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"To learn with" in the view of the holistic, relational and inclusive education

Summary

The text is an attempt at illustrating the category "to learn with…" in three approaches: holistic, inclusive and relational. Each of them brings in interesting solutions to work with children which originate in a constructivist-humanistic approach to education. The text points out the value of communication and building relationships between a teacher and a child; the sense of play and active learning by using a problem-solving approach, motivation and children's interest in the world.

Key words: children, education, holistic, inclusive and relational pedagogy

Drawing together the ideas of holistic and inclusive education, there emerges a conceptualisation of educational settings and activities existing in the space within and between the interactions and relationships between active, psycho-social human beings, be they adults or children, in the context of their particular social and cultural circumstances. Relationships underpin all learning, in positive or negative ways, and this happens irrespective of the fact whether the relationship and its influence is acknowledged or not (Hayes et al. 2017). It is impossible to analyse children and educators as individual subjects, they are rather defined in terms of relationships analysable in the context of an educational encounter (Hederman 2012), and each actor, adult or child, brings experience of a whole range of prior contexts, cultures and relationships into each new encounter (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). Important relationships in education include those between children and their peers, between children and adults, between educators and families and between educational settings and the communities and societies in which they are rooted.

Holistic version of education

Holistic education stems from the idea of holism and the holistic concept of a human. The former one is about understanding the world through relationships and inter-reliance and breaking unilateralism, where all spheres of reality are degrees of increasing differentiation of the same unity. The latter one – the holistic concept of a human assumes comprising various spheres of cognitive, emotional and social activities which are accompanied by human qualities and abilities (knowledge, emotions, social competences, strategies of actions, etc.). There is no possibility to separate these spheres of functioning, as emotions and feelings are displayed and the atmosphere of interpersonal communication and social experience is perceived as the most essential for the effects of the learning process.

The holistic education is perceived as a counterproposal for the traditional model of education and encyclopaedic knowledge aiming at a better preparation of a unit to life in a constant change – i.e. to a better self-understanding, understanding of the world around and to learning how to live in this world. This understanding is supported by the humanistic version which emphasises freedom, individuality and emotions of a human expressed in e.g. humanistic psychology and the Gestalt school of therapy. Holistic education can also be observed in its constructivist shape in two versions: i) developmental, which

emphasises the cognitive area, i.e. knowledge, abilities and activeness, independence and self-control and ii) social, being closely related to developing social competences such as: cooperation, assertiveness, tolerance, multiculturalism, constructive communication When properly integrated, they foster multilateral development of a human, and ensure preparation for a creative and independent life in the changing world. What is more, from the holistic point of view and the holistic concept of a human, each event, situation or task a human faces in their life has their cognitive, emotional, social and activising potential. Whether it will have a holistic impact on a human, which means whether it will be concise, activising, creative, or whether it will foster creative and critical thinking or provoke to thinking depends on the defining of the process of learning. The process of learning from the holistic point of view is understood as a process of generating knowledge in the mind of a learner, gaining social experience as well as improving communication skills. It is essential for the process of learning that the learning environment should be organised properly in a classroom or outside: materials and tools supplied, discussions moderated in the way that support and advising, mutual reliance and interpersonal communication naturally foster "situations of learning with…" i.e. i) I learn with you – you learn with me; ii) they learn with us – we learn with them. It is a type of a symmetric relationship which abounds with opportunities for mutual learning. The omniscient teacher withdraws and is replaced by a learning, cooperative community exchanging meanings and social interactions.

The holistic education disposes of numerous tools which can support, foster or arrange this kind of process of "learning with…". There are methods and forms of work with children which treat a child as an active searcher and participant of social interactions proposed by the holistic education. All of them are child-oriented and take into account a child's potential and interest in the world, draw on culturally adequate topics, use children's and other people's experience, exchange of opinions, abundance of expressions and ability to communicate and cooperate. These solutions include: 1. Problem-solving teaching which allows children to create their own intellectual problem-solving strategies, 2. Evaluation methods which allow for various performances, improvisations, dramas, stimulations or play, 3. Strategies of practical actions with experiments, observations, or children-made measurements, 4. Dialogues aimed at exchange of meanings between children and educators, and children and their peers, 5. Exploration speech in which children's questions inspire others to research or quest, 6. Teamwork including peer tutorial, 7. Avoiding the dominant role of an educator.

The proposed solutions fit into a model of learning in cooperation, which in turns corresponds with holistic education and emphasises the importance of "learning with…". This model assumes cooperation which means that "by means of social interactions a child gets control of intellectual tools, experiences a feeling of a subtle knowledge sharing, certain proxies and certain ways of using their minds" (Filipiak 2008: 30). It is a child-centred model which means that a child participating in classes where such a community is present has an chance to construct their knowledge or search for solutions together with their peers and educators, which not only enables them to involve their cognitive area but also gives access to their own as well as other people's emotions, allows them to gain new social experience and to communicate in a multidimensional way. As Ewa Kochanowska puts it, through such occasions a child is active, makes friends, learns together with others and cooperates in search of knowledge. What is more, they have the possibility of self-expressing their views and emotions. But above all, they share their own knowledge and gain insight into the knowledge of others (Kochanowska 2018). The process of learning understood as the one presented above affects the area of individual development as well as enables children to learn in cooperation where the category "to learn with…" can occur on numerous occasions.

Inclusive version of education

The 1980s and 1990s, characterised as a time of paradigmatic transition in the international social order (Santos 1991), contextualise three remarkable events in the field of education which signal a turning point in understanding the status of the social condition of contemporary children and childhood. These can be seen i) in sociopolitical terms – the almost universal ratification of the Children's Rights Convention, which enshrines their civil, social, economic, cultural and political rights around three interdependent categories – protection, provision and participation – and the challenges posed by the latter; ii) in socio-scientific terms – the constitution of Sociology of Childhood, challenging the prevailing medical-psychological perspectives in children''s research, and the current multiplicity of multidisciplinary studies that subscribe to the premises of the children's paradigm as social actors (James & Prout 1990); iii) in socio-educational terms – the educational institutionalisation of small children, which has become a norm in Western societies (Kjørholt & Qvortrup 2012) and the

increasing penetration of quality discourse exerted by neoliberal policies on education and the school system. Its repercussions on the reconceptualisation of the notion of social inclusion and inclusive education are reflected in the critique of the functionalist vision of the social integration of individuals, of the education model as a univocal, vertical and adult-centric process of child socialisation into the mainstream values, norms, rules and social roles. They all aim at ensuring the cohesion and harmony of the society and of the "traditional and dominant use of the term 'inclusion' and 'inclusive education' restricted to children with disabilities in educational settings" (Wong & Turner 2014: 54).

Being a contested concept with multiple meanings, assumptions and agendas (*idem*), the social inclusion and social inclusion in education as one aspect of inclusion in society, is intertwined and interdependent with other key concepts like those of democracy, citizenship or rights. Therefore their conceptual and empirical uses should attend to the particular issues related to the diversity of biosocial conditions of children and of their childhoods, without forgetting the existent power of relationships and inequalities. Thus, the notion of inclusion as a process of transformation and social change recognises and values the social, cultural, gender, age, ethnic, religious diversities as a priceless human potential and alive socio-educative and political resources, essential to "maximising social participation" and "minimising exclusion" in everyday school experiences. The processes of learning from this inclusive education perspective could be seen as real opportunities to strengthen the ties between the children's rights to education with those to rest, leisure and play, and both, to those of participation. They should also promote them into both children and pedagogical cultures and their connections; thus getting a refined knowledge about the processes of social recognition and belonging among children and with the teachers. They all together challenge familiar ways of thinking about children and adult-children relationships "and foster expectations for a new role for adults who take care of children" (Bae 2009: 394) in and for inclusive education in school contexts.

From Childhood Studies, Critical Early Education Studies and Children's Rights Studies inclusive education implies: i) assuming children as competent social actors with their own interests, conceptual autonomy and agendas, being actively involed in relationships with other children and adults to (re)produce peer cultures and participate in the school daily life and society; ii) recognising children's peer cultures as plural and public expressions of their agency, alterity, voices and participation, reflecting their (re)interpretations of social world; iii) valuing and respecting the presence of the children's ludic cultures – a set of

rules and meanings that children produce among peers and learn to master in the context of play (Brougère 1998), developing informal and integral learning through a selective appropriation of meaningful contents, some of them feeding desire for formal learning; iv) understanding children's participation as the right to experience that their voices are taken seriously and have an impact within the community.

Play, as an important mode of social participation involving choices, negotiations and decision-making and of enabling children to build a place of self/hetero recognition and belonging, reveals the diversity of children's voices – non-verbal, informal, improvised and direct – on their own right. A school understood more broadly as a site where children's play fulfil pedagogical rights – realisation, inclusion and participation – is a school committed to inclusive education, becoming children's space and not children's service. Thus "learning with…" inclusive education enhances play with the very purpose of playing and not only as "ludic-pedagogical" activities, instrumental to the precocious schoolarisation of children and restricting them to the condition of preschool pupils (Ferreira & Tomás 2017). In the same sense, "learning with…" inclusive education by emphasising children's social participation means including "children's co-determination in decision-making processes" through democratic practices involving intergenerational dialogue, shared power, negotiation and commitment (Bae 2009). Moving to more inclusive and equitable ways of working with children in schools requires daring to challenge the traditional adult-children relationship and pedagogy through constructivist and participatory (holistic) methodologies embedded into an ethic of the sensitive listening to children's points of view, awareness of adult/ethnocentrism and issues of power.

All these insights into understanding childhood, education and inclusive education in contemporary societies provide tools to a critical reflexivity in line with Ferreira and Tomás (2017), that advocate that pre-schools and schools are the *locus* of education and citizenship, implying the boldness to reinvent social, cultural, political, educational and pedagogical practices by the exercise of multiple imaginations. A "pedagogical imagination" in which the centrality of the child(ren) is not isolated from the social whole, and in which the Pedagogies of "invention" and "listening" are viewed as alternatives to transmissive model of pedagogy and more fitted to a democratic education, related to the 'notion of emergence' open to the unexpected, to the co-construction of the curriculum *with* the children by the recognition and appreciation of their knowledge, experiences and their cultures. An "epistemological imagination" makes it possible

to amplify and make more complex the analysis of education, childhood and social inclusion, taking as a value the theoretical and pedagogical multireferentiality and reflexivity about practices. A "democratic imagination" recognises the educational value of collective life in society, including the influential participation of children in the organisation and decisions that affect daily school life on the basis of a negotiated order between adults and children, which leads to an understanding of education as a deeply relational process.

Relational education

Research from developmental psychology in recent decades describes the fundamentally relational basis of well-being and development of infants and children (Hayes et al. 2017). Understanding of this crucial influence of relationships originally came from careful observational and experimental studies of infant-parent interactions (Trevarthen 2011) and this provides the root of much criticism of psychological perspectives from a reconceptualist or sociological stance – early psychological studies removed children and families from their cultural and social contexts in order to study them 'objectively'. As Bronfenbrenner famously pointed out, early developmental work became "the science of strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time" (Bronfenbrenner 1979: 19). However, modern psychology is no longer mired in the uni-culturalism of the past, just as modern sociology has moved on from the deficit models of working class families inherent in writing such as the early work of Bernstein (1961) on the so-called 'restricted' linguistic codes. Our relational conceptualisation of learning is based on an understanding of relationships as rooted in the social, cultural, linguistic and temporal contexts in which they occur. The neurobiological underpinnings of how these situated relationships influence all learning and development are currently being mapped out, and we are beginning to see how 'neurons' and 'neighbourhoods' influence each other (Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000; National Research Council 2012).

Thus, whilst initially controversial, this understanding of the development of human learning and development as dependent on early relational interactions is now becoming widely accepted. Colwyn Trevarthen (2017) describes how infants "are inherently social, interactive, playful, collaborative and meaning-making in human ways" and hence the human need "to experience a proper, healthy enthusiasm and sense of 'pride' in the company of appreciative others". Trevarthen

describes how this happens developmentally: "LOVE comes before PLAY, which is followed by WORK". An inclusive, holistic, relational approach to "learning with" shows how these elements of love, play and work can be intertwined to promote a high quality approach to education.

Our conceptualisation of relational education draws heavily on Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT), developed initially by Anthony Ryle in London from the 1960's onwards. This is a psychotherapeutic approach underpinned by a radically relational understanding of human development, well-being and suffering. CAT developed as an integration of cognitive, psychoanalytic and Vygotskian ideas (for a more detailed description see Ryle & Kerr 2002). It has more recently been informed by the work of Bakhtin, introduced to CAT thinking by Mikhail Leiman (1992), who drew on the latter to propose a 'dialogic' model of the 'Self'. CAT proposes a therapeutic framework focused on reciprocity in relationships and the replaying of relational patterns established early in life. In CAT the 'Self' is understood as fundamentally relationally-constituted: early relationships are dynamic two-way processes in which the child is an active participant; these early relationships provide the child with an internal working model of relationships (reciprocal roles), which then influence how she[1] is in future relationships (with others and herself) and how she anticipates other people will be with her. Again we note that these relationships occur in a context.

The basic unit for understanding and describing the dynamic nature of relationships in CAT (other to self, self to other, self to self) is the 'reciprocal role'. In CAT practice, the therapist works 'alongside' the client ("learning with") to make sense of and 'map' relational patterns in which the client is stuck and which lead to their currently presenting problems. Thus, by developing insight, people are opened up to the possibility of change. It is overtly acknowledged in CAT work that the dynamic therapist-client relationship is the active agent of change in the work and the dynamics of this relationship are also mapped and reflected upon. We believe the concept of the 'reciprocal role' and the process of 'mapping' can be used as tools to aid and facilitate reflective practice in educational settings, and the THRIECE Project is one of the first to apply the learning from CAT to the educational sphere. In this way, the frustratingly intangible concept of the 'quality' of relationships, becomes tangible and describable. Educators can reflect

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[1] The feminine pronoun is used here for ease of narrative but these processes apply to male children equally. Discussion of the impact of gender on relationship formation is beyond the scope of this paper.

on the dynamic nature of the ongoing relationship with a child, a parent or the system, and on their role in this relational dynamic. This opens up the potential to see how relationships can be moderated and altered as appropriate. Thus, by borrowing some of the tools of Cognitive Analytic Therapy, we open up a world of possibility in being able to describe, understand and possibly also improve early educational relationships, whilst also supporting educators in this process.

The theme of relationships and their importance for learning and development can be seen to thread through a wide range of educational research, drawing together areas traditionally studied by psychologists, such as emotional well-being and social or cognitive development, with areas traditionally studied by sociologists, such as the impact of exclusion or inclusion on learning. Thus, the understanding of relationships as fundamental to all educational processes can be seen to transcend traditional disciplinary borders. This notion of the educational value of a collective life in society enacted through interpersonal relationships at proximal (local) and distal (societal) level is encapsulated in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development. It may be that bioecological theory can therefore provide a a synthesising framework, driven by a focus on relationships, that allows us to draw on multiple perspectives without losing coherence. Bronfenbrenner is best known for his 1979 treatise highlighting contexts of development, from direct environmental impacts ('micro-system') to broader cultural factors ('macro-system'), and interactions between levels ('meso-system' and 'exo-system'). This early work presented systems functioning as somewhat static (Hayes et al. 2017), but the model is "an evolving theoretical system" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006: 793). Its most up-to-date iteration, the *bioecological* model, incorporates the child's agency, time (socio-historical and personal – 'chrono-system'), and emphasis on reciprocal, non-linear relationships (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). Thus, culture, agency, society and history are now foregrounded as the (entwined) roots from which individual relationships grow.

This yields a dynamic framework that is compatible with reconceptualist views of education drawing on sociological foundations, as well as more psychological theoretical foundations, providing a lens for understanding complex processes in education (Hayes et al. 2017). It is unfortunate that much work purporting to rely on bioecological perspectives instead reverts to the key tenets of the more well-known, but less dynamic, 'ecological model' (Rosa & Tudge 2013). The earlier version, while certainly a progression from stage-based, individualised, ethno-centric psychological perspectives, is more open to critique through

a reconceptualist or sociological lens than the up-to-date model (O'Toole 2016). Therefore, educators rooting themselves in those traditions may be prone to dismissing the potential of bioecological theory as a unifying framework, without understanding its more recent insights.

In understanding relational (and also holistic and inclusive) approaches to education, the bioecological concept of 'proximal processes' provides particular explanatory power. In brief, Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006) refer to interactions and relationships as 'proximal processes' and maintain that they are the "primary engines of development" (p. 822), playing a crucial role in education and the process of "learning with". Proximal processes are influenced by the personal characteristics of those involved, emphasising the agency of children as co-actors in relationships – relationships are not simply enacted upon children, rather children comprise active participants in the development, nature and quality of them. Different people elicit different reactions from us depending on our own personal histories and our own cultural and social norms, and all educational processes are underpinned by the resulting relationships.

The potential of holistic, inclusive, relational education as a means to transformative action

The aim of the current paper is to begin the process of identifying a conceptual framework for quality education that empowers educators to resist the neoliberał pressure to prioritise only that which is seen to have economic value, and to view children and childhood as a means to some future economic end. Rather, we argue, that the best educators use their learning contexts as a means for transformative action, by recognising the cultural, social and individual 'funds of knowledge' children bring to educational encounters, and using them to build relationships that empower children in their learning and in their lives. The framework we present here views learning not simply as a function of individual development or ability, but rather identifies a bi-directional, exponential synergy between children and their social and cultural contexts, mediated by significant relationships experienced. Therfore, holistic, inclusive and relational education can be transformative in a way that standardised approaches are never likely to be, to the benefit of children and the societies in which they live.

The importance of engaging with children and families as individuals with their own needs, strengths and cultures cannot be over-estimated. Educational

settings must consider issues of diversity such as language, gender, culture, religion and socio-economics in developing educational approaches. Unicultural perspectives may actually widen pre-existing gaps in experience and understanding (Hayes et al. 2017). The majority of educators try to form positive relationships with parents, families and communities, but without the formal opportunity to deconstruct the impact of socio-economics and cultural and linguistic heritage during preservice or continuing professional development, they may bring naïve, incomplete or even erroneous understandings to their interactions, based on their own educational, classed, gendered and ethnic experiences. Those involved in education in Europe at every level from professional development to research to policy-making to practice must incorporate diversity into all initiatives. Development of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches can feed into the very problems we aim to address, through deficit models and alienation of traditionally marginalised groups, and the discourse of measurable outcomes, in emphasising product, fails to recognise the critical contribution of process to children's learning (Hayes & Filipović 2017). Here we present an imperative to highlight and develop process-based quality, based on holistic, inclusive and relational approaches "to learn with" children, and argue that this can underlie transformative change for systems and for individuals.

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