

Educational Transforming, Learning Communities and Teacher Training

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This analyses of the paper show to develop innovative educational projects through teacher training. The starting point is “learning communities”, which is a project to change educational practice. It has a long history in Spain. This project is generated according to the assessment process in order to change practices required by Miguel Hernández School, located in Castro Urdiales, Cantabria. The University of Cantabria oversees the teacher training and organises training meetings with the teachers and volunteers involved in the transformation, such as learning communities, interactive groups, literary gatherings, etc., in order to improve innovative practices. The main success of this process is that the teachers, as they see the positive results of the implementation of these measures, have increasingly asked for more training in this area, because they have come to realize that they are contributing to offering better education for their students through their own professional training and intervention. In order to change educational practices at school, teacher training must be a main priority in any innovative projects.

Keywords: changing educational practices, teacher training, learning communities, interactive groups, literary gatherings

Introduction

The University of Cantabria oversees the teacher training required by Miguel Hernández School (Castro Urdiales), which is interested in becoming a learning community.

Learning communities is a project of social and cultural transformation of the educational centre and its environment, with the aim of giving everybody access to the information society (VV. AA., 2010). In Spain, around 80 schools have become learning communities since 1995 (Elboj, Puigdemívol, Soler, & Valls, 2002).

Referring to the multidisciplinary character of this theory, it is essential for us to mention pedagogical, sociological, psychological, and philosophical approaches: Dialogical learning (Flecha, 1997; Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha, & Racionero, 2008) has been built on Habermas’s (1987) “Theory of Communicative Action”, Freire’s (1970) “Pedagogy of Oppressed”, and Vigotsky (1979) “The Development of Higher Psychological Processes”, among others, showing strong ideas that substantiate the didactic action: dialogic learning.

Learning communities has two main objectives: On the one hand, the first objective is to change educational practice; and on the other hand, to generate knowledge in action. The learning communities theory is to connect educational knowledge and practice, and demonstrate that it is possible to link them. It is a

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criticism of the educational policies in this country that have not considered scientific research. The intellectuals have not been able to change the school into what they want (a democratic, involving, and solid environment). The innovative proposals have been made with “common sense” and “good intentions”, but without any relation to a solid academic theory of a multidisciplinary character.

According to Guarro (2005), learning communities’ characteristics are the following:

(1) Participation: Referring to whole agents that take part in educational practice, in order to optimize and develop new organization structural practices;

(2) Central place to the learning: The principal aim is to develop personal skills. It is required to restructure school organization, and develop collaborative programs;

(3) Positive expectations: Expectations for students with disabilities and helping them to improve their academic outcomes;

(4) Permanent improvement: Considering evaluation as a way to look for improvement needs.

According to this, learning communities involve lots of personal and material transformation (spaces, timetable, organizational changes...). In schools, there are developed performances to improve students’ instrumental learning and prevent their social exclusion. In the centre that we are currently advising, we have put two projects into practice: interactive groups and literary gatherings.

The Context

Miguel Hernández Centre is in Castro Urdiales, a small city with a typical fishing port in the Cantabric Sea. There, people make a living from the fishing, industrial activity, and services.

The school is located in a fairly homogeneous area whose socio-cultural and economic level is medium-low. A large percentage of families are linked to the primary sector, which leads to job precariousness and insecurity, with a good number of families in a situation of unemployment or intermittent employment. Population has not grown significantly in this area in recent years, since it is not a place of urban expansion, as the city centre is in the old part of the town. In the surrounding areas of the city, centre housing is less expensive, accessible for families with a lower level of income. This data are linked to the increase of immigrant students in the city centre. Castro Urdiales is a municipality with scarcity of socio-educational and cultural resources which leads to a lack of activities and in these areas outside of school hours (an example is the absence of a theatre or a children’s playroom). Families with higher levels of educational interest occupy their children’s leisure time with supplementary private activities, such as music classes or English classes, sporting activities or others organized by the parent’s association of the centre. Families with fewer economic resources (Álvarez & Larrinaga, 2012) are affected the most by this situation.

The first meetings held between university and school focussed on a “need assessment”. The basic idea was the possibility of change which a female teacher had demanded. Thus, at this stage, the teachers of the primary school became researchers, joined forces with the university professors and analysed the possibilities and established the difficulties of the starting point, based on the following observations:

(1) Existence of school groups with abundant learning difficulties and educational needs;

(2) Absence of a means of overcoming these difficulties and an absence of family resources too;

(3) Lack of a sense of the school system by on the part of students and their families.

From this initial diagnosis, a “roadmap” was designed that would allow us gradually to the changes. In this sense, there were two areas of action: Firstly, the main priority was to involve the centre in the process of

change. The support and leadership of the management of the centre, the information on the process of change in the centre and the selection of teachers and groups that participate in it have been priority elements from the beginning. Secondly, incorporate the school community into the centre. The main objective is to explain to families who are distanced from the educational approaches of the centre, the importance of their children's education and their co-responsibility in the educational task. That initial message has been designed to reach the families, because it is what we considered important and implicit in carrying several ideas. Firstly, the coordinated work of the families and teachers to educate the children. Secondly, families' awareness of the importance of schoolwork and the knowledge that one can gain in school. Thirdly, the idea of global learning in the sense that learning is not confined to the textbook or teacher. But, it is possible to learn from other sources, such as one's family or one's own peers. Finally, it is to give the families an image of their children with possibilities, without previous determinations, in short, an image of a rich childhood, with great intellectual, social and emotional potential. We believe that this approach will also change ideas that the centre has about its children and its possibilities. In addition, no less important, it tells us that learning, although it has an individual basis, also has social characteristics that should not be forgotten.

With these thoughts and previous performances, we decided that the most convenient course of action for the centre, given that the course was halfway through when the university was requested to intervene, was to try to implement some innovative teaching strategies that would contribute to this stated purpose. Examining the possibilities and limits offered by the centre, we decided to start a little innovation to the education developed in the fifth year of primary school.

The final decision, which was reported to teachers, students, and families of the centre, was to make interactive groups (Vargas & Flecha, 2000) in two classrooms of the fifth year of primary school. They were developed in the second and third quarter of the year of 2010-2011 with the satisfaction of everyone involved. In the present school year of 2011-2012, the number of classrooms engaged in the experience has increased to six, which has led to a growth in the involvement of teachers (six teachers tutors) and volunteers (24 people), because we are talking about 24 interactive groups.

Theory and Practice

There is an important development of interactive groups in our country. They represent significant changes in the ways of organizing the classroom and how to understand how students learn. In relation to the organisation of the classroom, discussing a proposal of "environmental modification", i.e., not only changes the physical structure of the classroom, but also modifies the emotional and intellectual perception that the subject makes and has of space. Time is another parameter of analysis and change in groups. It is a break from the typical structure dedicated to discipline, with a rigid schedule, to move to a temporary, perhaps more unstable, organization which at various times, students solve the educational proposals that teachers make. The last of the elements of analysis, are volunteers: the incorporation of an external person to the educational dynamics of the classroom. This is, perhaps, the most novel contribution of interactive groups: It sends an important message to the educational community, "the school teaches as a whole", and at the same time, incorporates the families into the school task.

Interactive groups are an innovative and flexible way of managing the lecture room in order to develop educational work with the intention of intensifying the learning process in one or more instrumental areas. The length of the lecture is based upon the number of groups set up in the lecture room (between four and six

students) and one volunteer from the community is present in every group to collaborate with them.

The final aim of this educational work is to try to enhance the learning of one or several instrumental areas. The number of groups in which splits the classroom is variable (four or five of students) and in each group goes to collaborate a volunteer from the community. The teacher of the lecture room designs the activities to be carried out (revision activities) by the groups and with the help of volunteers must resolve them according to the principles of the dialogic learning (Flecha & Puigvert, 2002) that succinctly tells us that we learn by interacting with other people. This approach of “social pedagogy” has personal and organizational implications. In the personal sphere, we have said that this is to reconstruct the way that the centre educates, and therefore, we are not going to stagnate with this out of date method. At the organizational level, the first modification is to change the spatial character of the classroom and centre. The second modification is the presence of several adults in the classroom sharing teaching and learning processes. Finally, a model in which groups of students can be doing different things at the same time that ensures greater control over how and under what conditions the learning occurs. Although the process of learning, both for students and teachers/volunteers is long, this method is intended to favour interaction, solidarity and cooperation between equals, based on the exchange of knowledge between group members through a mixture of verbal interactions. To achieve this, it is very important that the groups have mixed levels of knowledge, gender, culture, etc., so that the resulting learning can be richer.

With regard to the literary gatherings, this is a long cultural and educational process that is being developed in different types of entity whether it is schools for adults, associations of parents, groups of women, or cultural and educational entities. The process followed in literary gatherings in schools is based on carrying out an oral commentary of a complete literary work or just a chapter in the classroom, with the teacher acting as a mediator. These activities allow them to improve their literary sense: They share their impressions, discuss ideas or relevant passages. It, thereby, improves their reading abilities, their verbal expression, and their motivation to read, as well as many other skills.

The Followed Process

We have not found any precedents related to these proposals in Cantabria, but in other nearby regions, such as the Basque country (Bask Government, 2002), learning communities has an important development. We can say that from our university-school collaboration we are pioneering, a process of educational transformation is slowly but surely taking place in this region.

From the point of view of education actions undertaken in parallel to the development of the project, there have been several performances. First, we organized a dossier with the basic materials for the teaching staff of the centre to start a formation process with carefully selected readings. Simultaneously, the team of professors from the university started the necessary contacts, so that the theoretical training process could be linked with the practice. Then, we organized visits to communities of learning in Bilbao where we have the invaluable collaboration of M. Luisa Jaussi. At the moment, we are working to start to do learning communities training through the Network of centers of teachers in the Cantabrian community.

With regard to the followed processes, we have made small steps that ensure that we have control over the development of the experience. In this way, various moments have been contemplated: experience planning that is divulged in the center, development and evaluation.

With regard to the planning of innovation, the activities developed focused on the choice of curricular areas (in our case, we selected Spanish language and mathematics), interactive groups, the choice of volunteers and the establishment of a timetable that would allow us to organize the process.

Disclosure of the initiative to be implemented in the educational community of the centre is another essential aspect, because it allows us to observe potential resistance at the center. On the other hand, meetings were held with the families for the presentation of the project and the people and institutions involved in it, with the volunteers of the groups for the explanation of the project, its functions and a few aspects that were necessary for the clarification of the basic aspects and reported to the Cantabria Ministry of Education and the educational inspection of the proposal of innovation.

As to the development of the experience, this is performed once a week. The teachers involved prepare materials and activities for the two areas identified before (language and mathematics). On the same day, the material and objectives of the meeting are explained to the volunteers. Evaluation meetings of the sessions are held on the days that the university teaching staff are present (as observers of the interactive groups), to analyze the observed aspects, positive and negative elements are organized, but above all, we want to make small steps for the construction of pedagogical thought and arguments of what is being carried out.

The periodic evaluation of the project allows us to carry out an analysis of materials, their suitability, levels of difficulty, their contribution to the development of interactive groups and the work of volunteers, both from the view of outside observers from their own perception of the work and the analysis of those general aspects that are susceptible to improvement or attention, as it is information for families or teachers of the centre.

So far, since the first contact in November, 2010, we have made many important steps that show significant changes at different levels: The process of change has altered not only personal and organizational aspects relating to the center and the classroom, but also families. In addition, the regional education administration also has been implicated in the development of the experience.

The Professional Development

Achieving this broad educational transformation in a center is impossible without proper teacher training. As highlighted in pedagogical literature, teachers are presented as the element and key factor of educational transformation. From this point of view, it has already been demonstrated that external training given to teachers does not lead to the implementation of new knowledge in the classroom. Therefore, we cannot speak about a cause-effect process. Instead, those innovations in which the action/training are linked and operate in parallel have more possibilities of success and sustainability. On the other hand, teachers should be the only ones responsible for change. In our case, we speak of a “shared responsibility” in the process of innovation with families and volunteer participants. Last year, there were interactive groups and literary gatherings in two classrooms, which counted with the help of eight volunteers from the community (retired teachers, mothers of pupils of the school, teachers of the centre, students of teacher training, etc.).

At the same time, the teaching staff of the university is also a partner of the project, offering plenty of material to encourage self-education of teachers prior to its release in motion and we carry out formative meetings with teachers and volunteers involved in the transformation. During the development of the transformation, we did abundant sessions of follow-up action, to ensure that the process followed corresponded with the principles of dialogic learning that guide the action of the communities of learning. In these meetings, the involved teachers, volunteers and professors all participate and raise issues that each of them notes with respect to (Álvarez & Osoro, 2012).

In any case, we believe that the process carried out has been complex. As indicated by Castaneda and Adell (2011), processes of change do not only require a technical mastery of what one wants to change, but also require a clear personal commitment for it to be effective. We are, therefore, moving also in an emotional scope.

It also raises questions about teaching practices, teaching ideas or materials among other things.

We must not forget that in the process followed, not all the conditions have been favorable to the development of innovation. The presence of different “cultures” in the educational center, forms of communication of knowledge, and innovation as accurate as possible in the process the author wanted to carry out have been, over time, the vital elements for the development of the proposed change and allowing the incorporation of more interactive groups, more teachers and more volunteers into the project.

The interactive groups project has generated a clear example of teacher training among the people involved, within a model that moves away from the simple transfer of knowledge (typical example of the training model) to link to a project center where implications not only affect knowledge, but also offer other variables of affective and emotional character. Scott (2010) told us that to facilitate the professional development of teachers, the training should:

- (1) Focus on solving problems;
- (2) Provide opportunities to work with colleagues and experts;
- (3) Facilitate teachers’ exposure to innovations in knowledge, teaching practices, and support technologies;
- (4) Train teachers to try new strategies and skills;
- (5) Providing purpose-oriented reflection and discussion.

We can agree that, from these considerations, the project of interactive groups clearly meets these premises. The general basis of teamwork and the exchange of ideas have clearly helped not only the progress of the project, but also the professional development of teachers itself.

The Lessons Learned

Although there has been no systematic evaluation process to date, we can extrapolate some partial conclusions arising from the development of the project. It has shown a clear improvement in relations between teachers and pupils. There has also been an improvement in relations between the students themselves. Other ways of doing things and other models of relationship in the classroom were suggested. By the teaching staff, the consideration that the responsibility of learning does not fall solely on them and this is split between themselves, the students and volunteers. This idea that everyone can teach is a vital element in the process. There has been also a greater solidarity in the classroom and more interest in learning from students which was hardly there before. The proposed methodology allows collaboration not only between volunteers and children, but also among equals, and in this sense, the students have discovered that they like to help their classmates in the group, because they feel useful. Students who previously were not as involved in the learning process now feel involved thanks to the students who help them, feeling somewhat more participative in the learning process: The students are capable of constructing knowledge and feel competent doing school work.

With regards to the centre, new organizational forms that involve changes in the participation of families, the multi-purpose use of spaces and the reorganization of time have been incorporated. We think that these aspects are organizational changes that affect not only materials or structural elements, but also the construction of different perceptions of the center and what it does by different agents. We defend this symbolic character in terms of the representations that we produce.

Finally, we must point out an important aspect in this process: the incorporation of families either as volunteers or as beneficiaries of the experience. Pedagogical literature presents us with (at least theoretically)

the need to incorporate families in the educational process carried out in the centers, while the success of these approaches, and above all, practices to implement them who are not always the best, we have demonstrated over time that the project will develop that the family-school collaboration is possible from the incorporation of the former to the processes of teaching and learning.

We believe that in the near future, the development of interactive groups and literary gatherings will demand new training perspectives from the teachers of the center. In this year, there are six classes in the center that will develop these two educational performances and teachers are in permanent training in this respect. This developed educational transformation demands a high training commitment on the part of teachers. Without it, the transformation would be impossible. As noted by Fullan (2002), education of the teaching staff has the honour of being, at the same time, the worst problem and the best solution for education. But having said that, the training of teachers and in this particular case, the training in the field of learning communities also require an institutional commitment to its development. This is the aspect of “intangible” and accompanying educational policies to the development of innovation centers projects.

The main success of the said process is that in view of the good results of the implementation of these measures teachers demand more and more training in this regard, because they have discovered that they are helping to provide a better education for their students from their own training and professional intervention (Álvarez, Larrinaga, & Osoro, 2012).

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