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Participation and Learning in a Jenaplan School in the Netherlands: An Ethnographic Research with Children

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Abstract

This paper presents an ethnographic case study carried out in a Dutch Jenaplan primary school and it focuses on two dimensions: the conditions created by teachers which could favour or inhibit the participative and autonomous action of children, and the way children act, interpret and learn in those conditions. The analysis of the empirical data provided a comprehension about children's participation and learning at school using the Jenaplan pedagogy, taking into account relationships, space, time and materials. In methodological terms, children's collaboration revealed their competence and provided significant material for the research through their inner perspectives.

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1. Introduction

The existing research concerning children education is predominantly focused on teachers and the ways they teach. Other perspectives have emerged during the last decades, namely through Child Studies and particularly Childhood Sociology, which conceive children as social actors and emphasize their active and competent role in the learning process, valuing the daily experience and the principles of participation and autonomy. Considering these perspectives, this paper presents a research carried out in a Dutch primary school whose Jenaplan pedagogical principles are dialogue, play, work and celebration. The way children act at school and participate in their learning process demonstrates the special importance of children's perspectives. It could represent a significant step for the knowledge of children's cultures at school as well as enhancing children's learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

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2. Children's participation and learning at school

The traditional model of teaching all as one is still rooted in the pedagogical action of teachers due to the social and historical conditions that had influence in school and also in the child's social status along the decades. Children were mostly seen in their specific role of student, considered an immature being who needed to be educated by school and socialized by adults for his/her tough entry to society (Sirota, 2012). However, there are models, principles, values and techniques developed by educators such as Montessori, Parkhurst, Petersen or Freinet, who were influenced by others, namely Dewey, Froebel, Pestalozzi, that had focused on the importance of children's action at school as well as the creation of conditions to promote their autonomy, self development, communication and participation on school's learning process and daily life. Nowadays, the theoretical perspective of *agency*, that understands children as social actors, is being claimed among the academic and social fields, namely on Child Studies, especially within the "New Sociology" of childhood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Corsaro, 2004), in which children are seen as rational, competent and self-controlled beings (King, 2007). The Convention on the Rights of the Child also addresses the importance of children's participation and its right to make decisions in the contexts that influences their lives, school included (Alderson, 2000). Recently, the educational systems have abundantly adopted terms such as *participation*, *autonomy* and *success* but the complexity of the nature, levels and forms of participation are issues pointed out in many critical perspectives (Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) that need to be studied taking into consideration the particularities of the contexts and the involvement of the social actors (Christensen & James, 2000). Nonetheless, the topic of participation is not unproblematic as it depends on children's actions and competences; family, cultural, economic and political contexts, without ignoring the power relations which cross the social structures and influence the concrete possibilities of participation.

3. Children's voice and meanings: A collaborative and participative research with children

3.1. The method and its techniques

Due to the vision and recognition of children as active citizens, participatory research with children has been increasingly used by researchers to know children's views and opinions (Christensen & James, 2000; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Mayall, 2000; O'Kane, 2000; Punch, 2002) considering as well the benefits by the ethical, epistemological and political aspects that support it (Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman, 2010). Positioning in the sense of the children's capacity to participate in a scientific research that aims to understand their lives, it was undertaken an ethnographical case study in a Dutch Jenaplan primary school where children had a crucial role in gathering data and in its further interpretation. In order to get the children's meanings about their daily life at school, we intended to understand the mechanisms that enable children's participation in an Jenaplan school aiming to i) understand how the pedagogical model adopted by the school – the Jenaplan Pedagogy takes into consideration the children's participation; ii) comprehend the type of relationships and interactions between children and teachers that promotes the children's participation and iii) recognize the effects of school time, space and materials on children's participation.

The research was based on an interpretative paradigm and in qualitative methodologies, involving participant observation, interviews, visual materials and document analysis (Alderson, 2000; Clark & Moss, 2001; Willow et al, 2003; Clark, 2005; Christensen & James, 2000; Mayall, 2000). The researcher's diary notes, the texts, the posters and the visual materials made by children (photos and drawings) were considered essential data that allowed an accurate interpretation. Many techniques and methods to collect the data were made with the children so they were able to participate in the construction of the instruments needed for the research. Visual research techniques were fundamental taking into consideration that the researcher was unable to understand the children's language. In this way, those techniques were very useful for the development of the research in the sense that they helped to discover children's perspectives, experiences and the way they live their lives in a genuine manner.

3.2. *Children's active role on the research*

In order to involve the children in the research, they were invited to take photos and to make drawings regarding some themes and proposals of the research according to the researcher's perceptions and their own options about how they would like to collaborate. The themes were "myself at school", "me and my teacher", "the school", "what I like the most", "what I don't like at all", "children's participating", etc, which were fulfilled through photos or drawings made with pastel, crayons, aquarelle or others according to the children's interests. The proposals were presented before the "period of free play" and they could choose between participating with the researcher's activities or in other possible free activities according to their options. The drawings were made during periods of an hour and the production of photos was carried out during a week, when children captured images all day related to the suggested activity. Other activities were developed with older children, such as a focus-group during the "circle" or "dialogue" time and a play about "a day at school". After gathering each material, amiable conversations with children took place to understand the meanings and the representations of the drawings they made and the photos they took. With the help of a school teacher, the researcher tried to understand the reasons and meanings for certain elements chosen by the children, such as people, places, objects and kind of activities. Circle questions were asked to those who might had given answers about relationships, time, space and materials considering the school model for children's learning and participation.

4. **School's environment and its promotion for children's learning and participation**

The way children act and learn at school is truly related with the conditions prepared by their teachers. Firstly, it was noticed the importance of the school model - the Jenaplan pedagogy – and the thoughts, values, beliefs and experience of the teachers which are linked to the Jenaplan pedagogical principles. The main features of the Jenaplan Education will be clarified in the following section and furthermore its relation with the practical daily aspects on the school where the research was developed.

4.1. *The Jenaplan pedagogy*

The Jenaplan pedagogy emerged in the German University of Jena through the hands of Professor Peter Petersen in the beginnings of the XX century. It was part of the international "New School Movement", linked to the New Education Fellowship which some progressive educators were inspired by more progressive ideas, namely by Dewey and Froebel, about education and children's role in its learning. Jenaplan school's philosophical conception is comprehended as a community based on the humanism, conviviality and cooperation values. Thus, children's grouping is not founded by academic levels but in family-grouping's model in allusion of the home environment where there are children who are the youngsters, the middles and the oldest ones who learn, play and cooperate with each other. Children's activity is understood as a continuation of the family and society activities where there's room for work, play and communication among others. For this reason, the Jenaplan schools have a weekly work schedule that sets the rhythm of the school's and children's life and it consists of four called "basic activities": dialogue, play, work and celebration. The Jenaplan curriculum is called "World Orientation" and it is intended to promote children's responsibility and autonomy that allows them to live in a society orientated by democratic values through experimentation, collaboration and interaction between children and adults inside and outside school. It consists of eight areas of knowledge where the academic skills and social and moral aspects are developed in an integrated way, not necessarily separated by subjects or specific schedules although some skills, namely language and mathematics could be developed in lessons of homogenous groups of children. In this sense, the school's organization should correspond to these principles, namely the space, materials, schedule (rhythm in which the four basic activities are integrated), the pedagogic situations and activities.

4.2. School conditions

The school observed is organized by teachers with the collaboration of parents and children according to the main principles of Jenaplan's education which includes the physical and the pedagogical environment. Thus, space, materials and time organization seeks to promote children's autonomy and interaction between peers and teachers to learn and to promote good relationships has the "school as a community" and as a background principle. Children's life at school is regulated through a rhythmic schedule with the children's knowledge and in where the basic Jenaplan activities (dialogue, play, work and celebration) are assured everyday by: the "circle moments" (dialogue) in the beginning and the end of the day and in between tasks' transitions, and through the "the conversation box" where children write compliments, complaints, suggestions and other kinds of free manifestations that would be read and talked in the "circle moments"; moments of autonomous and collaborative work and free play inside school and rooms; and celebration at the beginning of the week with the whole school, in special occasions of children and common parties and other social occasions. Concerning children's work, in the younger age groups there is a daily rhythmic work plan that is set by cards with pictures of the different moments of the school's day and children can choose the activities they like in a "Choice Board". There's also three tasks per week related to the project that is running in which they can choose the days they will do each task for the purposes of helping them to start managing their work and time. In the middle and the older age groups, children have an individual work plan that is self fulfilled according to the teacher's plan and it gives openness for children to choose the schedule for the majority of exercises of the main subjects and also the project's tasks. Concerning this point, every day children work in a project that can be within the scope of school, group or individuals projects and where most of the subjects and skills development are integrated and in which attempts also to favor children's learning by collaboration among them. There are also other strategies and techniques used by teachers to help children self-regulate which needs to be properly explained in another space.

The environment projected for children's learning and action is thought further than the classrooms and it is extended to the whole school, especially in the corridors which have an important role in children's autonomy and collaboration development among others. The corridors are large, furnished with materials and corners for children's work and play and act as an extension of the classrooms, facilitated also by the glass walls of each room. Children play outside most of the time with natural materials and others provided by the school, and also in the corridors or in the "celebration room" during the "free time play". They are encouraged by teachers to play with their colleagues and also to be responsible for taking care of the school environment, such as on the organization and management of the space and materials. Besides, they are responsible for helping other colleagues from other groups in certain moments of work, for instance to help the youngest children in reading and in Maths exercises.

The importance of these conditions were described and shown through their narratives, drawings and photos during the research. The significance of the "free play moment" and the interaction between peers and teacher, also by expressing their feelings and to contribute on the discussion of the subjects and the important aspects for and in the group, namely on the "circle moments", assumed the significant points for their lives and participation at school. The presence of democratic techniques like the practice of assembly and voting about what things should be changed at school, was observed in the oldest age groups and its inner activities, such as to present and to discuss ideas, to form parties, to vote and to discuss the changes with the school director. These procedures were pointed out by children as to its importance of having a voice inside school. During the activities with the researcher, many children had recognized and valued their power and action at school, mainly the oldest children and those who came from other schools. However, generally children don't necessarily have conscious of these issues because they didn't have previously another school experience. In this way, their participation contributed for its consciousness of the dynamics, roles and power relations that exists on school and involves them. The exercises of gathering data, discussing and thinking with the researcher had brought a dialogical reflexivity both to children and to the researcher.

5. Conclusions

Children's actions at school are inherent to the teacher's role and their educational conceptions that share the main principles of the Jenaplan education and that are implemented through the conception of structured environments composed of spaces, materials, time, social interactions and ways of learning, that favour children's learning, participation and its interpersonal relationships (Azevedo, 2011). The study of this school allowed understanding the children's natural interest to experience, interact with others and with materials. It was noticed room as a space of conviviality and recreation aside autonomous and cooperative work.

The concept of "guided participation" from Rogoff (1991) is useful to explain what was observed on this school, taking into account the conditions prepared by teachers with the cooperation of children and their parents, promoting a democratic environment. On the other hand, the research demonstrates the importance of the children's collaboration on the academic research about issues that concerns their lives as they are competent to understand, select and reveal important information. In fact, ethnography at school, especially in collaboration with children, can be very useful to comprehend the dynamics and meanings of children and teachers perspectives to improve their conditions in order to develop a truly pedagogical and social environment.

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