examples of capabilities and knowledge learned from immigrants, but they refrain from introducing discourses on conflict.

The construction of conclusions based on the idea of conflict is a matter of discourse. An understanding of an individual’s response to a situation must incorporate the individual’s frame of reference and her/his position within the context where this situation takes place. Context and position tend to provide ‘legitimating reasons’
to justify certain conclusions and valorisations. The beliefs and practices expressed during the interviews are in conformity with a discursive situation given by the classroom micro-level, the social macro-levels and all the range of levels in between. The local students’ positions are constructed within the classroom and many other social systems that have an influence on the local students’ desires and beliefs. These are in themselves influenced by the normative expectations and processes of information gathering associated with the institutional role (being a local student in a multiethnic school) that these students hold. Sentences like ‘I’m not expected to learn Murshed’s way of subtracting’ suggest the assumption of a powerful institutional role.

Sergi, Mireia, Laia, and the other students featured share the role of students, and they also share the more specific role of ‘local students’. This role interacts in relation to many other roles, co-constructed by them and by many other people and groups. In particular, the role of local students interacts with Murshed and Afzal’s role of ‘immigrant students’ and with the teacher’s role of ‘teacher in a multiethnic mathematics classroom’. The interactions among students are interactions among people occupying different and diverse role positions. Roles have to do with the processes of deciding who is more likely to comply with certain demands, and with the distribution of the tasks. In the context of the classroom, the exact contents for the different role positions and the differentiation of roles itself allow certain ties between the local and the immigrant students, while other possible ties are not seen favourably.

The classroom practices described by the local students do not let the immigrants’ practices influence the local ones. Local students show preferences for particular forms of action and interaction in response to their perception of conflict. These students interpret certain whole-class and small-group interactions among local and immigrant students as not constitutive of learning. They do not accept maintaining a dialogue on mathematics with their immigrant peers: they listen to them, they are interested in their practices, they even take responsibility for their level of understanding, but they neither react to their meanings nor do they carry on prolonged conversations. It may happen that the teacher has trouble managing and facilitating a joint discourse, but the fact is that local students say they do not consider it necessary to incorporate the immigrants’ meanings. These findings situate conflict firmly within the discursive patterns that define and maintain the dominant representations of the multiethnic classroom.

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Notes

1. All transcripts have been translated into English. They were originally either in Catalan or Spanish.
Notes on contributors

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