

KAPITTEL 10

The Buber-Levinas Debate on Otherness: Reflections on Encounters with Diversity in School

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Abstract: This article turns to the underexposed debate between Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas in order to develop a reflection on encounters with otherness in an educational setting. First, I introduce a well-established and well-intended, yet problematic, way of approaching cultural diversity in school, looking at how the asymmetry between the other and the self may be reduced in a process of predicting and explaining the other. This will set the stage for the next part, examining how a positive recognition of alterity is addressed in the dispute between Buber and Levinas. Analysing the controversy between the two philosophers, the article contributes to a pedagogical reflection on how to meet the student as the other in closeness and distance without reducing him or her to a representative for a pre-defined cultural entity. Attention is also directed towards the ethical foundation of intercultural relations and what our responsibility for the other implies.

Keywords: Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, encounters with diversity, multicultural education

Introduction

Across the world, schools and educators are experiencing an increase in cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity in the classroom. As part of these shifting cultural textures and demographics, many countries have made multicultural education an imperative (Cochran-Smith, 2013;

Citation: Skreftsrud, T.-A. (2022). The Buber-Levinas Debate on Otherness: Reflections on Encounters with Diversity in School. In H. V. Kleive, J. G. Lillebø & K.-W. Sæther (Red.), *Møter og mangfold: Religion og kultur i historie, samtid og skole* (Kap. 10, pp. 229–247). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.156.ch10>
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OECD, 2015). In a culturally diverse school, all students should be met in ways that recognise their cultural and linguistic competencies. Students from diverse backgrounds should have their backgrounds affirmed as a source of identity, without school and society putting restrictions on who the students are and are able to be in the community of learners (Banks & Banks, 2005; OECD, 2015). The question is therefore not so much *if* a multicultural perspective should be adopted in education, but rather, *how* multicultural education should be understood and how a teaching approach that is sensitive to cultural complexity could be initiated and integrated within the educational system.

With this background, an important question is what it means to encounter the other in ways that recognise cultural differences without reducing the other to a representative of a predefined understanding of a cultural community. This applies to communication and interaction between schools and their students, as well as interpersonal meetings in the classroom. How can we as educators develop a reflective approach to cultural differences that acknowledges the complexity of the backgrounds and identities of our students?

In this article, I will discuss this question by drawing attention to the underexposed debate between Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) about encounters with otherness. Two creative and influential thinkers of the twentieth century, Buber and Levinas made significant contributions to ethical thinking, bringing the question of alterity and encounter to the foreground. Both were interested in the dynamics of human encounters and dedicated their philosophical thinking to exploring the ethical responsibility that begins with experiences of the other.

While Buber has been associated with a reciprocal I-Thou relationship that cultivates a close and symmetrical interrelationship, Levinas emphasised a face-to-face encounter characterised by an asymmetrical distance. This difference became subject to a critical exchange of ideas between the two philosophers, which is documented in two textual meetings – the first in a collection of essays on Buber to which Buber responded (Schilpp & Friedman, 1967), and the second in a compilation of critical dialogues between Buber and a variety of philosophers, including Levinas (Rome

& Rome, 1970). In these texts, Levinas repeated his objection to Buber's I-Thou relationship from earlier books and essays, claiming that Buber's encounter is insufficiently ethical, as it violates the other in favour of an egocentric formation process. Buber, who had never discussed Levinas's work in print before, now responded to his critique, claiming that Levinas had misunderstood his approach to alterity and refusing to accept Levinas's characterisation of his work.

Exploring the controversy between Buber and Levinas, I ask what can be learned from Buber and Levinas's discussion when reflecting upon encounters with the other in school. In particular, I accentuate the tension between symmetry and asymmetry in Buber and Levinas's exchange of ideas, a dimension of encounter that is often missing in educational attempts to address diversity in the classroom. In this way, the article contributes to a pedagogical reflection that encourages schools and educators to meet the student as the other in closeness and distance without reducing them to a representative for a predefined cultural entity.

I start the article by addressing some problems associated with teaching in a diverse setting, drawing attention to how the asymmetry between the other and the self may be reduced in a well-intended pedagogical affirmation of cultural differences. In the next part, I turn to the controversy between Buber and Levinas, looking at how the relation between the self and the other is interpreted in their thinking and how these understandings are articulated as part of their communication with each other. Finally, I lay out some consequences for education, asking what can be learned from the Buber-Levinas debate with regard to schools' encounters with diversity. In this way, I hope to stimulate a deepened conversation about what it means to encounter the other in closeness and distance, inside the classroom, and in our everyday relations.

Affirming cultural diversity – some problems with a multicultural education approach

The term 'multicultural education' refers to a number of approaches and is used by a variety of educators, researchers and policy makers in an equal variety of ways (May & Sleeter, 2010). In their pioneering

work, Banks and Banks (2005) have provided an understanding of the term that synthesises different ideas from a variety of conceptions and approaches. According to Banks and Banks (2005), multicultural education can be described as an idea, an educational reform and a process. As an idea, multicultural education states that ‘all students, regardless of the groups to which they belong, such as those related to gender, ethnicity, race, culture, language, social class, religion, or exceptionality, should experience educational equality in the schools’ (Banks & Banks, 2005, p. 25). Furthermore, understood as a reform movement, multicultural education aims to challenge what has often proven to be the function of schools: to facilitate the integration of children and young people into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it (Mayo, 1999). Rather than accepting dominant paradigms and practices, multicultural education should create a critical awareness by urging schools and educators to transform schools so that all students have an equal opportunity to experience success at school, both socially and academically. Finally, according to Banks and Banks (2005), multicultural education should be seen as an ongoing process. As an idea and reform movement, multicultural education is never a completed or concluded project. Rather, it is a continuous process, struggling towards creating equal opportunities in schools.

To find ways of affirming students’ cultural differences has been a central concern within practices of multicultural education. A central idea has been that teachers working with a diverse population of students can empower their students by recognising and affirming their cultural and linguistic backgrounds as being relevant to the school community and therefore also relevant to the society in which the school exists. In her influential work on ‘culturally responsive teaching’, Gay (2002, 2013) addresses the need for schools to affirm the local cultures of the students in ways that make their backgrounds a relevant source of knowledge in the classroom. Because students enter school with different cultures, teachers should know these cultures and reflect them in their teaching. Finding the right match between the students’ cultures and the school, the teaching becomes ‘culturally compatible’, meaning that the students’ home cultures are recognised as significant contributions to the

mainstream classroom. For Gay (2002, p. 107), this means knowing the 'ethnic groups' cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns', which in turn makes it possible for the teacher to relate to their students in ways that affirm their diverse backgrounds.

Nevertheless, despite the best of intentions, such multicultural practices may turn out to be problematic, as they tend to presuppose an essentialist conception of culture, reifying the identities and practices of ethnic groups (Mason, 2018; May & Sleeter, 2010). First, the inner diversification of societies has made communities highly differentiated. This implies that a person's identity is rarely bound to one particular group or community; rather, it reflects the range of communities in which the person is a part. Moreover, as human beings we are uniquely self-reflective, producing and reproducing identity in transformative processes of cultural interaction and exchange. Second, to see people as representatives of certain cultures or groups is a limitation of identity that potentially may put restrictions on who people are capable of becoming in their community. To claim that the intellectual thought of students from different ethnic groups is culturally encoded, or that teachers should be able to discern specific cultural traits that are characteristic for a group of people, risks trapping them within a narrow understanding of identity. Hence, when cultural background is essentialised, depoliticised and treated as a set of practices that can be described and labelled, structural inequalities and discriminatory practices may continue to persist.

The problems associated with multicultural education have led scholars to argue for alternative ways of engaging with questions of difference. This includes approaches such as anti-racist education (Troyna & Carrington, 2012), critical race theory (Lynn & Dixson, 2013), and critical multiculturalism (May & Sleeter, 2010), all of which were developed to address an oversimplified approach to cultural recognition. In the following, I will not continue to reflect on the contemporary history of multicultural education, but I would like to draw attention to the field of ethical philosophy. How can the interpretation of the controversy between Buber and Levinas produce constructive insights for a reflective

approach to cultural differences that acknowledges the complexity of the backgrounds and identities of our students?

The relation between Buber and Levinas

Buber and Levinas' work on ethical philosophy has generated a body of rich scholarship in a number of different fields. According to Friedman (2004), however, the relation between them still remains an underexposed field of research. Lipari (2004) indicates that today's scholars frequently assimilate Buber into Levinas's philosophy, making the differences between them invisible. This observation corresponds with Friedman's (2004) claim that many scholars in the field of philosophy read Buber through the lens of Levinas, thereby favouring Levinas's reading of Buber. Investigations of the relation between the two have the potential to expose in more depth the differences between them and emphasise in more detail how they critically relate to each other.

While Buber never commented directly on Levinas's work, Levinas frequently referred to Buber in his books and essays, repeatedly criticising his conception of the I-Thou-relationship. On two occasions, however, the two philosophers engaged in a textual dialogue with each other. These texts are of particular interest as they are the only examples to be found in which the two philosophers engage in a written dialogue with each other. This communication is comprised of two sets of questions and answers, which are included in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, originally published in 1958 (Schilpp & Friedman, 1967) and *Philosophical Interrogations*, originally published in 1964 (Rome & Rome, 1970). The first is a collection of essays on Buber, to which Buber responded in the same volume. Among the contributions from different philosophers, the volume included Levinas's essay 'Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge'. The second is a collection of critical questions to Buber to which Buber responded in a 'Replies to My Critics' section, including a six-page question-and-answer conversation between Buber and Levinas.

In these dialogues, readers can see their common interest in the ethical content of encounters, as they both explore the responsibility towards the Other and aim to interpret what it means to relate to alterity. However,

the textual discussion between them also demonstrates a profound and deep disagreement. While Buber addresses the importance of a symmetrical and mutual I-Thou relationship, Levinas continues to privilege an interpersonal connection framed within an asymmetrical face-to-face-relationship. This leads Levinas to dismiss Buber's I-Thou relationship as superficial and ethically insufficient. In the following, I present Levinas's critique of Buber and Buber's response, with particular attention to the passages in which Levinas raises questions regarding encounters with otherness in Buber's thinking and the paragraphs in which Buber responds directly to Levinas's critiques on this issue.

Levinas's critique of Buber

The discussion between Buber and Levinas developed over many years. In Levinas's early writing, he tried to separate his position from that of Buber, which resulted in several critical studies of Buber. Having established the point of difference, however, Bernasconi and Wood (1988) found that Levinas's way of relating to Buber underwent a transformation, although he continued to write about many of the same issues. In an interview conducted with Levinas several years after Buber's death, he expressed his deep admiration for Buber, acknowledging his work as a source of inspiration for his own thinking (Poirié, 1987). At the same time, he also reaffirmed their disagreement: 'But the central thing that determines the difference between my way of speaking and Buber's is the theme of asymmetry' (Poirié, 1987, p. 32). He continued by saying 'I have read Buber then with a great deal of respect and attention, but I have not reached the point of agreeing with him' (Poirié, 1987, p. 32). For Levinas, the reciprocity of the I-Thou-relationship was, thus, a major barrier when summing up his relation to Buber.

In the first textual meeting, Levinas resumes his question of reciprocity from 20 years earlier in *Time and the Other* (Levinas, 1947/1987). As with his earlier critique, Levinas's objection to Buber's I-Thou has its background in his understanding of encounter as an asymmetrical interpersonal relationship. Beyond any other concerns, the relation of responsibility is by no means a mutual relation, which becomes visible in the

ethical relation with the face of the other (see also Levinas, 1969). For Levinas, when a human being faces another person, the other addresses him and calls to him, unlike any other object. The presence of the other's face discloses a dimension of height, a recognition of the other as a master to be served. In this face-to-face relationship, the other does not have to utter words in order for the subject to feel responsible. Instead, the other person is exposed to the subject and expresses themselves simply by existing as an undeniable reality that cannot be reduced. At the core of Levinas's thought is the infinity of the other, who cannot be reduced to a bounded entity over which the subject can have power. Rather, the presence of the other's face comes from a height that dominates the subject. The face that appears before me 'summons me to my obligations and judges me' (Levinas, 1969, p. 215). For Levinas, the asymmetrical relationship constitutes the subject's ethical responsibility. In the face-to-face encounter, the infinity and alterity of the other is revealed, which is irreducible to the subject's ontological grasp and thereby compels the subject to respond.

From this position, Levinas claims an inherent discrepancy between the prominent place of the other in his own philosophy and Buber's symmetrical encounter. The reciprocity of Buber's I-Thou relationship commits violence against height as it excludes the otherness of the irreducible other. Buber's thinking therefore reproduces what he sees as the major problem in Western philosophy. In a famous quote from *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas, 1969, p. 43) he writes: 'Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being.' He continues by saying: 'The neutralization of the other who becomes a theme or an object – appearing, that is, taking its place in the light – is precisely his reduction to the same' (Levinas, 1969, p. 34). For Levinas, the question becomes 'how [to] ascribe an ethical meaning to the relation and still maintain the reciprocity on which Buber insists?' (Levinas, 1967, p. 147).

In Buber's thinking, the ethical is revealed *between* the persons in a relationship. For Buber, *between* implies an authentic and personal relationship, which he develops in the philosophy of I-It and I-Thou. This

notion refers to how persons relate to one another in two radically different ways: 'To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude' (Buber, 1923/2004, p. 11). For Buber, the I-It relationship is as a subjective-objective relationship, in which objects and events in the world are observed from a distance and bounded in time and space. Within the I-It relationship, another person is primarily an object to be experienced. The I-It relationship thus refers to a distant subject-object connection, whereas the I-Thou relationship has a fundamentally different character and is described as an immediate presence and as a subjective-subjective relationship, which is trustful and interpersonal (Buber, 1923/2004).

For Buber, there is a qualitative difference between the I-It and I-Thou-relationship: 'The primary word I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word I-It can never be spoken with the whole being' (Buber, 1923/2004, p. 11). When a person utters the basic words I-Thou and enters into a relationship with another person, something active and vital is created between them. Here, Buber draws on his Jewish background. The Hebrew word *dabar* refers to the living word. In Genesis, God creates with his word. Moreover, when Jacob deceives his father, Isaac, by pretending to be his brother Esau, his father cannot withdraw the blessing because the words are spoken and are already in effect. Engaging in the I-Thou relationship thus includes an openness to the fact that the encounter is active, creative and transformative. The I-Thou-relationship forms an individual's identity in a fundamental manner, as the other affects and alters him: 'I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou' (Buber, 1923/2004, p. 17).

For Levinas, however, the phrase that 'I become through my relation to the Thou' is highly problematic. In their first textual meeting, Levinas elaborates on his critique, stating that in Buber's case the 'originality of the relation lies in the fact that it is not known from the outside but only by the I which realises the relation' (Levinas, 1967, p. 147). According to Levinas, however, the position of the I is not interchangeable with that of the Thou, in contrast to what Buber claims is the reciprocal nature of the I-Thou relationship. This leads him to conclude that in Buber's thought, the I is inevitably positioned as superior to the Thou. Hence, in Levinas's understanding of Buber, the difference between the I and the Thou is

realised primarily by the I that, in turn, uses the difference as a mirror for self-awareness and self-development. Buber's mistake follows the colonial tendencies of the past, in which the West invented and objectified the Other in order to better understand itself (see Said, 2003).

Since Levinas interprets Buber's encounter as an arena for the I to develop and grow, it follows that the relationship between the I and the Thou is characterised by the process of making the Thou familiar to the I. In Levinas's interpretation of Buber, the I is being realised through his or her knowledge about the Thou. For Levinas, however, the other is not knowable and cannot be made into an object of the self. Gordon (2004, p. 111) explained that for Levinas, 'the epiphany of the face that appears before me, the manifestation of its infinity, defies my intention to possess it, and invites me to an ethical relation'. For Levinas, the appearance of the face undermines imperialist inclinations that desire to appropriate the other to the same (Gordon, 2004). Thus, in his communication with Buber, Levinas rhetorically asks, 'does not the ethical begin only at the point where the I becomes conscious of the Thou as beyond itself?' (Levinas, 1967, p. 147). He ends their first written dialogue by claiming that: 'although Buber has penetratingly described the Relation and the act of distancing, he has not taken separation seriously enough' (Levinas, 1967, p. 149).

Later, in their second direct textual meeting, Levinas returns to the issue of ontology, again drawing attention to the question of reciprocity in relations (Rome & Rome, 1970). Here, Levinas repeats his rhetorical and critical question about Buber's I-Thou-relationship, claiming that 'the recognition of the other is not a knowledge of the other similar in kind to other bits of knowledge and differing only in its content' (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 25). In contrast, Levinas claims, the Thou reveals itself as the absolute other, 'but it does so in a relation which does not imply reciprocity' (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 24). Because the relation between the I and the Thou cannot be reciprocal, Levinas (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 26) asks for an alternative:

Are we not compelled to substitute for the reciprocity of the I-Thou relation a structure which is more fundamental and which excludes reciprocity, that is, one which involves an asymmetry or difference of level and which thereby implies a real distancing?

From this, Levinas concludes that Buber's I-Thou relationship violates the other, by allowing the colonial power of the I to master the subjugated Thou through knowledge and classification. According to Levinas, the alterity of the other is jeopardised, as Buber's understanding of encounter does not recognise the alterity of the other. Rather, it reduces the other to a mirror for the self.

How Buber responded to Levinas's critique

Rather surprisingly, Buber sees no reason to engage in an in-depth discussion with Levinas's reading of him. Instead, he simply dismisses Levinas's interpretation of the I-Thou as a fundamental misunderstanding, which can be seen in the two sets of texts Buber published in response to questions posed to him by Levinas. In the 'Replies to My Critics' section (1967), Buber hardly seems to have noticed Levinas's critique, and responds only by saying that Levinas's reading is incorrect and that his own understanding is directed towards what happens *between* the participants in an encounter: 'Levinas cites my statement that through Thou I become I, and infers: hence I owe my place to my partner. No; rather the relation to him' (Buber, 1967, p. 697). Later, in their second textual meeting, he elaborates on what he means by referring to the *between* (Rome & Rome, 1970). As with their first textual meeting, Buber does not seem interested in engaging with Levinas's ideas. Instead, he announces that Levinas's critique 'makes a direct answer to his question impossible for me' (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 27). Therefore, he must content himself 'with making a few clarifying comments on his objections so far as that fundamental misunderstanding allows' (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 27). He continues by stating that it is not true that he unceasingly affirms the reciprocity of the relationship. On the contrary, he has always talked about it with many reservations and qualifications. For Buber, this means that '[n]o matter how all-embracing the relation of two beings to each other may be, it does not in any sense mean their "unification"' (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 27).

A more thorough background for this short answer can be found in other parts of Buber's authorship, where he elaborates on the interpretation of the I-Thou-relationship. While Levinas interprets Buber's

encounter as a case of either I-Thou or I-It and claims that ‘the primary relation is the recognition of the other as Thou and that the latter can then be objectified’ (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 25), Buber presents the two approaches in relation to one another, not as opposites. According to Buber, the I-Thou relationship does not exclude the I-It-relation in the sense that closeness removes distance. Rather, the I-It is included in the I-Thou, meaning that the I-Thou relationship has an integrating function towards the whole: ‘There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event’ (Buber, 1923/2004, p. 14). Accordingly, it seems that Buber’s I-Thou relationship has more to it than a close, interpersonal one, which can also be seen in the first textual meeting with Levinas, where Buber sees ‘the primal distance as the elementary presupposition of all human relations’ (Buber, 1967, p. 694). From this perspective, one can argue that Buber emphasises distance as a condition for entering into a trustful relationship. In the process of entering into an I-Thou relationship to another person, one views oneself as separated from the other.

This motif can also be found in one of Buber’s published lectures (1969, p. 18). Here, Buber uses the example of a child lying half-awake and half-asleep in bed at night waiting for his mother to address him. In Buber’s example, the child experiences an existential loneliness and becomes aware of being part of the world but also being separated from it. The child’s need for an intimate and personal relationship to the mother is closely related to feelings of absolute loneliness and distance. It is precisely the experience of loneliness that causes a person to seek a relationship with the other in the I-Thou relationship (see also Skrefsrud, 2014). Here, Buber’s use of distance seems to be close to the Latin *distare*, which means to stand apart from something or someone. Parallel with Derrida’s (1978) concept of *différance*, becoming aware of the separation from the other can be said to be an integrated part of the dialogical relationship. For Derrida, becoming aware of distance makes us challenge what we take for granted and focus our attention on absence. To recognise distance provides a greater responsiveness to what is excluded and helps us

to see with new eyes. In Derrida's thought, distance becomes a presupposition for conceptual meaning. In a similar way, Buber sees distance as a condition for interaction and mutual relationship. The experience of distance is integrated into the I-Thou relationship through the I-It relationship. In this regard, Buber's understanding of encounter encapsulates both distance and closeness.

On this basis, Buber's short answer to Levinas may be more comprehensible. According to Buber, the parties in the I-Thou encounter are not objectified by the other. In his reply to Levinas, he says: 'I cannot concede that the I and the Thou offer themselves to each other "as objects" in the relation' (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 27). Instead, the objectification of the other is located in the I-It relationship: 'Becoming an object is, in fact, precisely what most strongly characterises the I-It relationship in its opposition to the I-Thou relationship' (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 27). Without referring to the intersections between the I-Thou and I-It-relationship, Buber claims that he cannot accept that his understanding of encounter 'justifies the acceptance of an isolated I that stands over against neither a Thou nor an It' (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 28). As a final reply to Levinas, he underlines the symmetry of the I-Thou relationship without discarding otherness: 'Even as the foundation of an ethic, I cannot acknowledge "asymmetry." I live "ethically" when I confirm and further my Thou in the right of his existence and the goal of his becoming, in all his otherness' (Rome & Rome, 1970, p. 28).

From this perspective, the statement 'I become through my relation to the Thou' (Buber, 1923/2004, p. 17) reads differently than it does in the critique from Levinas. While Levinas claims that Buber's encounter ultimately violates the other in favour of an egocentric formation process, Buber's response signals that he agrees with Levinas, although he gives priority to a symmetrical relationship in favour of asymmetry. One can thus say that the concept of reciprocity remains an unsolved conflict between the two. Levinas rejects any form of reciprocity in the ethical relation, and continues to criticise Buber for reducing the relation between the I and the Thou but without really listening to how Buber frames the encounter. Buber, on the other side, objects to Levinas's characterisation of his work, but without being willing to listen to his critique

or engaging with Levinas's ideas. Ironically, their dialogue can be characterised by what Lipari (2004, p. 124) has called 'a failure of communication' or a 'failure of listening to the other'. In particular, it seems as though Levinas, who was a generation younger than Buber, has a strong need to position himself in contrast to Buber. One might even ask if Levinas is committing some kind of parricide, in order to establish his thinking as a new alternative to Buber's ideas.

The Buber-Levinas debate on otherness - implications for education

What can be learned from the Buber-Levinas dialogue on encounters with regard to schools' responsiveness to diversity? In this last section, I will highlight three implications that may help us to reflect upon encounters with the other in an educational setting.

First, I believe that Buber and Levinas's lack of will and inability to engage with each other's ideas paradoxically reminds us of what a dialogical encounter might be. In all its inadequacy, the Buber-Levinas dialogue encourages educators to not only acknowledge the existence of differences but also to actively engage with diversity and make room for ideas, beliefs and practices that differ from mainstream narratives. As formulated by Lipari (2004, p. 138):

In my dialogic encounter with you, I will not only listen for your radical alterity, but I will open and make a place for it. It means that I do not resort only to what is easy – what I already know, or what we have in common. It means that I listen for and make space for the difficult, the different, the radically strange.

According to Gay (2013), teachers may be hesitant to address cultural differences for fear of stereotyping or making generalisations. Teachers will try to compensate for the fear by ignoring or denying the existence of differences, and conduct their teaching from an assumed neutral position, which in most cases is equivalent to a majority culture perspective. In addition, a multicultural education approach is often reduced to superficial school celebrations and single happenings where flags, food and folk traditions are used to represent the diversity of the school and

the community. Although such school events may be more complex than what the critique from critical multiculturalists such as May and Sleeter (2010) suggest, these practices run the risk of reinforcing cultural borders and undermining the experience of real cultural encounters. This concern corresponds with national and international findings emphasising that issues of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity are not well integrated in education (Cochran-Smith, 2013; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012). Reflecting upon the Buber-Levinas dialogue will not provide schools and educators with alternative approaches that allow the teacher to integrate multicultural awareness and inclusion into everyday activities. But their thought-provoking failure to listen for the other may still inspire a greater awareness of what it means to recognise differences in the classroom, where perspectives are taken for granted, and how teaching may be perceived within a wider context for professional and didactic reflection.

Second, in both Buber and Levinas's understandings of encounter, we are urged to keep in mind the otherness of the other. This means that the other should never be reduced to a mirror for the subject, or absorbed into a concept of sameness. For Buber, the interpersonal, symmetrical relationship characterised by closeness (I-Thou), but also distance (I-It), warns against assimilating or appropriating the other into ourselves. For Levinas, the subject cannot call the other, or await the other's response. Rather, the subject is called to responsibility for the other through the other's face, which also is a command not to place the other in conformity with ourselves. Exploring their conversation on encounter, we are requested not to reduce the otherness of the other, but to meet him or her in both closeness and distance.

In the classroom, the Buber-Levinas dialogue reminds us not to underestimate the fact that many students live within complex identities that coexist. Hence, Buber and Levinas's warnings against assimilating the other serve as critiques of pedagogical practices that reduce cultural background to a predefined category and aim at explaining and defining the student within a restricted frame of reference that violates the significance of distance in an intercultural relation. At the same time, their conversation may inspire educators to investigate creative ways of

exploring a wider understanding of what it means to be a migrant student without restricting identity to monocultural understandings and notions of bounded cultures. Such a shift in thinking may lay the foundation for a classroom environment that prevents stereotypes from developing and enables intercultural understanding to emerge without reducing the complexity of cultural identities.

Third, I believe that Buber and Levinas's attention towards the presence of the other can enhance and deepen a pedagogical reflection on how diversity may be seen as a resource in the classroom. As May and Sleeter (2010) remind us, schools reflect the discourses and attitudes of the broader society that supports them. Many students with minority backgrounds therefore experience an often-imbedded devaluation of identity in school and society, meaning that their family backgrounds are perceived as culturally, socially and linguistically deprived and in need of repair. According to this logic, teaching should repair the errors and deficiencies represented in the minority students and their families and compensate for their lack of cognitive and academic knowledge.

For both Buber and Levinas, however, the acknowledgement of otherness leads them to the basic conclusion that the other is not me, which implies a fundamental recognition of alterity in itself. Hence, Buber and Levinas's conversation on otherness calls attention to the independent role of the other in the relation. Although their formulation of relation is very different, in both Buber and Levinas's thinking the other is always more than it appears to us, and always more than we can ever explain and comprehend. At the same time, to both Buber and Levinas, the self does not exist until it is encountered by the other. In Levinas's thinking, the other calls the subject to responsibility, while for Buber, the other affects and alters the subject as 'I become through my relation to the Thou' (Buber, 1923/2004, p. 17).

From this perspective, every student is a resource in the sense that he or she brings something constitutive to the classroom. Simultaneously, a resource-oriented pedagogy can never be reduced to a superficial approach where students represent a particular and predefined cultural background that should be affirmed. Instead, the very content of Buber and Levinas's dispute may highlight the need for a reflexive pedagogy,

where teachers develop a sensitivity to students' complex backgrounds. From this fundamental insight, teachers may provide reflexive learning activities that contribute to developing the language and culture students bring from home, and activate their prior experiences, cultural knowledge and skills in ways that challenge the perception in the broader society that these competencies are inferior or worthless.

To conclude, without claiming that Buber and Levinas's ideas are similar or are expressed in related or parallel structures, I have emphasised that they both argue strongly against reducing the other to an instrument for the self: Buber through the integrative I-Thou relationship and Levinas through insisting that the other comes from a height that is transcendent to the subject. In this way, they both draw a line to Derrida's (1978) understanding of encounter. Derrida (1978, p. 95) asks: 'What, then, is this encounter with the absolutely other?' He continues: 'Neither representation, nor limitation, nor conceptual relation to the same. The ego and the other do not permit themselves to be dominated or made into totalities by a concept of relationship'. Beyond Levinas's and Buber's disagreement, their common hermeneutical challenge is to maintain the fact that an understanding of the other is possible while at the same time recognising and respecting the stranger as the truly other. An important question for further research is how multicultural education approaches may benefit theoretically from such insights and what it might mean for everyday interrelations in the classroom.

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