

INVESTIGATIVE DIALOGUE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR LEARNING AND STUDENT AUTONOMY

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Abstract

Starting from the educational ideal outlined in the Brazilian National Curricular Parameters (NCP), a guiding document for Brazilian formal education that aims toward the development of autonomous, critical and participative individuals, this article seeks to reflect on the teaching implemented and the learning provided to children in the formal school setting, with reference to elementary school children (grades 1-4). Firstly, a comprehension is sought for the concept of autonomy as referenced in the NCP in the perspective of a formal school setting that demonstrates itself to be, in most aspects, still traditional. Then consideration is given to the necessity of disengaging from an imposed pedagogical practice and work with academic content in the form of problem-posing, challenging the child to think reflexively, to result in more active learning. Investigative dialogue is presented as a necessary attitude, as well as a methodological guide to implement the teaching-learning relationship as a way of developing of reflexive thinking in the child, considering this as the foundation of autonomous cognitive activity. The article concludes indicating when investigative dialogue is a pivotal point of a pedagogical practice; it becomes capable of providing, even in traditional schools, contexts of meaningful learning and bringing to reality educational models commended in the NCP.

Keywords: Autonomy. Investigative dialogue. Meaningful learning.

INTRODUCTION

The necessity for change in Brazilian formal education has been a recurring discussion in the political discourse and also among educators. This search became more explicit for teachers when, in 1997, the Brazilian Ministry of Education elaborated the National Curricular Parameters (NCP), which indicate the necessity of the educational system, to propose an educational practice adequate for the social, political, economic and cultural needs of Brazilian reality; that considers the interests and motivation of the students and that guarantees essential learning for the shaping of autonomous, critical and participative citizens, capable of acting with competence, dignity and responsibility in the society where they live (Brasil, 1997, p. 33). Of the qualities indicated as being necessary for a citizen of the current world, autonomy is the one that most engages our attention. What is understood as autonomy in the NCP text from 1997? What does autonomy involve? Does learning autonomy seek thinking for one's self? Is it autonomy of the being, the individual, in the choice of one's own values or is it citizen autonomy that respects the laws that democratic consensus has instituted? Presently, through education one can expect immediate access to autonomy of learning and the ideal of the NCP supposes an academic reality that can be transformed.

Currently, it is consensually evidenced that the school has received influence from various pedagogical tendencies, which has been mixing its teaching practice with renewed propositions of a constructivist origin. However, in essence, these practices still remain traditional, maintaining as a marked characteristic content-based teaching, focusing on the imposition and

exposition of the teacher's knowledge to a passive student, without the possibility of student-expressed interests and little student decision regarding the importance or utility of what is learned. For Delval (1998), this conception of education is based on a verbal methodology that prioritizes memorization of facts and concepts through repetitive activities that rarely require a questioning posture on the part of the student.

Is a questioning attitude the condition necessary for the development of critical and reflexive thinking and consequently the acquisition of the autonomy desired in the NCP? Parting from what basis is the student, to whom is transmitted specialized, abstract and fragmented knowledge that is decontextualized from his reality, stimulated to learn in a questioning manner that at the same time strives in the direction of reflexive critical thought and autonomy?

According to Freire (1985), rarely has it been considered that to learn with autonomy, it is necessary to think and reflect on the object or question of thought and, above all, to know how, instilled with curiosity, to elaborate a question, whose answer is sought in the form of knowledge to be learned. Thus is revealed the necessity of operationalizing teaching and learning in a manner that what is studied in the classroom may be presented as a challenging problem to the curiosity of the child, to the point that the child feels motivated to investigate the solution, producing their own learning. This is the guiding theme of this research that considered the NCP as the object of analysis.

Can the introduction of dialogue make the teaching-learning relationship more meaningful, even maintaining the traditional model of the school in regards to content and curricular structures? Is investigative dialogue compatible or necessary for the realization of the objectives commended in the NCP?

INVESTIGATIVE DIALOGUE

The academic discipline contents are to formal education the objects of teaching and learning. Thus, as thought does not emerge from nothing, it also cannot function in a vacuum. Dewey (1979, p. 71) affirms "suggestions and inferences can occur only upon a basis of information as to matters of fact". When formal education is criticized, as being content-based, one should ponder that this criticism is mostly based on that fact that contents are treated as a means unto themselves and not as a means toward thinking.

If the intention, described as the objective to be reached by formal education, is for the student to learn to think in a reflexive manner, becoming capable of efficiently administrating with autonomy the various problem situations that life may present, the academic discipline contents, objects of formal education, should then be treated in a manner that the student be able to instrumentalize this thought. In this sense, the student should be challenged to think history, mathematics, science and other academic disciplines, through the process of how this knowledge was conceived, instead of being presented in an organized, compartmentalized form in the curriculum. In this manner, the student may realize that the content, the object of his learning, originated from a problem-situation and that all academic disciplines are integrated into a unified whole, which is knowledge itself.

Problematize the academic discipline contents means then to create possibilities or situations that lead the student to think for himself/herself regarding the object considered for study. For Delval (1998), this would be to reflect and investigate one's own thought and also the thought of others.

A problem-posing education works with content in a broad perspective. It surpasses the limits imposed by the academic disciplines, seeking as a whole, what knowledge is, meaningful connections between the past, present and future, between cause and effect, between theory and practice. For example: teaching and learning in a problem-posing manner regarding African-native slavery in Brazil extends beyond the memorization of dates, names or facts, which

eventually will lose the strength of meaning throughout time, which as it passes, distances them from the problems that take place in the present.

According to Freire, “through critical dialogue about a text or a moment in society, we try to reveal it, unveil it, see its reasons for being like it is, the political and historical context of the material” (Shor & Freire, 1986, p. 24). Dialogue here is not something that is crystalized, because through it the teacher can link the content to be learned to the interest of learning, intentionally provoking so that the student may make it meaningful.

Problem-posing through this historical fact referred to above would then be seeking, through dialogue, to read between the lines of what took place, the causes and above all, understand its consequences still today in social reality. Questioning and reflecting could be implemented regarding when “they obtained freedom”, did the slaves received conditions to be free in fact. After all, what is freedom? Does freedom impose limits? Does “my freedom” depend on the freedom of the social group to which I belong? Is it possible for one individual to fully experience freedom without exercising some type of oppression over another? Is slavery a physical condition? Can it be circumstantial or psychological? Is slavery a fact that is buried in the past or does it still exist in Brazil? Does it also exist in other societies, other cultures? What can be said about forced labor, exploitation of child labor or even low wages? Are there other types of slavery? In modern society, what enslaves the human being?

For Sacristán (1998), only when content formally taught in the school setting is posed as a problem in the context of what the student experiences can one expect education to become, in fact, meaningful to the student. Because the activity referenced here is not restricted to the effort of holding the pencil and answering the questions previously formulated by someone, nor does it require memorizing facts, concepts and formulas. Activity in the context of an education that aims toward autonomy and critical thinking is, without a doubt, an activity of thought; it is the development of reflexive thought. Reflexive thought is a motory activity and as such moves investigation and from it one is also nurtured, producing knowledge.

In this context, it would be fitting to consider the possibility of a dialogical education having to be regulated by problem-posing or investigative procedures. Would it make sense to dialogue without investigating? And then what would be “investigative dialogue”?

According to Lorieri (2002), dialogue in an investigative manner means talking in an orderly manner regarding a subject (topic) with the intention of obtaining clearer and truer ideas regarding the subject, for oneself as well as for others who participate in the conversation (dialogue).

When one dialogues through conversation or discussion regarding which explanations best account for reality, or in other words, which of them can be recognized as true, then one is engaging in what is defined as “investigative dialogue”. It is with a basis in this conception that one investigates the investigative activity itself and reflexive thought, as an efficient condition for the production or reconstruction of knowledge, which would make formal school learning meaningful. How could this learning provide autonomy of thought and how could this autonomy of thought become autonomy of action?

For Splitter and Sharp (1999), a teaching process that works with information, facts, theoretical concepts and models of analyze in a manner that the student could see the utility, the vitality of such knowledge, instead of presenting them as something fixed, ready and finished, could stimulate a type of learning in the perspective of an active, reflexive and investigative education, that is characterized beyond this by dialogical interaction. In this case, the suggestions stemming from the investigative process are elaborated and refined through dialogue referenced in the problematic situation itself.

Dialogue, understood in this manner, involves interaction among subjects of an educational process, a problematic situation being investigated, concepts or tools of analysis and

explanation of criteria for the construction of foundational consensus. It is in this sense that dialogue seems to present itself as an invitation, a provocation, an instigation to the cognitive processes of each student respecting individuality, manner of thinking and, at the same time, the collective constructions that comprise broader theoretical perspectives.

THE CONCEPTION OF AUTONOMY PRESENT IN THE NCP

Admitting that formal learning should also enable the child to be an autonomous, critical and participative citizen, derived from the thought that the intended autonomy be an acquired condition through experienced situations such as problematic and meaningful ones, requiring or making possible, in the case of the child, autonomous thought. Acting with autonomy requires from the subject the ability of thinking reflexively, making judgments, choosing, deciding on the best possible solution within the context of the problem that has been presented. Is then the purpose of formal education the development of autonomous thought?

The NCP in its document entitled “Introduction” contains a specific section that discusses autonomy. Initially the document outlines a double conception: “autonomy is also understood at the same time as capability to be developed by students and as a general didactic principle that guides pedagogical practices” (Brasil, 1997, p. 94).

These two conceptions, throughout the rest of the text, are approached in an unseverable manner, or in other words, the development of student autonomy assumes adequate pedagogical practice. This is the conception defended in the prior section, considering that the promotion of an investigative dialogue depends upon classroom practice.

Considering that the student is ultimately responsible for their own learning and that the teacher is responsible for mobilizing this student toward knowledge and, consequently toward learning, it is identified within the NCP another approximation with the ideas defended here, understanding autonomy as: a methodological option that considers student action in the construction of his own knowledge, valuing his experiences, his previous knowledge and the interaction between teacher-student and student-student, seeking essentially the progressive passage through situations where the student is guided by another toward situations conducted by the student himself (Brasil, 1997, p. 94).

These could well be the dialogic interactions that take place in the classroom in the perspective of Splitter and Sharp (1999). Other evidence of investigative dialogue as an instrument for learning is present in the NCP when emphasis is made to “the ability to position oneself, elaborate personal projects and participate expressively and cooperatively in collective projects” (Brasil, 1997, p. 94). Although the text on autonomy in the PCN is rather synthetical, it is verifiable that it draws close to the ideas defended here regarding the importance of exercises or activities that favor investigative dialogue.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Education should be an active process. The activity mentioned here, in an attempt to reach the ideal proposed in the NCP, is a cognitive activity that in this case should be developed in a manner contrary to the mechanical memorization of rules, facts and imposed concepts, according to the interest of the individual teaching. This imposition of content administrated from the point of view of teaching, reveals the lack of dialogue between teaching and learning.

The school has prioritized teaching, and most of the time it is imposed, because knowledge, the aim of teaching and learning has been presented in an decontextualized, fragmented manner without meaning to the student who has the obligation of learning it, much of the time, without understanding it.

In the school setting there are two indispensable subjects, who without them education would not occur – the teacher and the student. Any and all educational intentionality should be carried

out in this relationship, and it is in this sense that the importance of investigative dialogue in formal education is underscored as a mediator between teaching and learning.

Dialogue is defended here as a necessary and possible attitude belonging to the teacher who finds himself committed to an emancipatory education for the child, as well as a methodological guide to operationalized the relationship of teaching-learning as a manner of developing the reflexive thought of the child, considering this as a fundamental autonomous cognitive activity. Learning to become autonomous implies learning with autonomy, and implies an education directed toward learning to learn – to be.

For Dewey (1979, p. 228), learning is learning to think – reflexively. And “thought does not work merely with things, but with their meanings.”

Learning can not then be confused with non-critical memorization of academic discipline content. Learning is an active process of constantly seeking meaning. We learn the meaning of things and they become meaningful when we question about them with curiosity, when we investigate them with interest, when we experience them, when we make connections between what is known and what is new and being learned at the moment.

In dialogue, ideas and thoughts become accessible and shared. They are not ideas without body, nor disconnected from content and meaning. They are ideas about a content area of study problematized from context experienced by the student and which become the object of investigation. Articulating dialogue and investigation, the dialogue becomes “investigative dialogue”. Freire tells us that dialogue is simultaneously creative and re-creative. “It [dialogue] seals the act of learning, which is never individual, although it has its individual dimension[...], it is the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object” (Shor & Freire, 1986, pp. 13, 14 and 124).

It is concluded that the introduction of investigative dialogue in community – teacher and student – as a methodological guide organizing the relationship of teaching and learning, can alter the pedagogical practice in our schools, preserving them in their objectives and values, but disengaging them from the imposed procedures and from non-meaningful learning contexts, leading to the development of reflexive thinking and toward shaping more autonomous, critical and participative individuals.

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