

LANGUAGES, HUMANITIES AND TECHNOLOGIES: BLENDING INTO ONE IN ORDER TO PROMOTE A CONSCIOUS CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN UNDER A VULNERABLE SITUATION IN BRAZIL

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Abstract

This paper aims at discussing the importance of activities which promote psycho-social-cultural development of children under social vulnerability in Brazil. An extension project of Critical Pedagogy was organized in order to raise the self-esteem of the subjects involved, and to promote the feeling of community belonging, making them understand their role as citizens in a globalized world. We observed that students improved their future perspectives after finishing the English Language and Informatics Course along with Philosophical discussions, proving that a critical education that deals with communication, technology and humanities has positive influence on students' development.

Introduction

Individuals and society in a globalized world, deeply depend on an aspect for their growth and recognition within this new context: the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). For this reason, we should have in mind that in order to respond to this requirement we must prepare ourselves to be fluent communicators, and this means we should know a foreign language, know how to manage technologies and be critical enough to get through the messages.

In this case, the English language may play a rather important role in the process, since it is the language of international communication in this globalized society, as Crystal points out (2001; 2003; 2010). Besides knowing how to use the English language, we also must know how to use the resources offered by informatics to enable us to communicate globally, because it's through the internet that most communication, either professional or personal, takes place today. According to Almeida and Prado (2012): "The integration among technologies, languages and representations plays an important role in the formation of better qualified people to live with each other and to act positively upon the society [...]".

Concerned about the young children who live under a vulnerable situation in the Information Society (Coll and Monereo, 2010), we proposed an Extension and Research Project at the Federal Institute of Education, Science and

Technology of Rio Grande do Sul (Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia do Rio Grande do Sul - IFRS) in the South of Brazil. The Project offered English and Informatics classes for those children who cannot afford paying for private courses; fundamentally, children who are at risk and study in a poor public school. As we wish to prepare them to be critical thinkers, we created spaces within the Project where they could develop abilities to help them to become more reflective, friendly, and conscious citizens – for this, we also offered philosophical workshops.

Paulo Freire (1996; 2001; 2010) approaches the matter of cultural liberating action in several of his works exalting the critical, fair, respectful, autonomous and engaged teaching in order to find the ideal: that each subject may transform his or her own world in a better one.

Through a qualitative approach, based on a sociocultural perspective, we observed the students' reactions and development in the classes and took notes on the reactions to methodological changes in the teaching and evaluation; we made use of interviews with parents and the school principal; and we also had the children answering two kinds of questionnaires at the beginning and closure of the Project. After collecting the data we analyzed them to answer some of our questions: Is a project like this – involving English, Informatics and cultural activities – able to change the future perspectives of children under vulnerable situation? What are the children's perceptions on their role as students/citizens in this globalized world? What are the families' influences? How is the school receptiveness on such a project?

We hope to bring to light with this paper the idea of education as emancipatory process, and as a freedom practice for the student, also, as a project of democratization – as opposed to education as a tool, as proposed by a neoliberal capitalistic perspective to produce consumers of the information and goods.

Social Pedagogy / Critical Pedagogy

In this article, Social Pedagogy and Critical Pedagogy walk together towards the formation of a reflexive and engaged student, someone capable of performing his or her specific role in the society.

Critical Pedagogy is inspired by the social construction of knowledge. According to Baltodano and Torres (2009, p. 63): “Critical educational theorists view school knowledge as historically and socially rooted and interesting bound.” It means that we learn in order to be part of a group, the group we are living with, the community we belong to. We want to feel accepted. There are always desires underneath our learning engagement and, unfortunately, it is most of the time rooted in the relation of power.

Learning is a life-long process, which means that we are being educated inside and outside the formal schooling sphere and the Social Pedagogy hopes the individual to have a social integration in his or her community, but with a critical capacity to improve this environment and to transform it.

Social Pedagogy rose in Germany due to the need of the society to encounter, in education, a solution for their human and social problems after the First World War (Díaz, 2006). The problems generated by the Great War such as unemployment, delinquency, lack of social protection in general and, especially, the problems related to children and youth, showed a clear need for a different way of thinking the educational process in Germany. Even though there has never been a War in Brazil – at least not a declared one – the necessity of education changes has also been identified here nowadays, and that is why we have had an increasing number of educators interested in this area.

Social Pedagogy has brought some important changes to Brazilian education, and today it is seen as a socio-critical pedagogy. The most striking features that characterize it are: start from a concrete situation and give importance to the cultural differences; be self-critical and use the reflection on the collective as criteria for valuing the practice; bound theory and practice in order to dialectic transform them as a consequence of their reciprocal influence.

As an important representative of this socio-critical pedagogy we can mention Klaus Mollenhauer, a German educator who was concerned with social justice and the education of children. One of his worries was about school curriculum and how it had “emerged as a representation of life ‘itself’ and the question of how children might become motivated to engage with such an artificial ‘construction’” (Biesta, 2014, p.36). It is this setting that schools should work differently, they should consider some changes to get close to the reality and to what happens in the “real” life outside its walls.

Díaz (2006, p.99) conceptualizes social pedagogy in a way that makes us realize its real essence: “[...] a social education [...] promotes and values a society that educates and an education that socializes, integrates and helps to avoid, to balance and to repair the risk, the difficulty, or the social conflict”. The author also exposes eleven different perspectives on social education, and those are: social pedagogy as adaptation; as socialization; as social competences acquisition; as didacticism of the social; as qualified professional action; as an action close to the not social adaptation; as the citizen politics formation; as prevention and social control; as social educative work; as *paidocenos* (an educating action of the society); as extra-schooling education.

Education is a process of transformation, a process of changes: the change of a biological individual into a social individual. So, social pedagogy, that is socio-critical pedagogy, is a strong ally for the positive transformation of our society.

Extension: possibilities for a Social Pedagogy

As one of the tripod that should serve as the foundation and bases of our Institution is the Extension, which should happen along with Research and Teaching. It is through extension courses and projects that we can attend the

community's demands, getting close to the people and fulfilling our role of public educators.

In our Project, extension was developed in partnership with the Municipal School Viriato Corrêa in the city of Rio Grande, in the South of Brazil, and offered 10 vacancies for students from this school in order for them to learn English, Informatics, as well as participate in several cultural activities and also the Philosophical meetings.

The work was transdisciplinary, counting on professionals and undergraduate students of Linguistics, Informatics, Philosophy, Psychology, and Social Work. Thus, the project was carried out to reach the following objectives: teaching English Language and Informatics so that students can belong to the Information Society and, therefore, improve their self-esteem; develop activities within the group so they realize their role as citizens through Philosophical meetings; promote the understanding and recognition of themselves and their relations with others to develop psychosocially through the cultural activities; and all these were accompanied through social diagnostic of the learners involved in the project.

On the perspective of the population researched, which is in social and economic precariousness, we observed a great vulnerability that often evolves to an exclusion condition. The children of the project were socially vulnerable and by enlarging their universe of knowledge and learning helped them to get through school as well as with their personal behavior, cooperating for their identities formation.

Data were collected through an interview and a questionnaire with one of the parents or the person responsible for the child, which gathered relevant information for a sociocultural and socioeconomic analysis. The profile of the families showed they belong to vulnerable groups because they are registered on *Cadastro Único para Programas Sociais* (a government social register), receiving what we call *Bolsa Família* (money from the government to support the family). Only four out of the ten students' families' representatives came for the interview. This showed the lack of commitment and interest of the families on their children's education. The ones who showed up for the interview were all mothers: two of them had studied up to the 5th grade, one had finished High School and another is studying in adult course to finish High School. Only two families have a computer at home and just one of them has access to the internet.

The concept of vulnerability refers to the individuals and families that lack emotional bonds, sense of belonging, and sociability; life cycles; stigmatized identities in terms of ethnic, culture and gender; personal disadvantages because of some deficiency; exclusion for being poor and, or, exclusion to the access of public politics; use of psychoactive substances; a range of violence from the family nucleus, groups or individuals; poor insertion or non-insertion in the work market; different strategies and alternatives to survive which may represent personal or social risk (Brasil, 2004).

The work developed with these families was based on the tripod subject (student), family and school, and it was constituted of actions that offered opportunity for the learner's social, human and educational development, aiming the socialization, their knowledge enlargement, relational bonds and schooling experience. Offering activities after school time – students studied regularly in the morning and went to the Project in the afternoon – consisting on an extra educational action that aims to enrich their informational, cultural and playful universe.

Among the interviewed families, all agreed that the activities carried out in the Project were very significant, since there was space for different learning and also dealt with current matters that triggered students' interest. Some said that their children were acting differently at home, showing more responsibility and motivation to go to school.

English classes

There is a common sense that no one learns English in Brazilian public schools (Silva, 2007; Lima, 2011). This may be confirmed with the children's testimony that answered the questionnaire saying that "at school the group of students is too big to practice English"; "the time is short"; and "the content is not well worked by the teachers".

English language competence in Brazilian schools is also seen as unachievable (Moita Lopes, 1996) and this is confirmed by the answers given to the question that dealt with having someone in the family or someone they knew that had already studied English. According to the students, none of the relatives or friends had ever had contact with the language. Most of the students also said that they came to the course because of their own will and not because of any other influence, except for one girl who said her mother told her to participate in the Project.

We researched the issues students considered more important when studying English both, before the course started and after it was finished, to compare their ideas about the foreign language learning. In the first questionnaire, they were asked to number the issues in order of importance of what they thought to be more relevant whenever studying a foreign language. The issues were disposed like this: a) grammar; b) location and weather of the speaking countries; c) the foreigner's habits; d) vocabulary. Alternatives B and C which dealt with sociocultural aspects were not checked by the students, proving that their worries were just on traditional aspects of foreign language learning. However, this belief changed when the course was over since the students now see the sociocultural aspects as fundamental for the process of learning the language to use in real situations.

The English classes provided students with an understanding of the "other" and the "other's culture", as a consequence, it provided an understanding of themselves and their own culture, their own world.

Informatics classes

The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) permeate our daily routine, making it possible our relationship with others and with the world. For this reason, everybody who wishes to take part in the Information Society (Coll and Monereo, 2010) should have the opportunity to develop the essential abilities for a cybernetic communication.

According to Lalueza *et al.* (2010, p.47): “Culture and cognition are mutually constructed through the concrete activities which are accomplished in everyday life”. That is, if children are born in a hunting community which greatly differs from an industrial community as well as it differs from a fishing community, the tools they use also differ and that makes them culturally different from each other too. With respect to ICT, the issue is the same: what are the mediate institutional practices, what are the activities that enable and promote the development of an important amount of the population?

The people born after 1980 are called the “Y Generation” and the ones born after 1990 are named the “Z Generation”. Although the target public of the Project belonged to the Z Generation and had been born in the so called “Digital Era” (Palfrey, J. and Gasser, U, 2011), they can’t be considered “digital natives” because they have been educated in an environment which does not promote stimulus for the use of technologies in favor of their growth and sociocultural development (Rosa, 2012). The prospect questionnaire showed that learners had no computer at home, neither access to the internet. The generations Y and Z are inquisitive generations; they are willing to know, they are curious. However, if we don’t guide them on how to use the ICT wisely they probably won’t use it for their sociocultural development.

The notion of space nowadays has changed greatly. “The ‘object’ of interest must be expected to shift from *things in space* to the actual *production of space*” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 37). As Soja (1996, p.62) points out, Lefebvre fuses (objective) physical and (subjective) mental space into social space through a critique of what he called ‘double illusion’. Actually, there is no more limited space; the space is wherever things happen, be it at school, at the club, at home, at church, or on the web.

After finishing the course, students seemed to be at ease with the internet, showing ability on the management of the computer and glad to be able to use it as a social communication tool.

Cultural activities

During the Extension Project, the students had the opportunity to participate in cultural activities which propitiated experiences they had never had before. Experiences that promoted cultural development and that allowed the students to dream, to create, to think.

Among the activities was a Museum visit; the itinerant Museum of the University of Rio Grande showed Haiti. There, students could see the

similarities and differences between our culture and the Haitians' culture. They could experience a little of the new culture through the music, through the pictures and frames, as well as through the objects used by this people. None of the students had ever seen a museum before; therefore it was clear to see their happiness and involvement on the visit.

The students were also taken to the movies and only one of them had already been to a movie theater once. They were able to feel the sensations the movie provokes with its sound and its big screen with figures, as this media proposes a kind of learning which is unique.

They were also introduced to the Theater. The students could watch to a play named "Par ou Ímpar" (Odd or Even) at Teatro Guarany in the neighbor city of Pelotas. The show was a mixture of music, play, and circus, where music, lights, magic, art, juggle and dream fulfilled their hearts and souls for an hour and a half.

The origin of the dramatic play, known as Theater, gets lost in time just like language and culture, but it was in the 70's that the educational theater was inserted in the school setting and it has shown, since then, that it is a strong ally for the teaching and learning process (Lomardo, 1994). That is why it was so important to take those kids to the theatrical environment or to take the Theater to school.

In other works we have already argued about the importance of the educational theater (Rosa, 2008, p. 307-308):

At the Educational Theater, the participants' imagination and creativity are explored; the relation with others is articulated; and the ability to think, criticize and formulate opinions is stimulated through the situations and conflicts presented on stage. Human beings are born with the need to express themselves and, through the theater, actors and viewers are emotionally affected and can reflect on moral values, attitudes and all the other aspects that influence one's personality.

Through our senses, we receive information about the world, which becomes repetitive and automatic (Pearce, 1989). Through the theater those senses are consciously and creatively experienced, offering opportunity to live uncountable antagonistic feelings such as: pleasure and pain, euphoria and relaxation, joy and sadness etc. This practice enables the subjects involved in the dramatic game to learn how to deal with several different situations that may be presented to them in the real life as well as it makes possible for them to explore the imaginary world.

All those cultural activities promote the students' sensibility to think and act, hence becoming more humans.

Philosophy and Psychology Workshops

Bearing in mind that education, including English and Informatics learning, produces an incidence on the students' subjectivities that goes beyond the process of learning which may be quantified and observed, this Project offered spaces where it was possible for the participants to express their subjectivity.

How to instigate findings and newness without working with the heuristic thinking? Piaget himself (1978, p. 130) argued: "The main objective for education is to create men who are able to do new things, not just to repeat what other generations have done". The philosophy workshops promoted the kids thinking and their comprehension of their roles at home, in their neighborhood, their community, their country, the world.

At the beginning of the course when they were asked about their role as a student in the society the answers were: "I don't know"; "study and learn"; and "graduate". In the end of the course the students answered to the same question, but then with a more conscious understanding of their role as a student: "to have a better future"; "to be someone in life"; "to make my parents proud of me"; "to help my community". Thus, after the workshops, we saw that their selfishness understanding of their role as a student turned into a more collaborative thought since they showed worry about the others – their families and the society.

About their role as citizens in their community, when asked about it in the end of the Project, the students demonstrated to have a better understanding that each one's attitude influences on someone else's life and that means living in a community, that means living in a fair society. They answered that the role of a citizen is "to work for the people"; "help and to be helped". The children were motivated to dream and to reach their dreams and they felt special because they could realize that each one has his or her own place and importance in the society.

The activities carried out during the workshops aimed to build knowledge from an epistemological constructive relation between teacher and students. This presupposes the motivation of students on thinking, on building their own knowledge, on researching. It's through the (re)appropriation of knowledge by the students that education as research may influence the appearance of technological innovations (Mansfield, 1995; Pova, 2008; Rosenberg, 1994). The workshops had different themes in order to the children be at ease to express their subjectivity, with activities that made possible for them to get to know themselves and know how to relate with others as a contribution to their educational process and their sociocultural development.

Thus, we analyzed, as part of the process, a non-measurable sphere of the teaching and learning of English and Informatics, which accounts for the effects of learning turned to the development of cultural and psychosocial horizons of those learners.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this text shows that psychological, cultural and social aspects are present in human relationships – especially on communication. In our analysis we verified that sociocultural development of the students who live under a vulnerable situation improved significantly with their participation in the extension project. The project provided English language education, informatics as well as cultural activities and philosophical workshops. The foreign language and informatics teaching were the bases for the development of the other activities such as Museum visits, going to the theater, and to the movies. Activities also included sessions of group reflection and comprehension of their role in society and the understanding of themselves.

The feedback of the Principal of the participant School, when interviewed, showed that Projects like this make a difference on the students' behavior back to school.

[the] school is located on Almirante Barroso Street, in a community which may be considered a risky area. We receive students with several peculiarities and, having in mind this group's profile, it is important to observe that they all come from families of low socioeconomic status and disadvantaged cultural standards. So, projects like this are very important for our school and hence for our students, since none of them would have conditions to experience English, Informatics and cultural activities if it wasn't for that. Our school is deeply glad to have this opportunity.

The Principal's testimony confirms the receptiveness of public school authorities when actions like the ones developed during the Project are offered to them.

According to Quintão (2005, p.1):

Social problems cannot be faced as autonomous situations, without relating it to the structural causes that have produced them. Guaranteeing the right of education means guaranteeing the access and permanence of children and teenagers at school; discussion that mandatorily goes through social, political, economic, and cultural themes. It is within this complexity that we must search the integration of sectorial politics, the interlacement of answers that are still very apart from social necessities; this way we can leverage the results.

With the activities developed in this Project, many of the children's and teenagers' rights were achieved. The Brazilian Children and Adolescent Statute (ECA, 1990), in its article 4th, defines:

It is the family's, the community's, the society's and the government's duty to assure, as priority, the effectiveness of the law referring to life,

health, nourishment, education, sport, leisure, professionalization, culture, dignity, respect, freedom and the living together with family and community.

Providing access to different learning activities which are not part of the children's everyday lives, mainly through Projects such as the one discussed here, contributes for the construction of life projects, enlarging their cultural references and the development of their potentialities, making it possible for them to have better future perspectives and possibilities to overcome their difficulties.

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