

DEMOCRACY AND CURRICULUM: THE NEED TO GIVE A NEW MEANING TO CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD(S)

Ofélia Libório

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Abstract

Recalling one of Dewey thoughts there is a consensus among educators that we should regard early childhood settings and schools as learning spaces for democracy through real life experiences of democratic life. Conceptions of self-centred child, with few realistic ideas about the world and about oneself, make democratic living at the kindergarten impossible. Consequently, democracy learning expresses itself, often in Portuguese early childhood curricula, in the learning of values and morals imposed by the early childhood teacher. These practices are opposite to research results that point to the advantage in children participating in competency development (Bennett, 2004) which is essential to democracy learning.

Changing conceptions culturally rooted about the child /children and the curriculum has been in our concern in the early childhood teachers' initial training (Aveiro University and Santarém Polytechnic Institute). Keeping that purpose in mind, we developed a research project of investigation-action-training with some teacher students and their supervisors. In this paper we present some results from the study developed with 18 teacher-students and 5 supervisors. We present some conclusions and reflection of this study based on content analysis of their learning portfolios and on semi-structured interviews to teacher-students and their teacher supervisors. The results point to the emergence of some ideas inherent to the conception of the child as a social actor with the capacity and ability of participating in the social life.

Keywords: Early childhood curriculum; Initial training.



Resumo

Resgatando um dos pensamentos de Dewey é consensual entre os educadores a ideia de que devemos encarar as instituições educativas como espaços de aprendizagem da democracia através de experiências de vida democrática. As concepções de criança auto-centrada, com ideias pouco realistas sobre o mundo e sobre si própria, impossibilitam a vida democrática no Jardim de infância. Consequentemente, a aprendizagem da democracia traduz-se, muitas vezes, nos currículos em Portugal, numa aprendizagem de valores baseada numa moralização imposta pelo educador. Estas práticas contrariam indicações oriundas da investigação que apontam para vantagens da participação das crianças quanto ao desenvolvimento de competências (Bennett, 2004) que consideramos essenciais à vida numa sociedade democrática.

Com intuito de mudar concepções culturalmente enraizadas sobre criança e currículo, desenvolvemos um projecto de investigação-acção-formação com alunos estagiários e educadores supervisores. As reflexões que apresentamos resultam da análise de conteúdo realizada aos portefólios de aprendizagem dos alunos e a entrevistas semi-estruturadas realizadas a alunos e educadores. Os resultados indicam alguma apropriação de ideias inerentes à concepção de criança actor social, com capacidade de participação na vida social.

Palavras-Chave: Currículo na educação de infância; Formação inicial.

Introduction

Recalling one of Dewey thoughts there is a consensus among educators that we should view early childhood institutions as learning spaces for democracy through real life experiences of democratic life. Nevertheless, democracy demands that, beyond the respect for individual freedom and differences, citizens should take part in the life of the community.

Conceptions of self-centred child, with few realistic ideas about the world and about oneself, make democratic living at the early childhood institutions impossible. Consequently, democracy learning expresses itself, often in Portuguese early childhood curricula, in the learning of values and morals imposed by the early



childhood educator. These practices are opposite to research results that point to the advantage in children participating in competency development (Bennett, 2004) which is essential to democracy learning.

Changing conceptions culturally rooted about the child/children and the curriculum has been in our concern in the early childhood teachers' initial education (Aveiro University and Santarém Polytechnic Institute.) Keeping that purpose in mind, we developed two research projects of research-practice-education with some teacher students and their supervisors. In this paper we present some results from Aveiro University's study developed with 18 teacher-students and 5 supervisors and some reflection about the on-going project developed in Santarém with 6 early childhood educators/ students supervisors. We present some conclusions and reflection of this study based on content analysis of their learning portfolios and on semi-structured interviews to teacher-students and their teacher supervisors. From the study conducted in Santarém, we present some data from the teachers' supervisors' portfolios about the inclusion of children's ideas and quality evaluation of their early childhood institution.

The results indicate the emergence of some ideas inherent to the conception of the child as a social actor with the capacity and ability of participating in the social life.

Conceptual Framework

Discourses about Early Childhood Education are actually integrating the idea that "children should be heard in the matters that concern them". This is a sentence that can either be seen through the philosophical point of view, attributing children the "whole person status" or through the historical and social point of view regarding the place of children on today's society. Childhood studies from the scientific point of view still miss evidence of children knowledge that takes into account children perspectives. In Portugal, as in other countries, a new understanding of childhood and children is emerging under the influence of the sociology of childhood (Prout and James, 1990 referred by Dahlberg; Moss and Pence, 1999), but this knowledge is not yet disseminated among specialists, practitioners and society in general. This paradigm includes the ideas that *"children are social actors, participating in constructing and determining their own lives, but also the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live, and contributing to learning as agents building on experiential knowledge. In short, they have agency"* (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). In western societies, this is also a political problem as children don't contribute to the development



of a democratic society if we don't consider their voices (Sarmento, 2006).

Problem and Main Objectives

Debates around teacher education eternally evolve around the Theory versus Practice dilemma. To the moment we haven't been able to find the "magic formula" (and it seems that we will never find it) capable of conducting Early Childhood Education students to build knowledge through the interlace of values and scientific theories (supposedly universal) contextualized through praxis.

Changing conceptions, the image of the child and pedagogical culture demands that we try, as early childhood educators' supervisors, ways of interlace that make building pedagogical knowing possible. This project's main objective is to create a learning context where such interlace is possible.

Children, constructions and images we have of the young child and dominant discourses that influence our "theories" of childhood were the main axis through which we made the research, the teacher education and practice in this project. The children researches through themselves (methods and techniques) were the content and the strategies elected as we aimed to develop professional competencies in our students.

Simultaneously, we think that the contexts in which our students practice (early childhood institutions) are also determinant in their future professional identity and pedagogical practice. In this way we think it is vital to develop equivalent processes (research – action – education) with the early childhood educators that supervise students in practice.

So, in this presentation we put forward some data based on the project developed with the students' initial training (Aveiro) and some data based on the early childhood educators (that cooperate in the teachers education) continuous training (Santarém).

The final main goals and conceptual framework are equivalent but they are two independent projects.

Objectives (Aveiro)

1. Clarify and de-construct students' conceptions of the young child that make students "immune" to teacher education:



- a) Through students in practice, create different ways of thinking about/ and acting with children – children as participants;
 - b) Through supervision and reflective practice, involve the team working in the early childhood institution in the progress made by the students.
2. Promote practice reflection about students' own knowledge and ways of actively listen to children:
 - a) De-construct what we know about children and pedagogy on Early Childhood Education, rehearsing ways of participating through actively listening to children.
 3. Build knowledge about children.

Objectives (Santarém)

Although the project developed in Santarém has the same final goals (teachers' initial education) it developed in its first stage as an autonomous project of action-research. The challenge presented to the early childhood educators was to develop ways of evaluating their own settings in cooperation with the others (children, parents, other staff) and establish their own plan of action based on previous assessment. The references were based on the DQP Project – the Portuguese adaptation of the EEL – Effective Early Learning Project (Pascal et al., 2006). The goals for this project were:

1. Clarify and de-construct educators' conceptions of the young child:
 - a) Through the instruments designed to promote children participation (DQP/ EEL children interviews) create different ways of thinking about/ and acting with children;
 - b) Through analysis and reflection on collected data, involve the team working in the early childhood institution (teacher students included) in the progress made by the educators.
2. Promote practice reflection about students and educators' own knowledge and ways of actively listen to children:
 - a) De-construct what we know about children and pedagogy on Early



Childhood Education, rehearsing ways of participating through actively listening to children.

3. Build knowledge about children.

Methodological Principles

In both projects, our purpose is to conduct a project where research – practice - teacher education are interconnected and promote each other. We follow some principles:

- Supervision as a way to provide external support to Early Childhood Institutions.
- Student/Educator research project articulated with pedagogical practice. Theory - Practice articulation through action-research;
- Research through students' and educators' written documents and notes taken through out the process.

The methods and techniques of generating and interpret data are:

- Content analysis of learning portfolios;
- Semi-structured interview to participants (students and educators) and content analysis;
- Notes taken through out the process, namely on meetings

In this paper we only refer to the students and educators' trial aiming participation and actively listening to children and to the effects of this practice in their professionalism and pedagogical knowledge. In this paper presentation, we focused on the Aveiros' analysis on the students while in Santarém, the analysis was focused in the early childhood educators. We wanted to asses the reflection made through out the entire process of quality evaluation by early childhood educators. For this, each educator had a *portfolio* that was shared and educators reflected in team meetings (with the participants from different institutions) about collected data. For this paper presentation we selected the data collected from children as participants in the institution evaluation.

The students' supervisors working in the early childhood institutions were directly involved in the action-research project and the content of their portfolios analysed. The



challenge and starting point of this project was to include children's perspectives on their institution quality evaluation and try new ways of listening to children.

Data Analysis

Students' portfolios and interviews

The learning portfolio is a formative instrument where the student includes what he/ she considers meaningful, worth registering and that can be shared with the persons involved in a co-operating relation (as in supervision). Consequently, data including ways of actively promoting children participation don't emerge in every portfolio with the same detail.

In every Early Childhood Institution, students registered the involvement and emotional well-being of the children (with the instruments adapted from Laevers, 1994). They interviewed children and developed an instrument to register and evaluate activities developed by the children (individual diary).

Each of these instruments, used at different times, led the students to a progressively better comprehension of each child and, above all, to the de-construction of certain theories and images of children.

We will not focus, at this moment, our analysis on the content of children's perspectives but on the student point of view.

We found a positive global effect of the process of Research-Practice-Teacher Education that is summarized in Table 1. We considered the dimensions of professional identity; theory-practice relation; competencies developed and pedagogical practice.

There was also a positive effect of documenting children's "voices" and listening to children (Table 2).

Early Childhood educators' portfolios and interviews

The reflection on the documenting and taking children's perspectives into account when evaluating the quality of early childhood institutions and making decisions concerning the pedagogical project was one of the main objectives of the project that involved early childhood educators. The task was to use and reflect upon instruments of inquiry that consider children's perspectives and validate them as



examples of good practices that could be used in other contexts and model student practice.

Table 1. Global effect of the process of Research-Practice-Teacher Education

<i>Professional Identity</i>	<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Relations between practice and theory</i>	<i>Competencies' development</i>	<i>Pedagogical Practice facilitation</i>
Observes (listens), reflect, is questioned by...	Deepening (integration, new readings)	Articulation	Comment/ listening	The process guides action
Understands children participation as crucial to pedagogical practice	Construction (conceptualization from new information, or from practice)	Understanding or personal validation (to attribute meaning, to believe)	Reflection	The process as action support (contextualized knowledge)
Takes conscience that pedagogical practice carry values		Understanding the theories and its importance (possible interpretive framework, possible practical utility)	Autonomy (security)	Practice coherent with the democratic and humanist values
<i>Values his/her role</i>				

Table 2. Effect of documenting children's "voices" and listening to children

<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Competencies development</i>	<i>Pedagogical Practice facilitation</i>	<i>Effect on children</i>
How to observe/ listen to children (different instruments and procedures)	Observe /listening	Develop pedagogical practice that is coherent with the democratic humanistic values and (inclusion, diversity and singularity, participation)	Competent, participative and critical
	Reflection	Team work (cooperation)	
	Autonomy (security)	Work with the families (cooperation)	
	To deal with the unexpected	Relation with the children	
		Children Knowledge	
		Reply to the interests of the involved ones (quality)	



We will focus on the reflection made throughout the process, by the 6 early childhood educators.

All the educators agreed that this interview was an important instrument that stimulated reflection about children and the way they see/feel the organization and the activities they develop daily in the early childhood institution they attend and, giving them active voice, promotes their involvement and active participation:

“It contributed positively because it allowed that the interviewed children felt their participation strengthened, their capacity to formulate opinions was recognized as their power of decision”

“(...) it promoted the dialogue in the entire group (...) they later agreed on deeper forms of participation for instance making decisions about the purchase of material, involving the families, etc.”

On the other hand, educators enhanced the relevancy and adequacy of children's affirmations, ideas, critiques and suggestions contained in the children's answers:

“The interview gave interesting data and we were surprised with the relevance and content of the answers. The security demonstrated during the inquiry, certifies that they know what they want, what they like and do not like (...)”

“It gave information on what the children thought and wanted to see modified in their setting. I can give the example of the increasing disinterest that the area of table games was having. They considered the purchase of more difficult games and even were affirmative about the amount of games that we would have to buy in order to make that area more appealing”.

“This interview is fantastic and charming. It allowed me to know the vision of the children (I cannot always do it) and consequently adjust it to my “lens”. It helped me to identify organizational issues. It surprised me how the children had clear ideas, opinions and knowledge of the life in the preschool. (...) it gave me the notion of what material lacks were felt by the children and act upon their information: we have to reformulate the costumes area; acquire more equipment for the exterior and another kind of toys; put wooden blocks on the garage area. The idea that not everything is going well in the transport was confirmed (...)”



It was rewarding to verify that the children knew the daily routines, they denote well-being, they are critical:

“In conclusion, I was delighted with the tenderness of the answers, realised that children are sensible and informative about their necessities and each time I reread an interview – There was an idea that I discovered more about, ‘a track’, ‘I can read more in the space between the lines ...’”

Educators considered that the collected information was useful for the improvement of the quality identifying and/or confirming some critical points and, consequently define and/or adjust future action:

“(...) It is certain – the transportation issue has to be dealt with (...)”

The effect of the interview was immediate – these opinions were determinant. It was impossible to stay indifferent to them, an immediate readjustment was made. Sometimes I feel that “the look at the children” gets diluted and mixed with “my look” and it is necessary to do this exercise in order to “focus” my view on the children again:

“Children interviews provide opportunities for exchanging information; help design the curriculum and the pedagogical project for each child”.

As it was said before, educators considered the child interview useful to promote the reflection of the children on the dynamics of the establishment and consequent involvement and quality improvement. Effectively, the accomplishment of the interviews is coherent with the idea that if adequacy and quality of children education is a goal to reach, the active participation of these in the process is not only possible but also indispensable:

“Their was a fortification of the necessity of listening to children and involve them in the educative action, not as mere receivers of the adult “curriculum” and ideas but as active, critical and construction agents of one common project (...) it is a priority to promote children’s active participation in the organization of the educational settings, in the projects, the planning and the evaluation that take place in preschool”

“It strengthen my idea that only with the involvement of the children that takes place when the educator is listening can we promote reasoning, request the



participation of each child, allow children to learn from errors and problem solving. Then it is possible to develop a consistent work that qualifies them and allows children to learn-the-to learn throughout life.”

The information collected through Interviews to the children was very pertinent and it was considered that it positively contributed for an evaluation. Children demonstrated capacity to reflect and emit important opinions on the different dimensions of the quality, disclosed some critical points that were not visible to the eyes of the educators, but also confirmed the positive effect of some of the strategically actions that already were in place.

Documentation of children’s voices was enhanced by this instrument but there is still the necessity of constructing other instruments and processes of evaluating children that take into account children and their perspectives.

Final Considerations

Students and early childhood educators’ portfolios and interviews made evident some changes on the course of this action-research project concerning professional identity, child image, pedagogical practice and quality conception. The following table sensitises the content analysis made to students’ portfolios and interviews in Aveiro’s project. These changes were similar and coherent with the changes made by the early childhood Educators in Santarém. So, it is possible to present it as a “conclusion” to both projects. These data were the object of reflection and used to design and plan future action – made evident in their pedagogical practice. The main ideas are systemized in Table 3.

In these modifications, we can see the image of the child changing from a weak, dependent and incapable being to a richer image of a young child co-constructer of culture and his/her own identity. This image of the child and childhood within a post-modern and social constructivist perspective allows early childhood educators to develop real life experiences of democracy: by actively “dividing the power” with children and allowing them to participate in the life of their communities with their own voice.



Table 3. Content analysis made to students' portfolios and interviews in Aveiro's

	<i>Professional identity</i>	<i>Child image</i>	<i>Curriculum</i>	<i>Quality</i>
<i>Before</i>	Reads reality and acts upon scientific and technical knowledge	Universal characteristics; predictable interests; incapable to express ideas and feelings; seen in function of her deficits	Technical knowledge application; adults knows what must be the learnt and how; predictable	Determined essentially by structural conditions
<i>After</i>	Observes and listens to real children, questions him/herself, builds curriculum with children	Contextualized, whose interests we can not know before we meet and ask them, capable of expressing ideas/feelings, capable of choose and make decisions, with prior knowledge	Thought in function of real children and their interests, participated with children ideas unpredictable	Determined essentially by educators' practice and by the meaning children attribute to the experiences taken.

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