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# Dialogic Gatherings: two experiences that connect the school with its environment

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**Abstract**

This paper presents an analysis of two dialogic literary gatherings, one in a public primary school in Murcia and the second in a secondary school in the Basque Country. The aim is to highlight and evaluate this participatory methodology among families, teachers, pupils and other community members. To this end a case study was performed based on observations and interviews. The results show the benefits of the activity for learning and improving relationships and linking schools to the territory.

*Keywords:* link to the territory; citizen participation; dialogic literary gatherings.

## 1. Introduction

In order to respond to the challenge of creating an inclusive, intercultural school we need to develop educational measures that take into account both the curriculum and the skills pupils should learn, and the situation of the society in which the school is embedded. Schools must provide pupils with educational responses that take into account diversity of needs. To do this, they need to remain open to innovation (Torres, 2012), and shift away from the uniformity of learning (Lorenzo, 2011). However, for innovation to reach schools it is essential to know and share experiences in these contexts. To this end, this article reports the experience of introducing the dialogical literary gathering (DLG) methodology into the innovative process of a primary school in the region of Murcia and a

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secondary school in the Basque Country. This methodology has been designed to bring about educational transformation, which is largely determined by the degree of involvement and responsibility of all the members of the educational community (Traver, Sales & Miller, 2009; Sales, Moliner & Traver, 2010; Sales 2012; Lozano, Cerezo & Alcaraz, 2015).

Fletcher, García and Gómez (2013), among others, define DLG as a successful intervention, based on egalitarian dialogue, that offers pupils a space for exchanging ideas, developing an interest in reading, expressing feelings and encouraging critical thinking through group reading of a piece of literature. According to Martín and Jiménez (2013), methodologies such as these aim to encourage pupils to discuss and reflect on the different possible visions that can arise from the same text, and the varied personal and group interpretations and implications. Hence, in addition to fostering language skills, the DLG promotes instrumental learning and improves coexistence by enhancing personal, cultural and social transformations.

In this intersubjective process, the word provides an opportunity for the individual and for the other to reconstruct themselves as subjects of value (Freire, 2012). Meanings of reality are created and recreated as a result of intersubjective agreements reached through communication processes (Aubert et al., 2008), thus opening up possibilities for transformation as a reader and as a person in the world. Therefore, the egalitarian dialogue that occurs in the gathering fosters intellectual flexibility and a predisposition for transformation (Fernández, Garvín & González, 2012).

Furthermore, the characteristics of the context enrich interactions: a participatory, heterogeneous context favors greater learning due to the usefulness and depth of egalitarian dialogue between people of different backgrounds and profiles (Aubert et al., 2008). In summary, the dialogic literary gathering offers the educational community the opportunity for pupils, family, and social agents to exchange views, thus favoring the development of skills, equal dialogue, participation, horizontality, solidarity, co-responsibility and cooperation (Arandia, Alonso-Olea & Martínez-Domínguez, 2010). These aspects strengthen the bases needed to achieve the intercultural inclusive school constituted as a driving agent of social change, and promote the idea of an effective school for all (Bolívar, 2006), but also a school developed by everyone, since as Sabariego (2002) states, education is a dynamic social construction that is not the sole responsibility of neither the school nor the family; it is a process in which jointly and interdependently, school, family and society are relevant and essential pillars. "An inclusive education is only viable if solid, wide-reaching networks of cooperation and interdependence are woven at all levels and among all stakeholders" (Echeita et al., 2004, p. 50).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Design

We carried out a case study to investigate the educational phenomenon of literary gatherings. The case study is an empirical research method that involves analyzing a phenomenon comprehensively, in a real context, especially if there is little evidence of the boundaries between the phenomenon and context (Yin, 2009). According to Martínez (2006) case studies offer the opportunity to understand the dynamics present in unique contexts; as mentioned above, in this paper we describe an educational experience carried out in a primary school in the region of Murcia and a secondary school in the Basque Country.

## 3. Objetives

The main objective of the study is to explore the dynamics of dialogic literary gatherings and assess what it is about this practice that fosters links between the school and its surrounding environment. To this end we propose the following specific objectives:

- To analyze how dialogic literary gatherings enable pupils to develop conflict resolution strategies and learn about values.
- To discover the links between the agents of the educational community by offering an opportunity for recognition among its members through dialogic literary gatherings.

*3.1. Context and Participants*

As the study took place in two contexts with different types of participation, we now discuss their most salient features, focusing on the specific contribution of the experience:

The infant and primary school where the DLG took place is located in the city of Murcia, in a neighborhood with an average socio-economic level but with a significant unemployment rate. The school currently has 430 pupils divided into 19 classes; 30% of the pupils come from immigrant families.

The participants in the activity were 5th-grade primary pupils – the main participants in the activities we observed; the coordinator of the literary gathering, a primary teacher in the same school; the 5th-grade class tutor; the pupils' families and the school management team.

The second case study took place in an industrial town with a population of 9,500 that is part of the Basque Country's educating cities network. The dialogic gathering was one of the 56 activities planned for that academic year, and involved 16 organizations and a cooperative school for 2 to 18 year-olds – ikastola in the Basque language – and a center run by the Garagune-Goyeneche Foundation that provides a day-centre service for adults with intellectual disabilities. Participants included secondary-level pupils at the ikastola, members of associations of pensioners, women, immigrants and people with intellectual disabilities.

*3.2. Tools*

The information for the case study, in the form of qualitative data, was gathered by observing a dialogic gathering in the two centers and through in-depth interviews with pupils, teachers, management team and families in the case of the school, and interviews with the principal of the ikastola and the manager of the day center for adults with intellectual disabilities in the case of the Basque Country. We gathered information on how the sessions developed, and the opinions and reflections of teachers, parents, pupils and principals.

*3.3. Process*

In the infant and primary school, the children began the activity at home by reading the text or story that would be the focus of the next dialogic literary gathering. The children were asked to read the text together with their parents, so as to start thinking about the values to be considered in the group session in the family context first, which is also crucial to the children's education. The home reading activity was also designed to encourage the family's involvement with the school, thereby improving family-school relationships. It should be noted that the school put strategies in place so all the pupils could work on the readings with adults. If a child did not have the opportunity to read with their own parents, the school arranged for them to read with the parents of a classmate and the educational community coordinated the various responses to the activity.

The next stage took place in the classroom and began with the explanation by the tutor or the activity coordinator about the tasks to be carried out during the session. Once the teacher and pupils had reviewed the methodology for the session together, the teacher introduced the value to be explored through the reading to initially assess what the children know about the value they are studying. To this end, the teacher asked a series of questions to stimulate student participation, such as what is solidarity? or what can we do in school to be more supportive? If the reading dealt with several values, or if they had already been discussed in previous sessions, the story was briefly introduced and then read together.

Following the introduction to the activity, together the group read the text or story selected to reflect the value chosen for study. Each pupil had a copy of the text and the coordinator invited them to take turns in reading a short passage. Short pauses were included in the reading for pupils to make personal reflections on what they had read, prompted by several questions. In sessions where parents were present, they were asked to participate in various ways, either by reading or by recounting personal experiences related to the values dealt with, or to the text itself.

After the reading and accompanying reflections, a series of conclusions were drawn about the experience. To do this, the tutor coordinating the activity encouraged the pupils, through a series of open questions, to reach some conclusions about what they had read.

It is important to note that this activity is not an isolated event, as it has been run for several years in the school and in each of the courses. These sessions reflect the collaboration between the schools, teachers and families: in the preparation and development of the activity there is cooperation and active participation among pupils, families, the school and the activity coordinator.

In the case of ikastola, the activity took place not in the school but in premises belonging to the town council. The participants were secondary pupils from the ikastola, and members of associations of pensioners, women, immigrants and people with intellectual disabilities, among others. This joint activity began on the initiative of a teacher at the ikastola who was about to work on the subject of disability through a book. The Garagune center took this opportunity to address the right to culture, a right people with intellectual disabilities are not very aware of; they adapted the text to include support in the form of images, and then debated and collected comments from the people involved in the initiative.

The repetition of this activity has generated a positive and relaxed atmosphere where everyone, each from their own reality, can comment as they wish. The people with intellectual disabilities participate in three different ways: through their own voices; supporting and explaining what another person is saying; and recounting to a third person what another attendee of the day centre said in the adapted reading sessions.

## 4. Results

We now present the results of this study with a focus on the specific research objectives. The following code is used: I = interview; GC = literary gatherings coordinator; T= teacher; D = school director; F = family member; P = pupil.

The first objective was to analyze how dialogic literary gatherings enable pupils to develop conflict resolution strategies and learn about values. In this regard, the infant and primary school teachers report that they develop much needed values for modern society and respond to the contents of learning how to be and how to live together. Among these values are solidarity and empathy. According to one of the teachers interviewed:

> *"Pupils are able to see how their peers feel; then they understand why their friend or classmate feels unhappy ... they begin to understand why."* (I, T1)

At the same time, dialogic literary gatherings help develop conflict resolution strategies by establishing an egalitarian dialogue that allows learners to resolve conflicts through communication; in the words of the coordinator of the center:

> *"The pupils get to know each other in the gatherings and this prevents many conflicts from arising. The idea is that the more I know you, the more I understand you, the more I empathize with you and I know how you feel. So we have completely removed all violence, because we prioritize the value of communication."* (I, T1)

This idea of egalitarian dialogue is also evident in the gathering in the town, as reflected in the way all participant citizens are listened to with respect and "the reception the pupils give to the other people".

This type of dialogue also encourages pupils to express their feelings by offering a space for pupils to communicate and talk about what they feel. The gatherings allow learners to develop their oral communication skills by participating in space where everyone can take part:

> *"They know how to express themselves, talk about emotions, contribute in a group conversation, and they have certain values and experiences. It is crucial for our pupils to develop these aspects, because they are in the stage of learning to be a person."* (I, GC).

> "*I like the gatherings because I find out my classmates' opinions and also if we have difficulty reading, we work at it there and we learn with our family, and we resolve conflicts too."* (I, P1).

These emotional variables are also mentioned by the school's director:

> "*I think it's lovely to share, to talk about emotions, books, literature, whoever comes*". (I, D)

The second specific objective was to discover the links between the agents of the educational community by offering an opportunity for recognition among its members through dialogic literary gatherings. In this regard, we note that the activity builds a bridge for cooperation between the school, the families, and other organizations in the

neighborhood or town, with the result that a culture of participation is promoted both inside and outside the school. One of the mothers of a child at the infant and primary school observed:

> *"You get the opportunity to have time to talk, because the children themselves ask for it. They ask you to tell them things about when you were little, which lets you recover some moments that were about to be lost. Personally, the experience has led me to share some beautiful moments from my childhood with my children; I remember my father, and how he used to tell me adventures in the same oral tradition".* (I, F1)

The presence of different people at the gathering in the school or the town center provides a framework for learning and recognition of the other. It helps break down group stereotypes.

> *"It seems that we do not all have the capacity to read a book. Seeing that there are ways to work on reading, to work on a story, then you can also work on your emotions in certain situations, and dispel myths that were perhaps deeply ingrained before.*" (I, D2)

This type of activity for building cultural links with the territory in a collaborative culture benefits all participants. But above all, in the case of people with intellectual disabilities, having their views listened to gives them back a sense of self-worth and value; for some of them reading novels has proved to be a hugely satisfying discovery. In the words of the director of the day centre:

> *"There have been some people who have begun to live a life beyond the life they had, their real life. It's magic."* (I, D2)

It is also noteworthy that this teaching strategy retains the objectives and curricula content for primary and secondary school pupils; but in turn it gives them an additional social bonus.

> *"For us it's about sharing the reading of a book; but it is an environment where stereotypes are broken down."* (I, D2)

From the informants' perspective, these are just some of the benefits of the DLG; in the school and the center several significant aspects were also observed. Some of them are listed below:

- There has been a significant increase in social and emotional competencies.
- Pupils' behavior has improved in conflict situations.
- A truly effective solution has been found to problems.
- A constructive learning environment has been generated.
- Disruptive behavior among pupils has fallen because they can access possible options before the conflict begins.
- There has been an increased capacity for dialogue, largely because conflict was caused by poor communication.
- The pupils and other participants have more confidence in their own abilities, thereby preventing many problems that interfere with teaching and learning activities.
- They have learned to communicate openly, to understand each other better, to share feelings, to trust their own abilities, to protest against injustice and to think of creative ways to resolve conflicts.
- The sessions have encouraged free expression, while preserving the confidentiality and secrecy about contents, emotions and behaviors.
- The experience has enhanced active listening and approval of situations experienced by others.
- Everyone's right to culture has been recognized.
- Sharing one's life with others gives the opportunity for personal growth.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of the results leads us to several conclusions. First, we believe the literary gatherings favor the development of an inclusive and intercultural education that breaks down stereotypes and myths, as the different topics covered and subsequent dialogue stimulate reflections on multiculturalism, or equality of people from different cultures, religions, etc. In addition, the methodology used allows all pupils to collaborate, and there was evidence of much more active participation than in an ordinary class, thereby increasing pupils' motivation. When immigrant children or pupils with special educational needs take part in the activity, the Spanish children interact

with them as though it were perfectly normal, and pupils welcome other people who they had previously considered very different, developing an equal, shared participation. Second, the collaboration of local agents in the activity was also a success as seen in the way they participated in the session discussions and told anecdotes, thus fostering the link with the territory.

Likewise, implementing this type of activity was supported by all the teachers, who understood the dialogic gatherings as an innovative tool that teaches pupils to empathize and to name their feelings, that helps shape good, critical citizens, as well as being a tool with which to develop elements of the curriculum that link the school with its social environment.

In summary, following the experiences of our research, we believe that the practice of dialogic literary gatherings creates the space and time for participation, where strategies for dialogue and innovation are learned that encourage intercultural communication, with texts rich in values and familiar to the pupils, through which to share ideas, feelings and enriching proposals to build a sense of community. Thus, in addition to helping all the pupils to develop the skills needed in today's society, they also take on a central role in transforming the environment because it enables all participants to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to reduce social differences, to encourage critical participation, and to promote equal relationships among all people and cultures.

## Acknowledgements

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