School, images of the futures and social processes in classrooms

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Futures studies express a deep concern for the negative effect school education has on young people's images of the future and their proactive attitude to the future. Here, images are regarded as cultural maps and the article attempts to outline a model of interaction in the classroom, which may be useful for understanding how school practices affect images. Given the cultural perspective on images, the analysis focuses on the social processes that organise the creation, negotiation, and distribution of cultural inventories in the classroom, including the meanings and meaningful expressions about future. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Whenever a culture is understood to be a collective phenomenon, it needs a sociology. When this sociology is left implicit, the danger is greater than it is a weak sociology.
Ulf Hannerz

1. Introduction

Futures research has dedicated considerable attention to school education and its role in shaping young people's images of the futures. The centrality of school in modern education systems and the dominance of the scholastic form of socialisation, especially in European and Western culture [1], fully justifies futures researchers' concern for the effect of school on children's capacity to imagine positive and alternative futures and on their empowerment for shaping them. However, as stated by Gidley and Hampson [2], researchers appear not to have significantly addressed "the nature and dynamics of the relevant societal structure and systems – in this case, the *education system* itself", which influence images of the future and the proactive attitudes of youth.

The article attempts to observe this aspect, by adopting a micro-sociological stance which focuses on the interaction processes between teachers and students, which are generated in classrooms. Moreover, the interest here is descriptive, rather than critical. This is quite a difference from an important component of futures research, but the choice seems to be justified by the overall research goal, which is exploratory.

The central concept in this work is culture. In fact, a cultural perspective appears relevant as, according to Giovannini (cited in Fischer [1]), school can be considered the locus where "contents, knowledge and intellectual competences, which are believed to be an indispensable heritage for all" are selected from the mass of cultural inventories. Given the focus on "the nature and dynamics" of interaction in schools, the attention to classrooms, and the cultural perspective adopted, the social processes organising cultural meanings [3] in the educational context, are studied.

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2. School and images of the future in futures research

As noticed in Section 1, futures studies has constantly shared a concern for the negative impact of school on young people's images of the future and proactive attitudes: poor self-confidence in the capacity of affecting the future (the school presents a negative framework that focuses on social, economic and environmental problems without dealing with possible solutions and the potential of individual action); lack of incentive for holistic thinking (e.g. sectorial and not interdisciplinary curricula); scarce promotion of imagination and creative thinking [4].

Firstly, futures research has claimed and acted for curriculum innovation to change "school systems [which] are still 'quintessentially' industrial era organisations", as Slaughter influentially affirms (cited in Gidley and Hampson [2]).

Secondly, literature investigated young people's "feared and preferred futures" [5], and their differences in age [6–11], gender [6,7,10,11], and education [10–14] (see also Gidley and Hampson for a wider review [2]). Moreover, futures research observed variations in images according to children's "intelligence" [8], socio-economic status (to be understood both as the level of education of the parents [8,15,16] and as the deprived conditions of living [15,16]), family and community structure [14,17], professional profiles [10,12] and even mental health [12]. The literature also studies the discrepancy of images, i.e. how feared, expected and preferred futures differ from each other [6].

Eventually, a third and influential stream of research has emerged more recently. This stream includes a group of studies whose aim of transforming youth's cultural patterns is embedded in the research design, and is to be reached "[d]irectly through changing the educational and enculturation processes of the young people (transforming education); [i]ndirectly through telling ourselves and our young people different stories about the future (futures studies)" [18].

In these studies, "there is a highlighting of the need to explore the notion of 'futures' and associated concepts such as 'broadened social literacies', 'resources of hope', and 'young people's empowerment', rather than focusing more narrowly on students' attitudes via their concerns for the future. Epistemologically, there is a shift from an interest in 'predictive or forecasting' to 'proactive or applied foresight values'" [5].

The main tool for matching this broad and radical research goal appears to be group-based processes for building alternative images of the future. These processes are labelled with different names, like imaging [19], futures [20] or vision workshops [13], scenario-development workshops [6] and the interaction processes are designed to create an "appropriately facilitative environment" [19] to favour the production of alternative images and to stimulate the empowerment of participants.

The procedures used are different, like the strategic scenario technique [6], the visioning process [18,20], but they are basically founded on what Elizabeth Boulding called a "breach in time", i.e. a "drastic discontinuity between present and future that can nevertheless be encompassed by the human imagination" [19].

While this kind of group exercise has been considered "effective in bringing about statistically significant change both in clarifying future goals and in creating a sense of empowerment" [20] and it can be hence useful to reverse or contrast the negative impact of the education system on images of the future, these researches say little about the social processes occurring in schools and classrooms and about the ways through which the impact of education on images occurs.

The following sections are an attempt to offer an insight into these aspects.

3. Culture, images of the future and social practices

The article deliberately focuses on a micro level of analysis. Though we recognise the importance of studying school as an organisation (meso-level) and educational policies at large (macro-level), this article refers to the ways through which social processes in classrooms organise, distribute, negotiate and create cultural maps of the futures. The framework proposed here is heavily indebted to the work of Ulf Hannerz and Michel de Certeau.

The concept of cultural maps to describe images of the future is based on Hutchinson, who notices how "metaphorically and genealogically speaking, our guiding images may be seen as forms of cultural maps" which are "not just cultural and historical artefacts. They are also contemporary sites of cultural politics" [21]. This approach conveniently establishes a dynamic perspective on images of the future (their change is also a matter of deliberate political decision and relates to the space of human action), and links them to the process of production/distribution of culture and the power relations underlying it. In a second article, Hutchinson reviews some of the most important cultural artefacts, criticises the underlying political assumptions, and hopes for alternative mapping practices [22].

Hutchinson's maps are an interconnected series of cultural objects, which I define according to Griswold [23] as "a shared significance embodied in a form", and, from a process point of view, they include also the mapping itself, the poiesis which generates these objects.

These two levels are what Hannerz [3] defines as the "two loci" of culture, an external and an internal one. On the one hand, we have public and overt forms, "a socially meaningful expression that is audible, or visible, or tangible, or can be articulated" [3], and this is properly the locus of cultural objects. On the other, we have individual interpretations of overt forms, which are and remain in human minds, and this is the locus of mapping as a process.

This duality generates the necessity of a complex definition of culture. Hannerz [3] proposes a two-fold definition, including:

(1.) "ideas and modes of thoughts, as entities and processes of the mind [..] as well as the various ways of handling ideas in characteristic modes of mental operations";

(2.) "forms of externalisation, as the different ways in which meaning is made accessible to the senses".

Moreover, the Author adds a third dimension, which is determinant in linking culture and society. This third dimension refers to:

(3.) "social distributions, [as] the ways in which the collective cultural inventory of meanings and meaningful external forms [...] is spread over a population and its social relationships".

According to this approach to culture, social relations frame cultural flows and distribute meanings, their overt forms, and the resources for individuals and social groups to affirm their own particular inventories of meanings. This view challenges several assumptions about both the nature of culture and its relation to society.

Firstly, this multi-fold definition challenges the reduction of culture to what Witten defines as a "tangible social construct, a kind of symbolic good or commodity that is explicitly produced" (cited in Griswold [23]).

Secondly, Hannerz [3] challenges the approaches arguing that "meanings and symbolic forms are predominantly generated in, or shaped by, particular types of social relations" and especially the influential simplistic Marxian school that "culture can in large part be studied as ideology, hegemony, domination and, at least occasionally, resistance".

Thirdly, the opposite view of "culturalism" is contested as "reductionist in that, from the assumption that human beings respond to everything in their surroundings by way of their culture, it proceeds to the conclusion that the study of culture is in itself sufficient for a complete understanding of human social life" [3].

Fourthly, the Author challenges "the idea of culture as something shared, in the sense of homogeneously distributed in society", a view whose consequence is "to make cultural analysis asocial, to describe the collective phenomenon as if it were homologous to a personal meaning system" [3].

In sum, culture may be conceived as a dynamic flow of meanings and meaningful forms. These meanings and forms are not distributed homogeneously in society, but are organised socially through a plurality of social relations, which are, in turn, partially constructed by the cultural flows.

This complex understanding of culture is a stimulus for drafting an articulated model of interaction between the social and the cultural sphere, i.e. a model for understanding how meanings and meaningful forms are socially organised. Again, the model is taken from Hannerz [3], who distinguishes four social "frameworks of flow": form of life, market, state (or regime), movements.

The form of life framework is the place of everyday face-to-face interaction. It is the place of routine, habits and repeated interpersonal interaction. The ideal-type of this frame implies a relatively free and mutual flow of meanings and forms, as it is assumed that the distribution of meanings and forms is symmetrical among the participants. The degree of sharing of cultural inventories is higher than in the other frameworks.

In the market framework, commodities are exchanged and they are considered "cultural commodities" as they bear some meaning. The production and the distribution of commodities, and the meanings they bear, are performed by specialists who receive for that a material reward. This framework is a key one in Western contemporary societies and futures research warned of the impact which the cultural industry and the media's products have on young people's images of the future [24,25].

The state describes an organisational form which involves a degree of control over activities within a territory on the basis of a concentrated, publicly acknowledged power. The concentration of power makes the state able to accumulate material resources for long-term cultural work, which is partly dedicated to the generation and distribution of legitimizing cultural inventories. Specialisation of knowledge is a condition for this action of legitimization. Hannerz proposes "regime" as an alternative name of this framework. While the Author prefers "state" because of state's key role in contemporary cultural systems, "regime" is here used as its more general scope seems preferable for an analysis that is not focussed on the societal level.

Finally, movements are collective efforts to transform a more or less large part of the meanings and meaningful forms of a cultural system, or to change the distribution of these meanings and forms. They emerge in a culture and act as a "consciousness raising" collective actor. They are usually less centralised in their management of cultural flows than regimes, and they concentrate less symbolic and material resources to carry on their cultural work. The futures studies community often represent itself also, or partly, in terms that are very close to the features of movements and this is true also for the "futures in education" area [2].

Hannerz's institutional perspective on culture, which is labelled by the Author as a "formal sociology of culture" offers a general model for framing the social organisation of meanings. To better understand the complex interaction of these four frameworks, we rely on De Certeau's work to make "explicit the systems of operational combinations (*les combinatoires d'opérations*)" which compose a culture [26].

Such practices are dependent on, and produce the asymmetrical/symmetrical distribution of meaning inventories. Participants to social interactions in the case of an ideal-type symmetrical distribution may count on similar cultural inventories, resources, power: they move from near starting points. Asymmetric distributions see participants to meaningful

social interaction starting from diverse inventories and diverse amounts of resources and power to affirm and expand their private array of cultural inventories.

In De Certeau's terms, we interpret asymmetric relations in terms of a duality between strategy and tactic. Strategic practice is "the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power [...] can be isolated from an environment. A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as 'proper' (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it" [26]. Tactical practice is instead "a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization, nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality)" [26]. The opposition of strategy and tactic is based on the asymmetry of power relations among different social actors. Strategic practice defines a distinct cultural space, whose meanings acquire a "proper" interpretation through the process which produces them. Tactical practice is instead a form of cultural production that re-edits, negotiates, and creates new meanings by manipulating those produced in strategic practices, by insinuating itself in the spaces which are created and delimited by other social actors.

Each of the frames may be structured according to this binary partition, but, and this aspect is the most important here, we can assume that strategic practice is mainly associated to the organisation/institutional frames of the regime and the market, while the form of life may be mainly associated to tactical social practices, with the movements that may assume an intermediate position.

The combination of Hannerz's and De Certeau's theories completes our interpretative frame of cultural dynamics. What is left, is to see how such a frame can be applied to study the social organisation of meanings and meaningful forms in classrooms.

4. Cultural frameworks and discursive practices in classrooms

Fischer [1] notices how the scholastic form of socialisation in the European and Western context emerged in a relatively recent period, which can be identified with the Modern Age, and it has become dominant with the Industrial age [27]. In this relatively short history, this "scholastic form of socialisation" acquired a series of distinctive features:

(1.) school practices are concentrated in a specific space, which is separated from other social practices;
(2.) the space is reserved to the function of teaching to young people;
(3.) families are excluded from the place of education;
(4.) young people in school must obey impersonal rules which are directed to the students as a whole.

These distinctive features of the modern scholastic systems are affirmed with "the progressive emergence of a formal educational institution which is dedicated, at least in principle, to provide progressive and continuous teaching to the whole population" [1].

As an agency of socialisation, it has been already mentioned in Section 1 that school selects "contents, knowledge and intellectual competences, which are believed to be an indispensable heritage for all" from the mass of cultural inventories [1]. This function of the school has been observed from an optimistic perspective or a pessimistic one. The former is mainly adopted by functionalist and neo-Weberian approaches, while the second is typical of conflict approaches, especially neo-Marxian analyses [28]. "The positive and negative images, notwithstanding the overt contrast, converge in a vision which has been correctly defined as static and based on social reproduction: the first approach affirms the importance of social reproduction for conserving equilibrium and consensus, while the second one founds its own explanation on conflicts among social classes, and stresses both the centrality of power and reproduction of the dominant ideology" on the one hand [1], and the importance of social processes in school that resist prevailing power and ideology on the other (e.g. the classic work of Willis [29]).

As already in Gramsci and the Frankfurt School [30], this 'negative approach' rejects reductionist economy-driven explanations and its awareness of the 'relative autonomy' of social reproduction from the logics of economic production became the base for the elaborations of cultural studies [31] and critical pedagogy [32]. Though the goals and the fundamental assumptions are different, the form and the target (the relation between school and the socio-technical system and its ideology) of such a critique seem close to some prominent perspectives in Futures Research [24,25].

A critique to the reproduction theory and a more articulated view of cultural processes in the school context, gained momentum in more recent years. For example, four fundamental problematics of reproduction theories are listed by Gewirtz and Cribbs and refer to the incapacity of reproduction theories to give a convincing account of social change, to relate "local and contingent explanations and grander more universal accounts of social reproduction", to inform about the role of agency in social processes, to adopt a reflexive stance on researcher's normative accounts of reproduction. This led to a gradual shift toward a greater attention to the concrete educational and social context and to the deployment of micro-social relations among actors [33].

As the class is the core of the scholastic formal institution and of social relations in the school environment, we focus on classroom to explore the mechanisms guiding the social organisation of meanings in the educational context. The starting point is Herbert's classic definition of a classroom as "one adult who regularly interacts with a group of youngsters whose presence is compulsory" [34].
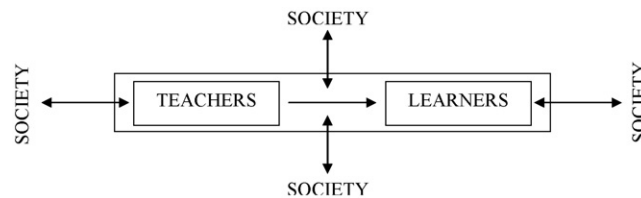
Fig. 1. A dual model of the education situation [35].
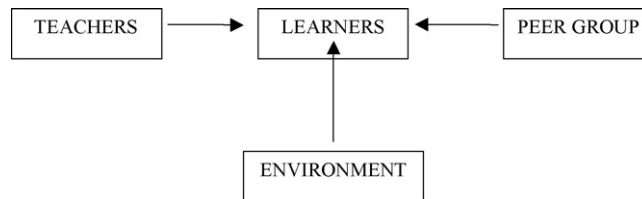

Fig. 2. A triadic model of the education situation [35].

This definition emphasises the triadic structure of the educational situation, which is better conceived, rather than as a duality of teacher/individual students (Fig. 1), as emerging from the interaction of teacher, students as individuals, and the peer group of students [35].

The triadic model also assumes that the peer group acts as an interpretive community for negotiating and mediating the influence of the larger socio-cultural environment (Fig. 2).

From this perspective, the study of classrooms is not a study of individuals, but a study of groups: an artificial group (the class itself), within which other subgroups emerge. Firstly, this partition is generated by the double dichotomy between childhood/adulthood, and between the opposite roles of the participants to the pedagogic relationship (teacher/learner). Secondly, new partitions usually occur among the students with the emergence of natural subgroups of peers [36].

A perspective on "groupness" appears hence to be essential to an interpretation of classroom social dynamics, but this approach seems to differ from the future-oriented research focussing on group interaction mentioned in Section 2 as it is not oriented to a transformative goal. As already noticed, the proactive approach in futures research on young people's images of the future is aimed at changing those images and at creating the conditions for subverting pre-existing social relations upon which the images rely. This feature establishes a strong link between this type of futures research and research using focus groups in critical sociology [37,38], and action research, as acknowledged by different Authors [2,39].

The intent of this article is instead to propose a theoretical framework for observing how groups emerging in social contexts affect images of the future of their members. The view adopted here focuses on everyday social practices and this approach considers "human life in its repetitive aspects and it relies on a constellation of interconnected concepts (habit, routine, familiarity, institution, socialization and so on), which constitute the cornerstones of a theory able to demonstrate how the reality in which we live, is a social construction" [30]. This different perspective appears to have a main consequence on the approach used: action-oriented futures research attempts to change pre-existing social and power relations, while here the text explores power asymmetry in social relations and their influence on the social organisation of culture in the classroom.

From this perspective, Hannerz's "formal sociology" and its four frameworks (form of life, market, regime, movement), are a valuable tool for outlining the patterns of cultural processes in the classroom.

The market is surely a relevant frame, as young people construct an important part of their meaning inventories through their patterns of consumption, and a large part of their forms of externalisation is based on the cultural objects they buy in the market. Movements are also important for their influence on the school context (e.g. on curricula, rules of behaviour, etc.). Moreover, young people can join them and have access to specialised cultural repertoires, which may be in contrast with those promoted by the school (e.g. youth countercultures).

However, the separateness of the school context from other social practices, though of course it is not absolute, and the working definition of classroom above mentioned ("one adult who regularly interacts with a group of youngsters whose presence is compulsory"), appear to justify a working model of the educational situation that includes only two frames, the form of life and the regime, whose central focus can be placed in the classroom itself and not outside.

In fact, the "regular interaction" is the explicit assumption of the form of life framework. Moreover, the adult (the teacher) may be assumed as she/he embodies the regime framework, which is the acknowledged authority in the educational sphere and defines the classroom as its proper organisational and social space. From this perspective, the compulsory presence of young people in the classroom is the first sign of this asymmetric relationship.

It has been stated that children in the classroom simultaneously experience two worlds which can be associated to the two frameworks outlined above. In Cadzen's words (cited in Alton-Lee et al. [40]), these are "two interpenetrating worlds:
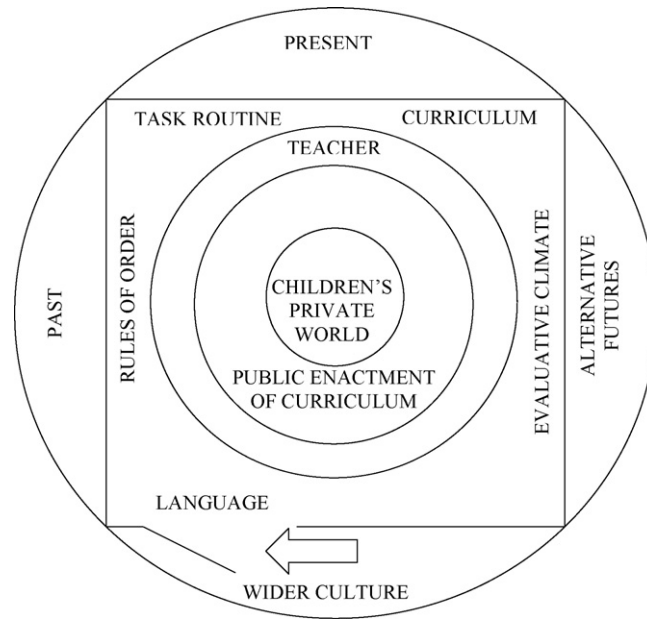
Fig. 3. Contextual influences on children's experience of classroom activities (adapted from [40]).

the official world of the teacher's agenda, and the unofficial world of the peer culture". The two worlds organise inventories of meanings which are partially different and even contrasting. We can assume that the meanings organised by the "teacher's agenda" describe the official or public culture of the classroom. Their frame of distribution is primarily the regime and they are considered to be objects of consumption for the majority of children. On the other hand, we can assume that the meanings of the peer culture as describe the unofficial or private culture of the classroom. Their framework of distribution is typically the form of life: face-to-face interaction among peers. The two cultures are not separated, but interact: their meanings are modified, negotiated, and distributed. On the one hand, private culture offers to peers inventories of meanings and forms to engage with the enacted curriculum [40], or prior knowledge to contest the contents of the teaching activity, or competences about the rules of interaction to break the social order in the classroom [41]. On the other, the teachers' activity is based on a transformative project of the school, which is aimed to modify children's cultural inventories and to replace them with the relevant repertoires of the social roles and status they will acquire when they are adults.

Though this transformative process has been labelled by some scholars a "demolition project" [42] of child culture, nevertheless it is not a simple and mechanistic process of destruction or replacement. As Alton-Lee et al. notice [40], children, individually and in groups, reinterpret public meanings in classroom interactions and what they experience is not simply the private or public classroom culture, but rather a "lived culture" of the classroom: "Lived culture refers to culture as it is produced in ongoing interactions and as a terrain in which class, race, and gender meanings and antagonisms are played out" (Apple and Weiss cited in Alton-Lee et al. [40]). Shifting the focus of our perspective, it does not appear improper to consider also cultural maps about past, present, and alternative futures, played out in the lived culture of the classroom (Fig. 3).

5. Lived culture and discursive practices in classrooms

The lived culture is produced at the intersection of public and private cultures, i.e. through the interaction of teachers and students. This relation is asymmetric and, in line with the transformative project of the school, "the power relation between students and teacher is enacted through the transmission of knowledge" [41]. This relational structure is based on an implicit assumption: the construction of the student as incompetent, both in terms of curriculum contents and relational skills. As a consequence, the teacher has an exclusive role in defining the agenda and the rules of interaction in the classroom. The teacher, moreover, is officially acknowledged as the only actor entitled to assess other actors' (students') performance in both in terms of content and behaviour [41].

Using De Certeau's distinction between tactic and strategy, we can state that the teacher is the locus of strategic practice in the classroom, while students are the locus of tactical practice. The strategic role of the teacher emerges fully when considering discursive practice in the classroom, as the teacher's power is enacted, embodied and may be observed in the structure of classroom conversation [41].

The interest in analysing the patterns and contents of classroom talk relies on the belief that teaching and learning are basically performed through discursive interaction.

Again, like culture, classroom discourse may be partitioned in a private discourse, which communicates primarily the contents of private culture through children's private talk which is neither known nor allowed by the teacher, and a public

Table 1
Strategic and tactical practices in classroom public discourse

	Tactic (student)	Strategy (teacher)
Contents	Compliance/competition for rewards	Agenda setting
	Interpretation of meaning	Definition of meaning
	Challenge to the teacher	Assessment
Forms	Violation of rules	Setting of rules
	Exploitation of rules	Allocation of turns

one, which communicates primarily the contents of public culture through the teacher's and the children's public talk. Public discourse is hence the locus of meanings that are considered relevant for the enactment of the curriculum. Therefore, access to public discourse is a key resource in classroom interaction, as it is obviously necessary to teachers for conducting pedagogic activities. The teacher "strategically" selects the contents which are allowed in the public discourse, both ex ante by defining the instructional units to be taught in line with the school transformative project, and ex post by evaluating students' performance and thus selecting the relevant meanings to be retained by the class. The teacher, moreover, also decides the rules of interaction that structures conversation and, in particular, rules of turn-taking.

Children publicly interact according to the rules of interaction, but students perform tactics to grant for them or their peers a privileged access to public discourse both violating the "rules of the game" established by and negotiated with the teacher, and exploiting rules themselves to gain access to public discourse beyond the will and programmes of the teacher (Table 1).

If public discourse is the proper place of teacher's strategy, children's tactics insinuate themselves into it, they "constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities" [26]. The children have a dual goal. On the one hand, they search for opportunities to compete for rewards (or to avoid punishment) through correctly providing an answer to the teacher's questions and, in general, through successfully performing an assigned task. On the other, they look both for chances to contest and oppose the meanings distributed through the public discourse, and for performing tasks which they are not allowed to do (e.g. assessment of peer performance).

Finally, looking at the structure of classroom conversation, the key feature is the assessment role of the teacher and the correspondent accountability of children. This exclusive role is reflected by the typical ternary structure of conversation: question (Q), answer (A), and evaluation (E).

The QAE structures a turn-taking series that involves the teacher, who opens the sequence by asking children to verbally perform a task, the pupils, who attempt to perform the task according to the contingent rules of interaction, and again the teacher, who evaluates the children's answers. Through this mechanism, the teacher can define the relevant scholastic knowledge, the interpretation of the meanings in classroom public culture, and their relevance for all practical purposes.

6. Conclusion

The classroom is a social space where meanings and meaningful forms are distributed, negotiated, and newly created. The institutional approach of Hannerz to the study of culture and De Certeau's couple of strategic and tactical practices, offers an interpretive framework for understanding social processes that organise meanings and forms.

If we consider images of the future as cultural maps, then the approach outlined in the article may be applied to investigate how the social organisation of meanings in the classroom affects student's images of the futures.

Such an approach appears to be promising for the development of two research programmes. The first one explores discursive practices occurring in real classroom settings during the discussion of future-oriented topics. The second concerns the possibility of implementing some longitudinal research work to observe how curricula and teaching practices influence specific images of the future which are embedded in instructional units (e.g. population issues, technology, etc.).

Both of them, and especially the second one, may contribute to our understanding of the "nature and dynamics" of education's influence on young people's images of the future.

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