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TRANSFORMATION OF A SCHOOL INTO A COOPERATIVE SCHOOL: THE MIRACLE OF AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL FOR A BETTER SCHOOL

Abstract

In this paper we will try to demonstrate that the educational institution is a cultural artifact, a living entity that also develops a different way of teaching. We will try to imagine another type of school where interpersonal relations are also a teaching aim; a school that goes from being obsessed with teaching for PISA testing to a school that, in addition to transmitting knowledge, is devoted to educating for life: i.e. a cooperative school (García, Traver & Candela, 2001; Parra & Peña, 2012), and we will describe the process of that change.

Introduction: Aims and motivation

We will try to describe briefly how to imagine that 'another type of school is possible'. In just a few years, our experience has shown us that you can go from a school that can barely provide education because of discipline problems (Lamberti, 2010; Pliego, 2011); where nobody can learn anything, not even reading or writing; where respect for diversity is totally lacking; where failure to recognize the teacher's authority is reinforced by parents' attitudes; and where parent involvement is obviously non-existent. In short, the conditions are terrible, but people have not stopped trying to form and change teaching methodologies by actually planning and designing a different kind of school that has worked much better, without achieving miracles. Academic failure remains very high, but at least children learn the basics instrumental to behaving correctly and accepting diversity.

We must point out that there has been support from the government, which gave the appropriate authorizations and supervised the experience by sending an inspector who never criticized and who allowed the center to make all the proposed changes. In other words, the Department of Education (Conselleria d'Educació) has done nothing, which is significant, because it has not increased human or material resources, but it is also true that there has been no interference with the development of the project.

Center Description

The St. James School (Escuela de Santiago Apóstol) in Valencia is a Catholic, Infant and Primary School, privately owned but run entirely with public money. It is considered as 'Compensatory Education Center' because it brings together more than 30% of students in "need of compensation" (gypsies and immigrant pupils), which means extra human and material resources from the local authority. It is located in a suburb of the city of Valencia (the El Cabañal district) and, as mentioned above, most of the pupils are from families which are socially, culturally and economically marginalised. It is a small center, few economic resources and limited space. It has a staff of 11 teachers who are general teachers of Primary Education, 3 specialists in Early Childhood Education, a specialist in Educational

Support for Integration in Primary Education, a specialist in Secondary Education and an educational psychologist spread across 11 classrooms (3 for Infant Education, 6 for Primary Education, 1 for Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO), and 1 for Special Education). The total number of pupils at the school is 150. The center receives external support from the Training and Resource Center for Teachers (CEFIRE) and has a training plan shared with other centers along the maritime area. The school meals service is provided by volunteers (from the university and NGOs) and paid monitors. Totally unthinkable a few years ago, the school now has a support teacher paid for by a gypsy association. The general educational organization is currently based around flexible groups: class groups of about 16-20 children who are divided into three level groups, each one of them with a teacher. There is still a high level of truancy and school failure (none of them go on to secondary education).

The teachers place the most common needs of their students into three blocks (Bonal, 1992; Ovejero, 1994):

a) Personal needs, such as lack of hygiene, clothing, food, and personal disruptions due to problems with self-image, self-esteem and hyperactive or violent behavior. More than 25 students use the daily showers service at school because their homes have no running water.

b) Social needs, such as lack of social skills, unfavorable conditions for study at home and non-acceptance of cultural diversity.

c) Educational needs, such as irregular attendance, lack of access to curriculum resources, lack of adequate balance between learning and skills that would correspond to their age and, finally, the pupils' difficulty in remaining in the educational system.

Moreover, regarding the role of families, teachers highlight the parents' low opinion of the school and their lack of participation in the educational community. Parent meetings, before the intervention, were only attended by 8%, mostly women.

The students are characterized by:

a) Being noticeably behind with their schooling (76%).

b) Belonging to socially disadvantaged minority: gypsy ethnic group.

c) There is another group that also belongs to a socially disadvantaged minority culture: immigrant pupils. So far, the center has mostly received immigrants from Spanish-speaking areas such as Equatorial Guinea, Colombia and Cuba.

d) Another group came from homes in areas disadvantaged by lack of decent housing.

e) Presenting basic personal needs. At present, 25 pupils at the center use the school showers service daily at nine o'clock, as their homes have no running water.

f) Most students have learning difficulties and/or behavior issues. Racism is a burning problem. Many gypsy children bring to school feelings of rejection which is extended to everything related to the "payo" (non-gypsies), including the teacher's authority.

Once the academic year begins, the center continues to receive special registration students from the Office of Enrolment (Local Government), the

Women's Shelter or the Guardianship Court. This added difficulty means constant adjustments and adaptations are required.

Objectives

As a result of the aforementioned circumstances at this particular center, and because school failure is very high, if not 100% (pupils at this school do not reach secondary education, so they never obtain the general education certificate), in many cases, pupils are referred to an occupational workshop until they are 16 years of age and old enough to work. Given these circumstances and seeing as the current organization and curriculum does not even manage to teach basic competences, the team of teachers, a representative from CEFIRE (Center for the Professionalization of Teachers) and two technical experts in cooperative education and cooperative schools from the University of Valencia decided to embark on a mission to transform this school into a school characterized by a cooperative model (one member of the technical team had visited cooperative schools and accelerated schools in New York and her experience was crucial to implementing the new model in this school). It was felt that applying the principles derived from cooperative learning could encourage maturity from the students in all areas: cognitive, affective and relational (Block, Everson & Guskey, 1994; Ovejero, 1994; García, Traver & Candela, 2001). There will also be improvements to teamwork among the teaching staff and greater involvement of the pupils' families (García, Traver & Candela, 2001; Parra & Peña, 2012).

In summary, the transformation caused by our intervention was focused on the following areas: awareness for cooperative learning and teamwork by teachers (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1992); training in cooperative methodology (techniques for efficiently implementing cooperative learning with students) (Lamberti, 2010; Chung Lee, 2011); planning of teaching, in a cooperative framework for socially deprived students, greater awareness and collaboration among parents, despite the difficulties, direct intervention with teachers and their students.

The idea was to transform the methods, teaching content (by trying to make it more relevant), organization and planning of the teaching (by setting up flexible groups and planning the curriculum together) and, above all, to transform the educational relationship, giving the students a more central role and listening to their views (Bonal, 1992; Aronson & Patnoe, 1997; Pliego, 2011).

Projects

All of the projects were designed with more or less the same structure. All of them start with a theoretical and practical justification of the proposal and the reasons for doing it at this center. Then there is a section dedicated to the project's objectives; the process followed and how this is evaluated.

We will present the title of each project and its goals.

In order to create a cooperative school, various strategies were developed to be able to intervene from different perspectives. Firstly, patient and systematic work had to be done with the members of staff, by this we mean that the task was daunting. It was not easy to change the mentality, attitudes and methods of the teachers. However, the results obtained show that that we have succeeded.

The design and implementation of a Continuing Education Project was begun during 2002, although we, the technical team, joined in 2007. All teacher training courses have been approved and funded by the Department of Education (Conselleria d' Educació) of Valencia.

Our direct involvement was with the teachers, and only occasionally with students, and this seemed insufficient given that the final recipients were those students needing remedial education. We were able to verify that all the training that they were receiving was being translated into concrete actions and a real improvement of the students. Thus, teachers had to make real what we were developing on a theoretical level, both in terms of attitudes and values and in the specific curriculum at each level. And all of this was performed through work projects and other cooperative techniques. This is how we designed and implemented with students projects such as the Cooperative Social Skills Project, the Thursday Market Project, the Intercultural Project, the Family Project and the Cooperative Learning in the Classroom Project. We also created and implemented other projects which are not expanded upon here so as not to unduly prolong the list; such as the Truancy Project, the Project for Showers and Laundry, the Inter-Agency Project (involving the Social Services, Educational Inspection, an external advisor, a Gypsy monitor, a volunteer from the Technical University and the Faculty of Literature at the Universities of Valencia and Jaume I in Castellón, etc.), the Flexible Curriculum Grouping Project (language and mathematics), the Interdisciplinary Workshop Project, the Showers and Food Project, the Workshop Project for Leisure and Recreation, and the Workshop for Health and Hygiene Project.

We also worked with families through the development of three video-letters to parents; in which students themselves, through the technique of role-playing, pass on information to their parents about the school and content related to the children's learning. We are all very happy with this project because, whereas before only 8% of families came when summoned to attend appointments, now virtually all do. In addition, the center also organized open days and exhibitions of students' work, and, in 2012, there was a highly successful gypsy exhibition by Jesus Salinas entitled 'Brown Archangels'. As well as the pupils' families, other schools in the district and various members of the local authorities came to visit this exhibition. This activity is part of the Intercultural Project.

The center won the National Award for Quality Compensatory Education Projects 2012, awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (MEC).

All projects implemented with the students are always preceded by a theoretical component that has been part of teacher training sessions; once this part is completed the practical design of projects begins.

1. Teacher Training Project
The final objectives were:
1. Raising awareness among teachers about the need to work on projects as a specific and effective way of treating cultural diversity.
2. Motivating teachers so that their methodological approaches take into account working regularly through projects.
3. Knowing the steps and procedures for project development.
4. Choosing a theme so the whole center works on one specific project: the Thursday Market Project, the Family Project, etc.

The partial objectives were identified as:
- Find out teachers' preconceptions about projects.
- Know how to approach the subject with students.
- Specify the activities of teachers.
- Specify the activities of students.
- Learn to develop indices and synthesis of the projects.
- Develop criteria and guidelines for evaluating projects.
- Undertake a practical project with all students at the center.

2. Cooperative Skills Project

Considering the specific characteristics of the intervention school's pupils, it was essential to work on social and cooperative skills.

3. The Thursday Market Project

This project aimed to bring learners and students closer to the reality in which they live to make learning more useful and functional and, therefore, improve motivation. Then, we developed the official curriculum through the students' daily experiences in their homes, families and neighborhoods, trying to solve real problems and providing the necessary tools to deal appropriately with life.

This project aimed to develop the following capabilities:
- The initiative in the students to do small research projects.
- Creativity, using alternative methods and explanations for different questions.
- Solving problems using the scientific method of problem solving.
- Synthesis, using different sources of information (collection, selection, management, analysis, interpretation and presentation) and different areas of knowledge.
- Comprehensive articulation of learning.
- Decision-making in determining what is relevant and therefore should be included in the project.
- Interpersonal communication, contrasting the opinions and different views of classmates and other people involved.

We performed an initial estimate of conceptual, procedural and attitudinal content, and a series of varied and diversified activities was designed. Although this was the estimate, the impact on other areas and content was greater. The key areas worked on included: Spanish Language, Valencian Language, Foreign Language, Mathematics, Environmental Awareness, Science, Art Education and cross-over subjects, among others.

The product realization is what brings life to the project and will serve both as an evaluation of the whole process and as a presentation for parents to see at the end of year. As an example of the many products, we will list some of the ones we have made which are part of the activities undertaken by pupils of different levels.

4. Intercultural Project

In the theoretical training project on intercultural education teachers covered the following topics:
- Intercultural theoretical aspects developed in this project.

- Design specifications for intercultural cooperative activities.
- Skills and specific techniques for intercultural education.
- Proposals to improve the peaceful coexistence of cultures.

We proposed the following objectives for the whole center:

a) Understand, value and accept yourself and others.
b) Learn to put yourself in someone else's place.
c) Improve intercultural tolerance through cooperative learning.
d) Understand and appreciate the cultural wealth provided by the different people at our center and our environment.
e) Look for common elements among cultural groups which allow mutual enrichment.

5. Family Project

This project is called 'Family Project', it was focused on the family working with pupils and students as direct work with parents is developed and has been developed through video production, exhibitions, open days, a Christmas party, Las Fallas (an annual Valencian festival), Saint John's Day celebrations, parent meetings, personal interviews and the Parents' School which we are now designing. The objectives are:

1. To help students show the kind of family community to which they belong.
2. Make the students think about this family model.
3. Awareness among students of equality between the sexes.
4. Gather information and research the different family models according to town.
5. Be able to respect and value all models of family organization, especially those different from our own.
6. Analyze the characteristics of the standard models of Western families, Roma and other people, looking for differences and similarities.
7. Demonstrate the fact that family configurations cause different family set ups.
8. Develop a sense of belonging to a family.
9. Understand and specify the roles within the "Paya" (non-gypsy) and gypsy family structure.
10. Instill in families, through their sons and daughters, the importance of school.
11. Facilitate their participation in school life; involve them in their children's exhibitions, reading, storytelling, singing, basket weaving workshops, market, sports, showers, parties and so on.
12. Capture the ideal meaning of different families: the family as a protector of children.
13. Identify the roles within the family and their possible implications.
14. Be able to express positive emotions about families, communicating to classmates the feelings and experiences of life in the family.

6. Cooperative Learning in the Classroom Project

The objectives were:

1. Empowering the students to self-regulate their learning.

2. Changing the structure of the class to give them the opportunity to teach one each other.
3. Adjust the curriculum to the characteristics of each of the students, to develop their full potential according to their pace, interests and possibilities.
4. Include all students in the class group which corresponds to their age.

Conclusions

The main conclusion we can draw, after all these years, is that it is possible to change the school. The change we have brought might not have helped to significantly improve academic results but, thanks to the enormous effort made by teachers to find a different more meaningful and relevant approach, many children, who not only couldn't read and write before but were also impossible to teach due to discipline problems, are now able to learn the basics, to change their attitudes towards others and towards diversity and to establish respectful social relationships.

Therefore, given the circumstances of the center, we consider the intervention a success and we believe that all projects undertaken are a useful tool to facilitate student learning and reduce racist attitudes by providing the asset of being educated in terms of basic tools that will help them integrate into an increasingly exclusive world.

The other major conclusion is that to go from a school that teaches for PISA standards to a school that educates for life, requires the following conditions:

1. A thoughtful teacher, able to think for themselves, willing to test changes in their own work; teachers willing to break from the norm and believe and get excited about what they are doing; teachers willing to be continually brought up to date to work in teams, confident that all students can learn.
2. Relatively manageable school centers, not too big, not macrocenters, where the staff members can come to consensus and pull in the same direction with a clear pedagogical leadership of management teams.
3. Schools with a high degree of autonomy. Therefore, an administration that is flexible and allows change and innovation.
4. A shared idea about the meaning of education for life, translated into a plan or projects.
5. Knowledge of the reality that characterizes the center, its location and its relationship with the environment, its possibilities and limits.

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