Social Development for Living Together: School Practice Diagnosis and Systemic Proposals

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Abstract

The school, as educational institution, is the essential nucleus for the formation of future citizens and social actors. In fact, it is the place of meeting of diverse individualities and social activities where values are affirmed, as well as forms of being and coexisting. In this paper we identify in the actual school practice the obstacles and facilitators for the individual and social development of the students for living together and propose educational strategies based on the Complexity Approach to Human Systems for improving the effectiveness of the implemented school practices.

Keywords: Living together, school practices, student voice

Introduction

In our contemporary societies, from the least developed to the so called "first world" countries, we find now a social environment of great violence and drug abuse, strong economic deterioration, unemployment and lack of dialogue and understanding between generations.

Therefore the educational institutions have the great challenge and the commitment not only to teach mathematics, science and language. They also must contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric by forming the new citizens (Ortega, 2006). These new citizens should be critical and creative social actors that participate in the construction of better ways of coexistence. According to Stacey (Stacey, 2001), when people communicate with each other to accomplish the joint action of living and acting together, they are continuously relating to each other in a responsive manner. Marion (Marion, 1995) asks what catalyses social behavior and concludes that humans are said to cooperate because that is the best way of achieving individual goals. In addition, individual human action is catalyzed by symbols: ideas, concepts, opinions, beliefs, emotions, projections and values like the understanding of the personal differences, the cooperation for the well of the collective whole, the search of justness and equity and the practice of tolerance.

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The School Social Development Objectives for Living Together

Let us consider a school group community as a complex system, conformed by the teacher and the students peer group, defined as a collective of human agents that interact with one another in a common internal environment defined by the school rules and the group interactions. According to Mead (Mead, 1934) it is in the detailed interaction between people, their ongoing choices and actions in their relating to each other, that their minds and selves arise.

However, the schools are located in neighborhoods where are seated families that belong to very diverse socioeconomic strata. The socio-cultural differences of individuals and families present a diversity of values, beliefs, lifestyles and behavior rules that are part of a plural society. This diversity is reflected in the students peer group. In accordance with this cultural and economic social heterogeneity, the objective of forming citizens that have the sensibility of participating with the other ones in the construction of a living together community, it is a work that is one of the main challenges of the education. In fact, the school must form citizens to be able:

a)   To understand and accept the principles and forms to live together in a heterogeneous community.

b)   To understand the common benefits of collaboration and mutual help.

c)   To balance the respect to the individuality with the collective good.

d)   To recognize and respect the personal differences.

The purpose of our research was to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the actual school practice for the individual and social development of the students in the sense discussed above. The questions to investigate were: Which educational actions promote the balanced development of the individual and social dimensions of the student? How do the students accept and assume the requirements for living together? Which advantages do the students get when they act as a community? We will sustain our analysis with data from our field investigations carried out in two public schools, located in low-income level urban areas of Mexico City (Velazquez, 2006) (Velazquez and Escobedo, 2008). In this research the analysis of discourse of Derek Edwards (Edwards, 1997,1999) was selected as the methodology to analyze the collective processes. The categories of complex responsive processes of relating of Mead (Mead, 1934), Stacey (Stacey, 2001) and Marion (Marion, 1995) are the theoretical basis for our analyses.

The school defines the school practices according to the desirable behaviors that are going to be preserved and transmitted to the new generation. In a complex systems framework this behaviors are conceived as desirable attractors to drive the students, as individuals that have gone by different socialization processes and experiences, toward the school educational objectives.

In the mentioned schools we found following instituted practices for achieving the social development objectives:

a) To contribute to acquire educational materials for common use,

b) To collaborate to get collective benefits,

c) To distribute equitably the limited spaces,

d) To participate in a common work environment

The school expects that these practices provide a unique context for social and emotional development, with equality, reciprocity and cooperation maturing and enhancing student's reasoning abilities and concern for others. All these are processes of action and interaction through which the students in the peer group act jointly transforming their environment and their identities (Mead 1934). We were interested in how the students accomplish joint action in the peer group through their interpersonal interactions, because modern research shows (Siegler, 2006) that social and emotional gains may be provided by peer interaction.

Evaluation of the Implemented School Practices

We adopted an ethnographic technique (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984) observing, registering and analyzing the discursive interaction and the habitual behaviors of the students and the teacher in the classroom. Particularly the discourse of the students expressing their explanations, dialogues, arguments, questions and proposals was analyzed in detail.

The analysis of the arguments and the actions of the students followed the approach of the discursive psychology proposed by Derek Edwards (1997). In this approach the discourse of the participants in a daily interaction may reveal the conceptions, beliefs and values that guide their actions.

The rhetoric is the means that they use to argue in particular situations in their social interactions, where the arguments that use express their notions of the world. With their argument they claim and they dispute things, they describe and they explain how the things are and how their versions differ from the versions of other people.

In our analysis we found that the pupils do not have any possibility to participate in the practice definition. We also found that the implementation and the daily real operation of the practices departed completely from the spirit of the formal established ones. Therefore we analyzed the actions of the participants and evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the practice implementation. In fact, we identified following conflicts in the practice implementation that hinder the educational targets:

a) The inequity between authority and students in the application of the regulations. This inequity imposes constraints only on the students and creates power differentials that affect the inner environment of the school group and the leadership of the teacher as a moral guide. We found a teacher's impulse to maintain power differentials as part of the traditional school ideology, which divides groups into binary opposites, making the power preserving behavior feel natural (Elias, 1989).

b) The auto-organization of the students in front of the authorities to defend themselves from the imposition and the authoritarianism. According to Stacey (Stacey et al. 2000) "organizing is

human experience as the living present, that is, continual interaction between humans who are all forming intentions, choosing and acting in relation to each other as they go about their daily work together". For this reason, when the imposed rules threaten some of the high-priority values of the students, like their sense of fairness and equity before the norm, there emerges a form of systemic auto-organization with a dissent answer and a challenge to the authority.

c)   The prevalence in the school of the control, surveillance and punishment measures. McGregor (McGregor, 1960) distinguishes between autocratic and participative styles of group management. He argues that autocratic styles are based on the view that people dislike work and avoid it if they could. They need to be coerced into working, being punished if they do not work and rewarded if they do. This is the "stick and the carrot" that is still so prevalent in schools.

d)   The absence of dialogue between teachers and students. It is important that the rules are the result of a practical ethical knowledge. Therefore, they should contemplate the rights of everybody. Unfortunately, we see that in the school practice the norms and rules are imposed in a unilateral and authoritarian way by the authority instead of trying that these rules are the result of a collective construction by the own students (Velazquez-Guzman and Lara-Rosano, 2007).

The previous results let us pose the following questions:

Which educational strategies could be implemented in the school for developing effectively the future citizens?

Is it possible a different organization from the current conventional forms?

Is it possible that the teachers as educational agents go so far as to modify their behaviors in order to become better builders of future citizens?

Conclusions

Taking into account that the maintenance of a relationship is dependent upon the members each striving to reach an acceptable balance between their own desires and needs and that of others, according to the approach of Relational Dialectics (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996), (Rawlings and Holl, 1988) we developed following proposals:

1) That the dialogue and the agreements be the means to solve novel situations. In fact, we recognize the valuable participation of the students in the construction of a school ethics through their arguments, value attitudes and actions, where a moral knowledge is expressed in continuous re-elaboration. (Velázquez-Guzman & Lara-Rosano (2005). Following the perspective of Gadamer about the community sense, the practical knowledge that arises through the contrasting experience is a phrónesis, because it is knowledge to distinguish what is good and what is bad for the community. This moral knowledge subsumes the individual preferences to the communality correct, making familiar to the students a community sense that before was strange.

2) That teachers and pupils, by means of the dialogue and the argumentation, participate in the making and upgrading of the rules, defining collectively the principles, rights and responsibilities of the members of the community to make possible the coexistence for the common good, nevertheless the plurality and the personal differences. In fact, Marion (1995) splits

individuals and groups into two distinct but interactive levels that affect each other. Individuals join groups, motivated by group symbols, creating a collective whole that is more than the sum of their individualities. If some of these group symbols are related with living together in a heterogeneous community with a balance between the respect to the individuality and the collective good and participating in the definition of the collective principles, rights and responsibilities of the members of the community then this student group will affect the way of how their members evolve.

3) That the values that strengthen the community sense like: friendship. respect. participation, solidarity, common good and the feeling of belonging to a community are encouraged. Under the surface of the social, individual resonances harmonize in the sense that people develop a shared view. Each individual is like an attractor and when individuals come together to form a group, they resonate with each other, producing through their communication a social attractor (Marion 1995). Prigogine (1997) casts his theories in terms of entities resonating with each other and evolving as collective ensembles. Therefore a strategic policy enhancing the above values may result in the development of social attractors that reproduce themselves changing the social pattern.

4) That the rules take into account the diverse needs for the members and their interactions. Langton (1989) talks about the inability to provide a global rule, for changes in a complex system's global state, making it necessary to concentrate on the interactions occurring at a local level between agents in the system. He states that it is the logical structure of the interactions, rather than the properties of the agents themselves, which is important, thus potentially elevating interaction to primacy.

5) That the equity and the justness be considered in the application of procedures that regulate the interactions between the members of the school group. In fact. students value fair treatment which causes them to be motivated to keep the fairness maintained within the relationships of their peers and the school (Adams, 1965). The school should have norms and rules with a communitarian sense that do not only constitute restrictions to the individual freedom of the pupils but also take into account rights and duties for everybody.

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