

Relational teacher-student practices and participation in the classroom: Challenges for the construction of a democratic school

Prácticas relacionales profesor-estudiante y participación en el aula: Desafíos para la construcción de una convivencia democrática

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Background

The construction of democratic schools is a key factor in the quality of the construction of civic competencies (Bolívar, 2008; Grau, García and López, 2019; Redon, 2010). The school as a social space is identified as a place of learning and coexistence (Uruñuela, 2006), challenged to analyze the dynamics of coexistence that become the characteristics of the social tissue.

According to Grau and collaborators (2019), democracy implies the maximum of citizen participation (reflect, debate and decide). The educational system is responsible for preparing citizens to exercise democracy with two central components for the construction of democratic schools: participation and coexistence.

This study was developed under the premise that the construction of a democratic coexistence is related to the daily relational practices that are daily deployed in the school within interconnected environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1987). The main focus of this research is on relational practices in the classroom, defined as those interactions between subjects that are carried out systematically over time, and may give rise to relational patterns within development environments, in this case within the classroom microsystem.

In recent years, interactions in the classroom have been a topic of research interest, which has made it possible to identify the importance of teaching practices and the role they play within the teaching-learning process (Figuroa-Céspedes, 2020; Iturra and Rosales (2015), not only on the curricular but also on the experience that living together implies. The relational practices that occur in the classroom between teachers and students are structured from the development of a bond framed in a teaching-learning process established from a stressed response to the incarnation of their respective roles. During this research, as a research team we entered the daily life of four Chilean classrooms to characterize the relational practices between teachers and students, in order to co-construct together with the participating subjects, bottom-up transformation paths that allow strengthening the creation of democratic environments for coexistence at school.

Aims

To describe and analyze the relational teachers-students' practices in the classroom.

Method & procedures

This article describes the first phase of a longitudinal participatory action research (PAR) in two public primary schools (three years). This phase corresponds to the initial familiarization and diagnosis, and to an ethnographic approach with four courses (145 students, 5th and 7th grade) from two schools, during an academic year (2019). The information production techniques were classroom observations (recorded in logs), application of sociograms, interviews, focus groups, participatory workshops, and coordination meetings. Specifically, this article presents the results associated with the classroom observations in the four participating courses (85 analyzed classroom logs, 816 interaction segments).

Results & discussion

Sequences of participation and actions were identified to allowed characterizing relational practices between teachers and students. Participants and joint actions identified in interaction segments were considered as units of analysis. It was identified that more than half of the interactions in the classroom are initiated by the teachers, being these part of a unidirectional nature, therefore subordinate to the teaching actions. At the same time, self-work interactions were privileged for the students, that sometimes challenged the teacher's authority through unauthorized interactions in the environment, such as expressing discontent or rejection of activities. Finally, in spaces that are not directed by teachers, the students functioned under authoritarian logics within the classroom, reproducing authoritarian practices with their peers. This has allowed us to recognize that the daily practices in the classroom are located in an adult-centered relational framework, with power concentrated in the teacher, generating few possibilities of participation for students within the classroom.

For this reason, the construction of a democratic school has been challenged by the daily routine of the classroom in which few opportunities to coexist democratically are co-constructed and rather a cultural pattern "subordinate to childhood" continues to be reproduced. From an ecological perspective, everything that emerges inside the classroom is also the product of the interactions that occur and are fed back through the interconnection with other environments, therefore, the challenge does not come only to the subjects who interact in the classroom or in the school, but to society in general. With this, this study only confirms that the challenge of building a democratic coexistence still needs a lot of energy to be achieved.

Conclusion

There is still a long way to go and build democratic and participatory spaces within the classroom at school at least in relation to the experience observed in classrooms throughout an academic year, which could represent well what happens in other classrooms with similar environments. Relational practices are rooted in social mandates at the meso and macro system level, which stresses this relationship. However, we bet that these relationships could be solved in a particular way and have the capacity for flexibility and ecological transformation. The transformation can only be of a participatory nature, through joint reflection, including students and adults, where it is possible to dialogue from the collaborative experience, in order to rebuild the traditional classroom that has historically been characterized as an authoritarian and adult-centered space. One of the theoretical alternatives is related to the concept of decoupling of Grossetti (2005), which from the bottom up perspective proposes -from micro practices- to modify the regularities in the interaction, and therefore in the experience of a "democratic classroom". Finally, it is essential to recognize the great relevance of the teaching role as one that mediates and facilitates the learning processes that take place in the classroom (Figueroa-Céspedes, 2020), they co-construct a shared sense of living together in the classroom.

Keywords: democracy, participation, social interaction, teacher-student relationship

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