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**THE POWER OF STORIES FOR CHILD-CENTRED PRACTICES
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION**

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the power of stories for child-centred practices in early childhood teacher education. It is necessary to reflect critically about why it is essential to give the opportunity to the children to express their own stories and that the future teachers reflect on their own early childhood stories at school. These questions were studied by us when participating as a partner institution in the following European Erasmus Projects coordinated by V. Campbell-Barr, & J. Georgeson (Plymouth University): “Interpreting Child-Centredness to support Quality and Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Care” and “Child-Centred Competences for Early Childhood Education and Care” (2017-2021). We developed several case studies in the first project that produced qualitative and fundamental dates regarding our topic for both projects. We found that becoming aware of the world of children is essential for develop critical practices at school. Early Childhood Grade students must learn to understand this world as if they had children's eyes. The way to understand childhood culture is that students could explore their past experiences and games being children.

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1. Introduction

Becoming aware of the world of children is essential. Early Childhood Grade students have to learn to understand and appreciate this world as if they had children's eyes. This learning is facilitated if future teachers have the opportunity for observing the children's ways to explore the world. Students have to develop curiosity, unsurprising and interest in childhood strategies as valuable. It is going to be necessary that they explore their own early childhood stories. Future teachers need to reflect on their own experiences as scholars. They could explore the power relationship in their own school periods and now how it can be influenced on their own ideas about education and teaching practices.

We are going to discuss in our participation about the power of stories for child-centred practices in early childhood teacher education. It is necessary to reflect critically about why it is essential to give the opportunity to children to express their own stories and that the future teachers reflect on their own early childhood stories at school. Becoming aware of the influence that their particular biographical history can have an important power on their thinking of educational practice. It constitutes an extraordinary challenge for future teachers. No actions, interpretations and explanations of the world are neutral, among them, those related to childhood because the values are immersed in our point of view of the world. The biography of everyone has important influences on our values and so it is so important to reflect very deeply on it (Tilley-Lubbs & Bèrnard Calva, 2016)

All those questions were studied by us while we were participating as a partner institution in the following European Erasmus Projects coordinated by V. Campbell-Barr, and J. Georgeson (Plymouth University): "Interpreting Child-Centredness to support Quality and Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Care" and "Child-Centred Competences for Early Childhood Education and Care" (2017-2021). Our ideas belong to one of the online courses about child-centred practices built by the University of a Coruña (Spain) in the two Erasmus Projects in which we have had the opportunity to participate by developing several qualitative studies in early childhood education level.

2. Problem Statement

To address stories about children's school and family life as told by educators and close relatives is crucial for the ideas and practices of future teachers. The aim is to reflect on the conceptions revealed by adult narratives and the effects they can have on the children life of students. Future teachers need to explore the way in which such stories could influence their infant development and contribute to extend the perception of children as capable beings. Then they are going to understand the power of all these stories told the adults in each child's life.

The activities and reflections associated with this kind of stories are designed to advance child-centred practice by incorporating an essential aspect: understanding childhood as diverse in characteristics and origins. Hence, we refer to childhood (James & Prout, 2015) with the understanding that all children are not only entitled to the same rights, but they are also in the process of acquiring shared duties. We cannot forget, then, that education and care have become intertwined, this making education first and foremost a form of caring (Gopnik, 2016).

Through child-centred pedagogy, children are perceived as capable of engaging in their own learning and participating in the search for solutions to the problems people face. Participation is also a child's right, which was established and has since 1989 been recognised by the United Nations through an international treaty reflecting the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has in turn given rise to legal regulations throughout the world. Students as future teachers must protect all these rights and develop teaching practices which respect all of them so necessary for reaching democratic schools (Cambell-Barr, 2021; Sánchez-Blanco, 2015, 2021).

The challenges students face in their training as future teachers should make it possible to construct of complex knowledge and thought about teaching practices. To study their own school biographies as stories is crucial and it produces a lot of conflict in the student's minds and heart. Conflict is an essential part of their existence as human beings, in a way that responds to our natural state and allows them to learn throughout their lives. Learning and conflict take us back, in short, to a life lived, thought (Seguró, 2018) and therefore examined (Nussbaum, 1997), since they undoubtedly go hand in hand, as was evident in the life of all the students, future teachers.

Children's stories are different because there are different childhoods. Each future teacher lived a particular childhood. They have their own school and family stories. Also, they should reflect critically very deeply on the stories that adults told them. Then they are going to be aware of how their values built with all these stories might be a potential impediment for their interpretations and explanations about children's narratives. Understanding the origin of the own values is going to help the student to fight against the oppressive ideas about education (Freire, 1970).

Genuine children's stories must be thought and protected by educators because they are at risk of disappearing (Sánchez Blanco, 2013; Zavalloni, 2011). The economicism and consumerism in the market society and the power of publicity could colonise their wishes, their games' plots and, in general, their specific way of playing and exploring the world. University students grew up in the world of the mass media and they should be aware of their influences. Critical analysis is essential for understanding the children's behaviours and their own childhood (Buckingham, 2011; Giroux, 2010; Steinberg, 2011).

In any case, we know that children's play could be deeply invested with culture, gender, religion, economy, etc (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991). Childhood is neither universal nor apolitical (Butler et al., 2019). So all these circumstances might be analysed and discussed by future teachers and it is only possible if they learn to analyse children's different languages (Malaguzzi, 1996).

3. Research Questions

Future teachers have values referring to young children's cultures. Part of them were internalised through their school life and must be analysed and deconstructed. That is why central questions for training future teachers are:

- What kind of stories should mentors use with students in order for them to become aware of their values about childhood cultures?
- How should mentors explore with students to understand the scope of child-centred practice and the commitments and responsibilities that come with it?

4. Purpose of the Study

Our purpose is to explore the power of school stories that students have experienced when they were children. These stories should be analysed, because it is through them that they have had access to models for professional practice and for relating to children. Such models have in turn shaped a universe of ideas and perceptions about children that must be deconstructed in any teaching preparation programme that claims to be critical (Miller, 2017).

Also, it is necessary to research about children's biographies of the great figures of pedagogy and to try to understand how their childhood experiences had a great influence on their educational theories. By doing this kind of inquiry, they will understand the value that early childhood experiences have for human beings.

5. Research Methods

Several case studies and reflections belonged to the Erasmus Projects developed about child-centred practice, especially in the first Erasmus Project. Two studies were developed in kindergartens and two more were developed in two public schools. These case studies help us to promote powerful critical reflection processes about the teacher training in the Early Childhood Education and Care Studies in the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of A Coruña. Also, in the second project we developed a process for interviewing several students about child-centred practices and their studies at the university as future teacher. Currently, we are in this point of our work.

6. Findings

Children show how they are capable of formulating diverse hypotheses about the physical and social world, imagining amazing stories. Finding out how they investigate the world and how they build knowledge about it is essential to empower child-centred pedagogy at schools, generating practices that stem from considering children as untiring, unique, diverse and capable researchers (Campbell-Barr & Georgeson, 2019). Students at the university had childhoods where they could find amazing life stories that they had to research by themselves. They have the challenge to research about the origins of their previous ideas about education. Understanding the ways of they were taught at school would help them to produce reflections and changes in their ideas about early childhood and care. Also, discussion and analysis of past school activities by students is a way of students learn by doing how to teach and act in the classroom (Catalano & Chis, 2016).

The reflection on the biography of thinkers in the history of education is very valuable. Future teachers become aware of the importance of childhood experiences in the ideas of adults when they analyse such biographies. Knowing some data about important past time pedagogues' childhood lives will make students understand the origin of their concerns and ideas about the importance of child-centred practice. Also, reading classic pedagogues, as Ordine (2017) points out, is of great help because it allows students to resist the dictation and the ups and downs of pedagogical fashions. Students are going to be aware of new ideas about education which were often expressed yet along the history of pedagogy.

Analysing traditional story provides a good opportunity for students to reflect on their own experiences in early childhood education and the values in such stories. Students could share their experiences with their partners; it is about contrasting their own perception and values about children and teaching in early childhood education. Reflecting about traditional stories provides good opportunities to promote complex thought between students. It takes them closer to different points of view about childhood in specific periods of history, cultures and places. This kind of discussions provokes that students reflect on themselves, about their own childhoods, the childhood of their ancestors and those of other children in the world. According to Barthes (1989), the story is one of the great categories of knowledge that is being used by human being since past times to understand and order the world.

Stories related to Christmas or Tooth Mouse (Tooth Fairy in other countries) are fantastical, but are presented to young minds as true; that is, they constitute falsehoods around which teaching practices are generated. A lot of university students had stories like those in their lives. Mentors encourage students to consider whether, through these intentionally misleading stories, children's needs and their best interests are upheld, or whether such storytelling underestimates and thus undermines children's abilities to lead their own learning. We should ask who is truly most in need of such stories: the adults who reproduce them or the children who receive them? We can find evident prejudices and stereotypes in the story-lines contained in the tales told around Christmas (Sánchez-Blanco, 2020): is it ethical to link being bad to not-receiving-gifts? Should the school be with respect to these stories? How might a child from a family with limited resources feel when s/he receives few or none of the presents requested in her/his letter to Father Christmas? What about the unsustainable over-consumption of toys encouraged by such stories?

This kind of learning environment is supported by the reflection shared with other partners that students should be offered the opportunity to know different life stories, to understand that all of them learn at different rates and have different needs and potentials. Also they have different ways of learning and develop their lives in different socio-cultural, political and economic contexts. All these different circumstances made them understand the value of the differences, essential for the lives of children and to become a critical teacher.

Students as future teachers should learn, moreover, that any resource used in their education at school always contained stories on which they have to reflect critically; stories of justice and injustice on which they should learn to deliberate and to take decisions. Those stories make that all the resources contain different values that should be explored. It is not the task for collecting stories. It is for understanding, explaining and turning them into a way of reflection on the world where future teachers lived being children. The materials produced at school by students when they were first ages scholars are very useful for the mentor to promote critical thinking. Also, scholar photos are an extraordinary resource for researching what happened in their school, what ideas about children were being broadcasting.

Art, and specially painting, is a good way to explore the ideas about childhood and the education along the history in different contexts. The representations of children and teachers by the painters give the students the opportunity of thinking critically about education at family and at school during the first ages and along the past times (De Mause, 1995). There are many painters and other artist who tell us amazing and very different kinds of stories about children in their works.

Finally, we recall the importance of mentors addressing children's rights with students. Going through one's biography trying to find stories in which rights were respected is important. But it is also necessary to become aware of those other stories in which these rights were violated by adults inside and outside schools, such as the physical or psychological punishment suffered. Mentors should take on the challenge of discussing these childhood experiences lived by the students to destroy stereotypes and bias.

7. Conclusion

Early childhood education and care teacher training should give future teachers the opportunity to review and analyse their earliest experiences as children at school, as well as those told by others, including young relatives and adults at their families. The aim is to reflect critically on the degree to which those who educated them, or others, respected their rights as children. Children's right to learn, childhood concerns, particularities, interests and needs have to be respected, and also their presence in the design and development of educational practices. Any future educator who is involved in early childhood education and care (ECEC) studies has a child story life inside and outside the school, and that story could be affecting their future practice very directly and their way of think about education. It is so essential to reflect on those experiences and to be aware about the importance to respect children's rights.

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