

Continuity and Discontinuity of Educational Experience amidst School and Family: Epistemological and Conceptual Foundations

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Abstract

This theoretical paper's goal is to understand the sense ascribed to cultural continuity and discontinuity in the field of school-family-community partnership and shed light on the tendency to make the discontinuous continuous. To do this we propose a framework composed of different categories. Through this framework we situate cultural continuity and discontinuity amidst the conceptual, epistemological and metatheoretical levels and localise different forms of school/family interactions –in poverty-related context.

Keywords: Cultural Continuity; Cultural Discontinuity; Epistemology; School-Family Relationship

Introduction

In scientific, political and institutional discourse on education, we find that a child's educational success depends on the establishment continuity of the systems composing its ecosystem. We can here refer to the discourse on interprofessionnal collaboration [1], the inclusion of at-risk students, differentiated pedagogy and the school-family-community partnership [2,3]. The idea of establishing, in a poverty-related environment, continuity in the context of what is labeled cultural discontinuity is at the foundation of the school-family partnership and the actions deployed by educators with regard to this phenomenon [4-6]. At the base of these actions reside the implicit representations of cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity that we propose identifying within the framework of this theoretical article. These representations remain implicit in different

fields, particularly child psychology, and underlie the tendency to make the cultural discontinuity continuous in a static (additive) fashion. This problem translates in specific domains such as school-family-community partnership. The "cultures" of the families from poverty-related contexts are negated and parents are artificially made into school's agents without having the possibility to be fully integrated into school. Yet the political and institutional discourses promote school-family continuity, meaning putting (integrating) the systems together. How is such continuity represented alongside school-family discontinuity? This paper responds to this question from an epistemological and conceptual point of view.

First, we present the problem of cultural discontinuity in poverty-related environment. Second, we present different forms of school-family interaction with regard different epistemological conceptions of cultural

continuity and cultural discontinuity. Third, we schematically systematize and extend these categories by integrating the conceptual, epistemological and met-theoretical levels. This could for instance enable understanding how educators make the discontinuous continuous. We conclude by integrating the temporal dimension to our analysis.

The Problem of Cultural Discontinuity in Poverty-Related Environment From an Ecosystemic Point of View

In poverty-related environment, characterised by a higher concentration of socio-economic deprivation indications, the child is considered to be “at risk” of academic failure due to learning difficulties experienced in situations of cultural discontinuity. This concept is defined as the gap between school and family as cultures [7]. Ultimately, when exposed, in a school setting, to cultural objects incoherent with the basis of family culture, the child is susceptible to experiencing a major cultural disruption, due to the imbalance that occurs, making them particularly vulnerable on the cognitive and relational levels [6-8]. In response to this phenomenon, educators will make it a relatively drastic treatment by establishing conditions of continuity in the context of cultural discontinuity, or by reversing the direction of the current, thereby reducing discontinuity. Their actions have often involved a static interpretation of cultural discontinuity, and the cultural continuity to be established takes the form of an artificial plating of school culture on family culture, a tendency which, paradoxically, reinforces the cultural discontinuity and keeps parents from poverty-related environment on the outer limits of the school [9].

From an ecosystemic point of view, it is important to consider that educators do not passively respond to an external phenomenon nor impose constraints on families but that, being in active relation with their environment, they construct such a phenomenon (cultural discontinuity) [10]. In such a perspective, it is important to clarify the educators’ representations, but also to consider this phenomenon as a process engaging different people at the frontier of school and family, rather than as an external and pre-established “fact”. In this sense, cultural discontinuity may constitute a heuristic tool to dynamically understand the representations of actors in regard to their environment:

Cultural discontinuity can be used as an analytic or theoretical tool to explain educational practices that

demonstrated such disconnections and inconsistencies. School-based norms and values are socially and culturally constructed by people, such as teacher and administrators, and these constructions sometimes conflict with those of the student. Teachers and students’ cultural identities, insights, and perspectives inform how they understand, relate to, see, and experience the world and relate to others [7].

Situated on the frontier of school and family – considered as dynamic cultural universes [11], the participants (child, parents, teachers) are situated amidst a zone of tension comprising polarities. On one hand, these are those of the cultures represented as either continued or discontinued. Cultures as polarities are related in a continued or discontinuous fashion. We are therefore interested in the phenomena of cultural continuity and discontinuity.

This necessitates an epistemological reading grid extending and systematizing the categories.

A Framework for the Epistemological Conception of Continuity and Cultural Discontinuity: Differentiation between conceptual and epistemological plans

On the conceptual level, we are interested in cultural continuity, as well as cultural discontinuity. On the epistemological level, we are analyzing each of these phenomena (cultural continuity and discontinuity) through the angle of continuity (additivity reflecting a mechanistic epistemology) and discontinuity (non-additivity, dynamism). Epistemologically, we limit ourselves to contrasting additive with non-additivity without situating the latter in a specific epistemology (interactionism, phenomenology, constructivism, constructionism, etc.). This will prevent rendering our analysis too complex and losing sight into details, for instance regarding the fact that both additivity and non-additivity could be part of an interactionist paradigm [12]. Our analysis could be completed afterward.

Referring to additivity and non-additivity enable us to characterise how are cultural continuity and discontinuity represented. Each of them could be seen as a static or dynamic phenomena.

We therefore have four reading categories:

1. Additive cultural continuity
2. Non-additive cultural continuity
3. Additive cultural discontinuity

4. Non-additive cultural discontinuity

In a complementary fashion, we will also reflect on the tendency to make the discontinuous continuous –from cultural discontinuity to continuity. We will ask ourselves if this move is static or dynamic. Here, we add two categories:

5. Additive relationship between cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity.
6. Non-additive relationship between cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity.

Note that this analysis could be made more complex by mixing-up these last two categories with the first four. We could therefore consider, for instance, the additive/non-additive relationship between additive/non-additive cultural continuity and additive/non-additive cultural discontinuity. We will not delve into this meta-level of analysis.

From the perspective of the six categories, we can complete the work executed in psychology which recognizes the static or dynamic character of the continuity and discontinuity of the child's learning, while being critical as to their epistemological foundations [13].

From an *epistemological* view, the continuity refers to the additive (linear) relationship between objects, actors and systems, while discontinuity inscribes this same relationship in a non-additive logic [13,14]. We will often refer to the concept of interaction to designate these relationships. The continuity/discontinuity axis is notably reflected in the coherence/incoherence relationship, as well as the stability/change relationship [15,16]. The change itself can be continued (variational) or discontinued (transformational) [13]. In this case, we are interested in the spatial, rather than the temporal, plane.

Inscribed in this overview, the study of social polarities (Markovà, 2007) and cultural ruptures as conceptual phenomena –which can refer to cultural discontinuity, can manifest itself in an additive (continuity) or non-additive (discontinuity) epistemological frame [9]. The cultural continuity –as a conceptual phenomenon–can also be read in accordance with one of these two epistemological perspectives; it is therefore not necessarily additive.

It should be noted that culture will not be approached from the angle of ethnicity to which some authors refer but, rather in a systemic-cultural logic [11], as a symbolic

negotiated universe reflected in the relationship between the individual and his environment. In this perspective Valsiner suggests that “*culture belongs to the relating of the person and the environment* [17]. Here culture becomes exemplified through different processes by which persons relate with their worlds.” (pp. 21). From this angle, both the cultural continuity and discontinuity phenomena are, by taking into account the individual/environment relationship that underlies them, considered processes that can be inscribed in an additive or non-additive logic –as an ecosystemic approach can itself be situated with regard to different epistemology [13,18-21].

We situate these phenomena (processes) in the field of school-family-community partnership and not in their original theoretical universes, although we will refer to certain foundations. This is reflected notably by the fact that the differentiated readings of the concept of culture (González, 1999) that will be conveyed are essentially those that are specific to this field despite the definition of the concept of culture that we have provided as a general guide to our approach [22]. We are not looking to make a systemic and synthetic presentation of the concept of cultural discontinuity through its theoretical foundations but, rather, to identify its applications in the field of school-family-community partnership, in epistemological terms. We will often refer to Gutiérrez and her colleagues (2009) who present a synthesis of this concept (as well as that of cultural continuity) and who link it to school-family relationships [9]. We then identify the dominant tendencies of the Anglo-Saxon and, partially, Quebecois and French literature in relation to the categories proposed.

Cultural Continuity

The constitution of the school-family-community partnership field *in reaction to cultural discontinuity* predominantly directs emphasis on the cultural continuity to be established or (re)established [4]. In order to reach for cultural continuity, academic parental engagement is favoured to the extent that it “helps to synchronize the demands made to students at school and at home” [23]. Let us first situate the cultural continuity – as a conceptual phenomenon–with regard to an additive (continuous) logic.

Cultural Continuity in an Additive Frame

In order to prove the “existence” of an already existing cultural continuity some researchers believe that school

and family are not as different as the authors generally suggest. They consider these instances of socialization from a functionality perspective, by highlighting the fact that there are marked correspondences between these institutions about areas of sociability, despite minor corresponding—compared to schools, families are composed of less members than the school and the emphasis is on the affective sphere [4,24]. The fact that parents and teachers pursue the same goal of support for academic success translates their common vision and, on a more global scale, expresses the idea of an entanglement between these instances of socialization [25-27]. As criticised by Crozier and Vincent (1996a), this perspective implies a presumed academic consensus between parents and teachers about *academic* goals based on the school's form of socialization—the equilibrium's center of the parent/teacher relationship is established around the school rather than the family [28-30].

This is reflected in typology, with a teleological orientation, based on a continuum (cf., Baum, 2002; Larivée, 2008, 2011) where the point of arrival—the ideal form of engagement to be reached by the child and the parent—implicitly constitutes school culture [31-39].

The idea of consensus, considered *a priori*, as a stable datum, between school and family expresses a static understanding of each of these cultures and their relations; they are considered homogenous ensembles where there is little cultural variation [9,40,41]. This is what Auerbach (2007) also states: "In these works, consensus and cooperation are assumed; parent involvement is treated as a social fact on neutral terrain rather than as socially constructed phenomena on the contested terrain of schooling" (p. 251).

The fact, for many authors, speaking about the school-family and parent-teacher relationships in a generic sense, without referring to parents' sociocultural origins [42,43], and presuming a consensus without looking at these cultural basis, constitute a masking operation of cultural dynamics [44-46]. The emphasis on consensus as a social fact has its counterpart in political discourse where parents of poverty-related environment are believed to share the same interests as teachers [5].

Cultural continuity in a non-additive frame

So far, we have tried to demonstrate the anchoring of cultural continuity in an additive epistemological frame. In the scientific literature on the field of the school-family partnership, we can also find some evidence of a non-

additive interpretation of cultural continuity. From this perspective, it is not considered a social fact, but a destination whose reach passes through a dynamic process. Here, seeking continuity does not necessarily implies a negation of cultural discontinuity or attempted resolution ultimately involving such a negation. Also, this enterprise is, at times, a part of a dynamic relational framework where tension is seen as the engine of evolution. In this line of thinking, parental engagement is presented as a mediator in the school-family relationship [47] that takes shape amidst intersubjective relational processes from which a *consensus can emerge* [48,49]. Flood and Anders (2005) present, in these terms, such a "partner-based" process [50]:

McCarthy suggested that teachers establish and maintain frequent and reciprocal communications with families. She argued that by developing a better understanding of children's families and by helping them understand and use reading resources with their children, teachers could increase home-school congruence and continuity for all students (pp. 114).

It remains, however, that, within the limits of this teleological perspective [51], the destination to be reached is often given at the outset and circumscribed around school culture [34,39], which is reflected, as we have already mentioned, in several typologies of parental commitment. As an expression of a static conception of culture, this perspective often leaves little room for the subjectivity of the parents (Boulanger, 2018) from poverty-related environment in regards to this culture [9,52]. However, a non-additive conception of cultural continuity (conceptual phenomenon) sometimes implies that the parents and children of poverty-related environment contextually negotiate their relationship to the world, in particular from artifacts [48,49]. This expresses a relationship between cultural continuity and discontinuity as far as the non-additive conception of cultural discontinuity promoted by the authors just cited supports the non-additive conception of cultural continuity we were referring to. We will develop more on this later. For the moment, we present the concept of cultural discontinuity.

Cultural Discontinuity

Cultural Discontinuity in an Additive Frame

When cultural discontinuity is situated in an additive perspective, the school and the families—as two cultures representing polarities—are made of mutually exclusive

closed classes or categories [9]. The emphasis on dichotomies and the manifestation of a social break-up leads more to divide than to unite the actors and their socio-cultural universe, which is reflected in particular by excluding certain forms of socialization [53]. When cultural difference is recognized, it leads to exclusion because there is an implicit or explicit hierarchy with school at the top.

The family is therefore considered as a series of risk factors and its members as carriers of deficits. This is what leads to cultural gap reinforcement:

When schools do not recognize racial and cultural issues, especially when people are not treated equally, racial and cultural boundaries and divisions between families and schools are reinforced [54].

Thus, cultural discontinuity reinforces cultural discontinuity, thanks to an additive logic implying *adding the same to the same*. In this perspective, rigid boundaries prevent a bidirectional exchange between the school and the family. When bidirectionality is possible, such as with Epstein's model, the implicit hierarchy and the rigid boundary make this bidirectional relationship vertical (the school as the normative agent), formal (mainly formal types of engagement) and a linear sequence (teachers sending letter and parents calling) rather than a dialogical zone [52,55].

Cultural Discontinuity in a Non-Additive Frame

Occasionally, moreover, cultural discontinuity is apprehended on a non-additive epistemological base. Doucet (2011) reveals in these terms the commonality between the approaches situated in this logic [53]:

Representing more of a poststructuralist world view, such frameworks have challenged the binary constructions suggested by cultural mismatch theories, insisting that boundaries between apparently separate spheres are permeable and never fixed. (p. 2707).

The presence of a cultural break could be considered an indication of a manifestation of cultural diversity [56-58]. Celebrating this diversity and considering the importance and the intrinsic value of family culture for the educational success of children from poverty-related environment, certain authors make the teachers' knowledge, recognition and solicitation, in class, of family culture a condition for the rapprochement of the familial and scholar forms of socialization [59-60].

Apprehending the presence of a cultural gap between the school and family not only as an indication of diversity to be exploited, but also as a constructive zone enabling the development of the child and the systems that surround them, certain authors favour the actualization of intersubjective processes, negotiation processes [61], as well as the co-construction of knowledge and dynamic articulation of cultures [62]. In this regard, Mérini (1995) refers to interculturality and Samaras and Wilson (1997) refer to the process of enculturation. From a related perspective, Changkakoti and Akkari speak of interculturalization [58,62,63].

In order to escape from the culture of reproach, it seems important to us to be able to change the premises, namely to leave the monocultural logic behind and to take an interest in the conditions that make it possible to establish an interculturalization zone. *Interculturalization* would mean that not only family and school cultures are brought into contact, but that there is, created at the border, a third negotiation space where the alliance becomes possible, it being understood that there is not only one only possible type of interculturalization.

In this line of thinking, rather than considering the *consensus* as a given, certain authors understand it as a sociocultural process which involves negotiation or intersubjectivity between parents of poverty-related environment and teachers [64]. Cultural discontinuity is then placed in a space conducive to a dynamic articulation of the educational universes, this in contrast with the reductionist treatment (static perspective) that Epstein (1987, 1995, 2001) makes of the entanglement of socialization spheres [25,26,35,39,66].

According to certain authors to be overall constructive, the tension generated from cultural discontinuity needs to be canalized or mediated by means of mechanisms and tools amidst a dialogical zone between the parent, the child and the teachers. Social networks also form a mediator of parental engagement and the school-family relationship [27-73].

As commendable as they may be, when they are not accompanied by a non-additive reading of the concept of culture, these dynamic conceptions of cultural discontinuity may mask a reductionist perspective or they lead to it [9].

This type of come and go between cultural continuity and discontinuity amidst a tension between an additive

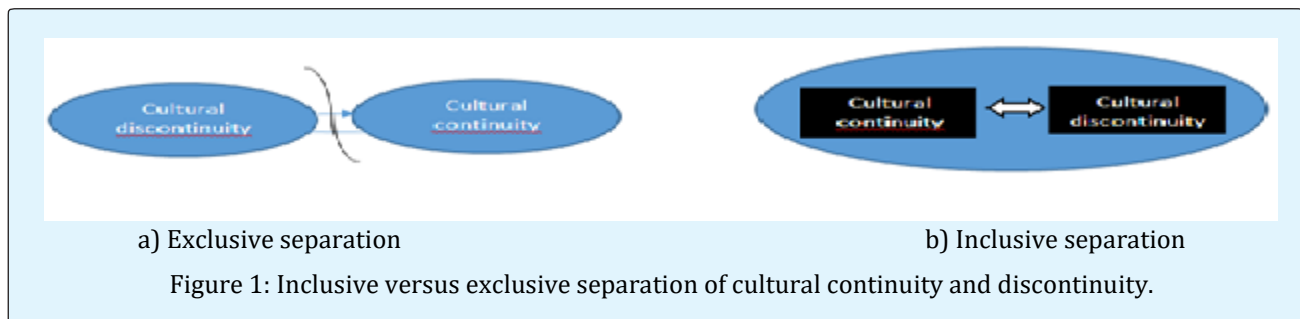
and a non-additive epistemologies provides us with clues as to the nature of the interactions between these two types of cultural phenomena. Let us take a look at the additive and non-additive (epistemological) relations between continuity and cultural discontinuity, providing, on this subject, some general reference points.

Additive and Non-additive Relations Between Cultural Continuity and Discontinuity: Inclusive and Exclusive Perspective

Reflecting on the additive and non-additive nature of the relationship between cultural continuity and discontinuity assumes that we identify these two phenomena as two interacting polarities. The nature of this interaction varies depending on the epistemological logic. Speaking in terms of choice (*either/or*) between cultural continuity and discontinuity implies an additive perspective. The phenomena of cultural continuity and discontinuity are therefore understood from an exclusive

separation perspective expressing the tendency to separate two units (which are here polarities) and viewing them separately, as non-interrelated, and understanding them outside of their context, that is to say the whole in which they are both inscribed [74]. In a contrastive view, the units in question –cultural continuity and discontinuity–can be distinguished for the purposes of analysis, but functionally perceived as interrelated and contextualized; we are here in logic of *inclusive separation*. In support of Valsiner (1998), this leads us to propose the following plan [74].

Exclusive separation logic= Additive relation between cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity
 Inclusive separation logic = Non-additive relation between cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity
 The reader should line the two polarities –cultural continuity and discontinuity— through an exclusive perspective (additive) or inclusive perspective (non-additive).



Exclusive separation between cultural continuity and discontinuity implies at the outset considering each of them as two separated FIELDS, in Lewin's (1936) term (Figure 1a) [75]. Cultural continuity and discontinuity –as polarities— are decontextualized from the global totality that is both a part of. Generally, cultural discontinuity is considered of as a starting point to be made into cultural continuity. This entails that at the very outset there is no cultural continuity. Therefore, cultural continuity and discontinuity are not considered of as two complementary phenomena that are necessary to each other [12]. Let's us take the example of a consensus. In such a perspective (Figure 1a), a consensus only happens when the school and family agents *have* similar and convergent opinions. This occurs only when cultural continuity happens. Divergences –expressing cultural discontinuity–are considered of as obstacles to be overcome. Because cultural continuity and discontinuity are

conceived as two separated in a decontextualized way phenomena, the former is projected in the school and the later in the family. This means that making the discontinuous continuous –removing discontinuity as the pathological agents–implies the school agents normatively acting upon the family to make parents actions fitting with school norms.

In a contrastive way, rather considering cultural continuity and discontinuity in an inclusive way (Figure 1b) implies recognizing them as two complementary phenomena interacting in the same field over time. Here, a consensus is a process in which there is tension between agreement and disagreement. This consensus is in a constant state of dynamic equilibrium –see in particular Tateo's and Marsico' (2013) concept of tensegrity [76]. This means that sameness of point of view

is never achieved; it is in a constant state of tension in a dialogical space. There is never a final state corresponding to a specific and well-delimited consensus but a process of addressiveness and responses [77]. Here, we situate the relation between cultural continuity and discontinuity in a non-additive epistemological frame. Yet, what is missing in our frame is the relation between additivity and non-additivity. Do we always have to choose non-additivity? Couldn't there be an inclusive relation between additive and non-additivity as two complementary epistemological orientations?

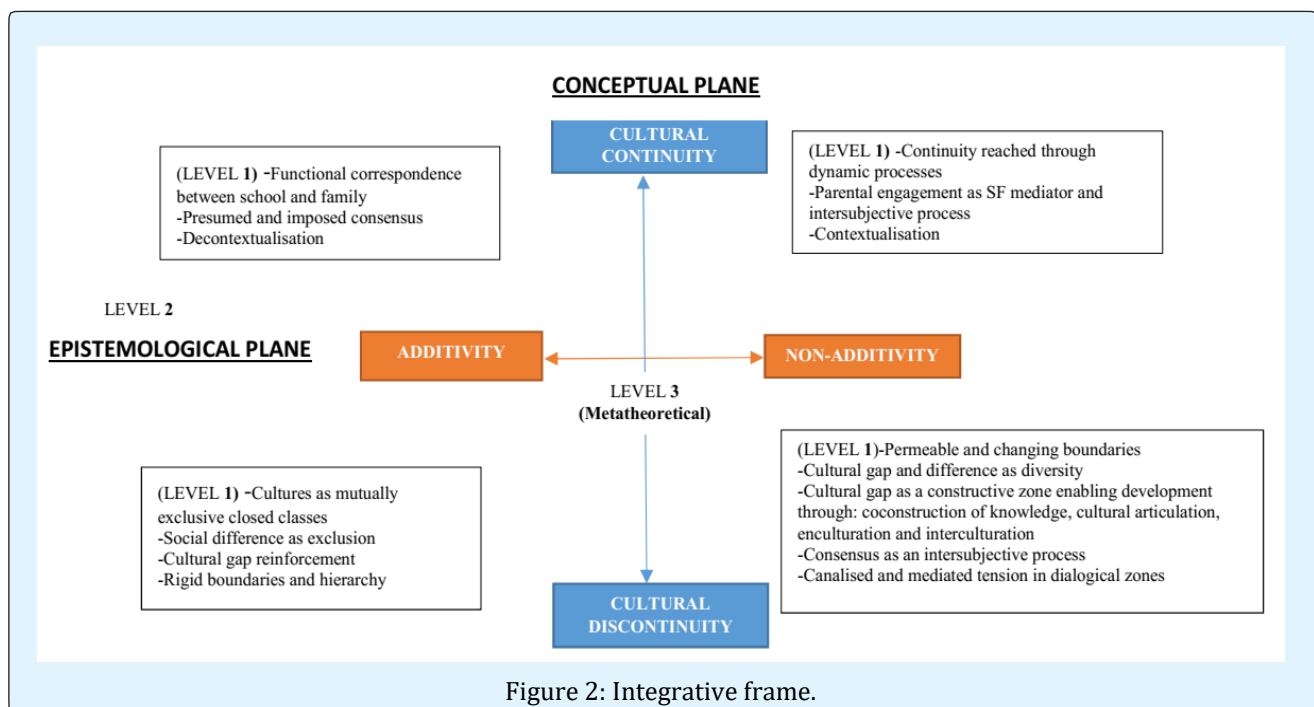
We synthesize now the different categories presented with regard levels of inquiry in order to integrate, in a second time, this concern with the relation between additivity and non-additivity.

We mentioned earlier that *each of the concepts* of cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity is situated in an additive and/or non-additive epistemological frame. We mentioned for instance that taking an additive stance on cultural continuity implies imposing a consensus while a non-additive conception of both cultural continuity and discontinuity makes this consensus a process. We also said that additive cultural continuity implies recognizing functional corresponding between school and family. The

first level of analysis comprises all the specific forms of school/family interaction presented previously.

The second level is epistemological. It characterises each of the form of school/family interaction (first level) with regard, first, to each concept (cultural continuity and discontinuity) and, second, to the relation between the concepts. Here, we referred to the inclusive (non-additive) or exclusive (additive) relation between the concepts of cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity (Figure 1).

The third is *metatheoretical*. This is the metatheoretical level in which «thought is about basic concepts that impact on both the theoretical and observational level. A metatheory itself is a set of rules, principles, or a story (narrative), that both describes and prescribes what is acceptable and unacceptable as theory-the means of conceptual exploration of any scientific domain» [13]. This is in this sense that «[s]cientific metatheories transcend (i.e., 'meta') theories and methods in the sense that they define the context in which theoretical and methodological concepts are constructed» [78]. It is therefore situated at a highest level than the epistemological (second level).



The third level refers to the inclusive or exclusive relation between the *epistemological* additive and non-additive orientation of each of the two conceptual phenomenon (cultural continuity and discontinuity) interacting together. So, cultural continuity can be *inclusively* conceived as *both* a dynamic (non-additive) and a static (additive) phenomenon or exclusively as either a dynamic (non-additive) or a static phenomenon (additive). It could be translated in the tension between structure and process. A consensus could be seen as both a process (non-additive continuity) leading to a product having a certain form or structure (additive continuity) when it get stabilised and anchored. It can then be renegotiated when debated. Here a move from additive continuity to non-additive continuity. This is the case with social representation comprises as both a stable form and a process. Of course, there are many nuances to this illustration, for instance regarding the non-additive nature of a form or structure and the additive nature of a process.

Here, we applied the metathereotical relation between additivity and non-additivity to a concept (cultural continuity). We could also apply this to the (additive *or* non-additive) relation between cultural continuity and discontinuity (second level). We will not render or analysis even more complex by delving into this articulation between the second and the third level.

The Figure 2 schematizes the three aforementioned levels. The vertical axis represents the conceptual aspect (cultural continuity and discontinuity). The forms of school/family interaction (level 1) that are listed pertained to cultural continuity when they are situated on the top of the Figure 2, and to cultural discontinuity when they appear in the bottom.

The horizontal axis is epistemological (level 2). The forms of school/family interaction are situated in an additive logic when they appear in the left of the Figure 1, and to a non-additive perspective when they are situated in the right part. The met theoretical relation between additivity and non-additivity (the horizontal orange arrow) represents the third level.

Conclusion

From a spatial to a temporal conception of cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity In this text we presented four forms of cultural interactions from an ecosystemic perspective: additive cultural continuity,

non-additive cultural continuity, additive cultural discontinuity and non-additive cultural discontinuity. This classification implies situating the concepts of cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity on the epistemological level, reflecting on the interplay between these concepts and opening on the relation between additivity and non-additivity. In this regard we suggested that non-additivity can necessarily imply additivity. This is the case with the very frame we proposed!

As a matter of fact, our conception of cultural continuity and discontinuity remained inscribed in a SPATIAL logic rather than temporal.

The different pieces in this schema need not be static, but they move. This schema needs change. In certain circumstances, social representations –as forms—of parental engagement and parent competences are contextually reconstructed, for instance when parents and teachers engage in flexible activities in the communities [52].

Acting reflexively, parent and teacher can distancing themselves from some stereotypes –as additive forms—and contextually (re)construct meaning [79]. Social changes such as the application of new educational policies can lead to deconstruct how schooling is conceived –in micro-discourses—in order to enable the constructive adaptation to a new context [36]. Action-research often enables a constructive and reflexive dialogue between parents and teachers [70]. Reflecting on, and distancing themselves from, a common belief (representation) of education, people engage in an intersubjective process to reconstruct it. This also happens when actors in education reconstruct their relation to ethnic beliefs through distancing and reflexive process [64].

In these different cases, cultural continuity needs discontinuity –both as a concept (cultural discontinuity) and as an epistemology (non-additivity). People distancing themselves from stereotype happens when the static is made dynamic! These recommendations could be useful for educational psychologists who act on social interfaces under the cultural guidance of ideologies and representations that our paper tried to highlight. Their discipline-psychology and particularly child psychology-still needs what Valsiner (1989) labels a developmental epistemology. With regard our paper this implies recognizing non-additivity but also extending our reflection with regard to irreversible time [80,81].

Without this process aspect, our categories remain (relatively static) labels with no explanatory value. What needs to be done is to put this frame into irreversible time and reflect on the concept of culture [82]. What does the word cultural in cultural continuity stand for? What makes it cultural? Is it a form or process?

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