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The challenge of coexistence in socially vulnerable schools

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Abstract

Society in general and schools in particular continue to express their concerns with regard to the many challenges posed nowadays by living in a globalized world, where learning to coexist involves knowing oneself and those around us. Therefore, the professionals from the education sector and specially from the most vulnerable contexts demand the necessity to know strategies and initiatives which enable them to build a democratic school, where learning to coexist is the key to educate engaged citizens living in an increasingly intercultural, changing world. The study presented here has been conducted in two differentiated, but complementary, phases. During the first phase a document search has been conducted on two inter-connected concepts: education and democracy, reviewing the theoretical and conceptual contributions from prominent authors, both national and international. During the second phase we have selected a series of peer and cooperative support strategies, as we consider them to be most appropriate to transform the school of today and tomorrow. We have stated their characteristics and their implementation possibilities. Class Assembly, Peer Support Program, Pair Reading, and Alternative Leisure to the Playground, are just some of those selected. It must therefore be concluded that building a democratic school is the way towards quality in education, by opening the school to participation through strategies which give a voice to the whole education community.

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1. Introduction

School coexistence is an ongoing challenge for the current education system. Learning to live in a society is an increasingly complex task and is still one of the objectives to achieve at an international level (UNESCO, 2015). Besides, there are already many professionals in education who request support from the public authorities in order to receive training in strategies which will help them face a reality that has become more and more complex. We currently live in a changing and diverse society, and responding to the needs of the education community has become a challenging task to address.

From this perspective, alternatives within the education sector have been sought in order to set aside the inefficient, but still present, punishment strategies. They continue to be a resource used in many schools, even while their little operability is well known by all. The lack of resources to deal with situations such as school violence, school bullying and constant signs of disrespect has become an issue. It is for this reason that this study has been conducted, aiming at supporting those professionals who sometimes feel lost when they have to face situations which are becoming more difficult to deal with and to step in.

Context is, without a doubt, a relevant aspect in the educational process of individuals. Firstly, the education received within the nuclear family is crucial as it exercises a significant impact on many aspects, as well as being credited the responsibility of teaching values for social coexistence (Parada, 2010). On the other hand, the peer groups –which children spend a large part of their time with as they grow up– are steadily gaining more and more importance, intensity and stability, and are becoming the most influent socialising context (Inglés, 2009; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; Maysless, Wiseman & Hai, 1998). While being aware of the role exercised by both socialising agents, we must not forget that it is at school that children spend a great deal of their time and, for this reason, we stand for a democratic education based on respect, tolerance and mutual dialogue.

Hence, in this article we have addressed a research carried out in two complementary stages. In the first place, we have performed a document search on the connection between the concepts of “Democracy” and “Education”, following on the discourse from relevant experts and on the basis that there is a need for education on, and for, democracy. On the second stage of the research, and using the same methodology, we have selected a series of strategies to improve school coexistence. These strategies can be of great interest to education centres, especially those within contexts with a risk of social exclusion. Finally, we offer a social-educational program proposal.

Ultimately, it is essential to continue standing for a democratic school by implementing strategies that help students live together. Thus, schools can transform into spaces where the priority is learning to coexist peacefully.

2. Objectives

The main aim of this article is the development of a program for school coexistence improvement based on the connection between democracy and education. We have used as a starting point the strategies addressed in research studies by experts on the subject.

The following specific objectives derive from our main aim:

- To establish a theoretical frame around the meaning of democratic education by carrying out an extensive search of data.
- To sort the information collected and reflect the different meanings found during the search process on a table.
- To perform a document search of strategies for school coexistence improvement.
- To group those strategies on a table while specifying at the same time their main characteristics.
- To design a social-educational program for the improvement of school coexistence drawn from the information gathered during both research stages.

3. Methodology

This research is framed within the qualitative methodology, using a strategy of collection and analysis of information, known as documentary analysis. As Del Rincón et al. (1995, p.342) state, the analysis of documents is a very useful source to obtain retrospective and referential information about a situation, a phenomenon or a specific

program. This search has been carried out using primary sources, with the aim of analysing information in a systematic and organized way. In order to ensure the research process is reliable we have followed the five basic stages presented by Bisquerra (2012, p. 351):

- a) Tracking or inventory of the existing and available documents.
- b) Classification of the specified documents.
- c) Selection of the most relevant documents for the purposes of the research.
- d) An in-depth reading of the content of these documents in order to extract elements for analysis and to register them in memos or comments into margins, so as to identify patterns, trends, confluences and contradictions.
- e) A comparative and cross-referenced reading of the documents so it is possible to build a comprehensive synthesis about the social reality being analysed.

As we have previously described, the research consists of two complementary phases, both of which have used the same methodology:

- Phase 1: Document search on the relationship between two concepts: Democracy and Education, with the prospect of analysing the discourse of experts on the subject.
- Phase 2: Document search on coexistence improvement strategies which are appropriate to reduce the rate of school violence and to improve interpersonal relationships within the education community.

After completing this process we offer a program for the improvement of school coexistence, with the prospect of it becoming operational during future researches.

4. Findings

After previously having explained our research we present the findings obtained through both phases below.

4.1. Findings obtained during Phase 1

As our aim was to perform an extensive document search on the connection between the concepts of democracy and education –established by many authors–, it has been necessary to collect a great amount of quotes. Those most relevant thereon have been selected (Table 1) for the purpose of observing and reflecting on possible differences, similarities or variances.

Table 1. Selected data on the relationship between “democracy and education”

Quote	Authorship
“In a democracy, the school should embody the democratic values and educate pupils on attitudes of tolerance, respect, equality, solidarity, cooperation and participation. I see democracy not just on its formal dimension but as a lifestyle too”.	Santos-Guerra, 1996, p. 251
“Democratic schools need to be based on a broad definition of “we”, a commitment to building a community that is both of the school and of the society in which the school exists”.	Apple & Beane, 1997, p. 44 (Spanish translation)
“Participation in social life needs to be nurtured by education so that the democratic life becomes a culture, rooted in the citizens’ minds and hearts; without this it would be reduced to a frame of procedures of formal participation”.	Gimeno-Sacristán, 2001, p. 155
“Democratic discipline rests on values such as mutual respect –key in any type of coexistence–, rights and duties and on the capacity of self-sacrifice. From a procedural point of view, this model of discipline is founded on mutual dialogue, reasoning, negotiation and persuasion”.	Santos-Guerra, 2003, p. 94
(...) “education for peace must include education for democracy, justice, disarmament, human rights, tolerance, respect to cultural diversity, preservation of the environment, conflict prevention, reconciliation, non-violence, and culture of peace”.	Mayor-Zaragoza, 2003, p. 19
“The difficulties of democratic organization are taking place in schools, where the clear fall of participation emerges as one of the most significant and worrying indicators. Nevertheless, as we will see, participation is irreplaceable in order to foster democratic models of coexistence. The pedagogy of coexistence cannot be designed leaving aside those concerned”	Jares, 2006, p. 14

“Learning to live democratically can only be achieved by living democratically”.	Martín and Puig, 2007, p. 91
“Education for a democratic citizenship is crucial to promote a free, tolerant, and fair society, which contributes to protect the values and principles that are the basics of a democracy: freedom, pluralism, human rights and the rule of law”.	Bolívar, 2008, p. 128
“It goes without saying that calling for active participation, as an example of democratic life at school, or praising the virtues of an education for citizenship when a specific situation remains rooted to a whirlpool of disputes is pure illusion”.	Godás, Santos- Rego and Lorenzo, 2008, p. 42
(...) “where children are seen as citizens and, therefore, able to establish experiences of democracy and citizenship”.	Tonucci, 2009, p. 24
“Democracy is an educational political value that international agencies also promote in teaching the modern-day citizen, and through which they offer and conditionaid through funding, consulting, programs, etc. In this sense democracy is defined as the possibility of shaping a responsible, committed, and participative citizen”.	Buenfil, 2011, p. 33
“School cannot only be a good place for the education of values; it must be –together with the family– the best place to learn and to become happy, free, fair and democratic people”.	Martínez, Esteban and Buxarrais, 2011, p. 99
“When viewed in the foreground, the political and democratic horizon of participation is conceived as a social action committed to the education of subjects capable of changing the world, not merely reproducing it. From this standpoint, participation can be visualized in the relational field as able to contribute to more critical and emancipated political stances, and more symmetrical social relationships, which, on a subjective level, could be translated into an autonomous and proactive citizenship”.	Oraición, 2011, p. 63
“Education nowadays cannot renounce to the building of a participative, critical and responsible citizenship and, subsequently, to boosting the role of the educational centres as ideal scenarios for the learning of democratic values”.	García-Raga y López-Martín, 2014, 93
“Clearly, the theories posed by some authors express the prevailing mood of a society that, subject to constant changes, is delegating more and more to the educational institutions, which it recognizes as suitable places to practice and live democracy and the values that guarantee coexistence by respecting differences”.	Puig-Gutiérrez y Morales-Lozano, 2015, p. 264

After a thorough analysis of these quotes, it is evident that there is a wide variety of authors who work and are concerned about discussing democracy and education, albeit their foci are diverse according to the definitions. Hence, many of the quotes show student participation and the importance of promoting civic values as priority topics. There are also definitions including references to the value of coexistence. In any case, there are a large number of conceptions that stress the importance of the three elements considered to be essential for the construction of a democratic school: participation, the need for coexistence and the commitment to build an involved, critical and structured citizenship.

4.2. Findings obtained during Phase 2

The following table contains the strategies we consider to be most ideal to work on school coexistence in primary education centres that are in contexts with a risk of social exclusion.

Table 2. Selection of strategies for the improvement of school coexistence

Strategy	Description	Author of reference
Class Assembly	Time and space for mutual dialogue, communication, prevention and conflict resolution. It is advisable to hold the assembly once a week, arranged in a circle with the help of the dashboard “I congratulate, I criticise, I propose” as guidance.	Freinet (1971)
Pair Reading	Sharing the pleasure of reading in an asymmetric fashion. Students from upper grades will share one or two weekly readings with younger students (in pairs), encouraging reading while creating friendship bonds.	Durán & Blanch (2015); Valdebenito & Durán (2014)

Peer Mentoring	Asymmetric pairs (from upper and lower grades) who share a common objective, with the aim of building emotional bonds. The involvement of both is required: the mentor learns teaching and the mentee learns to receive customised help from a peer. Moreover, autonomy and responsibility are boosted on both.	Durán (2012)
Curriculum-Specific Work Areas	Organisation of the space in areas according to the curriculum and the needs of the children in the classroom. Numerous experts indicate these areas enhance cooperative learning, as well as social relations and peer interactions.	Ezquerro & Argos (2008); Isbell & Exelby (2001)
Alternative Leisure to the Playground	A games classroom available during playground time. Board games and sports equipment are coordinated and guarded by students from upper grades. It is an alternative to the playground break, as most conflicts usually occur during that time at school.	Volk, Dane, Marini & Vaillancourt (2015)
Peer Support Program	2 responsible upper-grade students are selected in each class. They take specific roles regarding inclusion of all pupils, assistance to new students, academic support and monitoring and prevention and resolution of small conflicts. They will be a referent in the school, together with the teaching staff in charge of the group of supporting students.	Torrego (2012)
Peer Mediation	It is a strategy of peer conflict resolution which is rarely used in primary education, as it is the experts' advice to implement it in secondary education. In order to become a mediator and be given specific training people must volunteer as well as those who decide to use this service. A series of conflict resolution phases are adopted with the intention of adequately dealing with the specific issue or challenge.	Boqué (2005)
Art Mediation	Art activities or workshops aim at boosting group cohesion and thus preventing conflicts. It is advisable that these workshops are managed by established artists, so that they know how to convey the magic of art. Plays, dance, music, painting and sculpture are just some of the possibilities.	Moreno (2010)

As we can see, many experts have researched and verified that the implementation of certain strategies for conflict resolution can significantly improve school coexistence. Class Assemblies, Curriculum-Specific Work Areas, and Alternative Leisure to the Playground, are some examples of the need to look for other spaces for social relationships, mutual dialogue and pleasure, providing time to get to know each other and to grow up both as an individual and as a group. Strategies such as Pair Reading and Peer Mentoring advocate for the creation of asymmetric pairs where older and younger students perform joint activities; they learn from each other and establish really interesting, and extremely enriching, emotional bonds and friendly ties. The Peer Support Program and Peer Mediation are strategies of conflict prevention and resolution, both including specific training for supporting students or mediators; this goes a step further in peer intervention when small conflicts emerge as it confers responsibility and autonomy during the resolution process. Finally, Art Mediation is a relatively new initiative: it seeks personal growth and group cohesion by means of workshops or activities that aim at making students thrill and enjoy through art.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The findings we have presented previously indicate a need for further research along these lines, so that we move towards the transformation of the school into a place where the priority will be learning to coexist. Firstly, it is worth stressing that the connection between education and democracy is clear and so it has been determined by the discourse of relevant authors in this field. We have reached the conclusion that a democratic school is not only founded on teaching values, it also requires the democratic governance of its functioning. Participation, coexistence and training for responsible citizenship are the cornerstones on which the building of a democratic school must be founded. One of the common aspects the different authors that appear in this study identify as a fundamental value –or even an absolute prerequisite– for the adequate development of a democratic school is, undoubtedly, the participation of each

and every group of the educational community. As stated by García-Pérez (2009), participation is conceived as a critical element in order to learn to live in an increasingly demanding world, and it is a key point to learn to face problems and be competent in decision-making. Therefore, schools need to boost coexistence improvement, by promoting the full development of all the education community (José, Pareja and Pedrosa, 2013). We can fairly say that learning to live in society, to participate in the community, is not an easy task, but it must be a priority objective at school; participation is taught and learnt and must be experienced on a practical level.

With regards to the strategies proposed in this study, it should be noted that many experts have already confirmed their proper performance in educational centres located within different contexts, as for example the researches carried by Cowie et al (2002) and Naylor & Cowie (1999) about the benefits of peer support programs. Therefore, we believe it is vital to continue working along these lines.

Following these conclusions, the program intended is a set of strategies selected from those previously described: Class Assembly, Pair Reading, Alternative Leisure to the Playground, Peer Support Program and Art Mediation. We believe these are the most appropriate strategies as they all use cooperative learning as well as peer support –with all the educational benefits they contribute as a whole to the educational community–, in line with the findings of researches like those presented by Turnuklua et al. (2010), Akgun & Araz (2014), Hakvoort & Olsson (2014) and Peñalva-Vélez et al (2015).

Similarly, it is important to note that further research has to consider the need of a greater involvement of the families in the educational centre; they have to be granted an active role as they are the first socializing agent and cannot be left in the background. The search for strategies that potentiate family participation is thus another pending task in the current education system, and henceforth it is the responsibility of researchers on school coexistence.

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