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Dialogic Learning in Interactive Groups

by M. Josepa Adell Nolla, Carlos Herrero, and Belinda Siles

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This jointly written article is the attempt to share with other teachers, teacher trainers, other professionals and participants in the field of education, our experiences with *interactive groups*. It brings new meaning to our work to see children infused with hope, enthusiasm and purpose in the classroom since we have begun this egalitarian educational practice. The joy and fulfilment we are seeing and experiencing is contagious. We feel that to bring to light innovations that are working in the classroom and school is fundamental for all of us in our profession as we take on the responsibility, along with parents and other community members, of accompanying children on part of their journey in the learning process. We hope that these exchanges, can help us to move step by step together towards overcoming social, educational and economic inequalities, and assuring every child's participation in the knowledge society.

The decision to adopt the practice of interactive groups was an important step in the process of converting our schools into Learning Communities, at the heart of which lies the commitment on the part of teachers, family members, boys and girls, other professionals and community members to make our educational and social dreams a reality. We were inspired by the promise of a new horizon, in the knowledge society, in which "no child is left behind" as the result of ethnic, cultural, socio-economic or religious background. What we have discovered, through our daily experiences with interactive groups, is that teaching on the basis of equality and dialogue, or the principles set out by dialogic learning, is a way to ensure more learning as well as solidarity among all of the participants in the Learning Community.

With dialogic learning we aim high: high expectations for every child, high educational quality and high educational results. The principles of egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, solidarity, instrumental learning, transformation, creation of meaning and the equality of differences set the theoretical ground for the practice of interactive groups and, in the words of Freire, *the language of possibility*. Work in heterogeneous groups and the participation with young people of family members, volunteers and community members, alongside the teachers, has allowed us to open our doors to transformations that are profound and tangible. We are seeing learning happen on many different levels: instrumental, social and psychological.

Sharing this common project has been a source of meaning in the lives of students, their families and the whole educational community in both of our schools in Dr. Fleming in Viladecans and Dr. Alberich i Casas in Reus. In the two experiences that we present below we hope to paint a picture of the dream that we have been building together on a daily basis.

Doctor Fleming is a public Primary school situated in the outskirts of the city of Viladecans, in the province of Barcelona, in Catalonia (Spain).

We started the Learning Communities project in Doctor Fleming school in 2002. Since then, an extremely gratifying process of transformation has been observed, for all the teaching staff, students, families and the neighborhood in general. Reading the informative leaflet that the school has prepared this semester, it is quickly evident how this community understands the Learning Communities project and the aspects that are most emphasised:

Last semester our center started its transformation to a Learning Community; as we know, it is a project of transformation that seeks to improve school performance and to avoid social and cultural marginalization. These two large aims can only be achieved based on the active participation of the surrounding community, families and volunteers with the school in a joint project. Our involvement and active participation are fundamental for the project's success.

Organizing the class into interactive groups is important in order to reach these objectives. Learning processes have been created that help to overcome current barriers in the education system, improving school performance and avoiding children's exclusion from the education system.

To be able to carry out interactive groups, the participation of volunteers is very important, given that organizing such groups within the classroom requires the presence of various adults. This year, 25 volunteers have collaborated in the school, among them, university students, relatives, ex-students, high school students. We hope that, as the project progresses, an even greater number of people will come to collaborate in the school than happened in our first year of transforming the center into a Learning Community, during which we counted on the involvement and help of 40 volunteers. The students' attitude towards the volunteers is very positive, which facilitates learning and increases motivation, creating a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom.

The experiences of interactive groups is dispelling the teaching staffs' initial skepticism and providing sufficiently valid arguments to defend and demonstrate the pedagogic orientations of the project - permanent progress and high expectations- as results are achieved in practice.

In response to the suggestion by a volunteer to group the students according to performance level, two teachers quickly answered that "in our school we do not do this because having heterogeneous groups greatly enriches everyone's learning. They help each other, and in this way complement each other. In day-to-day work, it has been demonstrated that they advance much more when they work all together, and it would be a shame to lose all the shared enrichment."

Another aspect that stands out is to see how the interactive groups help to increase the self-esteem of the student and the expectations that some boys and girls have of themselves. They are changing roles continuously, as some students that have always needed help from their peers to carry out tasks, are now helping the other students and seeing that their knowledge and skills are valued and recognized.

As we have already mentioned, Doctor Fleming Primary School is in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Viladecans. Once in the area, the multicultural reality of the neighborhood is immediately apparent. We find girls and boys who have recently arrived in the country and for them language is the first obstacle to overcome. However, the organization of interactive groups allows us to follow the work of each child with closer attention, combining learning the different school subjects with learning the language. In addition, language learning is promoted by the dynamics of interactive groups, in which the participants engage in more dialogue and mutual help to overcome difficulties.

At the beginning of the school year, a volunteer who had just started said to the teacher, "It surprises me that, with the variety of cultures together in the classroom, there hasn't been a single conflict yet." The teacher answered that at the beginning of the last semester there were more conflicts, and less interrelation between the students but they had worked hard to resolve the problems.

The interrelations that take place between students in interactive groups are a very important factor in resolving this situation. The groups are made up of four or five children who are grouped heterogeneously, regardless of their learning level or cultural origin. In the groups, apart from acquiring academic knowledge, values like solidarity among cultures are promoted. In an assembly, family members said that in the school and its activities, they teach their children to live in today's world, a multicultural world, where it is important to encourage living together and understanding others.

As Paulo Freire, said *we are beings of transformation and not accommodation*, and in Doctor Fleming School in Viladecans, we attempt to transform education, trying not to adopt a passive position that leads to adaptation and acceptance of adverse situations. We are fighting on a daily basis to assure the educational success of all the children.

The motivation that is awakened and the good results that are reaped in interactive groups result from the development of dialogic learning, where relations based on solidarity are generated among students, and where, on the basis of egalitarian dialogue and the pedagogy of maximums, all students see their abilities valued, which gives meaning to education.

Dr. Alberich i Casas *is a public Primary school situated in the outskirts of the city of Reus, province of Tarragona, in Catalonia (Spain).*

To talk about interactive groups in our school means referring to one of the main reasons that motivated us to transform our school into a Learning Community. As teachers, we did not feel satisfied with our students' results. Evidently, there had already been a concern that had led to gradual changes in our work: a communicative focus in language learning, organizing the curriculum through work projects, etc.; but in the end, they did not produce the changes we had hoped for. Therefore, we had to look for another solution. Many of us saw clearly in the sensitization phase that incorporating more people than those teaching in the classrooms could help us with this. The pedagogic focus we were following to improve learning was, to a certain extent, already along these lines, given that the tendency of the school was to put more teachers in the classroom, rather than remove those students that had difficulties to give them extra help externally.

Our first step was to make a call for possible volunteers, a vital element for our project.

The channel used was the Commission for Pedagogical Quality, through which a media campaign was designed: advertisements were sent to local newspapers, television and radio stations. Notices were also put up in the University and in establishments close to the school. Finally, they were handed out to all the families. The publicity campaign was run intensively for 15 days. The potential volunteers were asked to go to the school, where their schedule of availability was written down. Once the database had been created, the teachers interested in organizing interactive groups compared their needs and schedules with those of the potential volunteers for each class. All this organizational work took up the first semester of the school year 2002-03

Once we had "hired the staff " we started to include them in classes during the second semester. In the first session, we were overcome with nervousness. On the one hand, the teachers had to design many more learning activities and commit to a fixed timetable, (the activities in each group cannot be longer than 20 minutes) On the other hand, the volunteers (the majority mothers and fathers of the students) expressed their fears of "not being up to par". But all our doubts dissolved on the first day. As a result, when we were evaluating together how the experience had gone at the end of the semester, we agreed that it had been extremely positive. Teachers emphasize the intensive pace that work has taken on. Tasks that in normal conditions required twice or three times as long to cover in class, were completed in 20 minutes. Volunteers stressed the good climate of collaboration that was created among them and how this made the class cohesive. The fact that they had to face teaching tasks made them value much more the efforts of those who work in the field of education. Also, the successful results reinforced the self-esteem of all the participants.

In the work they do, volunteers see a way of refreshing their own education. This is especially true with regards to Spanish speakers who are not used to speaking Catalan. Given that this is the main language used in the school, everybody makes an effort to speak it correctly, something that results in positive linguistic attitudes and enriched personal experiences. The most spectacular experiences were those of some special education students, who, with individual help from a volunteer, were for the most part able to be just students like others and were not left out of the group as happens in more traditional classes.

We use the interactive groups to consolidate basic instrumental learning. Generally, in language and in mathematics, in each session there is a task from a different part of the curriculum: comprehension, oral and written expression in language; calculation, problems and measurements in math. We place greater emphasis on hands-on work (learning to tell the time is not the same as measuring angles etc. in groups of six as it is with the whole class) and, in teaching oral expression, interactive groups are very dynamic.

In terms of the organization of each group, they function in the following way. The volunteers are informed about the task beforehand. Generally, they arrive at the school fifteen minutes before the classes start, (usually in the afternoon) in case there is anything that needs to be talked about and also in order to start on time. In the hour and a half that we have, we can run four different activities each lasting twenty minutes. At the end of the session, there is time to talk

about how everything has gone and we make note of the things that need to be improved. The tasks for the next day are also assigned so that everybody can prepare.

The space we work in is the same for each class although the set up is different depending on the level. For example, in Early Childhood Education -3 years- there are four large tables placed separately, each with a different colored tablecloth. The children divide up randomly, (when they do not fit in the same activity they look for another space with another activity to do). Once the time has run out, (15 minutes in this case) the tutor running the class plays the triangle and they all know they must leave what they are doing and change activities. In High School, the distribution of the students is planned in advance. We put up a list every three months on the notice board in the class. There are four different groups, always heterogeneous, and the students know which group they are in because of their number on the list. Each group of students corresponds to different weeks in the trimester, which are color-coded. This makes it easy for each student to know where to go, so that when the afternoon session starts everyone is already seated and they can make maximum use of the time. When we go to the Information Technology class, the volunteers are the ones that go round the tables.

Having completed one year since the beginning of our experiment, we have interactive groups in practically all of the classes. Only in the Middle school have they not yet been convinced of the merit of this initiative. However, we do not doubt that it will be only a matter of time before they join us.

Conclusion

We work in two different neighborhoods and schools; however, we share a common project, in which we have chosen a new form of education, one in which everyone's needs and interests are recognized and valued. Opening the school doors to the community, volunteers and students' family members to participate in interactive groups, among many other activities, has given us the support, richness of experience and range of teaching styles to carry out a practice that is transforming all of our lives. Children from different backgrounds, with different experiences, or with different learning stages, who in the past might have been separated for varying reasons, are now working together in groups. They help each other and learn from one another, increasing their instrumental knowledge and building relationships on the basis of equality and respect for difference.