

Learning Diversity: A Collaborative Work Experience of Literary Education in a Spanish Teacher Training Classroom

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present an experience carried out in a group of 50 university students of the subject Literary Education in the Childhood Classroom in the 2014/2015 academic year. The activity is based on the need to educate on diversity and includes literature, drama and puppets as powerful tools for the awareness, reflection and dialogue about the topic of diversity.

Based on research about children's literature focused on diversity, the work groups started a debate on the (in)visibility of most of these works. Once a text was chosen, students produced and dramatized a puppet play. The process included every aspect of production, from the initial conception to the final performance, focusing on an element of reflection and multiplicity of roles during the entire process. We believe the experience was very positive and beneficial for the literary training of the teacher. It provided a framework for the programming and development of activities about all kinds of diversity in the early childhood education classroom.

Key words: diversity, teacher education, educational proposals, family, puppets.

1. Education and Diversity

Attention to diversity is one aspect of education that have become more important in recent decades. Many diversity fields based on tolerance and the acceptance of the difference can be covered in the classroom. When defining intercultural education, most authors agree on a series of characteristics that can be applied to many other types of diversity, summarized by Auxiliadora Sales in the following way:

We start from the idea that Intercultural Education is an educational model that promotes the cultural improvement of the citizenry, on the basis of recognition and respect to diversity, through exchange and dialogue, so they can participate actively and critically in the development of a democratic society based on equality, justice and solidarity (Sales, 2003, p. 9).

In the same vein, Olga María Alegre (2010, p. 46) emphasizes that the basis for inclusive education is appreciating the rules, culture and coexistence forms of the students belonging to ethnic or cultural minorities. It would imply joint learning as a basic element, independently from personal, social and cultural conditions of the pupils, including disabilities. These measures concern the whole group of students, not only minorities, because diversity involves the society in its entirety, not only minority groups (Alegre, 2004, p. 33). As explained by Margarita Bartolomé, we still need to spread the awareness among the teaching staff of the need to offer this

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education for all learners. Some teachers often confuse intercultural or diverse education with compensatory measures for certain students.

We believe that work on the affective and family diversity can be built on the same grounds as intercultural education: through dialogue between those who are different, to reach the conclusion that there are a lot of things that unite us, and the difference can be a positive challenge, since we are enriched by the perspective and the views of the other.

There is no doubt that this is one of the greatest educational challenges of our time. It affects the way that individuals — every individual — build their own identity and, particularly, the need to overcome traditional ways of thinking and acting in relation to the concept of citizenship.

2. Diversity in Literature

Literature has always been a meeting point (Praver, 1998, p. 32), firstly between the author and the receiver, often physically separated in time, space, language and culture. Also in ideas and view points over the world. In this regard, as Josep Ballester reminds us (2007, p. 98): “the schemes of values and world views of the different human communities, as well as certain behavioral patterns and the popular wisdom cultivated for generations, are stored and alive in language and literature.” The focus of our didactic proposal is precisely the ability of literature to put different people — in a broad sense — face to face and establish a dialogue between them.

Taking into account basic aspects and objectives of intercultural education and the importance of a respectful educational action that advances liberty and creativity in the students, there is no doubt that literature can be a very valuable element. It is a source of knowledge about other people, a tool for coexistence, and plays a relevant role in the acquisition and development of basic competencies, especially linguistic communication competency, cultural and artistic competency and social and civic competency:

The ultimate goal is, indeed, to advance the critical skills of citizens; that is, create individuals that can exert their citizenship in a committed and responsible way in today’s society, and contribute decisively to improving coexistence and respect among people with different perspectives (Ballester et al., 2010, p. 550).

It is well known that the aim of literary education is to provide to the student what we call literary competency (Ballester, 2007, p. 94), understood as a human skill that enables the production and reception of literature. The ability is not innate and is configured by several factors among which education is one of the most important. On the other hand, literature is also a source of knowledge and acts as a purveyor of the values, rules and systems of a community and its members: these functions, together with the transmission of culture, the liberty and gratification function, and the commitment to reality, among others, contribute to the comprehensive education of the person.

Antonio Mendoza insists on literature’s ability, especially comparatively, to link common and diverse cultural aspects (Mendoza, 1994, p. 17). Therefore, a contemporary approach to teaching literature that takes the diverse context into account should also cover all these aspects and cultural connections in literature: references, historic and social aspects, and meta-literary influences. Ibarra and Ballester (2000) also note the potential of literature regarding dialogue. For these authors, literature is a powerful instrument to comprehend one’s self and the world, to discover otherness, a tool for social cohesion and for the creation of plural identities.

3. New Family Models in Children's and Young People's Literature: Challenges and Resistance

We believe that dialogical and inclusive education must also include all the current variants of family model: this variety exists in society and, therefore, it must be present in literature, especially in the case of Children's and Young People's Literature (CYPL). Literature is the reflection of the society that produces it and, in the case of children's and young people's literature, a referent to consolidate identity and a sense of belonging to the group and society.

One of the main challenges for literature that addresses new affective and family structures and makes them visible is, as several experts detected a few years ago, to avoid stereotypes and improve literary quality (Chick, 2008). The goal is just to produce literature, which will portray different family models in a positive and normal way. On the other hand, the low number of publications that commit to diversity from a normalizing perspective is noteworthy. This kind of literature is received with precaution by broad sectors of the editorial, teaching and parent collectives.

It is clear that children's and young people's literature is an educational agent (Colomer, 2010, p. 49), as family and school: in this sense, texts devoted to children and young people show the way that a society likes to represent itself. Therefore, this kind of literature mirrors the horizons and shortcomings of the society that produced it.

From the premise that whatever has a name exists (Romero Lombardo, 2011), the visibilization of social reality in its diversity and pluralism gains importance: concealing different family realities present around us perpetuates situations of inequality, injustice and suffering. Thus, one of the Gemma Lluch's criteria (2012, p. 223) for choosing literary texts for children and young people is that characters should represent the social and cultural parameters of the context. Iñaki Tofiño (2006) insists on this perspective and provides a classification scale for children materials, depending on the level of inclusion of realities other than the traditionally recognized in this type of texts. The resulting levels go from invisibility as the lowest level, through obvious discrimination, kind discrimination and affirmation to neutrality as the highest step.

These approaches help us to understand the need to raise awareness of the different types of affective and family units in literature and at school as a reflection of the diversity of a society that aims to educate on tolerance. Our society should put an end to certain prejudice and choose to recognize in literature the different realities that exist in the everyday lives of many of our pupils.

There are points we can establish regarding literature in general and its educational, aesthetic and ludic possibilities. They can be especially highlighted in the case of theater, and particularly in puppet theater. By its own nature, it provides the opportunity to reflect on how we comprehend diversity, the different cultures, and our plural societies.

4. Theater in the Classroom: Puppets

There is no doubt that theater, understood as an activity encompassing literature, visual arts and movement, is full of educational possibilities. This has not always been appreciated in the field of learning or in the field of dramatic art. In the world of theater, puppetry offers a great deal of possibilities, some already known and others probably still waiting to be developed:

(a) It answers to curriculum requirements and to the education research tendency towards interdisciplinarity.

(b) The fact that it was present throughout history and in different cultures offers many possibilities regarding the observation of different creation, aesthetic, manipulation and dramatic techniques. Similarly, the fascination produced by the object on stage turns it into an educational element (as understood by most pedagogical renewal movements).

(c) Finally, the fact that artistic avant-gardes found puppets to be an interesting element from the artistic point of view also placed them in a privileged position when it came to being included in a multidisciplinary project including art education, body language and literary education (Baird, 1965).

Another reason to include puppets to our project is their historically transgressive character, the fact that they have systematically challenged all authority. Although the attempts to “deactivate” it finally succeed, especially in the late eighteenth century, some puppet theater companies today can help us understand those plays that upset political and ecclesiastical authority so much.

Perhaps the most successful attempt to “deactivate” puppet theater and remove its subversive charge occurred at the end of the eighteenth century, when children became part of the audience of public shows and a specific recipient of literature: from that moment on, the idea of what is or is not appropriate evolved hand in hand with the progressive idealization of children, who became almost otherworldly “angelic” beings, devoid of any cruelty. They managed to strip puppets from their expressive (and subversive) potential and put them at the service of established order or turned them into something banal. Thus, the great contradiction around puppet theater is that it is one of the artistic forms with the most transgressive potential, yet also one of the most subject to clichés (Baixas, 1999).

This is paradoxical, because the field of education-schools being one of the spaces to which puppets had been relegated — is the field that is starting to recover a different approach to puppetry. From the twentieth century, puppets have been used as a learning tool in several fields of knowledge. Similarly, the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century brought research on the effects of puppet creation, manipulation and shows for different pathologies (Oltra, 2013). One of the ideas was that puppets enable the possibility to establish a dialogue between what we have within and the objectivity of a medium in which subjects can express their personality and project their questions, fears, and hopes.

Thanks to this potential, we believe that puppets can be very helpful in the quest for new perspectives about reality, because reality is diverse and it should be studied from diverse approaches. The literary basis for our puppet work operates in the same sense. Let us remember that literature is a very powerful tool for the creation of identities (sometimes also for imposition, destruction or discrimination), understood as representations and categorizations of the world and ourselves. Our proposal is based on choosing texts about diversity, following Ignacio Tofiño’s scale (2006), which sets levels for children’s literature, from the most discriminatory to the most normalizing.

5. Didactic Proposal: Planning

We proposed an initial question for our classroom work: if literature explains how a society is (how it wants to be, what it is afraid of, etc.), and there are some themes, characters and situations that many boys and girls experience in their daily family life which are not reflected in children’s literature, what can we do? How to bring the diversity of social life to the classroom, so that children from different families see themselves reflected, and

children belonging to traditional family models know other family realities?

We discussed elsewhere (Oltra-Albiach, 2011; Oltra-Albiach & Pardo-Coy, 2013) about the scarce and superficial presence of diversity in the children's literature works that are used in classrooms, as well as the fact that teachers have very little training in this field. For this reason, we try to include some of these contents on the training curriculum of the degree of Infant Education, in the syllabus of the subject Literary Education in the Childhood Education Classroom. The activity was developed with a group of 50 second year students of the degree on Teacher Training for Infant Education. The content of the proposal is intended for a school group of five-year-old; among other reasons, because we think that it would be optimal for literary education interventions (early reading stage) and to work on diversity and fight stereotypes and prejudice. However, the proposal is also suitable for the first two years of primary education.

Hence, our proposal was based on the need to portray diversity in literary education for our teacher training students in order to promote reflection and offer tools to work on affective and sexual diversity in the childhood education classroom, using very similar procedures to the ones used in intercultural work: raising awareness about stereotypes and fighting prejudice before it manifests (Ballester & Mas, 2003). The goal is to advance intercultural competencies in students, in connection with affective and sexual diversity, from the basic ideas that we are all "different" for someone and that sex/gender and sexual orientation stereotypes, among others, operate in society. We also wanted to raise issues regarding the subject Literary Education in the Childhood Classroom and the lack of diversity content in its syllabus. This course is structured into five content units, the third one devoted to gender.

6. Didactic Proposal: Development

The base activity, which guides the whole process, is creating a puppet play after presenting several examples of children's LGBT literature and other children's works with a focus on diversity. On the one hand, we want to raise awareness among teacher trainees about the frequent omission of both affective and sexual diversity and of the literature where it is present. The starting point of the activity was organizing, together with the area of Education of Col·lectiu Lambda¹ a workshop titled Education in the affective and sexual diversity, which served as an excellent trigger for ideas and motivation.

From this preparatory activity, students took a session of Internet research on children's literature and family diversity, followed by a series of work sessions in which a didactic proposal was developed. This proposal, with appropriate adaptations, could be implemented with pupils aged 5 and also in the first cycle of primary education (6 and 7).

The objectives of the proposal are related to the subject own skills and other transversal that are related to tolerance and attitudes towards diversity:

- Using Information and Communication Technologies as usual working tools.
- Working cooperatively and individually.
- Critically analyze literary works.
- Develop skills related to the production of texts.
- Value the core competencies acquired through children's literature.
- Be able to apply classroom strategies and active methods in Early Childhood Education.

1 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Collective of Valencia (Spain), <http://www.lambdavalencia.org>.

- Develop a responsible attitude and respect for others that favors a climate conducive to personal freedom, learning and living together and fostering attitudes that promote coexistence in the scopes of school, family and society.
- Learn to accept, respect and defend the uniqueness of others: social and cultural specificities, etc.

Students, in groups of five, started an internet research from a series of initial guidelines: they had to search children literature with the issue of family diversity, and later they had to choose a work to develop the activity. This research served to awareness among the students of the existence of a large number of works of this kind in the world, which are often not known. Actually it is a literature that usually don't go beyond a few diverse families that purchase the works for their children to know other literature with other family referents.

A work was selected from among the examples of children's LGBT literature presented during the workshop and other works selected after the students' research (23 literary works in total). The chosen title was *King & King*, by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland, originally published in Dutch (as *Koning en Koning*) and translated into English in 2002 (there is also sequel: *King & King & Family*, published in 2006). The work tells the story of a prince whose mother — the queen — wanted him to marry. They did not like any candidate. Finally, the companion of one of the princesses coming to the kingdom has the honor of becoming the king's husband. A motivational activity on the tale (one class session) was developed, using a number of questions and activities for before, during and after the reading:

Activities before reading

- What does the title suggest?
- Invent a story with the title.
- What does the first illustration suggest?
- What do we think will happen?
- Look for information on Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland and their work.

Activities while we read (we stop mid-story)

- What is going on?
- What characters have appeared?
- What are they like?
- What would you do if you were in the characters' position?

Activities after reading

- What happened?
- What secondary character did you like the most?
- What do you think about the story?
- Invent a different ending.
- Continue the story.
- Draw the characters.

From this initial motivating activity, was performed the didactic proposal, structured in 6 sessions of 1:30 hours and with a weekly frequency. Throughout the sessions, the following activities were carried out:

(1) Distribution of tasks and temporal organization (session 1). We wanted to work from a conception of theater as a whole, without more important roles than others; so, all the roles in a theatrical production were distributed: writers, actors, puppeteers, puppet makers, decorators, equipment managers, responsible for theater hall, marketing managers, stage directors, stage managers, set designers, puppet designers, assemblers of the

puppet theater, etc. Regarding types of puppet, we have chosen glove puppets, for its easy construction and manipulation, and because they are perfectly adapted both sessions for university students and for children (remember that the ultimate purpose of this proposal is to take it to school).

(2) Development of different tasks and functions (sessions 2, 3 and 4). During the three assigned sessions, all groups developed their tasks cooperatively. Each component was responsible for their work to the group, and the group was responsible to the class. During this stage there were discussions, making decisions and interesting group discussions, where the issue of family diversity and its treatment in the children classroom were always presents.

(3) Rehearsals (session 5).

(4) Premiere of King & King 2015 (session 6).

Through the questions and dialogue developed in class, we build the characters, create the puppets and produce the entire play, from its conception to the representation. Teacher-student and peer interaction (during the implementation of the activities, problem-solving and debate) is essential to advance the reflection and positive assessment of difference (beyond mere tolerance).

The treatment of affective and sexual diversity we suggest is similar to what several of the cited authors suggested for different sorts of diversity (cultural, ethnic, linguistic...) and tries to avoid some of the historic mistakes of the field: the tendency to involve only “those who are different” instead of the whole group of students, to take “paternalistic”, “patronizing” or “stereotypical” stances, ethnocentrism, etc. In this case, dealing with affective and sexual diversity from an heterocentric and patriarchal perspective would not be a good solution.

Our approach is expressive and productive, but, most importantly, comprehensive, interpretive and reflective: our intention is not just artistic expression, but also teaching how to approach and look at a comprehensive project of literary and diversity education. Among the identified aspects, there are:

- Family types: variety and characteristics.
- Binary characterization based on sex assigned before birth from a medical and reproductive perspective.
- Gender stereotypes and behaviors traditionally considered outside the norm.
- The attributes we assign to each sex and gender/hyper-sexualization, especially of girls/the school as a factory of men through performativity and certain rituals.
- The relationship between colors and sex/gender.
- Use of adjectives regarding sex/gender. Qualifiers related to action for boys and to feelings for girls...

The final product, King & King 2015 (puppet version), was performed at the Faculty of Teacher Training (University of Valencia) with great success. Remember that this kind of proposal is intended to be reproduced in the class of early childhood education, with appropriate modifications, for their specific characteristics and being able to reflect and discuss about difference and tolerance. There are present the various works of theater and also the various skills and intelligences of students, so it is an activity that attends the diversity of capacities in the classroom.

At the end of the activity, an evaluation questionnaire of the proposal was completed by 48 students. It provided very interesting feedback from students, as well as mechanisms to improve the work in future editions. The form consists of four items and an open question for the overall assessment of the proposal:

(1) How do they evaluate the activity? The possible answers ranged from 1 to 5 (where 1 was very negatively and 5 was very positively). 70% was 5, 22% marked the 4. Only 1 person described the activity as negative.

(2) Highlights of the activity. Most of the students (over 90%) reported that they had never worked with this

type of literature nor known artistic and educational puppet possibilities. Most of them (60%) consider that it is necessary to introduce subjects related to family diversity in university curricula. In some cases, students also think that the activity has helped to break off prejudices about using puppets as a teaching tool.

(3) Conflictive aspects. 75% think that there is no negative aspect in the proposal; however, the remaining 25% think that could find difficulties when carrying out this activity in the classroom of childhood education, both from a personal point of view and from the educative community.

(4) Aspects to improve. Most of them raises the issue of the difficulty in sustaining attention of children for an extended period.

Some students offered very attractive valuations on activity. We have selected a few of them especially interesting:

- “I am Catholic, and my family model corresponds to the conventional, but in the name of respecting others I think that is very important to know and appreciate family diversity”.

- “I didn’t know this kind of literature, but now I think that it’s very important for a teacher to know it and know how to use”.

- “I think that with these activities we can help children from diverse families to recognize them in these stories and improve their integration into the classroom”.

- “This activity has opened me to a world of ideas and educational possibilities that I will put into practice in the future, as a teacher”.

The result obtained thanks to the questions about the activity was very positive and poses new challenges regarding the way diversity is portrayed in the classroom and the opportunities, goals and resistances it arises.

7. Conclusions

The experience was very well regarded by the students. They stressed the need to understand, recognize and value affective and sexual diversity as a part of reality in school centers; another important point is the awareness about the lack of training and tools to explore the reality of diversity in the classroom: most of our students impinges on the need for introducing diversity-related contents in the programs of Teacher Education studies.

Concerning the literary work, they highlighted cooperative literary creation and the acquisition of competencies related to literature through the creation of a dramatic text based on a tale. Regarding the use of puppets as a tool, they emphasized aspects such as their diverse past, their roots in different cultures, their aesthetic values and perspectives and, therefore, their possibilities for working with diversity. Most students recognize having inadequate training on this subject in their university studies, especially related to use, possibilities and types of puppets.

Literature provides us with a tool to know ourselves and also to understand the others: through this empathic possibility, children learn to know and respect the others and in the case of children belonging to diverse families — also learn to be represented and recognized in children’s literature. To sum up, it is important for schools to introduce diversity as a value from early childhood education, to create the basis for a less discriminatory, less patriarchal and less unequal society: a society based on people and not on labels, stigmas and prejudices with we often mark the one who is “the other” for each one of us.

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