

ILIANA MIRTSHEWA (ED.)

Children's Perspective on School, Teaching and Learning.

“JOY TO LEARN”



SOFIA, 2015

Iliana Mirtschewa (Ed.)

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THE PATH TO HAPPINESS

A SMALL STUDIE ABOUT CHILDREN'S JOY TO LEARN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

In line with the research we presented last year about children as the leading actors in their learning process entitled 'Children as protagonist of their learning' which dealt with the pedagogy of listening and class diaries "Do we hear the voice of children?". We pointed out in that occasion the possibilities and benefits of listening to children's voices through their learning diaries.

Pedagogical child research about children's subjective perspective of school, teaching and learning trying to make them speak about their own experience and view of their learning processes is referring to the tradition of phenomenological methodology but aims on developing solid qualitative methodologies for an empirical research approach (Schultheis, Pfrang & Hiebl, 2015). The field and discourses of phenomenological research in education have been widened.

Now we explore the importance of reflective writing as a tool that offers a better insight into the children's perspective on learning. Seeks the views of a school's pupils as part of the learning process (Hopkins, 2008). On this occasion instead of being asked to keep a diary, the children had to answer questions about their positive experiences in learning at school. Questions like: Do you remember a situation in which learning at school made you really happy? What was so special about his situation? Do you have any idea why this situation was so special? Tell me about your feelings in this special moment? or Do you still think of this situation sometimes?

For this purpose students should write a free text. In order to facilitate the process, the children were told a story in class which they had to finish by writing about their personal experiences. We want to know when children are particularly motivated in a learning situation. We consider this situation as 'pedagogical moment' (Van Manen, 2008). Most of the stories they tell are of an anecdotal nature and were obtained as part of an activity presented in class.

Ask and listen the children about their perception of their learning improvement are consistent with the academic results (Rovirosa, 1989). Does encouraging participative and cooperative methodologies, feelings and atmosphere inside and outside school really produce significant learning? We want to find out about their thoughts, feelings, needs, wishes, fears, etc. What can the teacher do to ensure that the child learns with joy? And the parents? Finally what succeeded in the school, classroom and other learning spaces by children's activities?

By the end of this paper we hope to have set out some of the key factors, providing evidence that helps to move forward qualitative research from the children's perspective. The analysis of the data is grouped around a number of framework categories obtained from the initial categories of the 'Joy to Learn project' (JTL) so enabling us to provide a real comparative study between countries in three continents like America, Europe and Asia, that are taking part in JTL project. Is this possible?

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Context and data collection

Two suburban schools took part in this project the Primary School Luz Casanova and the Primary Padre Manjón, both from our home city of Granada. We were working with a sample population of 347 students ranging from first to sixth year i.e. aged from six to twelve. The data for this study was collected at two primary schools (6–11 years old) who agreed to collaborate with the Catholic School of Education the Teacher Training College La Inmaculada.

The schools are situated in the Norte District of Granada. This neighbourhood has the poorest economic and educational level of all the city's districts. It is a marginal area with a high roma and immigrant population. It also has the highest rates of illiteracy and unemployment. 55.7% (12,682) of the population over 16 years of age in the Norte district of Granada do not have the school leaving certificate (Basic education). Of these, 15% (1,841) cannot read or write. The Norte district has the highest percentage of illiterate people and of people with no school qualifications in Granada.

Years ago many young people dropped out of school to go to work in the construction industry. Now they are unemployed and lack the training that could enable them to get back into the job market. Failure at school increases the unemployment rate. In absolute and relative terms there are more women (1,078) than men (763) who cannot read or write. In other words 58.6% of the illiterate population of the Norte district are female while 41.4% are male. It is very worrying that so many young people do not even complete basic education. Far from improving, the number of children from this neighbourhood leaving school without the basic school leaving certificate are in fact getting worse. The neighbourhood is strongly stigmatised by the rest of the city. (Fuentes, 2010)

The pupil's family from Primary school Luz Casanova and Padre Manjón come from low socioeconomic status. Schools are located in a very deprived neighbourhood of the city of Granada, with a highly precarious economic situation with high rates of early school leaving, absentism and conflicts in the classrooms as well conflicts between teachers and families. Children at the different grades had very low linguistic competence and low reading and writing skills.

These schools are working on principles that aim to achieve success at school through learning communities, based on dialogue not only between the teacher and the pupil, but which also involves the whole community. Engaging parents in their children's education is an important way to increase students educational opportunities. Family participation in children's learning activities emerged as particularly important.

Various projects are currently trying to tackle this problem. At present there are six schools in the area which have turned themselves into learning communities. This is a new educational approach which has been approved by the Regional Government of Andalusia and which involves not only the teachers but also the families and the neighbourhood.

This two schools that have collaborated in our research officially signed up for this model of learning during academic year 2013–2014. We believe that this is an important fact to take into account when assessing the children's answers, as many of them highlight learning in interactive groups as something very positive. Increased dialogue and communication between the family and the school helps resolve both behavioural and academic issues.

Learning communities means dialogue important in learning and development are central for relationships, is the bases of cooperative situations of learning and have fun between childrens and other community members. When children work in smaller groups they can

develop higher levels of interaction. Furthermore, the involvement of parents from different backgrounds in childrens learning increases interaction opportunities, learning interactions among peers and adults through multiplying learning interactions in the different spaces in which children act (classroom, after-school, home, etc.)

The interactive groups, the end-of-year party and the school trips because we learn a lot in many different ways. It's great fun (8 age). We work a lot, I work better. It's easy because I'm with my friends. I felt a very happy moment and I still remember it (8 age). I really enjoy myself and I learn a lot at this school. Working in interactive groups is easier and it's more fun with my classmates. (11 age). My happiest moment was last month when I had a great time in interactive groups and I learnt a lot. I learnt a lot because I got an 8 in the exam (11 age). My moment was when we did Maths games in interactive groups. It was great fun because we learnt in a different way (11 age).

Turning difficulties into possibilities providing all children with better learning opportunities to reduce social and educational inequalities. It's the mainly way to increased motivacion for learning (Flecha, 2013).

Educational research, a bit about the theoretical framework

The joy of learning experienced by a child when he or she discovers something special for the first time is a pathway to happiness. This is also important at school, in both the learning processes and in the pedagogical moments that arise during teaching processes. We have often wondered why happiness and joy are so absent and ignored by the curriculum and classroom teaching. When school is converted into a wastepaper basket into which we throw all the problems we do not want to solve, the logical result is that it becomes a prison in which sadness is the predominant emotion.

We want the children to tell us what it is that makes them happy in school and why. In order to understand the research we are presenting at this conference, adults must be prepared to recapture that youthful capacity to be amazed and to listen actively and accept everyday experiences as a constant source of motivation and learning. These pedagogical moments are a step, a cascade of glances, gestures, recognitions, intuition, moments of great clarity and conscious actions within a pedagogical continuum.

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. How can we at school respond to the vital need to educate for happiness? We decided to ask the children, the leading actors in their learning process, in order to find out more about their small-big world. To understand their experiences in school learning we must first comprehend the complexity of educational processes.

As teachers ourselves, we would like to emphasise that the desire for happiness is closely related to our finiteness and that children aspire to the maximum, to everything. We do not know whether happiness is at the end of the path or not. But what we do know is that to a certain extent it also lies along the path itself; in the process of discovering and conquering the mystery of life, love and truth.

Pedagogy is not just an objective social science construct. It is a phenomenon that issues a complex imperative in the manner that we see, feel, sense, reflect and respond. In everyday life, we ongoingly act and interact with children, but I wonder, did I do that right when in my class? Pedagogy is a science of experience; it is a human science, indeed it is an ethical human science that is conducted or studied with practical intent... It is a science of experience because it finds its object (the pedagogical situation) in the world of lived experience (van Manen, 2007).

We approach this research from the perspective of phenomenological anthropology (Langeveld) with in communication, learning and interciproal experience. We always think more than we can express. Inevitable, we can do more than we anticipate. In learning we are met by another (...) (Meyer-Drawe, 2010). The centrality of the subject and the pedagogy of the encounter are essential. Pedagogy of the sense of the person involves accessing an everyday pedagogical experience from a phenomenological pedagogy. The method of educational research focusses on the analysis of text produced by children who were asked to describe their personal experiences.

We are well aware that these brief responses have their limitations but we believe that they shed sufficient light to enable us to perceive how children experience their world, how they experience the world of school, their needs, their joys, how they express their feelings and their emotions. Phenomenology pedagogy studies the world of life using methods of reflection and writing; of reflective writing, this allows us to move from the anecdote to the category, from metaphorical language to the point where we understand reality better. Because of the age of the children, their essays have large amounts of description and specific detail that are poles apart from abstract concepts and theorisation. Writing cannot be reduced to a merely mechanical process; it is more a creative reflective process which reveals another process in which the children become aware of the experiences they have lived through.

We will now offer a brief summary of our research on the experience of joy in learning. Our objectives revolve around pedagogical recognition and pedagogical moments. Recognizing the pedagogical moments often requires time and pedagogical sensitivity. The same is true of course, for families. We may not fully understand what it is to be a mother or a father until we have truly lived the caring life of a mother or father ourselves.

At the same time, there are many teachers, social workers, nurses and other childcare professionals who have developed a wonderful sense of pedagogy without having had children of their own. For example, just because we have been students and have spent many years in schools and other educational institutions that does not mean that we really know what it is to be a teacher.

An example by Ayala Carabajo (2011) for the value of analysing written text lies in the ability of this method to access a greater understanding and depth of the human experience and in so doing discover the meaning and the sense of a particular experience differences two levels into account. Macro-thematic analysis: describing the experience exactly as it was experienced and micro-thematic analysis: describing the experience from within, what he or she was thinking and feeling at the time.

(Macro-thematic analysis). I got a surprise when my mother came through the door.

(Micro-thematic analysis). Because it was the first time she came to the class to be almost my teacher. I felt happy and surprised to see her.

(Macro analysis) The other day my teacher gave us an exam.

(Micro analysis) I got full marks in almost everything. Later when I saw the exam I wanted to rush home to tell my parents about the marks I had got because I wanted them to congratulate me and to give them a surprise. I felt very good after showing them the exam because of the marks I had got. But when I looked carefully at the exam, I realized that I have to concentrate more in reading comprehension (9 age).

Childrens write and tell us their stories

Analysis and interpretation of the texts

We find out follows categories after studies worthfull to present by the own children: these are the freedom, the first time, friendship, different kind of recognition, learning-service, play, nature and parents.

There is always a first time

My happy moment at school was when I came to the school for the first time and I met my new friends. I learnt many things that day for example to read, add up, subtract (...) I felt embarrassed the first day I came to school. I remember my first friend at this school was Irene. I also remember that Nani, our teacher in first year, asked me if I knew how to read and I replied more or less (10 age). My happiest moment was when I came to this school. The special thing was when I met my friends. (...) this school is much cooler than the other one I went to before. In the school I'm at now, I'm learning loads (10 age). The happiest moment I like best is the first time I came to the Padre Manjón school. I felt happy, cheerful and relaxed. The special thing for me was that when I came to the school, I learnt more than I knew. When I came to school, I felt that I was going to be surrounded by friends, I also felt that when I saw my friends I felt a lot of teaching. I remember her as loving, affectionate and sincere (8 age). The day I took my First Communion the special thing was when I went up to the altar and took the body of Christ because from that day on I was going to have Jesus in my heart. Inside my heart, I felt a powerful heart because I knew I was with Jesus. I learnt that I can never forget Jesus like any other person because he died for me and for everyone (9 age). My happy moment was when I was on the bus going to the circus. My school friends and I were getting off the bus. I met a girl, and I fell in love for the first time. At that moment I did not know what love meant but now after all these years I know what it means and just before we came to my house I bumped into her for the second time and she loved me and I loved her too, but I didn't know it. Now I know because we are going out. Her name's Andrea, at that moment I learnt the meaning of love (10 age).

Freedom

The happiest moment at school was when we went on a school-trip. The special thing was that we were allowed to go to the forest and we saw loads of things. I felt freedom and happiness. (...) It is special because it was fun. I learnt to climb and feel safe (10 age). The best day in the world for me was when I met a girl and I fell in love but I still haven't told her I love her (8 age).

Friendship

With the phenomenological text the aim is to make the reader experience a kind of 'epiphany' of meaning. In other words, the text must provoke a transformative effect such that its meaning refers to a sudden perception of an intuitive comprehension of the lived meaning of something. This experience is so strong or noticeable that it can stir us in the very core of our being like the friendship or the born.

When I first arrived at the school the special thing was when I made my first friend, Carmen. I felt very, very, very happy to have a true friend. I always remember it and everyday I relive it with my friend Carmen. When course 6A and 6B all went together on an outing to Las Mimbres and I had a wonderful time. I felt great joy to see my friends having such a great time and that we were all together. I learnt that friends will always be there for you and that they will never let you down (at least your real friends). I remember that every day I see my friends and we laugh about everything. I also remember it every night just before I fall asleep (11 age). I have learnt that I will never lose hope. One day I learnt that if we try hard we can win (10 age). I have learnt many things in class and I have felt very great excitement. I have a fantastic time and also in road safety classes. I learnt to respect the rules of the road and we saw a lot of things. I felt very fortunate (9 age). My happy moment was when I first came to the school, it was absolutely wonderful for me, it was as if I was as happy as when I was born. I felt as if I was with all my family, I felt happiness (7 age).

'I was born' is a powerful metaphor. Children may experience different codes of contact in school. The most elemental and basic kind of contact is family. The term 'family' refers to a form of contact or closeness that is the unity of living together. It is not uncommon to hear a teacher talk of her students as her children and her class as her family. Only if children feel secure and safe at school will they dare to risk themselves and extend themselves.

Recognition

An encounter is not just the appearance or sensory perception of the presence of someone else. The essence of encounter consists in the discovery of who engages with me in a relation.

It is easy to observe that the desire for recognition appears as a need that we all feel.

I felt happy when the teacher gave me a hug. The special thing was that at that moment I was happy. I felt good because at that moment I felt that my teacher loved me (7 age). When I had learnt to multiply I felt good. When everybody clapped to congratulate me on my essay it was fantastic. Because it made me so happy (7 age). When I went to the country and I built a hut, I felt like a heroine, when on the news they said that some men had gone to the country and had taken shelter in a hut, I felt special, a heroine and a builder (8 age). The moment that made me happy was the first day we did drama; the special thing was when our teacher Conchi chose me to recite a poem that nobody else could do, it was special because she chose me specially. I felt really good, even special (11 age).

Direct exclusive encounters between teachers and pupils are essential so that an opportunity can arise for them to genuinely recognize. Recognition directly acts on and influences the degree of motivation.

One morning I went to school and did an exam of Spanish language and maths. The next day the teacher gave us back the exams and I had done very well. The others in my group congratulated me and I felt very happy (9 age).

For many people feeling recognized can spur them into action or into taking difficult decisions. Recognition from the teacher can help to reduce the anxiety that some children feel when faced with complex tasks.

My happy moment is when we did the Nativity play when I was in fourth year. The special thing is that I signed up to act as a star. I felt so happy because at last I could act on stage. What I learned is that you must not feel nervous or embarrassed when you are acting. I still remember that (9 age).

It is a mistake to believe that only the extraordinary or the outstanding is worthy of recognition.

When I had my operation, my teacher lent me Pupi for all the Easter holidays and I felt happy (6 age). Meeting my teacher, Nani, she is good-natured, pretty, she is very happy, she is a good teacher. She's a princess (6 age). I have a great time because she makes us laugh, I felt joy (7 age). Because I had a kind, friendly teacher. I am very lucky (7 age). My happy moment was when I moved up to third year, I was happy and excited about meeting my new teacher. At the same time I was a bit sad because I was not going to be with Mari del Carmen any more, but I soon felt happy again. I was with Pepe, I had new classmates and Paula and Yasmin. The first day we played games and on the second we started working. The way of doing the exercises was great fun and very enjoyable. What I learned was that although I was saying goodbye to my old teacher forever I am always going to have another one and more classmates to play with (9 age). When I arrived at school, it was special because the playground was very nice. I felt joy. I learnt to improve my handwriting thanks to the teachers. I remember it very well (10 age). The moment that I most remember was when a student teacher came for the first time in sixth year. She taught PE and I am a girl who doesn't like doing gym or running. But she taught PE in a very special way, we didn't have to run or make a big effort. It was doing PE by dancing. I feel very happy when I look back on it (11 age).

In everyday experience at school and in the family, recognition is a means of balancing the experience of failure in learning which some children experience intensely.

When I met my classmates. It was special because everybody liked me and treated me as one of the group. I felt very happy because I thought nobody was going to like me and I would be all alone but it wasn't like that. With them I learned that having friends is like having lots of jewels that help you in everything and play with you. I remember it perfectly because nobody will ever make me forget it because I love them too and I value them dearly (11 age).

Learning about service

The happy day was the first day we went to see the little kids, the three-year-olds. It was fantastic because that was when she said that each one of us has a godson and each week one of us can go when it was somebody's birthday. The special thing was when they put me with Maria's brother Antonio. This boy knows a lot and he is very nice, I could cover him with kisses. I felt like his big sister: I looked after him, I fed him, I played with him. I still remember it and I will remember it always because it made me very happy (11 age). My happy moment was when we went to be with the little boys and girls. I was with a boy, Manuel because I had a great time, I felt excitement, love and enjoyment. I still remember it. I have learned to be more affectionate (11 age). When I went to be with the little children; I was with a girl, Rebeca. It was very special for me because it was different from a normal day and we had cake, nuts etc. It was very nice I felt joy, affection etc. What I remember most is when she gave me a kiss on the cheek. I felt happy I am the godfather of Rebeca: a happy very lively girl. I learnt how to be responsible, how to look after someone smaller than me (11 age).

Play

A happy moment was when we went to the laboratory. I liked it very much because we learnt by playing. I felt that learning by playing is much better than learning without playing. I remember it a lot because I was very happy at that moment (11 age).

Nature

When I went with the class to las Mimbres. It was very special because I learnt a lot about nature and we saw some beautiful views, I felt very creative, able to draw everything just as I was seeing it. I enjoyed every minute of the trip, I felt free because there was a lot of space everywhere. It was great fun because we built a hut with some branches and then we played loads of other games (8 age).

My happy moment was when we went on a school trip to Las Mimbres. The special thing was that we were all working in a team. We made a hut, a shower of leaves. I liked it because the teachers looked after us and I felt nature in my heart. It was an incredible experience (9 age).

Parents

I was very happy when my mother read me a story (6 age). I liked going on the school trip. To be special for mummy because I felt that I had a lot of friends. I felt that my mother loved me (7 age). When my parents enrolled me in the school. Because I am very lucky. I felt for a moment that I would make friends (7 age). When I went to the road safety classes we learnt about some road signs. It was special because my father had learned that and other things about road signs and I reminded him about some of the things. I felt very good when I explained it to my father because he also remembered it and I went and I had a great time (9 age). When I went to the Alhambra with my teacher Paco. Something very special happened because we went on a trip outside the city. I felt very happy when I told my parents about it so that they would know just how much fun we had had (10 age).

Conclusions

1. The children need to be frequently and systematically given the opportunity to recognize themselves freely in writings in which they can express their state of mind, their gratifying experiences, their concerns, even their fears and desires. Like a mirror they need to reflect on their interaction with reality.
2. Introspective writing is an excellent method for self-knowledge, reflection and self-awareness (as are diaries and personal letters). The stories recount significant anecdotes and experiences. They are short stories which reveal the emotional and life background of the child. Qualitative (phenomenological) research cannot really be separated from the practice of writing.
3. They provide the teacher with an important source of knowledge and an in-depth insight into the experience and the enjoyment lived by the students. They want to know the results.

4. On the basis of the results of this research, we would like to highlight some of the most important or significant elements for the state of happiness of the students: activities outside the classroom (trips to the country, visits to monuments, theme parks) that help to break up the routine, the experimental as an essential aspect of learning by discovery, the new or the realization or living of circumstances 'for the first time'.
5. Human relations are shown to be much more important than relations with things. Especially relations with classmates, parents or teachers, which implies a close relationship between happiness, subjectivity and especially inter-subjectivity. At this point we should take a closer look at two main themes: friendship and the feeling of belonging to a peer group, and recognition by adults in pedagogical moments.
6. Recognize the positive impact of interactive groups as a different way of learning in groups and the importance of involving parents in the classroom.
7. The importance of parents in terms of the pedagogical recognition they provide regarding the positive experiences that their children wish to share with them.

Hopefully, each of us can recognize the power of learning with joy and fun. We may recognize the consequences of pedagogy when we become aware of the latent, lasting and lingering effects of the events that make up the innumerable often-forgotten experiences.

The powerful pedagogical theme of the significance – learning, enjoy, happiness – in our lives (professional) is a poorly recognized and a little understood pedagogical phenomenon.

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