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THE PRACTICE OF *DIALOGIC LEARNING* AS A SUCCESSFUL MEANS TO OVERCOME INEQUALITIES: 'LA PAZ' LEARNING COMMUNITY CASE

Abstract

The paper presents a successful educational practice that, inspired by the *dialogic learning* methodological principles, is implemented through a *learning community*. Theoretical bases are introduced, along with some defining traits of didactic practice. The focus is on the 'La Paz' *learning community* case, as a means to illustrate both with significant data and relevant human stories how *dialogic learning* can change lives and decisively contribute to break the cycle of poverty and marginality. Located in two of the poorest neighborhoods in Spain, the experience is particularly representative due to, firstly, the extremely deprived living conditions of the population; and, secondly, because of the intense changes that this educational practice has represented both for the school community and for the neighborhoods as a whole.

The principles of *dialogic learning*

Succinctly exposed, *dialogic learning* is based on seven principles:

1. *Egalitarian dialogue*: in professor Ramón Flecha's words, 'a dialogue is egalitarian when it takes different contributions into consideration according to the validity of their reasoning, instead of according to the positions of power held by those who make the contributions' (2000, p. 2).

2. *Cultural intelligence*: the idea of *intelligence* is usually linked to the idea of what can be achieved in the academic order and, somehow related, to marks achieved in a coefficient intelligence test. The concept of *cultural intelligence*, in contrast, focuses on a number of skills that are not limited to this academic sphere – though it is not completely excluded. *Cultural intelligence* comes out by the capability to handle a situation in one specific social context, with all its wide diversity of connotations. Therefore, *academic intelligence* is not completely out of *cultural intelligence*, but this one transcends the purely *academic* field to include other relevant intellectual aspects oriented to solve problems and appropriately manage situations. To put another way, *academic intelligence* is an integrating part of *cultural intelligence,* but this concept goes beyond to imply also two other kinds of intelligence: the so-called *practical intelligence* and the *communicative intelligence* (Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha & Racionero, 2008, pp. 183-187). Whereas the first aforementioned one arises from what it is learnt by doing, the second relies on individuals' language skills to get across and to receive communicative feedback from other interlocutors.

As could be easily noticed, this aspect is particularly relevant in the practice of *dialogic learning*, so solidly rooted in communicative basis. As professor Adriana Aubert *et al* put it, 'el aprendizaje dialógico reconoce esta inteligencia y promueve que los niños y las niñas se ayuden entre sí para resolver actividades, de forma que quienes tienen mayor habilidad en una tarea ayuden al compañero o compañera al

que le cuesta más para que, finalmente, sean ambos quienes puedan resolver la actividad con éxito' [dialogic learning acknowledges this intelligence and promotes that boys and girls help each other to solve activities, in such a way that those most skilled help the less-skilled mates so that both can successfully solve the activity].

3. *Transformation*: put simply, what this idea is putting forward is no more, no less than education can change the social reality, overcoming existing inequalities. It is in this sense that a strong criticism to the theories of reproduction emerges, given that for this theoretical approach education is a mechanism that reproduces social differences, whereas for the dialogic learning education can be legitimately thought as a means to overcome them. As professor Ramón Flecha puts it, 'unfortunately, however, the reproductionists had for years appeared as if they were clairvoyant intellectuals, exposing what they called the naïvete and lack of scientific basis of emancipatory proposals like Freire's. But with the evolution of the social sciences credence has now been given to transformative alternatives and both the reproduction model and the structuralism it was based upon have been discredited' (Flecha, 2000, p. 13).

4. *Instrumental dimension*: an important remark by professor Flecha is that 'dialogic learning embraces every aspect of learning. It therefore involves the acquisition of all instrumental knowledge and all necessary skills. Dialogic learning is not opposed to instrumental learning' (2000, p. 15). The *instrumental dimension* of learning emphasizes the idea that education can enhance economically disadvantaged people's lives by providing an essential tool for social promotion. Subsequently, it rejects the idea that education should limit its objectives when offered to worse-off groups, because of their less propitious cultural settings. The *instrumental dimension* of *dialogic learning* firmly opposes, therefore, to proposals like Ausubel's (1989, in Aubert *et al*, 2008, pp. 202-204), who systematically highlighted the unwillingness of less affluent groups to achieve educational goals equitable to those of children enjoying the so-called *cultural capital*.

5. *Meaning creation*:   meaning is created through education if decisively contributes to provide our lives with a value and a sense that are not imposed by external forces or authorities, but by the very individuals through communication; in short, 'meaning is recreated when interpersonal interaction is actually directed by ourselves' (Flecha, 2000, p. 18).

6. *Solidarity*: it is difficult to think of an idea with a higher number of connotations than *solidarity*, and this diversity affects also to the term when it is applied to educational practices. However, in my view, there is one particular meaning that more significantly covers the experience of solidarity in the educational context, and that is expressed in the following words: 'Lo que es realmente solidario no es que todos los chicos y chicas tengan la oportunidad de ir a los centros de enseñanza sino que todos y todas consigan los mejores resultados' ['what is really solidar is not that all the children have the same opportunity to attend educational centers, but that all the children achieve the best results'] (Aubert *et al*, 2008, p. 225). I found it particularly relevant because it reflects the marked commitment of *dialogic learning* not only with the educational achievements of a majority of students but, more significantly, with the success of those coming from disadvantaged contexts, who would be beforehand condemned to failure if we take into consideration some well-known theoretical approaches. In everyday school life,

solidarity implies that outstanding students teach low performers, with a mutual benefit for both, but also that, for instance, skillful children in the playground are helped with those who are succeeding in the classroom, and vice versa. *Solidarity* means, as well, that nobody can be left behind, and that success will come out of the collective effort of the learning community, including not only professionals of education, but also volunteers, as relatives and other socially committed people.

7. *Equality of differences*: 'Equality is the aim, and this includes an equal right to differences' (Flecha, 2000, p. 25). It means that the idea of equality should be inclusive, recognizing the value of the differences that could exist in the educational community. In this way, for instance, Muslim women, supposedly so culturally retarded, according to some stereotypes and prejudices, can not only serve as linguistic supports in foreign languages, but also can show how gender differences are prevailing in *every* culture, including occidental ones.

Dialogic learning in practice

The *dialogic learning* presented its, so to speak, administrative face by INCLUD-ED project. Promoted by the CREA, an institution attached to the Universidad de Barcelona, INCLUD-ED – the educational research project with highest EU funding – investigated how educational practices could be evidence-based in order to be successful. In the following link, INCLUD-ED Final Conference presentations, made by researchers and protagonists, can be found: http://creaub.info/included/2012/01/11/videofinalconference/.

The didactics of dialogic learning works out in practice by some very characteristics means. The first one is the *interactive groups*, which are the result of organizing the whole class into several smaller groups, made up with students with different skills, interests and levels of educational achievement. In a very characteristic manner, these groups are headed by a grown-up. Obviously, it implies the involvement of adults, others than the teacher, that serve as volunteers, no matter if they are administrative staff of the center, relatives, neighbors, teacher training students in practice or, more significantly, individuals that, being fully conscious of the social value of *learning communities*, decide to use some of their leisure in being part of this project.

Another very distinctive activity is the *dialogic literary circles*. In my view, the relevance of this activity, particularly when it comes to marginalized social groups as the ones in the case we will mention afterwards, is given by how useful it turns out to be to enhance the reading skills – so essential in the educational process due to its linguistic nature, as emphasized by Bernstein (1993). Probably this can be approached as the obvious part in the benefits of the activity, even though it is not despicable at all. But beyond this linguistic outcome, no less relevant is the fact that these dialogic literary circles firmly boost the participants' self-steem and confidence, particularly if they are adults who are not used to the habits of academic activity, and make them feel at ease in the practice of something that a short time ago was somehow strange to them.

The success is inextricably linked also to participation of different social agents that actively conjugates their efforts with the school's ones. This kind of initiatives symbolizes the relevance of the societal involvement for the success of what happens inside the classrooms. In this sense, the work that associations like Miguel

Fenollera (http://ajmiguelfenollera.blogspot.com.es/) do with socially excluded children very adequately represents the idea that education, particularly in this kind of social settings, is a collective purpose.

Case study in a worse-off and marginalized setting: 'La Paz' School

The point is to what extent methodological and theoretical principles are really working in everyday educational practices. That is why I would like to focus this paper's attention on one illustrative case of *learning community* that takes places in my hometown, Albacete. It is the reality of 'La Paz' School and also remarkably of the neighborhoods where it is located, namely 'La Estrella' and 'Las Seiscientas'. The reference to the neighborhoods is obliged, not only because the social setting is always relevant to every educational analysis, but mainly because in this case we are referring to two of the worst-off and most deprived areas in Albacete, as well as in the whole country Spain (Observatorio Municipal de Igualdad de Oportunidades de Albacete, 2011, pp. 137-143). By and large, school life is hardly separable from the neighborhood life, but this is particularly true in this case, because transformation process in the school came hand by hand by the transformation process in the neighborhood, and vice versa.

'La Paz' experience as a *learning community* begins after the educational failure of the previous school, named 'San Juan', which came out with really worrisome drop-out and absenteeism rates, and with serious problems in the coexistence between children, relatives and teachers, and also among children themselves. During the paper presentation, we will have the chance to illustrate this reality through some local newspaper pieces of news, with some highly significant headlines, as a means to contrast the reality of the center before and after becoming a *learning community*.

In any case, these differences appear also through some data that clearly show a contrasting reality. If we look at the center enrolment rates before the transformation into a *learning community*, we find some serious causes for concern. In 1994-1995 academic year, the number of students enrolled in 'San Juan' School was 334; in 2005-2006, the figure dropped to 45, as a result of the difficult coexistence and the worrisome academic performance of their students. Most of the parents desperately tried to enroll their children in another center, running away from the never-ending atmosphere of conflict and violence, and from the inefficiency of the educational system that was implemented. The *learning community* began in 2006-2007 with 114 students; after the first years of the experience, the figures not only were no longer decreasing, but increased up to 190 students in 2010-2011 – more than tripling the enrolment rate. Besides, whereas in 2006 the number of absentees students plus those who dropped out was 122, in 2009 fell to 13 – with significant improvements in essential skills, as linguistics, and the coexistence atmosphere.

Another question that can immediately come up is the economic cost of the new model. Probably, the improvement in educational performance is the result of a significant increase in the quality and quantity of resources invested by educational officials, and that is where the ultimate explanation lies on. This is not the reason, though. The 2005-2006 ratio students per professional was 5'88 in the last course before the implementation of *dialogic learning*, and 5 years later the ratio was 8'05. When it comes to economic resources, the monthly expenditure in professionals per

student was 400 euros in 2005-2006, which drop to slightly over 300 in 2010-2011. Similarly, the number of students taught per 1000 euros of monthly spending on professionals was 2'4 in 2005-2006, and 5 years later it reached 3'25.

But, certainly, the main contribution of the implementation of the principles of *dialogic learning* in the neighborhoods of 'Las Seiscientas' and 'La Estrella' is not so much related to the saving in public budget as to the deep transformation that the school is promoting in the human communities. Determinist theoretical bases that put the emphasis on how low performers in education come from less affluent groups collapse if look at the personal lives of some of the protagonists of this educational practice. 'La Paz' *learning community* has managed to transform stories of prison, drug addiction and marginality in stories of integration and personal and family development. Personal stories like Rafael Layón's 'Yiyo' (http://vimeo.com/34869131) or Vanessa's (Racionero *et al,* 2012, pp. 50-51) incarnates the transformation that education, through successful practices, can bring to people.

Conclusion: breaking the cycle of poverty through education

It is frequent to find that statistical data show how highly conditioning could be some sociological factors – like parents' cultural level, social class or gender – for future educational development of individuals. Research has shown, however, that evidence-based educational practices are apt to break the cycle of poverty and marginality. *Dialogic learning*, as implemented in *learning communities*, shows the high potential of education as a transformative tool. We have proved through one particular case settled in southern Spain that, even when taken a population with really high levels of unemployment, crime rates and marginality, scientific approaches to education can dramatically change living conditions and enhance personal lives. For this purpose, the active contribution of the whole educational community is needed. Education, therefore, turns out to be a collective commitment that involves a variety of agents for something that, in the end, goes far beyond the walls of the school to reach every person in the neighborhood.

'La Paz' is showing on a daily basis that education can change lives, but not only those of students, but also the lives of the neighborhoods where it takes place. The whole human community is to be held responsible for these changes, but the origin, the heart of the change is at school, and that is quite a statement.

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