Inclusion and Teachers' Training: Reflecting upon Hows and Whys

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Abstract: *This work discusses an action on teachers' training called Pedagogical Residence, a course offered to graduates from a public University in Brazil who decided to go on with teaching but come to us for support. Here we present some workshops dealing with inclusion, prejudice and other issues regarding situations teachers have to face and need to work what we call 'the hows and whys'. The workshops were planned and developed by masters and doctoral students, as well as undergraduate students at the end of the course of Education at UERJ, who held some sort of financial assistance from the university, as scholarships for initial research. Methodology is examination of the use of narratives by teachers enrolled in the process; the main results show that universities and school systems can think together about long term programs considering that teachers' training is a co-responsibility process.*

Keywords: Teachers' training; University-school co-participation; Narratives.

Introduction

This work discusses an action on teachers' training called Pedagogical Residence, a course offered to graduates from a public university in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, who decided to go on with teaching but come to us for support for beginning teachers graduated from the institution, although has been incorporating newcomers from other institutions brought by colleagues who believe in what we do and share.

The paper presents thoughts about meetings where the discussions dealt with inclusion, prejudice and other issues regarding situations teachers face and need to work what we call 'the hows and whys'. Other debates occurred about broader subjects like teacher-student interactions, content to be planned and delivered to students, day-to-day situations with parents regarding students' misbehavior or homework. The kind of work that can be developed with teachers and in the schools is an example of how the university can work with schools and help to develop human resources.

In order to be a good teacher we need to help others develop what they have and do best, unfortunately, a culture not well developed at university level. As professors we tend to give our 'knowledge' to the ones who we think don't know much, going against the thought of Freire (1994) on teaching as an exchange and a feeling that good teaching involves a constant dialogical conversation between student and teacher and student-student.

The main methodological approach for the present research, dealing with the dialectics between theory and practice, consisted of pedagogical activities that enabled participant and collaborative planning and research. The university team and the teachers involved with the activity worked together, for a process constructing knowledge dialoguing, interacting, and reflecting upon the possibilities brought about by the proposed activity, to the group and to the individuals as well. The goal was to make it possible for public school teachers to be reflexive in the exercise of their chosen teaching profession. The Pedagogical Residence was registered as an extension program for those involved and as a consequence it would certify for career development. It is hard to measure the effects of such initiatives so this recognition was significant for the project's success.

Theoretical Reflexions

While reflecting on the process developed with the participants, a discussion on the notion of belonging became a significant way of linking deeper constructions on perceptions about ourselves and others. The conception of belonging refers to a possibility of changing behaviors, attitudes and values for transforming people and relations capable of creating protagonists of a new paradigm.

Morin (2000) considers belonging to humanity as a triad made up of the individual, species and society. In this approach, society lives for the individual, s/he lives for society and both live for the human species. For this author, the movement between unity and diversity assures individuals' self-realization, perpetuation of culture and society's self-organization, and understands belonging as a feeling. By considering that its ethical and political purpose is plenitude and free expression by individuals, this movement between unity and diversity states that all truly human development is nothing more than the development of individual autonomy, communitarian participations and feelings of belonging to human species. According to Morin, several manifestations witness the presence of the *homus ludens, poeticus, consumans, imaginarius, demens*. (Morin, 2000, p. 50). These are seen in activities like games and parties that are not only pauses before returning to work or 'real' life, and beliefs in gods and ideas which cannot be reduced to illusions or superstitions as they have roots that refer to the human being in its own nature. He suggests that education can illustrate the unity/diversity principle in all spheres and nothing human can be considered strange as prejudice is present in everyday life, culturally constructed by humans and hard to break down. Stating that we ascribe deficiencies to our students and their families, Palmer (1998) challenged us to see students as they really are: "Why do we diagnose their condition in morbid terms that lead to deadly modes of teaching? Our conventional diagnosis allows us to ignore our failings as teachers by blaming the victims." Once we accept that all children can learn at high levels, we have increased their chances of feeling a sense of belonging in our classrooms. One way we can accomplish a sense of belonging is to build community within the classroom. And that can start with building communities within the teachers, studying together themes of their choice, what has relations to our workshop proposal.

For Sarmento (2002), it is within community relations and in the construction of reference values that belonging to groups is built up; social units constitute materials and symbolic reference for individuals, when they perceive themselves as integrated. As we work with teachers as a group in discussing relevant topics to their practice, requested by them, we are

encouraging them to become a social group. By doing so, they are exchanging symbolic and material references, in which they establish links and identity, avoiding isolation from the process. The notion of belonging as social identity is a central aspect of how we define who we are and where we stand. Belonging is a very powerful tool as it deals with our inner self, to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to be accepted and loved, with our strengths and weaknesses. We are individuals but it is our membership to different groups is what matters in constructing our sense of identity. To belong is for humans what a good soil is for plants or a clean sea for fishes, nurturing and providing a safe environment for the adventure of living. In our case, as humans, this involves building social interactions and citizenship.

The idea of social belonging corresponds to a community with personal relations of mutual recognition and feelings of adherence to common principles and visions about the world that enable people to feel participants of the same space and time, origin and territory. Our sense of identity is founded on social interactions that show our belonging to particular communities through shared beliefs, values, or practices. The choices that we make, from our religious views to friends that we acquire, to the cars we drive or the insurance we buy, serve to position us as part of the groups, networks and communities that make up human society.

Developing a sense of belonging is an ongoing process that involves membership in, or exclusion from, a wide variety of different groups during the course of our lives. In a society where our social status is, to a great extent, measured by the work we do or the money we earn, it is no surprise that professional identity is an important locus of belonging for both men and women. It is, after all, often the first characteristic that people offer up when introducing themselves to others. On empowering teachers through processes of self-improvement, we, as the university voice, can help improve working conditions for those who are at the public schools and can feel better about their career choice and their place in society.

The importance given to our membership within particular groups, like family, workplace, school or any other space, can determine the kind of identities we build. One can be aware of changes that occur over time, one group that we used to belong to suddenly does not say much to us anymore. The students we deal with in schools sense that feeling all the time and we, as attentive teachers, must pay attention to these situations. Often these situations are potentially harmful for those who feel excluded for a long period of time, from all groups. Failing to achieve an adequate sense of belonging can have important negative consequences (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). On the other hand, as we join and leave different social networks and groups, we reposition ourselves in relation to others, developing new connections and discarding others in a continuous process of social interaction and integration. This is very positive for our constitution as human beings living in society. Opposing the idea of belonging, we have the exclusion processes in society in general and in classrooms in particular. We dealt with inclusion as a category, talking about the examples brought up by teachers as we went along to the workshops, discussing and reflecting together.

Castel (1997) notes that social dysfunction should not be considered as exclusion. When dealing with situations of school exclusion, teachers should sort out symptoms that can lead to mistakes in judgment. We have to try to assure that positive discrimination measures, that are necessary, do not become exceptions and also try to remember the preventive aspects of fight

against exclusion. When dealing with teachers, several issues can be related to the feeling of exclusion, like salary and social recognition. Castel examines the issue of exclusion in an historical perspective, emphasizing the relations that are present. For him, exclusion is not lack of social relations, but a set of particular social relationships in society taken as a whole.

The concept of exclusion is a theoretically disputed subject. It is also political, insofar as the way to see the phenomenon involves certain ways to treat it when thinking about practical measures of intervention. Thus, a vision of social exclusion as a phenomenon that expresses disruptions in the social fabric suggests the construction of new theoretical paradigms and ways of life never thought of before. On the other hand, social exclusion as a form of precarious insertion can turn revolutionary propositions of social transformations into reformists or even superficial proposals. In a society such as Brazil's, which many argue is based on inequality, one has to be aware of the difference between given rights and rights that have been fought for by individuals and groups within society. Concessions do not build up citizenship, self-understanding does. Therefore, theory and practice must come together, interacting and mutually influencing one another.

Exclusion does not necessarily mean marginalization, even if it can, sometimes, lead to it. To make sure that we are talking about exclusion in the same way, it is necessary to take into account the procedures that lead to exclusion, which may be diverse. During the workshop teachers talked often about excluded students. This made us think about the processes these students and teachers live with in schools that promote situations we try to avoid.

Erwin (2003) calls our attention to the importance of good relations in schools saying that we are social creatures, live in family units, work on teams, form civic organizations, attend social gatherings, and engage in hundreds of other behaviors that help us connect with others. He states that there is a lifelong connection between the quality of our relationships and our physical and mental well-being. Erwin advises teachers to create the conditions for students to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in dozens of ways. He provides examples: learning each student's name as soon as possible; engaging students in activities that help them learn one another's names; greeting all students as they enter your classroom; letting students know your outside interests, what you stand for, and who you are; engaging students in team-building activities; teaching them how to work cooperatively; and, giving regular opportunities to learn in structured cooperative activities. A good approach and form of evaluation is to conduct class meetings on a regular basis for class-building, problem-solving, and content-related discussions.

In the course of our lives, we become interdependent, and form many give-and-take relationships, building a healthy interdependence with family, community, and culture. Biologically designed to live, play, grow, and work in groups, we are, at our core, social creatures. Affiliation is the strength that allows us to join with others to create something stronger, more adaptive, and more creative than any individual: the group. Perry (2002) suggests that teachers can help their students to master skills for group work and develop sense of belonging by being aware of exclusion processes that occur in their classrooms and, in so doing, promote better interaction activities, dealing with violence episodes that can emerge in such situations. It is a good way to use tasks that require two or three students to accomplish so these activities will help them see the value in cooperating and team building.

Presenting the work developed: the hows

The project was organized as workshops planned and developed by the group, especially involving educational inclusion/exclusion concerning public school students. Unfolding themes of interest for teachers helped them make interconnections between theory and practice, broadening their possibilities for action within the public school system. The entire process developed with the group of teachers and school administrators had, as a main goal, the improvement of classroom interactions, as far as the teaching process related to contents transmission as well as improving teacher-student relations.

The project was officially registered as an extension program for those involved and, as a result, it would certify them for training undergraduate and graduate students in charge of planning and developing the several activities undertaken. It is hard to measure the effects of such initiatives so this recognition was significant for the project's success. To ensure that the results reach the classroom and operate any significant change in basic education, teachers need to have information and knowledge about them. In this way, we this work contributes in a way that teachers can understand: the interactions that are expressed within the classroom and thus have subsidies to develop a pedagogical practice centered on the student and their learning and the prospect of their future success.

We believe in the possibilities of an alternative of overcoming the difficulties presented daily in the school through dialogues between research and educational practices in the classroom, allowing for the creation of spaces for inclusion within the school. Thus, the development of activities with recurring thematics in education can provide a critical mass driving towards an educative praxis in favor of all students. The goal was to make it possible for public school teachers, both while taking part in the workshops and afterwards, to be reflexive in the exercise of teaching.

The workshops were planned and developed by masters and doctoral students, as well as undergraduate students at the end of the course of Education at UERJ, all who held some financial assistance from the university. The activities were meant to discuss themes of interest, explain the issues involved and to promote interaction between the given content and the participants. At the end of the work, there was an individual assessment to evaluate the program. The intention was to lead teachers to discuss more specific issues on inclusion, thus enabling discussions among the group so that all could give their contributions. In this context, we built together with teachers a proposal for the work, talked about students with educational difficulties and discussed with teachers their pedagogical practices. The aim was to provide an opportunity for the possibility of self-reflection of their practices with a critical glance and a desire to improve their way of teaching and seeing the teaching profession.

Educating teachers can be a very challenging task. To propose workshops in order to discuss concepts and practices in this area deals with private and public dimensions and individual and collective perspectives in a way that completes a cycle. According to Josso (2004), it is through the dialectics of individuals and groups that we build our humanity, so the process lived by teachers and the UERJ team reflects relations in movement. We searched our inner selves, our roots and reflecting on our experiences have our individual points of view, give meaning to our stories and, from a collective point of view, we understand ourselves as

belonging to a community. The people involved have learned that one can combine constraints with margins of freedom, through an increase of lucidity (Josso, 2004).

Some considerations: the whys

University research can play an important role in promoting spaces of reflection and improvement. It is our social duty to give a return to society who pays our wages and grants. An evaluation of the project brings about a contribution on the understanding of alternatives to deal with school failure, promoting other forms of dealing with our frustrations and drawbacks when performing the difficult mission of teaching. We learned once more that research in education could be a form of producing better conditions for all those actors involved in schooling. We learn that better relations can lead to better performances. We believe this kind of approach can inspire others who work in the field of teacher training in dealing with inclusion.

Our goals were to promote an interaction between research and practice, bringing benefits to all involved in the process, broadening the scope of possible approaches to teaching and learning. Dialoguing about experiences and feelings, bridges were built in order to enhance belonging within the groups and strengthen individuals to deal with their realities as committed professionals.

From our lived experience, we note that it is necessary to search for strategies that can help overcome difficulties and challenges building up a school community where all feel a belonging to that universe, creating and maintaining positive interactions without losing individual singularities. Universities and school systems can think together about long term programs, curricular organization, space organization, power relations, towards building a more democratic and participatory school prepared to incorporate a new culture. At the same time, it is important to open new environments for participation and expression of students' from diverse backgrounds. For that, there must be an aggregator space, where coexistence and tolerance of differences are key elements to ensure a stable environment and healthy intra and interpersonal relations.

We, as teachers of teachers, need to acquire knowledge of the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of diversity and to understand the relations between individual and group identities and functioning, so that teachers are able to recognize different aspects of diversity, not as student deficits, but as resources for promoting a rich learning environment. A wide range of teaching approaches, methods and materials for responding to diversity exists; we need to know these approaches and acquire the skills in inquiring about different socio-cultural issues; we also need to be able to create, in our classrooms and in the school community, a climate in which there is open-mindedness and respect. This involves developing students' understanding, curiosity about and respect for others and nurturing positive relationships. It is an important part of teaching to find ways to motivate and stimulate all students to participate in learning and to find creative ways of ensuring that they are not excluded from participation. Teaching children to learn both individually and in co-operation with others is an important way of developing a strong school community and enhancing relationships within it.

The Pedagogical Residence brought significant resources for teachers and the university. We educators must understand that in every teaching-learning experience one must consider his

or her own knowledge, the knowledge of others and, when possible, grow in knowledge and humanity. This work can help to improve teacher-student interactions, and also help raise consciousness about the importance of self-reflection in teachers training.

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