

Educational Partnerships and Intercultural Education in Primary School

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Abstract: Within the framework of a research study developed at the University of Aveiro, a group of educational partners representing local institutions was gathered. The aim was to conceptualize, implement and evaluate a collaborative research project on intercultural education. Each of the participants was interviewed (semi-structured interview), in order to know their perceptions in practices on intercultural and collaborative work and the reasons that lead to this collaborative participation and their expectations concerning the work that is still to be done. Their answers revealed that the intercultural issue is familiar to all participants and that they feel the need to learn more about this topic motivated them to participate in this collaborative project. Further more, all of them reported previous experience on collaborative work, acknowledging its assets in comparison to the work carried out individually. These data will allow us to guide the work that will be developed by the network of partners and also to analyze the evolution of their representations of intercultural education and work in partnership, through the application of a final interview.

Key words: Intercultural Education, Educational Partnerships.

Introduction

This paper emerges from a research study being developed at the university of Aveiro, Portugal, named “Intercultural education in primary school: partnerships involving the school and the community”. Within the framework of this study a group of educational partners, who represent the different institutions of the local community was gathered, aiming at conceiving, implementing and assessing a project on intercultural education.

The project began in September 2010 and will be carried out till the end of the present school year (June 2011). During this time, the partners will have the opportunity to develop a set of activities to be implemented to their target audience and to get training on intercultural education. The group is made of six primary school teachers, two music teachers (extra-curriculum activities), a representative of an association for Ukrainian immigrants, a representative of a cultural association, a representative of a cooperative for social work (which deals with people with disabilities), a representative of the local library and government and a team of researchers from the Open Laboratory for the Learning of Foreign Languages (LALE) from de University of Aveiro. In the following pages we intend to present and discuss the results of an interview carried out to the group of partners in order to know their attitudes towards intercultural education and collaborative work, as well as the motivation for accepting the invitation of being part of this working group.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural diversity is an undeniable characteristic of today's societies. Managing cultural and ethical conflicts stands out as one of the most delicate and complex tasks of modern societies and their governmental institutions (Guerra, 2008). Therefore, there is an urgent call for mutual understanding and respect, where one can find the acknowledgement of the value of diversity and the promotion of critical participation of all the citizens in the democratic life (UNESCO, 2006).

Cultural, social, economic and political diversity which characterises each society has its reflection on schools. In this context, school plays a crucial role, given that it is expected to provide pupils a high level of education, adapted to its characteristics, needs and interests (Soeiro & Pinto, 2006). In this sense, Breeze (2003) states that intercultural education does not represent as an option but a necessity and a moral prerogative, since there is a mandatory demand for education to answer to the context of diversity, by opening a path to dialogue among people from different cultures.

Intercultural education stands out as an educational approach that aims at developing citizens' cultural enrichment by appealing to the acknowledgement and respect for diversity through exchange and dialogue, active and critical participation in order to enhance a democratic society underpinned by equality, tolerance and solidarity/unity (Miranda, 2004). Intercultural education can be defined as:

«an educational approach based on respect for and recognition of cultural diversity, aimed at every member of the society as a whole. It posits a formal and informal intervention model, holistic, integral and encompassing all dimensions of the educational process in order to achieve a real equality of opportunities/results, to promote intercultural communication and competency, and to overcome racism in all its expressions.» (Aguado & Malik, 2006:448)

However, this concept is often used ambiguously or even inappropriately, referring to practices that have nothing to do with intercultural education. To Portera (2008) the concept of interculturalism is often confused with multiculturalism. The author explains that while the multicultural perspective refers to images and stereotypes of cultures and cultural differences, the intercultural perspective is related to the dynamics of cultures in contact, intercultural relations and intercultural competence.

Dervin (2010) adds that intercultural education often comes to be seen as a mere cultural formation. Pretceille-Abdallah (2006) defines "cultural formation" as the cultural knowledge of the Other, based on a discourse of categorization that is based on a factual and descriptive knowledge. In other words, Dervin (2010) explains that the mere knowledge and facts about other cultures do not necessarily contribute to an intercultural education. Giménez (2003) adds that the emphasis on intercultural education is the interaction between culturally distinct entities or individuals. Thus, intercultural education places its emphasis on mutual learning, cooperation and exchange, focusing on the coexistence of different, trying to build unity in diversity.

By promoting intercultural education, schools look for the development of their pupils' knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to the construction of a fair and democratic world (UNESCO, 2006). It must be intended to all students and be able to embrace all participants in pupils' education process, so that all the community represents a place where diversity is valued (Vieira, 2006).

This task cannot be an exclusive concern of schools. Recent studies from Aguado & Malik (2006) refer that it is essential that the work on intercultural education is developed based on partnerships that comprises not only school but also the whole community. In this sense, the implementation of an intercultural approach on education must consider working communities that integrate different educational actors- not only the school community (teachers, pupils, school assistants and families) but the whole community (Aguado & Malik, 2006; Rey-Von Allmen, 2004). These collaborative networks allow the dialogue, and the exchange of ideias, values, experiences and critical reflection, leading to the enrichment of professional development (Damiani, 2008; Veiga Simão, Flores, Morgado; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Thus, the actions of the partners, regarding cultural diversity can be easily enhanced (Angelides, Stylianou & Leigh, 2007; Leite, 2005).

Other authors argue that educational partnerships are considered crucial in terms of educational development, since the collaboration between schools and other institutions may lead to new and adapted answers to the actual educational problems (ACIDI, 2007; Aguado, Jaurena & Benito, 2005, Canário, 2007; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Martins, 2009; Ornelas & Moniz, 2007). Educational partnerships are considered a crucial aspect of any policy for sustainable and sustained development and therefore should be part of every interventional program concerning education (Campus, 2004). Interaction and collaboration among all participants should also be at the forefront of this type of projects. Roldão (2007) identifies three main goals of collaborative work: firstly there is a demand for a more successful achievement of a goal, secondly, the skills of each participants are expected to be activated by insuring

everyone's enrolment, and finally the enlargement of knowledge build upon each one's contribution and interaction is expected.

Hernández (2007) admits that the collaborative work may take different forms, according to the heterogeneity of the group and the objectives of the work to develop. If in some cases the work is limited to an occasional meeting to plan an activity, in other cases may involve the sharing of opinions, the seeking for help to resolve conflicts or constraints and the search for new ideas for improving the practices of all elements of the group.

However, some studies also show some constrains related to this kind of work, such as problems with personal interaction, lack of training and professional development opportunities, along side with other aspects of organizational and contextual nature (Veiga Simão et al, 2009).

Method of the study

Within the network of partnerships established in this project, a semi-structured interview was developed with the following aims: i) to get to know the representations of the participants in relation to intercultural education; ii) to identify and characterize intercultural practices dynamised in the partner institution; iii) to get to know the views of partners on the importance of carrying out activities related to intercultural education; iv) to get to know the needs of the participant in terms of knowledge on intercultural education; v) to identify and characterize partners' practices concerning partnership work; vi) to get to know the partners' representations about working in partnership (gains, constraints,...) and vii) to get to know their motivations for participation in a partnership project on intercultural education.

The participants were interviewed individually before the development of the partnership project on intercultural education. The average duration of the interviews was thirty minutes. Their answers were audio taped, transcribed and analyzed. To ensure their anonymity, each respondent was identified with the symbol P (partner) followed by a number between 1 and 12.

The data collected allowed us to make an initial characterization of the partners involved in this project with respect, not only to their representations on intercultural education and work in partnership, but also in relation to the type of work undertaken by each one in these areas. It also allowed us to know their motivations and expectations regarding the participation in this project. These previous experiences reported by them will guide us through the development of a partnership project on intercultural education. In addition, we intend to replicate this interview at the end of the project in order to analyze the evolution of partners' representations on these issues.

Findings and Discussion

Intercultural concepts and practices of network partners

First, we questioned the participants about their conceptions of intercultural education. The answers indicate two distinct groups: one refers to a multicultural perspective and the other to an intercultural perspective. Half of the participants related the theme of interculturalism with the mere existence of different countries and cultures, stressing that such different cultures should be respected and known. According to these responses, we can assume that the "other peoples and cultures" are understood in a multicultural perspective, as explained in Portera (2008).

The second group states that the word "intercultural" necessarily refers to interaction, considering, therefore, that interculturalism is related not only with the knowledge of other cultures, but also with the relationship that may exist between them. The responses of this group refer to a dynamic view of the cultures in contact, which, according to Portera (2008), corresponds to an intercultural perspective.

Then we asked participants to share with us some of their previous experiences regarding the implementation of activities on intercultural education. Only one said he had never developed work on this topic. All the others had already done at least at the professional level, activities related to intercultural education. Four of them said they had also developed such activities outside the institution where they work.

Nine of the respondents said that their aim to carrying out this type of activity was the awareness of different peoples and cultures. Seven of them added the integration / inclusion of minorities, four indicated sharing knowledge and experiences between people of different nationalities and cultures and two cited the respect for citizens with disabilities. Only one of them indicated the respect for other cultures and the development of personal and social skills.

When asked about the importance of conducting activities on intercultural education, all respondents are unanimous in stating that such activities are indeed very important. On the one hand, and for personal reasons, two of the participants consider it essential to carry out these activities because they are immigrants and have already experienced situations of discrimination and integration problems caused by this condition. Let's illustrate with the declaration of P1: "*Personally because I'm different (laughs) in another sense / of course (...). You are trying very*

hard and then someone makes fun of you because you have a different accent (...).Not because you said something wrong. It's (...) just because you have a different accent. Those things hurt a little/ you know?"²⁸¹

And P11: *"Now/ for example/ there is a very boring tendency in politics! Because there are many politicians who say they do not need immigrants. (...)We didn't come here to take everything away from Portuguese. We came here/ of course/ to live our lives the best we can but we made a huge effort to have something here. "*

Moreover, for professional reasons, the remaining respondents consider it very important that the public for those who develop their work have the opportunity to know and respect different realities, not only in cultural terms, but also for differences physical, mental, social, religious and economic changes that distinguish us from each other. Let's take the example of P12: *"because interculturalism isn't just/ ahm/ and sometimes we forget the people who can not read/ that are a considerable part of the Portuguese population/ and that device we have is wonderful because it changes the writing/ ahm/ in voice (...) And besides an amblyopic or blind can read an illiterate person can also read/ and we're doing intercultural education because culture and cultural parameters of this person are different from mine/ because there is a big difference, which is access to information, so/ and ahm// the reactions are great!"*

Besides, they also point out that this type of activity is essential when working with culturally heterogeneous public, since they promote the inclusion of minority groups, valuing differences and the development of values of solidarity, tolerance and nondiscrimination. In the words of P7: *"(...) currently, values are falling. It is a fact that more children discriminate against others. For being different! I do not say that it is always because of the culture/ but increasingly, we have more people from different cultures in our schools. Many more! And then we must begin to value and begin to show children that they are normal people and we have to... Of course they have different cultures/ have different principles/ they do different things in the community but we have to value it! Being different does not mean being bad!"*

Finally, with regard to their needs for training on intercultural education, all respondents agree they would like to receive training in this area, either to recall previously constructed knowledge, whether to stay updated on the evolution of societies from the perspective of permanent training.

Practices and conceptions on working in partnership

We questioned the participants in order to assess whether working in partnership with other partners or with other community institutions was, or was not, a usual routine for them. According to the answers provided, all the participants state having already worked with other partners, namely with educative purposes. The eight teachers revealed that it is usual for them to work in partnership with other community institutions (governmental or cultural institutions), either in activities of lesson planning, development of projects or management of the school where they develop their professional activity. Four of them also mention partnerships with their students' parents. The remaining respondents affirm that the partnerships they establish usually involve the participation of other community institutions, including schools.

By analysing the respondents' speech, it becomes clear that there are some discrepancies as far as their understanding of the concept of 'partnerships' is concerned. In four situations, this concept is described as merely occasional contacts where one of the partners accepts an invitation or a request, presented by the other partner, to develop a previously defined activity, without any sharing of ideas or opinions between them.

P1 gives us an example: *"In the schools/ when they ask us to do something/ usually leave the job to our responsibility. Understand? They want us to do a certain thing/ (...)! Now it's up to us!"*

The other eight participants refer that there are situations when the work relationship is more occasional (as previously described) and situations when there is the development of a sustained work in which the participation of all the people involved is valued and encouraged. These last situations illustrate, in the participants' point of view, an effective collaboration.

This collaboration is indicated in the words of P6: *"We try to give everyone/ an active participation in meetings. Ahm / is important to know everyone's opinion and therefore everyone can collaborate."*

²⁸¹ Our translation

P7 also supports this idea: *"With the Parish Council (...) is teamwork. We are there to shape activities and to see if they want to participate/ (...) there is a continuous work, there is a beginning, middle and end."*

The data collected in these interviews indicate us, therefore, that the respondents seem to hold different representations of the concepts of "working in partnership" and "collaborative work" (Hernández, 2007). This fact may be the result of a certain difficulty in defining these concepts, associated with the lack of an explicit reflection about them (Veiga Simão et al, 2009).

Following from that, we asked the participants to point out some advantages that they associate with their understanding of 'work developed in partnership'. The majority of the respondents (seven) indicated the enrichment of the work, as a result of the contribution of different partners, as one of the main advantages. For P8 *"work is always much more positive"* and to P9 *"(...) there is also the possibility of developing other types of activities."*

The "spirit of mutual help" was mentioned by five of the respondents and 'sharing' by four. Two respondents pointed out the optimization of human and financial resources and other two indicated the deepening of knowledge. P1 e P11, the two partners who find themselves in a situation of immigration, pointed out the personal satisfaction of working with other people, as well as the difficulty of working alone. In addition, P6 referred that working in partnership gives greater visibility to the institution where he/she works: *"(...) the institution may ahm/ work in the community/ the institution can be seen in the community (...) there are people who know the institution/ the work that is done there/ (...) and we try to break down barriers through these partnerships."*

On the other hand, when questioned about the constraints of working collaboratively with other partners, the answers were, once again, diversified. Four of the participants did not point out any constraint as far as this type of work is concerned. Other four mentioned the existence of some personal difficulties in building a relationship with partners, an idea which is well illustrated in the words of P7: *"The difficulty of certain people to work in partnership"* and P10: *"(...) In the place where I used to work things were not going well. There were no partnerships with other institutions. (...) they were unwilling to participate/ not interested in participating. (...) There are very complicated cases, people are very suspicious. (...) there is a rivalry and I want to do better than you / I have to do better than you. "*

Two participants indicated that the main constraints are the fear of exposure and public speaking. P4 tells us: *"And I think when we come to this kind of work/ many are willing to say something. But/ what will he think of me? Or/ I'll speak in public/ I get all flushed when I speak in public. And I think that is the biggest problem."*

Other respondents indicated, as a constraint, an unbalanced distribution of roles (P12: *"when / the protagonists ahm // eventually take / gain prominence in relation to what really matters here in the partnership"*), difficulties in conciliating different work schedules (P2, *"we work with several/ with many people/ and sometimes the timings are difficult to conciliate..."*) and loss of individuality resulting from the participation of other partners.

The respondents demonstrate, once again, differences in relation to their representations on the merits and constraints of the work developed in collaboration with other partners as well as to the different roles that participants in such work may take.

Some respondents identified some constraints in partnership working, especially personal constraints. However, all agree that this type of work has more benefits than disadvantages. Among the benefits, the respondents point to the "job enrichment" as a result of sharing and mutual help. Consequently, they all affirm to be available for participation in future projects involving this type of work.

Motivations and expectations for participation in a partnership project on intercultural education

In a final moment, participants were asked about the reasons that led to the participation in the project proposed to them. Regarding the motivation for participating in the project, all participants indicated that they consider the issue of intercultural education very interesting. Nine of them added that they would like to acquire more knowledge in this area, and they saw the participation in this project as an opportunity for personal and professional development.

Moreover, the fact that they already knew the other participants and the work they developed was one factor that led five of the respondents to be part of the project. Three interviewees focused on the professional interest in developing partnership working and two of them mention the personal pleasure of working with other people.

Finally, regarding the expectations for participation in this network of partnerships, it was noted that a common factor is the concern for their attendance at meetings and the time it will be available for the development of possible activities.

Besides, once they are willing to give their best, even if the circumstances are not the most favorable, they expect the other participants do the same, as is demonstrated by the response of P4: *"When I enjoy doing something it doesn't mean I will do an excellent job, but I'll do my best to do it. If I had more time maybe I could do a better job but it's the best I can do according to the time I have available. And I'm sure I'll do my best! What we can under the conditions we have."*

The same is verified in the words of Q2: "Overall, I hope that from the moment that the partners become partners they actually fulfill the conditions of this partnership. And if those conditions imply the participation in meetings, sharing ideas, I expect them to do so. When they know they are not going to make it, it's better to say that it is difficult and not delay the group because then you have to go looking for other partners. "

Thus, there is a major concern for partners to honor the commitment they are taking by agreeing to participate in this network, so that the group can achieve their aims.

Conclusions

The realization of an interview, in an early stage of this study, contributed to two essential objectives. On the one hand, we have to consider the work that is expected to be developed by the network of educational partners in the next phase of this study, i.e., the design, implementation and evaluation of a project on intercultural education. From this standpoint, the interview enabled us to gather data that allow us to envision how networking can take place, taking into account previous experiences and representations of the various partners with regard to this type of work.

The fact that all partners have affirmed the previous participation in other studies involving partnerships show that they are aware of the responsibilities and constraints that such work entails, but also all the gains it may bring to their personal and professional development. However, it should be taken into account that the respondents' prior representations regarding the work developed in partnership differ, which indicates some uncertainty in the meaning of this concept and a possible need for further and explicit reflection on the subject.

We also believe that prior knowledge of other partners with whom they will work and the recognition of the value of the work performed by them has led the participants to accept the invitation to join this network of partnerships. We believe that this factor may be what gives them the motivation and confidence to try to "give their best" and expect the other partners to correspond those expectations. According to this, we expect that this journey may be a place for shared reflection, full of discoveries and achievements and an improvement in performance and personal and professional satisfaction of all participants (Damiani, 2008; Roldão, 2007).

Moreover, it is our intention to include in the final phase of this study a new moment of survey to the participants in the network of partnerships. We intend, therefore, to know their views on the conduct of the work that has been done and assess the evolution of their representations not only about working in partnership but also on the theme of intercultural education. On this matter, we have already concluded that all respondents seem to be aware to the issues of interculturalism although this concept may still be confused with multiculturalism or even a mere cultural training (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006; Dervin, 2010; Portera, 2008).

However, they all claim they feel the need to acquire more knowledge on this subject. This seems to be another motivation that led them to accept the invitation to form the network of educational partners. In this sense, we think it will be important to include moments of training on intercultural education in the course of the project, enabling participants the co-construction of a collective definition of this concept. Such definition will be an essential guidance for the design of the activities to implement with their students and all the community. Thus, we believe that the development of this project can lead to rethink and improve intercultural practices of all partners of the network in order to provide students, parents and the community the necessary growth to become the best citizens in this intercultural world.

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