

# PROMOTING CULTURAL DIVERSITY(IES) WITH CHILDREN: ACCOUNTS OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN THE EDUCATION CONTEXT

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## Abstract

We live in a heterogeneous world, where there are different cultures, with which it is imminent to learn to live together [1]. Learning to live together means respect and openness towards human relationships, it means getting closer to the other and not pushing him away, through respect, dialogue, sharing interests, always based on the involvement with the difference without any kind of prejudice. To live together in a multicultural environment is to make interactions with others a source of experience [2]. Schools today are multicultural, this is largely due to migration driven by economic and social markers from more affluent countries. It is therefore necessary, especially in schools, to act to integrate and enhance the positivity of diversity(ies), as well as to promote opportunity(ies) for all. Therefore, this study aims at finding out the children's beliefs on cultural diversity, specifically on what they think of themselves, of the other and how they understand the cultural differences they experience. The methodology followed is part of a qualitative approach and the study was carried out with a 1st cycle class of 7- and 8-year-old children from a state school in the North of Portugal. Data were collected using the interview survey technique and, for data analysis, since the questions were open-ended, the content analysis technique was used [3]. The results show that children are open when approaching the topic under study, as well as curious to learn more about different cultures from their own, showing a non-stereotyped view of the topic. The analysis of the data also reveals positive and favourable attitudes towards intercultural relations. The results as well show that pedagogical activities on cultural diversity in the classroom stimulate children's learning and contribute to promote respect for themselves and for others.

Keywords: cultural diversity, multiculturalism, primary school.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The large-scale ease of movement of people and the consequent increasing migration have contributed greatly to the transformation of the population. With a culturally diverse society, schools have also become multicultural. This phenomenon has challenged schools to keep up with changes in society and to contribute to an intercultural school, where coexistence among culturally diverse people is more real than mere coexistence. This change was long overdue. Leite [4] calls attention to the fact that the school is not modern in face of the cultural mosaic it houses, stating that

if school education does not transform itself, breaking away from the traditionalism that characterizes it and including in its culture subcultures of populations or groups that until recently it ignored or were alien to it, as well as issues of local and global realities, [it will be] subject to at least two situations: (1) losing one of the reasons for its existence, which is to contribute to an education for all; (2) being a vehicle for the marginalization of certain social groups and forcing them into a process of assimilation, subjecting them to a loss of their cultural identities [4, p.97].

The school for everyone may not be the school we all want. Perhaps it is important to think of the school as a vehicle for practices and attitudes that converge with this (these) diversity(ies). In a heterogeneous world, where there are different cultures, it is urgent to learn to live together [1]. Learning to live together means respect and openness to human relationships, it means getting closer to the other and not pushing him away, through respect, dialogue, and the combination of interests, always based on the involvement with the difference without any kind of prejudice. Living together in multiculturalism is to make interactions with others a source of experience; it is, basically, to educate oneself by communicating with the other who is culturally different from me [2].

The school assumes here the role of helping to understand the world, of providing experiences of active citizenship, and teachers, for having an added role in education, should prepare themselves to work with this (these) diversity (s), making children aware that we are plural beings, that we interact and relate to people from other cultures. That is, by adopting an intercultural attitude, based on respect and acceptance of the other, we assume their particularities, without prejudice or discrimination.

Stoer and Cortesão [5], reflecting on intercultural educational practices, draw attention to the possible effects that these practices may trigger, saying that: (i) if the practices, on the one hand, result in a greater affirmation of minority groups, on the other hand, they may merely contribute to accentuating these differences; (ii) if the practices may, on the one hand, have a playful character, they may, on the other hand, not contribute to the development of ethnic-cultural awareness in children; (iii) while the practices may improve personal and group image, they may not be sufficient to learn about the knowledge of the dominant culture; and (iv) they may liberate and raise awareness about human rights, but they may also ghettoize and isolate. In other words, if care is not taken, the so-called multicultural practices may contribute to make differences even more evident to the detriment of developing a better capacity for acceptance and coexistence.

The above-mentioned authors also assume a theoretical-epistemological framework to face multicultural situations, which includes stimulating the critical spirit, identifying power relations; allowing the identification of perverse effects of educational actions undertaken by "benign multiculturalism" [5, p.29]; assuming a rupture with research that does not value an involvement in the identification and analysis of situations of injustice at school; and, allowing an action linked to research. In this scenario, the role of the teacher, as an agent that promotes democracy in the school, will be the cornerstone.

The teacher's role in the face of cultural diversity depends largely on the way he/she sees it, on his/her commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, on his/her attitude and behaviour of social justice. In short, it depends on the way he/she feels the sense of otherness. The teacher, as we have said, has a decisive role in promoting cultural diversity and the "construction of the concept of the inter/multicultural teacher necessarily takes place in the field and within the limits of the school construction agenda" [5, p.46], being fully aware, as Pereira states that "teachers' attitudes are a central issue in multicultural education, and the effectiveness or failure of any program depends on them" [6, p.22].

The construction of the concept of the inter/multicultural teacher, according to Stoer and Cortesão [5] may be based on the following characteristics: (i) to view cultural diversity as a source of richness for the teaching/learning process; (ii) to promote the monetization of knowledge and cultures; (iii) to take cultural diversity into consideration in the classroom, making it a condition of confrontation between cultures; (iv) to re-map their cultural identity to overcome cultural ethnocentrism; (v) to advocate the decentration of the school - the school assumes itself as part of the local community and, (vi) to know cultural differences through the development of pedagogical devices on the basis of the notion of culture as a social practice.

The teacher's role in building an inter/multicultural education is highlighted, and he/she should be engaged in promoting an education that stimulates the development of skills in children that prepare them for coexistence and cooperation among different cultures.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used is the qualitative approach, with the main objective of understanding children's opinions and perspectives regarding cultural diversity. Sousa, referring to the characteristics of qualitative methodology, mentions that it seeks to "understand the mechanisms, how certain behaviours, attitudes and functions work" [7, p.31]. We followed this investigative line with the intention of valuing children's opinions, as well as their experiences and their interpretation of them. Thus, we believe we can access, as Bogdan and Biklen state, data "rich in descriptive detail about people, places, and conversations" [8, p.16].

In order to deepen the children's opinion about cultural diversity, we conducted an interview with children from the 1st cycle of basic education (1st CEB), from a class in a school grouping in the city of Bragança, located in the North of Portugal continental.

We started from the assumption that, as Freire-Ribeiro states, "children know more about their world than any adult. In this context, interviews are one of the best opportunities to understand that world and to understand what the child thinks and knows" [9, p. 308]. However, interviewing children follows very specific criteria. And as such, "we started by informing the children of our work intentions, because they

have the right to be informed that they are being investigated and of the nature of the research and they need to give their consent to participate in the study" [9, p. 309]. We then prepared the consents and the "information pack" [10] which was "specially designed to inform and to serve as an incentive and facilitator for children's discourse, helping them to verbalize their conceptions and their willingness to participate in the interviews" [9, p. 309].

The interview was semi-structured and was based on a script of questions to be asked to the children. Considering that the purpose was for the children to talk about the theme and express their perspectives, in some moments, the script was not followed. We also chose to conduct the interviews in a panel, or in small groups, so that the children would not feel uncomfortable, but more relaxed in the presence of friends.

The "information package" that also served as the motto for the conversation with the children, was supported by the narrative album entitled "The wolf who wanted to change colour" by Orianne Lallemand and illustrated by Éléonore Thuillier and some images from it. It also had four photographs of children of diverse cultural background and in situations of vulnerability. We respected each child's opinion, since the role of the interviewer "does not consist in modifying points of view, but rather in understanding the subjects' points of view and the reasons that lead them to assume them" [8, p.138].

The records were audio recorded and it should also be noted that they were made after previously asking the parents, the children, and the class teacher for permission (informed consent) to conduct the interview. To analyse the data collected in the interviews we used content analysis [3]. To guarantee the anonymity of the children, the names presented throughout the data analysis are fictitious.

### **3 RESULTS**

In this topic we describe, analyse, and interpret the data from the interview conducted with 20 primary school children aged 7 and 8 years old. In order to analyse and process the data, we started from the theoretical basis that supported the research. To do so, we defined a priori three categories of analysis, in which we tried to integrate the ideas expressed by the children: i) conceptions about multiculturalism; ii) ethical values; and iii) education for active citizenship. Once the categories were defined, we explained the subcategories and the respective indicators, to obtain common and differentiating data respecting the children's discourse.

#### **3.1 Multiculturality conceptions**

Before we asked the children the questions, we dialogued with them about what we intended to do and the purpose of the interview. Afterwards, we showed them some pictures of children from different countries. We can say that this was the starting point for the interview. The children, although reserved at first, were enthusiastic and opinionated about what they were observing.

In what concerns the first question "Are these children happy?", only twelve of the twenty children answered, and from these, six associated that the children were not happy because they were "poor", or "had no money". With the analysis of the registration units, we verified that the children associate the sadness of these children with hunger and lack of money, as well as the lack of a home. We also verified that children are aware of some situations that occur in people's lives, namely for some children. One child associated the sadness of the children with their skin tone, as we can see in the following unit of register: "there are people who make fun of your skin tone" (Miguel). On the other hand, five children did not express any previous conceptualization regarding what they observed, basing themselves on the answers they heard from their colleagues in the group and repeating that they were happy children.

In the second question we asked, still referring to the picture, "Can they play together? Why?". Only thirteen children answered. One child established a relationship between cultural difference and the act of playing, highlighting the distance: "No, because they live in several countries" (Evangeline). The child assumed that she could not play with the other child because of the distance between the two countries. However, twelve children did not recognize a relationship of culture/play difference, and overall, all gave the same answer, "Yes [They can all play together]." There was only one child who was adamant in stating and justifying his answer "[Yes] They are children like the others" (Joaquim). We found that the children did not identify any aspects or factors that would prevent them from being able to play with those children in the picture, regardless of whether they recognized that they were sad, perhaps because they had low economic conditions.

The answers to the questions "Are these children the same as you? Why?" and "Is it better that we are all different or all the same? Why?", indicate that thirteen children attributed an equality/inequality

relationship, related to physical, linguistic, cultural, and social differences. "Different, because if we were all the same, the world wouldn't be funny" (Carolina); "Because some are from another country, others have another skin tone" (António); "Others have different eyes... [it's better to be] all different, because then we wouldn't know who was who." (Joaquim).

As we can see, the children established a relationship with equality, highlighting some traits that differentiate us, such as linguistic, social, and cultural, and what predominated in the children's answers were the physical differences associated with skin tone. However, they showed that the skin tone, or being from another country, was not an obstacle, showing that being different is something positive. For children and young people today to understand the issues of inter/multiculturality and learn to live with different people and cultures, we need the intervention of education in the school environment where it should take a pedagogical orientation aimed at sharing culture [1] [5].

### **3.2 Ethical values**

At one stage of the interview, we told the story entitled "The wolf who wanted to change colour" and the questions were close to the events of the story. In the children's answers to the question "Why do you think the wolf wanted to change colour?", six children established a relationship between skin tone and beauty, justifying their answers based on the concept of "beautiful", or beautiful as we can see in the following records: "He didn't think his colour was beautiful" (Matilde); "Because he didn't like his colour" (Óscar). Twelve children established a positive relationship between different skin tones and friendship, and it can be referred that these children do not consider the skin tone as a condition for making friends. Two children did not attribute any relationship between the colour of the wolf, simply saying that we may not like something we may have. We verified in the speech of this group of children the awareness that everyone is as they are, revealing the importance of liking what we are, because "we can't change ourselves" (Telma).

Taking into consideration the answers given by the children to the question "Do you think that being different is bad or good?", the indicator "Positive difference" emerged. According to the registration units, in relation to the positive opinions about the "Perception of differences" we could see that fourteen children showed positive perception of differences, while no child showed difference as something negative, as observed in the following examples: "The most important thing in a person is the inside!" (Leia); "Being different is good, because if we are all the same, we have no difference" (Leonardo). Being different is something positive in the life of this group of children, because they know there are differences, but they don't identify them as a problem or as something negative, also adding that the most important thing, in the relationship with the other, "is friendship and love!" (Telma).

### **3.3 Education for active citizenship**

When we asked the children about their knowledge of some social problems and taking into account the analysis of the children's answers, we noticed that they are aware of some situations that occur in the world, namely those related to child exploitation, school attendance (or not), the absence of family, discrimination (racial and sex/gender). To illustrate this assertion, the following records are reported: "I would try to help so that discrimination doesn't happen" (Matilde); "To the boys who are in other countries and don't have school or anything, try to get some transportation to help them come to Portugal [to have] the right to school and have food." (Miguel); "Yes, all children have the same rights." (Irene).

We think that the children, even if implicitly, highlighted some children's rights, which, to them, seem essential. They certainly focused on their daily lives and realized that not all children have the same "luck" or opportunities as them. On the other hand, they have indicated a perspective of change, to improve the lives of these children, emphasizing the fact that they should not work, but go to school.

We can see in the children's speeches what Freire-Ribeiro also evidences in his study when he says that "children recognize that there are people who don't have the same rights as others, and they associate this idea to the economic and social condition. They say that poorer people, those who are different or exploited by others have almost no rights" [9, p.434]. However, they sought to explain solutions, seemingly easy to implement, to remedy these human rights violations.

It became perceptible that the issues addressed are not totally unknown to these children, which may lead us to the conclusion that the experiences of these children have allowed them to make certain statements. In fact, we can say that children's formal, non-formal and informal experiences influence the way they build their representations and perceptions about the issues and problems faced by societies.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The multicultural school is a space where cultures "mix", sometimes generating subcultures. Conflicts and clashes of values are often generated, although human rights are increasingly highlighted to raise awareness and consciousness for their inclusion and acceptance. Education for cultural diversity can contribute to improving children's attitudes towards this reality. Education for diversity is one of the greatest challenges facing schools, which is to create a school for all, a school where every child from different ethnic-cultural minorities can experience equal opportunities and succeed.

Today's society is plural, but so is the school. Therefore, the earlier a child has information and contact with different cultures, the easier it will be for him or her to acquire respect for differences. Therefore, it is relevant to know what life is like in the world around them. For children and young people today to understand the issues of inter/multiculturality and learn to live together with different peoples and cultures, we need the intervention of education in the school environment, in which a pedagogical orientation towards the sharing of cultures must be assumed [1] [5].

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