

Developing a Reflective Teaching Practice Based on Student Voice: Some Changes Experienced from the Point of View of Teachers

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Abstract

Overcoming certain perspectives of teaching that have interpreted teachers as technician, now we consider the teacher as an agent that makes decisions and judgements, does research on his practice, etc., where reflection is an integral part of his daily work (Marcelo, 1987). Thus, situations that influence educational practice are complex and genuine and teachers should reflect on them in context and implement ad hoc strategies to address them (Schön 1998; Zeichner, 2010).

Under these assumptions we have constructed a proposal for teacher reflection that takes into account the movement of student voice as a driver of change in school. We understand that setting spaces for dialogue in classrooms and in schools in which voices of students are heard are important in order to understand what vision this group has regarding their education (Oliveria -Formosinho, 2008; Fielding, 2011). This can be established as a powerful tool to encourage reflective processes focusing on transforming and improving.

We present some of these thoughts, which come from a number of interviews carried out in some schools in Cantabria (Spain) with teachers who participated in student voice experiences. We've organized these reflections into three major areas: school level (how the collaborative project has helped build a more democratic school culture), their role as teachers (how listening to the student voice caused changes in their teaching; how they transformed the image of their students seeing them as critical partners in the process of change), changes in students (improvements of their self-perception, sense of belonging...).

Keywords: reflective practitioner, student voice, educational improvement.

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Introduction and some theoretical pointers

The present communication introduces the partial results of a research project developed within the R + D + I project directed by Teresa Susinos¹, whose main objective is the improvement and transformation of schools through the opening and empowering of areas of student participation: special focus is placed on those groups that have traditionally had greater difficulties to both be heard and achieve academic success.

Against the background of this principal objective, in this research we present we have tried to combine the movement of student voice, on which the said project is founded, and the movement of reflective teachers. Both of these concepts have nuclei of different performance but a common purpose: breaking the status quo questioning the secondary role that students, primarily, and teachers, secondly, have had when it comes to participating in decisions of educational relevance and promoting changes and improvement in schools.

The reflexive movement thrives/feeds on the influences of works such as Dewey (1989), Schön (1992, 1998) and Zeichner (2010) and calls for the need to promote the training and development of " reflective teachers ", ie professionals who think from the action and become researchers of their own practice. This approach seeks to overcome certain technical perspectives of teaching who have conceived the teacher as a technical applier understanding that the definition of clear and precise objectives, and by means of the mere application of technical expertise, produced by academic experts, any problem of practice is mechanically solvable (Schon, 1998). Professional practice is interpreted ultimately as a problem of selecting the appropriate media and educational reforms are always designed and implemented from the top downwards.

The consequences of these approaches point directly to a devaluation of the teacher as a reflective and deliberative agent, not to mention an exorbitant routinization of teaching processes. Beyer and Zeichner (1990) furthermore perceive the danger of a scientific discourse that simplifies reality and masks the struggles for power and control that make up our reality, stripping any educational issues of political and social resonance.

In contrast to these approaches , the reflective tendency understands that teachers occupy a privileged position in the educational and socialization process that represents the school : they are the main mediators of school culture and knowledge and , as leading actors of these processes have specific knowledge that they mobilize and produce in the area of their daily practice (Tardiff, 2004). The reflexive movement advocates the agency of teachers when making decisions, researching into their practice, passing judgments and producing legitimate pedagogical knowledge, where reflective activity is integral to their daily work (Marcelo, 1987). In short, a teacher who ultimately plays an active and decisive role in defining the means and ends of their work (Zeichner, 1993).

¹ Schools that work towards inclusive education: working with the local community, student voice and educational support for promoting change. (Director: Teresa Susinos. EDU 2011-29928-C03-03)

The student voice movement, on the other hand, attempts to rescue the voices of students to understand what viewpoint this collective group holds on the educational situation. It recommends the agency of students in decision-making on vehicular elements of school life, such as the curriculum, and which are aimed at transforming and improving school (Oliveria - Formosinho, 2008; Fielding, 2011). In order that these voices may be heard it becomes vital to build spaces where students can feel safe to express their opinions, speak or stand up and be counted, and spaces where the said voice is considered to be authoritative in education and transformation processes (Arnaiz, 2004; Susinos, 2009). This makes it necessary to rethink the areas, be they physical or metaphorical, of school participation as well as power issues about whom has the right to make decisions, how that power is to be used and those who are condemned to remain silent.

Under the umbrella of these theoretical assumptions we construct a proposal for teacher reflection that takes into account the student voice movement as a driver of change in school. We understand that setting up dialogic spaces in classrooms and in schools in which the voices of students are heard can be constituted as a powerful element when it comes to promoting reflective processes in teachers and other education professionals aimed at transforming and improving education as well as their professional development. We present some of these thoughts, which come from a series of interviews with teachers after participating in experiences of student voice in schools in Spain.

Methodology

From the methodological point of view, this research is based on the pillars of the qualitative tradition and is clearly influenced by the ethnographic approach (Hymes, 2006). In order to do this, we use a variety of collection tools such as classroom observations, field notes, photographs, diaries and interviews. In this work we analysed data from seven semi-structured interviews carried out on various professional educators (tutors from Infants and Primary, the principal, the counsellor, and a specialist in Therapeutic Education) working in two schools- one Infants and the other Primary in the Spanish education System, and more precisely in the community of Cantabria. These interviews were carried out after completing their participation in different experiences of student voice for school improvement and transformation school, in collaboration with a number of professionals from the University of Cantabria.

In order to conduct the interviews a script was drawn up with great topics for discussion and some questions that worked at all times as a guide, rather than as a closed set of proposals. Thus, the script became a tool for relating the topics with the responses and for accessing new information in their theoretical space, facilitating the development of an interview that would promote the explicit thought processes of the participating professionals (Díaz de Rada, 2007).

To perform the data analysis we used a thematic coding system in which we define the analytical categories and codes (Huber, 2003). Likewise, in order to define the coding system we employ strategies of an inductive and deductive nature to the extent that, although we started with an initial scheme of variables to analyse, the work done

with the data made it necessary to redefine some of these categories and codes during the analysis process.

The categories that emerged during the process of framing analyses allow the reflections of teachers around the following areas:

- Changes in students: learning that they have developed and skills and personal variables that have been enhanced; transformations of their role in the classroom / school.
- Changes in the teachers: changes in relation to their conception of the student; perceived improvements in their professionalism.
- Changes at the school level: improvements and perceived changes at a school level and in terms of school culture.
- Proposals for further improvement: the concept of student voice and its relation to new participation suggestions over the coming years.

Results

The reflections made by the professionals are varied in relation to the different areas we have identified. Similarly disparate are the consequences that these discussions will have on the educational practice of each teacher and professional participant. It is essential to clarify that each category is not independent of the others, revealing that the way of conceiving each of them will impact, directly, in the way that we understand each other. So, for example, what one teacher understands by student participation will shape the conclusions they have drawn about the learning experiences developed by students and/or by themselves and, of course, this will determine future courses of action arising from such reflections.

1. Changes in students:

Many of these professionals think that promoting the role of students in managing the classroom and the school thus making them feel important and responsible when deciding to participate, has resulted in the development of a series of positive feelings and attitudes in the students. Especially, the group of participant teachers recognised that the participation experiences that they have carried out in the classroom have helped improve the personal qualities of the students in terms of motivation, interest, attention, confidence, self-esteem, and so on, generating, in this way, a sort of private benefit or welfare.

Furthermore, a smaller segment of our sample underscores the relevance of this experience as a learning enhancer related to curricular skills such as the ability to communicate: organizing their opinions, taking turns to speak, respecting the ideas of peers, and so forth.

"In such young children you see how they gain in confidence, self-esteem, all the tools of expression, and communication suddenly take off, literally take off" (Tutor Elementary).

Beyond the individual level, teachers also reflect on the benefits that voice pedagogy has when it comes to improving relations between students and to building

collaborative cultures that link all school stages and cycles: all learn that any student of any age can contribute something, developing a competent image, not only of themselves but also of their peers. More precisely, the Infants teachers emphasize the inter-level value implied in this project, emphasizing the benefits that these experiences have meant for younger students at the school:

"When you hear 'University project', any of us will say, 'Well, that must be for the 5 year-olds onwards'", but look how well it went down, it has included the 2 year-olds and gone right up to the final year ... it has been wonderful ... " (Infants Tutor).

In relation to the role now occupied by the students in the classroom and in the school itself, most professionals agree that the students are now active agents when it comes to deciding and taking actions in school, in contrast to the traditionally passive role. Some professionals even claim that the process of empowerment has helped students learn that there is another way of working and being in school, and a way that they now claim and demand.

"Let us just say that they participate in a more active way and now have power over areas that previously they did not have. They were only agents, let's say, passive elements there, thinking well, I'll study what I'm told to, today I'll do what they tell me to, now I will do the exercises that they set me . Now they have say, as to how the groups are organized, how they worked, when they presented things, when they didn't ... " (Elementary Tutor).

Needless to say, the interpretation of the concept of participation and agency is different for each of the professionals, as we will underline when we analyse the semantic field generated by teachers around the concept of student voice.

Finally, it is a small number of professionals who reflect upon the significance of creating democratic proposals in schools to help form *"little citizens who can give their opinion"* (Head-teacher of one school) and to exercise critical citizenship starting today.

2. Changes in teachers:

Within this category we must distinguish two types of reflections associated with learning that teachers believe they have made as a result of participation in this experience. Firstly, those related to the direct act of listening to the voices of students and, secondly, those connected with the learning experienced as a result of participation in a project that has interwoven the school world and university.

Having made this clarification, we proceed to analyse the various reflections that teachers have made about gains and learning, both in personal and professional terms, that participation in this project has given them, starting with those that deal directly with student voice and ending with those that are more related to the collaborative project with the university.

The teachers are of the practically unanimous opinion that the image they had of the students has been substantially modified to understand them now as being competent agents whose reflections it is possible and desirable to learn from. Many of them

realize the loss accrued by devaluing the knowledge and concerns of children in favour of adults and they begin to consider them as change agents capable of generating relevant proposals to be examined collaboratively.

"We were wrong, we think that the older we are the more we know whereas in fact we do not know so much" (Elementary Tutor).

They have learned, in short, that student voice deserves to be heard and by listening more carefully much more can be learned than we imagine. This is illustrated by one of the teachers when he says that *"they have changed me a lot"* (Elementary Tutor).

Among other things, the change in their conception of the students, have brought about other significant changes in the way they consider themselves as teachers and their practice in the classroom.

One teacher stresses how she, who characterized herself as authoritarian and fairly rigid, has learnt to become more flexible and more tolerant of the opinions and ways of doing things that differ from hers.

Another group of teachers also suggest how much listening to student voice has sparked changes in their teaching leading them to become more dialogic and inclusive professionals:

"And it's something we have to learn as professionals, that we are not independent from our class, but rather there comes a time when we are all together as one there, and they interact and we answer them respond and they answer this response with another, and hence we create a very interesting dynamic circle among everyone in the class, and this is something we should take great care of" (Elementary Tutor).

In line with the movement of reflective practitioners, many of them also explain that listening to student voice, on the one hand, and participating in a collaborative project promoted by the university, on the other hand, has facilitated the development of reflective processes that have led to a questioning of the practices and routines that they were conducting as teachers and / or education professionals. They realize the need to stop and think and reflect, at certain times, on daily practice, analysing what else can be done differently from their normal practice or what alternatives exist compared to the solutions given to a particular situation. They have learned to discern that, many times, many things become routine and not because they have pedagogical sense. However, in contrast to the reflexive theory of Schön (1992, 1998), understand that they have not been able, on their own, to break with practices that, they now consider as excessively routinized. They feel the need to consider other perspectives (the university and students) to be able to deploy these reflexive processes aimed at transforming and improving school.

"For me the reflection has in my case, made me myself, stop a moment to think about what education is all about, how we go about things and how we can do it" (Infants Tutor).

"It has changed because it has forced me to reflect upon my daily practice and see that right now as a representative of the management team, I can do things that

maybe from a Tutoring session cannot be done. Then within these confines of 'power' that I have been given by the community well I can direct my activities, seek funds and organize things according to ideas that are good for everyone, that maybe at some other time if we do not think about things, the day-to-day takes over. We need to think from time to time, but we live so fast that you have to stop and try to say, let's see how I can improve this" (Head-teacher of one school).

Finally, as for the reflections related to participation in this project in collaboration with the university, we found that some consider the mediation by external agents has helped them work in an organized and more collaborative way with other educational professionals. In only a few cases, some interpretations we feel worth mentioning, as being reductionist and dangerously related to the applicationist teaching perspective to which we alluded to in previous sections, that deal with some technical learning such as how to hold an assembly or a counselling process or, more generally, *"how to teach, which methodology"* (Infants Tutor) .

3. Changes in the school:

The student voice movement seeks to enhance the participation of students in the decision -making of all areas of school life, rather than limiting it to the classroom level only. That is why many of the reflections of the professionals participating have been about the improvements and changes that they have perceived at a school and concerning school culture.

The main value that they identify at a school level is the planting of seeds for change. While most think that more time is needed to consolidate some proposals that have begun to take shape, all also agree that participation in this experience has restored a will that had previously been lost, to develop new projects. Above all, it has shown them that much can be achieved if all work collaboratively.

"But I think there is on a very subtle level, a feeling of 'hey, this is really good, let's keep it going ...', where at first there was more scepticism" (One school counsellor).

In this regard, it is interesting to see the infectious nature of how the participation of these professionals in the project has stirred others previously undecided as to whether to participate. Many teachers have shown curiosity and interest in the initiative, which has resulted in reflective processes shared with those who were participating. Some have even tried working in a similar way.

"Yes, I have seen my colleagues from my cycle asking me ... with some fear actually, 'hey this thing the kids are doing and you believe in, but you will still keep doing checks, and you still have to check their progress in Environmental Awareness Classes, right?', I see them at the first stage of approaching the project and wondering how the project has turned out" (Elementary Tutor) .

"Then people have been joining the project and what's more , colleagues have come up and congratulated me, the kids have gone to school, how happy they are, and then they in turn are working similarly taking advantage of this dynamic approach" (One head-teacher) .

Many reflections estimate ultimately that to develop a collaborative project that has involved the whole school or different classes of the same educational cycle has helped them build a more democratic and respectful school culture that in turn has allowed them to start to communicate better. They consider that the school climate has improved and the school begins to function as a community.

"Well, we have worked as a team for a start. For example, they have respected people's new ideas, in a project whereby all are involved... when we used to talk about a project we would say. Just extra work, but when you see that it makes sense and that it may be of interest to the coexistence of the entire educational community then for me that is what I think has changed the most" (Head-teacher of the school).

4. Proposals for further improvement:

In this final section we analyse the reflections that teachers made after participating in this experience, as to what they understand by student voice and how this concept can be related to suggestions to be put into practice over the coming years.

As noted in previous sections although all the teachers have developed ideas and discourses in which they begin to consider involving students in decision-making in school life as essential to implementing school improvement, we found significant differences in the level of involvement that they define and to the type of decisions over which the students should have authority.

Some professionals reduce the concept of student voice and opening spaces for participation as merely sporadic proposals in which students can express their opinions. Assemblies, meetings, and so on, but ultimate responsibility for the decision rests with the teacher.

"What I've learned is that it is possible to give voice to students and I have seen the way they have become organized, held assemblies, conducted interviews, had meetings" (Infants Tutor).

The improvements proposed by these professionals include performing, in a more assiduous way, this type of initiative, without making other changes to the rest of school practices.

Other professionals, however, think that students are capable of managing themselves and taking responsibility for a host of educational issues which traditionally have not been permitted to speak about, so it becomes essential to find spaces for them to decide. These professionals question the value of many of the decisions usually taken by adult and understand that promoting various democratic spaces in the centre where their interests and proposals are listened to and taken into account as an authoritative voice (Susinos and Rodriguez, 2011) is essential in order to begin to change things.

"I think it is necessary for the children to learn to speak and I think that adults need to learn to listen to what they say and to do this we must think about how, and in ways to do this" (School Counsellor).

This understanding spawns proposals that are related to decisions in which students traditionally have not been considered, such as those related to the curricular and methodological field. These professionals come to value the contributions that students can make about the contents to be worked as well as the way to work them.

"I think it also would be nice if they could talk about methodology but do not call it so, on how to learn, because many times we give it to them very done, very thought out, very structured in our own way, and they would surprise us learning in a different way, and telling us how they would like to learn" (Elementary Tutor).

Finally, other proposed changes involve taking this process of participation to families, establishing lines of home-school action that are common and, finally, taking them into the community.

"Yes, I think it would be interesting to devise some way that would engage families, and that would be through the children. There are families that are involved, it is true, but in general they think as their children thought, the child goes to school, the teacher teaches and you come home and it's another world. No, they should be involved in saying, well, education is not the school nor the family separately. It's everything because the child lives in this world, is a few hours at school, is a few hours with the family. We are going to have common areas because they are not separate spheres" (Elementary Tutor).

Conclusions

In this paper we have presented some interesting thoughts that have arisen as a result of the participation of teachers in a student voice experience. However, the different understandings of the concept of participation outline very diverse directions in which their practices are heading, some more desirable and consistent with the pedagogy of voice than others.

Moreover, to differing extents, we find how the opening up of dialogical spaces between different actors (teachers and other professionals, students, university lecturers) and educational activities have helped develop reflective processes in which teachers have mobilized some knowledge they are starting to project to different processes of transformation and improvement (Tardiff, 2004).

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