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Dialogue in the classroom: the ideal method for values education in multicultural contexts

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Abstract

This paper, based on an ethnographic study carried out by the author, explains how it is possible to educate for values on a cross-curricular basis in Primary Education, using a dialogic method. The relevance of this method is emphasised for multicultural contexts, given its inclusive nature, as it enables immigrant students to show their schoolmates their different ways of life, and therefore, to feel welcome and foster satisfactory social relationships. It is considered to be of vital importance that teachers are aware of the importance of education for citizenship and can encourage a permanent spirit of dialogue in their classes.

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1. Introduction

There is no doubt that schools should educate for responsible citizenship, but reality shows that this issue is often overlooked, and inadequately addressed. Schujman (2004: 17) considers that ‘you cannot say that the issue of discrimination is not addressed in schools... Nor can you say that do not try and transmit the value of solidarity. You could also say that solidarity is one of the most important values in institutional projects and there are more than just a few solidarity acts carried out in schools. It is not the absence of these themes that is worrying, but rather the superficiality of how they are treated’.

In fact, when teachers do not have an explicit plan for values education, it is pushed into the background and dealt with on a casual basis, generally when there are conflicts in the classroom. These occasions are more prone to result in “moralising” than in a serene, continuous ethical reasoning and reflection (Álvarez, 2011). Haynes (2004:

49) denounced that citizenship education ‘is not suited to impromptu meetings on odd occasions when there are a few spare minutes. Regular meetings are necessary.’

Our question is therefore, how is it possible to implement values education in classrooms in a systematic way? There are possibly many answers to this question. Our approach, however, argues that, by applying a conversational methodology in the classroom, adopted by all members of the class, a broad range of subjects related to the students’ citizenship education can be profoundly addressed, provided that teachers are aware of its importance, and encourage a dialogic approach in class on a continuous basis. This is the approach that we consider to be most appropriate, as it allows the short-sightedness of incidental, casual approaches to be overcome (Álvarez, 2011). This vision is based on the study carried out by the author entitled: “Dialogue as an educational strategy in civic values: an ethnographic study in Primary Schooling”. Here, the importance of values education in Primary Education was explained, as it is in this education stage where the foundations for behaviour and moral judgement are developed in children. Failing to work on value conflicts in the classroom at this stage could involve shortcomings in the civic education of many students

2. Theoretical framework

Research into values education is possibly more complicated than any other educational topic, as it is a complex, diffuse, subject, open to many different potential interpretations. Investigating dialogue as an educational method is complicated, because the subject is elusive and there are a wide variety of conceptions related to it (De Luca, 1983; Edwards and Mercer, 1988; Lago, 1990; Cazden, 1991; Cortina, 1993; Escámez and Martínez, 1993; Puig, 1995; Flecha, 1997; Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan, 1998; Burbules, 1999; Navarro, 2000; Habermas, 2001; Pomar, 2001; Asensio, 2004; Saló, 2006; García, 2007).

Some authors, such as Navarro (2000), hold that dialogue is the best way forward in values education, since it serves: (1) as a means, which implies that people are skilled in communicative exchanges and that we have things to say (to each other); and (2) as an end, which assumes the category of a value, in the sense that dialogic situations are preferred above situations that are violent or that upset peaceful social relations.

But, in view of the above, we have to ask ourselves exactly what is meant by dialogue in the classroom. Various and very heterogeneous concepts exist, which can lead to confusion. There are those who consider that dialogue exists in every Primary classroom, as there are conversations taking place in all classrooms. Others think that there are conversations in all classrooms, but that actual dialogues only occur in those that meet certain criteria. There are also those who believe that there is oral work done in classes, but that this does not always result in conversations or in dialogues –only in monologues. Some others, however, differentiate between spontaneous, pedagogic, philosophic and other kinds of dialogue. Therefore, no unanimous view exists on the matter.

From an educational point of view, Burbules, one of the most prominent researchers in into dialogic methods worldwide, describes dialogue as a conversational interaction deliberately addressed to teaching and learning, and argues that not every conversation has a pedagogical purpose; and, in the reverse, that not all pedagogical communicative relationships are forms of conversation (such as, for example, presentations) (Burbules, 1999: 12). According to this definition, dialogue is a pedagogic method or procedure directed at learning, which tries to relate the proposals made by the participants, with the aim that the end knowledge is enriched by the participation of all those involved. This has been the understanding of the concept throughout the ethnographic study undertaken.

Interaction in the classroom usually responds to the model of initiation, question and answer, as determined by the academic pressure of vast academic programmes. Cazden (1991: 39) considers that the most widely-used model of school discourse in all degrees and levels is the sequence known as I-R-E (teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation). Classroom interactions, from this point of view, start with an invitation by the teacher to a child. The chosen student responds by contributing a story, an idea, etc., and, finally, the teacher comments on this contribution before resuming the same sequence with another child.

Given the limitations of this communicative approach that has been naturalised by the school tradition, it seems obvious that, in order to foster a true dialogic dynamic in classes, such as that proposed by Burbules, it is necessary to break away from this usual structure, thus giving students a voice. This can be effected by establishing turn-taking in communication, rules to be followed in order to take part, etc., so that the student truly participates in the

development of knowledge in class, and enriches it, whether this is in the form of offering academic knowledge, providing an open and honest reflection in the classroom, revising their own proposals or ideas held previously, sharing experiences, establishing practical commitments, etc. It could be said that dialogue should constitute the basic educational strategy to be used by teachers so that students can acquire new knowledge, attitudes and behaviour in the classroom, by implementing reflexive processes about values.

The study suggests that discussions must be held about relevant social problems related to the ideas that emerge in class; that school content should be problematised, extracting the ethical dimensions of the issues under discussion and talking about them. As proposed by Jordán and Santolaria (1995: 177), values education should be addressed on a cross-curricular basis whenever there is a moral component in any subject and at any time. They added that it is necessary to consider and reflect on such moral component, together with the topics covered in each subject, to ensure that students learn that morality is not something separate from life, and that they are prepared to construct their own judgement criteria and moral behaviour.

3. Method and Context

To properly investigate this complex issue, it was considered essential that the researcher should have the opportunity to 'live' the subject from within, where the ethnographic study was being carried out. We considered it vital to use a research model that would give priority to observation of real life in the classroom by the researcher, so as to provide an insight into the development of this teaching-learning dialogic methodology.

The basic characteristics of the ethnographic model are: the prolonged participation in the context under study to be able to see things from the point of view of a 'native', the participant observation of the researcher as a 'marginal native', and holistic reflexive description.

Ethnography allows the researcher access to first-hand information about the interactions produced in the classrooms between a teacher and a group of students, and those interactions constitute the core of school pedagogy (Woods, 1987; Goetz and Lecompte, 1988; Delamont, 1984; Jackson, 1991; Serra, 2004; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2005; Velasco and Díaz, 2006).

A single case study was conducted, which is the most relevant method to use when following qualitative methodologies (Stake, 2005). The case-study methodology involved carrying out in-depth field work in a primary school, specifically, in a 5th grade classroom. This class was chosen specifically for the type of teaching used, given that there had been strong interest on the part of the teacher in values education and in fostering positive relationships between the students. In addition, the approach used was based on dialogic tenets. Hammersley and Atkinson (2005: 56) stated that, in ethnographic studies, the selection of one small group is of paramount importance, as the larger the number of places of study, the shorter the time devoted to each of them. The researcher must draw a line between breadth and depth in the research study. In order to collect information, a series of techniques were selected that were consistent with the adopted research approach. These were basically: participant observation by the researcher in the classroom (the classes were audio-recorded, and notes were taken), interviews with the agents involved, debate forums and analysis of documents, seeking the triangulation of subjects, methods, and spaces and times. This information was used to carry out a three-level content analysis: (1) analytical reflection on the data, (2) selection, reduction and organisation of data and (3) data categorisation.

The study was conducted in a centre with four hundred and forty students from twenty-one nationalities, immigrant children making up 25% of the total. The teacher/tutor involved in the study taught a group of students in the third stage of Primary Education; 40% of those students were immigrants. The group consisted of twenty-five students, fifteen boys and ten girls, of between nine and eleven years old. Ten were immigrants of nine different nationalities: Polish, Brazilian, Spanish, and six Spanish-speaking Latin American nationalities.

The teacher did not only aim to instruct his group, but also to educate them in citizenship values, assisted by pedagogical convictions based on over thirty years of reading, practice and various reflections on this area. Thanks to the tenacity of the teacher/tutor, the class experienced genuine moments of values education and addressed various social problems using dialogue, allowing students to calmly reflect, and take a moral stance on, the subject under discussion. They were also able to have their say in the classroom and offer their own experiences or thoughts to their classmates, and even to generate some small debates. All these were recorded, transcribed and

analysed throughout the ethnographic research process.

In the classroom there were moments of conversation on various relevant social problems in which all who wished to participated, in order to allow students to serenely reflect upon the subject under discussion, take a moral stance, have their say in the classroom and present their opinion, make comments on the ideas shown, etc.

4. Results

Cross-disciplinary dialogue took place many times in the classroom that year. It is impossible to list every situation, and they are difficult to assess, albeit easy to reproduce (although every transcription reduces the actual teaching practice in situ to a more or less large number of interventions). Due to constraints on the length of this paper, two brief classroom exchanges will be transcribed below in which certain values education emerged.

The first one took place at the beginning of a Mathematics lesson in which the teacher asked the students to show him the homework from the previous class. This opens up a dialogue about 'duties*', not only understood in the academic sense.

- *Student3: My mother, as she's had the baby, has to stay in bed, so when I get back from class I sweep and wash the floor.*
- *Teacher: You do it because you want to. Because you feel that you have that duty. Because if you didn't, what would you be? So what would you be if you did that, what would you say of yourself?*
- *Student3: That when seeing a person like that, with a baby girl...*
- *Teacher: It could have happened that your mum, step-mum, had the baby, and you would say "it's not my problem", and you wouldn't do anything. And this is called... [taps the side of his face with his hand]*
- *Student1: Being cheeky.*
- *Student2: Having nerve.*
- *Teacher: Being cheeky, or having nerve, that's right. And does your mother tell you to do it, student3?*
- *Student3: No.*
- *Teacher: Why is it not necessary for her to tell you to do it?*
- *Student3: Because I know. It is my duty.*
- *Teacher: You feel it is. It isn't necessary for anyone to tell you. One nearly always knows what one has to do. For example, in class, is it easy to know what you should do? ... For example, when I give a child a talking to, is it because he doesn't know what he should do, or is it because he knows, but doesn't do it?*
- *Student4: He knows but doesn't do it.*
- *Teacher: He knows but doesn't do it. Very often people don't do what they should..., very often, both children and adults.*

In this example it can be seen that Student4 participates on several occasions. Student3 is a Colombian boy who is perfectly integrated into the class and shares with the group his life experience in terms of his behaviour at home with his mother, thus teaching a lesson in civic behaviour to his fellow students. He is very clear about it in his mind, because this attitude is valued very highly in his country of origin.

In the example below, a dialogue took place in the class about why, when people used to live in villages, they had a bench in front of their house, and at that time, people used to sit there to talk to each other and sew.

- *Teacher: Why did people use to sit in front of their houses to talk, and very often also to do their sewing, [...] Why has that disappeared in the city and very often in villages too? [...] Why is that? Why did that change happen? Who can think why? Who can figure out why?... Why, Student5?*
- *Student5: Because in Manolo's times [Manolo is the main character in the book that they are working with] there was no television. It wasn't like it happens now, that we lie on the sofa and start watching tele*

* The dual meaning of the Spanish word 'deberes' cannot be conveyed in English. 'Deberes' means both 'homework' and 'duties' in English.

and we don't talk within the family, and all that. At that time, because there was no tele, they picked up a chair and sat outside and talked to their family or their friends.

- Teacher: That's great, Student5. If I had said it, instead of you saying it, I wouldn't have said it better.

[...]

- Student5: Not even when they sit down to eat, which is what usually happens. When I was with my mother in Venezuela, each of us got home for lunch, and we said: 'We won't eat yet. We're going to talk a little bit about what happened to us today. You, Student5, tell us what happened at school, and I will talk about what happened to me at work', and so on.

- Teacher: Is that what your family used to do in Venezuela?

- Student5: Yes.

- Teacher: Before lunch?

- Student5: Yes, mum wouldn't let us have lunch until each of us talked about their day at school, or something. My brother too.

[...]

- Student5: Then my mum would say to my brother: 'You won't leave the table to eat in the living room because we need to talk as a family, because this can't stop being as it was when we lived in Venezuela. And although we've now grown up and we have studied, and he's older, it doesn't matter, we still need to talk as a family, so that we don't lose touch with each other.'

- Teacher: Sure, Student5's mum had to fight her son a bit, because her son wanted to take his lunch to the living room, in front of the television.

- Student6: Every day what I do is grab the food and go to watch tele.

- Teacher: Exactly, and not talk to anybody.

- Student7: Me too.

- Teacher: And do what the tele says. That happens in most homes, people hardly talk to each other. That happens almost every day.

- Student5: My mum used to get very angry.

- Teacher: She used to get very angry because your brother, who is younger, belongs to a generation where the television is there, and the television traps everyone.

- Student5: When I get home later, before lunch, I'll tell my mum what I did today, and I will explain to her a bit about what I did in class, and later I'll do my homework.

In this case Student5, a Venezuelan girl, shares an important observation with the group, to explain why people talk to each other less nowadays. To do so, she describes her life experience in Venezuela to the class, and gives a lesson in values education to her schoolmates, noting the importance of talking to each other within the family.

Both examples, as well as many other gathered in the course of the research study, highlight how it is possible to apply values education in the classroom, by following a dialogic methodology and how, in turn, this contributes to making immigrant students feel that they are part of the educational practices, thus turning the class into a space that welcomes a rich intercultural exchange.

Additionally, a genuinely positive work environment is fostered by using dialogue in the classroom. It is a climate in which innumerable topics related to values education can be approached on a cross-disciplinary basis, creating a reflexive scenario in which previous ideas about a certain issue can converge, as well as academic knowledge, experiences, etc. When a student shares an idea or an experience, this is an offer being made to the group for their reflection, so that each student can recreate their life and understand their context better. This is also very important in promoting the reflexive capacities of children, as when they hear their schoolmates take part in class, they learn to get to know each other, and themselves, better.

5. Conclusion

This dialogic way of teaching is in opposition to learning alone, and improves relationships in the classroom and in the school. Learning occurs between people, on a collaborative and egalitarian basis, in a convivial, respectful atmosphere and a climate of personal recognition. Based on the contributions of students (their experiences, their

ideas, their attitudes, their context) a valuable space for learning and discussion is promoted, as it serves to develop cohesion among schoolmates and encourages the exercise of thought. Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan (1998: 283) considered that 'in order for a moral education program to be adequate, it must enable the child to think reasonably, develop patterns of constructive action, become aware of personal feelings and the feelings of others, develop sensitivity to interpersonal contexts, and acquire a sense of proportion regarding his or her own needs and aspirations vis-à-vis those of others'.

In this task, as is evidenced by the two examples, no specific materials for values education are required to give students a moral education. Such materials are, in any case, an optional resource. In the context of pedagogical studies, efforts have been often made, from both theoretical and practical approaches, to develop sophisticated materials for values education. Dialogic teaching does not necessarily need materials, it is sufficient to pull the threads of situations that are dealt with in the classroom on a day-to-day basis, searching for their moral dimension, turning ordinary situations of classroom life into problems to be debated in a contextualised way by all of the class members (Navarro, 2000; Pomar, 2001). To do so, it is crucial to create time and space in the classroom for students to ask, express themselves, recreate their lives and reflect upon them freely (De Luca, 1983; Edwards and Mercer, 1988; Cazden, 1991; Saló, 2006).

It is also common in the context of education to use tales with morale, de-contextualised dilemmas, stories that bring to the fore desirable behaviour. Why not work on the basis of real, everyday experience? Why replace it with non-existent aspects of reality? These approaches in values education can be good as an introductory means and, sometimes, through a pleasant narrative, are very appealing to children. However, they should not become the only resource, but simply one more available option. They may be used to reinforce what is said or done regularly in the classroom, which is the most important thing, and in this capacity, they would no longer be fundamental to values education. De-contextualised teaching has very little meaning and provokes very little interest in children (Lipman, Sharp y Oscanyan, 1998; Haynes, 2004; Schujman, 2004). If the usual dynamics in the classroom is conversation, both aspects are achieved almost naturally.

Additionally, dialogue enables 'non-infantilising' teaching to take place (Álvarez, 2010). When values education is approached dialogically, the purpose is promoting in children qualities that would be desirable in all citizens. To do so, to a large extent, children must be treated as the people that they are, with an ability to think, express opinions, disagree or change their minds. It is common to approach civic training in primary school through stories, activity sheets, dramatisation, etc. The majority of people who deal with children on a regular basis do not even think about relating to them as if they were adults; rather, they 'infantilise' children to the extreme. Children are little beings who know, feel, reflect and have an experience that they need to understand, and that is why it is necessary to believe in them, believe in their capacity of expression and comprehension, listen to them and help them understand and question 'their' world, considering them as beings with an opinion, an ability to think and experiences of their own.

In our view, the verbal dimension of teaching is not nurtured much in most classrooms (De Luca, 1983; Edwards y Mercer, 1988; Cazden, 1991; Burbules, 1999; Navarro, 2000; Pomar, 2001; Saló, 2006). This results in problems related to expression, and lack of ease and self-confidence with a view to the future, when people need to speak in public. Schools are often entirely blamed for this deficiency, although in our opinion, this position is rather reductionist; however, this dimension of teaching must not be ignored. For people to express themselves correctly and confidently, it is important to have practised, which must be encouraged in schools. Through the discussions held in the classroom, students are able to practice and become familiar with verbal communication. They are capable of connecting different points of view, listening and being listened to, arguing their points, explaining, putting themselves in the place of another, in short, learning basic thinking and communication skills.

Of course, in order to follow this teaching methodology, teachers must be aware and have appropriate training, develop professional convictions and face a number of difficulties. All of these must be done from a dialogic methodology, which is, by no means, easy.

In view of the results of the research study, it can be concluded that dialogic methodologies can contribute towards the generation of a rich communicative context within the classroom, thus fostering schools where foreign students are understood and welcomed, so improving the social relationships within. Classrooms are undoubtedly

plural spaces, which must be allowed to emerge by means of reflexive dialogue, in order to teach contents, but also to develop values education.

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