



KLAUDIA SCHULTHEIS, AGNES PFRANG, PETRA HIEBL (EDS.)

CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL, TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Studies of the Educational Experience of Children

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Studies of the
Educational Experience of Children

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Children as Protagonists of their Learning

María Isabel Rodríguez Peralta

Introduction

We emphasize three reasons to support the innovative approaches to qualitative pedagogical research into childhood discussed at the Eichstaett conference. First, in Spain, children’s perspectives have been largely ignored by educational researchers who have focused their attention on adult’s perceptions of children’s educational experiences. Children’s perspectives on schooling, teaching and learning thus constitute a significantly underdeveloped field of educational research (Castro, 2010).

Secondly, research on children’s voices offers the potential to improve their schoolwork and teacher training institutions by enhancing our understanding of both teaching and learning. Lastly, children’s voices have an important contribution to engaging with a rapidly changing ‘global village’ and thus to promoting the mutual understanding upon which a just world depends.

Children as protagonists of their learning

Genuine education is impossible without action. All knowledge should serve to understand and respond to life. Reality is the first and last reference point for theory. It is important to reduce the role of abstract theory in understanding human experience and acknowledge that phenomenology is the central pillar of understanding experience, both our own and that of others. Experience is gained by combining our experiences with thought and reflection. For the Spanish author Guillermo Roviroa (Rodríguez, 2011) the active pedagogy of ‘see – judge – act’ is the way to capture the dynamic of everyday experience. To be a protagonist involves taking an active part in society and abandoning the role of spectator.

Only three methods have been devised to overcome ignorance. Didactic learning involves effort and the combining of intelligence, memory and will. It stands in contrast to intuitive learning which is how almost all ordinary knowledge in life is acquired. The perfect method lies somewhere between these two and involves learning what is experienced, in other words, incorporating knowledge into life. This is how learning should happen, at school or work and in life (Rodríguez, 2010). This paper presents the questions of why and how a protagonistic approach by children in their own learning, engagement and autonomy is important: What does such an approach involve? Why is it necessary? What are the theories behind it? What are the strategies used to achieve it? How can an organization achieve it in the classroom and in or out of school? (Bird, 1999). In addition, what form should conversation with children take? For example, when should a teacher speak and when should a teacher be silent? What can be judged an effective strategy and not? (van Manen, 2008).

Children's protagonism is the process whereby children and young people assume the principal role in their own development and that of their peers to achieve the realization of their rights. It is based on participation and involves exploring methods designed to transform the status of the child from social object to social subject. Learning becomes a collaborative social activity and it here that children learn best since they feel they belong to a community within which they are trusted, loved, and have the freedom to make choices. They explore their potential for learning by trying out new things without an external threat of judgment. By thus shaping their own learning, they experience freedom and learn to exercise responsibility.

Children's rights: Children's voices

You say: 'Children are annoying'. You clarify: 'You need to always to respect their perceptions'. You are wrong. Because you actually need to tip-toe upon their perceptions and ideals (Korczak)

Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) was one of the first pedagogues who changed the attitude of adults towards children. His fundamental idea was that a child has a right to be respected; each child has his own way, his

own path, on which he or she embarks immediately following birth. The role of an adult is not to impose goals on a child, but to help children achieve their own goals. Korczak was the founder and principal of two orphanages in Warsaw. In 1926 he started a newspaper written for children by children. During the Second World War his orphanage was forced to move into the Warsaw Ghetto. Although, on August 1942, two hundred children in his care, the staff members and he were taken to Treblinka extermination camp, he never abandoned his children.

He was one of the world's greatest authorities on children and was renowned and loved during his lifetime as a doctor, writer, educator, teacher, broadcaster, philosopher, author of children's books and fighter for the rights of the children. He wrote many books and during the occupation he kept a diary.

As a children's advocate he spoke of the need for a Declaration of Children's Rights long before any such document was drawn up by the Geneva Convention or the United Nations General Assembly. The Declaration he envisaged—a demand for action — was left uncompleted at the time of his death, but the message is clear: Children have the right to live in the present, not as persons of the future. Children are not foolish and they are entitled to be taken seriously. Children have the right to be loved; therefore, educators should love children as their own. Children have a right to education.

But in this new century, it is shameful that there are still 400 million enslaved children between the ages of four and fourteen years around the world and, of these, 165 million are under five. War, prostitution, exploitation, starvation or ill treatment: these are the everyday experiences of millions of children and the situation is not getting better. Many of these enslaved children are the same age as children in classrooms across the world. They face harsh conditions and are the victims of an economic system that has scant regard for ethics, human dignity and the welfare of children.

Holy Father Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (2011) has expressed the problem in the following terms.

I have always been distressed at the lot of those who are victims of various kinds of human trafficking. How I wish that all of us would hear

God's cry: "Where is your brother?" (Gen 4:9). Where is your brother or sister who is enslaved? Where are the brother and sister who you are killing each day in clandestine warehouses, in rings of prostitution, in children used for begging, in exploiting undocumented labour? Let us not look the other way. There is greater complicity than we think. The issue involves everyone! This infamous network of crime is now well established in our cities, and many people have blood on their hands as a result of their comfortable and silent complicity.

Korzczak took action long ago. Today we, too, are called to action. This message is reiterated in the words of Pope Francis, in response to the worsening reality of the present moment, as conditioned by economic systems. And so we are called to question, how do we break this indifference? We can see in the lives of three exemplary youth how young people can be protagonists, and thus raise their voices in favor of education.

Children fight with their lives in favour of their rights: some examples

When one dreams, it is only a dream. When we dream together, it is the beginning of reality (Camara)

Iqbal Masih

On April 16, 1995 Iqbal Masih, a Catholic militant in Pakistan was murdered at the age of twelve for opposing child slavery after receiving many threats for having closed companies in which all the workers were young. Iqbal was an articulate, confident, and powerful speaker and an uncompromising critic of child servitude. Iqbal's words of encouragement to other children and his willingness to speak out against child slavery has helped to free many illegally bonded children. At the time of his death, he was enrolled in a school for freed bonded children, where he was a bright and energetic student. His dream for the future was to become a lawyer. That way, he reasoned, he could continue to fight for freedom (Grijalvo, 1997)

In Spain, the organization Solidarity Youth Path has organized the 2014 Solidarity March

published a guide for use in enhancing awareness of the rights of the child. It has organized a large scale 'solidarity march' throughout the country to express support for the over 400 million children who are victims of slavery, the more than 1,600 million adults who are unemployed, and those millions of people worldwide who suffer exploitation. It seeks also to promote greater awareness of the causes of child slavery and exploitation.

Malala Yousufzai

A 15 year old girl Malala was left fighting for her life after being targeted by Taliban gunmen for speaking out against violence and promoting the education of girls. She was not afraid to return to school after the attack and is studying hard. She said: 'Education is very important for girls, and we need education. More, more, more'. She has won several peace prizes.

Zlata Filipovic

Zlata was dubbed the 'Anne Frank of Sarajevo' because like Anne, she also kept a diary in which she wrote down her thoughts. Zlata Filipovic wrote in her diary 'When the Bosnia war started with all its horrors my diary became more than a place to record daily events. It became a friend. I discovered the beauty of writing; it became a type of therapy for dealing with everything that was going on'. (Foreword Gruwell, 1999). Using Zlata's Diary (1991 to 1993), A Child's life in Sarajevo and Anne Frank's The Diary of a Young Girl as guides, Gruwell undertook a life-changing, eye-opening, spirit-raising odyssey against intolerance and misunderstanding.

While it is clear that individuals bear different degrees of responsibility, the need for a response ought to be universal. Qualitative research based on analysis of children's diaries is an important tool for understanding children and effecting change. The rigour of rational logic, which teaches us to think, needs to be combined with the flexibility of a living logic, which teaches us to live. Fundamentally, it is a question of cultivating reflexive thinking (Rodriguez, 2011), a skill important not only as a tool for teaching, but also as an aim of education (Dewey, 1989). There is a form

of love called understanding: love through understanding is a high form of solidarity.

The pedagogy of listening

Why do we forget so easily that in order to talk, we first had to learn to listen? We have to listen to children not only because we can help them but also because they can help us. (Rovirosa)

Children's diaries are a useful means of accessing children's ideas and thoughts. Being sensitive and responsive to them requires time, dedication and the patience to create the necessary conditions and climate to enable each child to find his place and natural pace (Rodríguez, 2011). 'Listening' to children's ideas offers the possibility of discovering how they think and how they question and develop a relationship with the world around them. This possibility is enhanced when it occurs within a group context that allows the experience of others to be shared and debated.

The first 'listening' pedagogy was proposed by the American philosopher and educator John Dewey who stated that 'The connections of the ear with vital and out-going thought and emotion are immensely closer and more varied than those of the eye'. Only by being a listener can a teacher or a student really understand his or her life (van Manen, 2008). Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator (Dewey, 1989)

We should therefore listen to children so that their questions direct our search for their reasons and give us the strength to find non-violent, honest and responsible answers to their questions. We should listen to children so that their words give us courage for the future and help us to find a new way to converse with them and with ourselves.

Listening should be sensitive to the patterns that connect us to others, it should be open and responsive to the need to listen and be listened to, and it must involve all our senses, not just our ears. Our understanding and our own being are a small part of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together.

No way. The hundred is there is one of the most important poems ever written about young children's creativity by Malaguzzi (1993), the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach to education, which recognizes

the many languages, symbols and codes that children use in order to express themselves and communicate like: listening to ourselves, 'internal listening,' not only encourages us to listen to others but it also functions reflexively when others listen to us. It leads to a time of silence that lies beyond chronological time and embraces both past and future time.

It is prompted and generated by curiosity, desire, doubt and uncertainty. Attentive listening produces questions, not answers, and sustains the pedagogy of questions and generated emotions; it is influenced by the emotions of others and it stimulates emotions in the listener. Listening needs to welcome and be open to differences, recognizing the value of the opinions and interpretation expressed by others.

Such listening is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and a suspension of our judgments and prejudices. It requires openness to change and it demands that we value the unknown and overcome the feelings of emptiness and precariousness that we experience when our certainties are challenged. Most importantly, it is the basis of the relationships that underpin effective learning. Through action and reflection, learning takes shape in the mind of the subject, and through representation and exchange, becomes knowledge and skill.

Listening takes place within a 'listening context', where one learns to listen and narrate, and each individual feels legitimized to represent and offer interpretations of her or his theories through action, emotion, expression and representation, using symbols and images. Understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue.

This is a difficult path that requires energy, hard work and, occasionally, suffering. But it also offers wonder, joy, enthusiasm and passion. It is a path that takes time, time that children have and adults often do not, or do not want to have. This is where the school comes in; it should first and foremost be a 'context for multiple listening', involving the teachers and children, individually and as a group, who should listen to one another and to themselves. This notion of a context to promote multiple listening overturns the traditional teaching-learning relationship.

Learning diary for qualitative research: Write, read and listen

The goal is to discover how important it is to begin mentoring elementary school students about the importance of picking up a pen and writing reflections about daily experience. The project titled: One, two, three ...action, a collaborative project between a school and university was created by Jesus Fernandez, principal from the Elementary School 'El Sauce', in Chauchina, a little village of Granada. This project is an initiative for innovative learning, bridging an elementary school and the School of Educacion 'La Inmaculada', at the University of Granada.

In this section, we outline how children can use their diaries to write about aspects of their experience. Twenty-five school students at the age of ten years old, teachers, university students and the families of the children are all involved in the process. The time schedule follows.

First step:

During the period of December to February, twenty-five children from the village school El Sauce in Granada created storylines in cooperative groups (5 x 5) as part of an interdisciplinary project in which children developed their skills in science, arts and language. The children were required to write a script and create and act out the scenes with recycled materials and the help of their parents.

Second step:

In February, each group presented their film to students of the final semester, who at that time were doing their Practicum at the School of Education La Inmaculada.

After receiving applause in celebration for their successful presentations, the children were given a personalized certificate, recognizing their participation in the conference.

Third step:

From February to May, the children were invited to write a diary from February until May. Each was given a small notebook, and invited to write and/or draw what they wanted to say about the topic, to indicate

how they felt about learning with the other children and with the teacher, and to say what they had learnt from the project-movie and the presentation. The children were free to write about what they liked, cooperative working, how they resolved tensions and conflict, and/or how they viewed the role of the teacher.

But the most important part was what they thought about the visit to the university. One outcome was that the researchers gained an insight into how the children and the teacher perceived the project. This was a new experience for both the children and their teacher, all of whom were unfamiliar with the concept of a learning diary.

Forth step:

In May, on a warm spring day, the diaries were collected in the classroom. The researchers were warmly welcomed into the classroom and the children read aloud from their diaries about the visit to the university. This was followed by a discussion which required the children to listen and respect opinions that were different from their own. Following the discussion, the children raised many questions that provided rich insight into the children's thinking and priorities.

Fifth step:

In June, after collecting the data, the learning diaries were subsequently analyzed qualitatively by university students of the second semester, who were studying Theory and Practice of Teaching in Elementary School. The research design involved recording, diary writing, data collection, and transcription. And finally, the analytical categories referred to above were used to support a number of conclusions as indicated.

Conclusions

1. Children have a right to a voice, to speak, to be heard and to be listened to. Every child is capable of learning, and the pedagogy of listening allows children's voices to be heard. Such pedagogy should form the basis of a classroom culture that emphasizes listening as the basis of learning.
2. A diary can be used to expose the learning strategies used by each child, although necessarily in a partial and subjective way.
3. It is important to provide opportunities for children to participate in and engage with relevant learning activities which they can relate to the broader, day to day contexts of their lives.
4. A diary facilitates a whole-child approach to rich, diverse and responsive assessments based upon authentic learning experiences. Such assessments confirm the importance of children's ideas and opinions.
5. Relating children's learning to their everyday lives offers them many learning opportunities to discover and develop skills and knowledge.
6. A protagonistic pedagogy helps children to develop a sense of communality and partnership as 'agents for change'.
7. Children's socialization within family and community groups constitutes a rich and diverse source of knowledge that can be turned into an advantage in the classroom.
8. Like adults, children are capable of taking on multiple ways of being, doing, thinking and acting. They should, therefore, be afforded the respect of being regarded as unique co-creators and co-constructors of knowledge.
9. Enriching the qualitative research, the diaries written by children –school students- are useful in increasing our comprehension about their perspectives on learning.
10. It's important to begin mentoring elementary school students about the importance of picking up a pen.

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