Council for Educational Cooperation: the Development of Students' Democratic Participation

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Abstract

The development of students' democratic participation in the classroom is a priority in today's schools to uphold this crucial right and, therefore, to foster their full participation as active citizens, preparing them for life in society [1]. Accordingly, the present investigation focuses on the study of the democratic participation of students in the Council for Educational Cooperation (CEC), which is a pedagogical strategy included in the syntax of the Modern School Movement in Portugal [2]. The CEC originates from the Institutional Pedagogy [3] and it is a time of effective democratic participation, where students manage everything that concerns their group/community, whether it's curricular learning or social relations that arise from the school/classroom interactions, thus developing socio-moral and cognitive skills [4]. This study involved the participation of 25 students from a 3rd year class of Primary School and aimed to: (i) characterize the students' perceptions regarding the CEC; (ii) describe student participation in the CEC; (iii) identify, with the students' cooperation, strategies to improve the functioning of the CEC; (iv) describe the evolution of student participation in CEC. This is a qualitative study that resorts to action-research methodological procedures. As data gathering techniques, survey by questionnaire, focus group interview, participant observation and documentary research are privileged. For the data analysis, we resort to content analysis, following the assumptions of Bardin (2013) [5]. The results show that all students value the CEC, although most do not participate and have some difficulty in managing it with autonomy and responsibility. It was possible, through structural changes to the CEC suggested by the participating researchers and the students, in a dialogical, reflective and cooperative process, to improve these students' participation in the Council.

Keywords: *Council for Educational Cooperation; Democratic Participation; Autonomy; Responsibility*

1. Introduction

The development of students' democratic participation in the classroom is a priority in today's schools to uphold this crucial right and, therefore, to foster their full participation as active citizens, preparing them for life in society [1]. The CEC is in fact a perfect place for them to develop such skills, as it provides a time of effective democratic participation, where students manage everything that concerns their group/community, whether it's curricular learning or social relations that arise from the school/classroom interactions, thus developing socio-moral and cognitive skills [4]. Although the CEC is present in various moments throughout the school week, there is a very important one that happens every Friday afternoon, in which there are three fundamental topics that must be discussed: (i) reading and discussion of the previous Minutes, (ii) evaluation of the individual work plans and (iii) reading and discussion of the situations written on the Class Diary. This moment, however, is not supposed to be managed by the teacher, but by the students, being presided over by two of them on a rotating basis (the President and the Secretary), though the teacher still has a supporting and regulating role. Therefore, this moment is dependent on the participation of all students, in solving the problems that concern the whole class, from which the students develop themselves sociomorally and a culture of active and democratic participation is promoted. However, there were some aspects observed in the classroom in which this investigation took place that prevented its full realization, namely: the insufficient autonomy of the students in the management of the CEC, the scarce participation of most of the students in those moments and consequent weak accountability of the students in the CEC, as well as non-compliance with some ethical clarification steps [6] of the discussed situations.

2. Methodology

Taking into account the aspects that were identified in the classroom regarding the CEC, the following questions were raised: (i) what are the students' perceptions of the CEC?, (ii) what is the participation of students like in the CEC?, (iii) what strategies can students adopt to improve moments of CEC?, (iv) what progress will these students make in their participation in the CEC, after the process of monitoring? Accordingly, the general objective of this research is to *study the processes of participation democratic behavior of students in the CEC*. Furthermore, the specific objectives are to (i) characterize students' perceptions of the CEC; (ii) describe students' participation in the CEC; (iii) implement, with the cooperation of the students, strategies to improve the functioning of the CEC; (iv) describe the evolution of student participation in the CEC. A qualitative methodology was followed, taking into account procedures close to the research-action methodology. Thus, in this case it is intended to improve the moments of CEC and enhance student participation, developing in them democratic participation and the competences that this mechanism provides them, in a reflective and dialogical way. This is therefore part of a paradigm of critical action-research since the researchers have a moderating role in the process and "the group collectively assumes responsibility for the development and transformation of the practice" [7] (p. 365). As data gathering techniques, survey by questionnaire, *focus group* interview, participant observation and documentary research are privileged. The research was held throughout 3 major moments, according to the following design:

- Pre-intervention: survey by questionnaire to the group of students; Collective moment to return/disclose the questionnaire results and agree on changes to the CEC with a view to its improvement; Conception of support instruments/changes for the CEC, agreed and developed with the students.
- Intervention: Implementation of the amendments developed for CEC support and regulation instruments built; Observation of student participation.
- Post-intervention: *Focus group* interview in the last CEC to evaluate with the students the changes that were implemented.

For the data analysis, we resort mainly to content analysis, following the assumptions of Bardin (2013) [5]. The present study was carried out in a private school located in the metropolitan area of Lisbon. It involved the participation of 25 students from a 3rd year class of Primary School, as well as the class's teacher cooperation.

3. Results

Regarding the students' perceptions of the CEC, the initial results of the survey showed that all the students recognized the importance of the CEC for cooperative conflict management, although it is not the only dimension that can be addressed. However, some students confessed to not participate in it, writing reasons such as being shy, having nothing to say or not wanting to be a "tattletale". Some of the students didn't know about all the tasks that the President and the Secretary had, conditioning the functioning of the CEC. Some students suggested that they should all stop writing down what happens on the CEC, which is the Secretary's task, and some also pointed out that some of their colleagues should participate more often. These results were taken into account and there were some changes made to the way the CEC worked in that class, namely: (i) create an official Minute to be written by the Secretaries and be placed in the classroom; (ii) having two Secretaries instead of just one, to facilitate the writing of the Minute and the management of the CEC; (iii) create a script with the steps for troubleshooting problems in CEC; (iv) design a checklist to regulate the fulfillment of the tasks of the President and Secretaries and the steps of the ethics clarification map; (v) create two posters containing the President's and Secretaries' tasks to be placed in the classroom. These changes aimed to help regulate the participation and involvement of the students in the CEC, as well as promote their autonomy in its management. Regarding this, results showed that the students were able to lead the CEC with more autonomy, mainly due to the changes/clarifications made to the President and Secretaries' tasks, which was attested by the students and confirmed by the teacher. However, many students still didn't participate in those moments, even though a slight decrease was observed in the beginning of the intervention. Considering the ethics clarification steps [6], there were also some improvements observed, although some students still pointed out some difficulties regarding the explanation of the intentions behind the acts practiced by the actors involved and to experience putting oneself in other people's shoes. Bearing in mind the first objective of this study "characterize the students' perceptions of the CCE", all students consider it an important space for the group, although not all of them participate in it. Regarding its usefulness, they highlight the dimension of cooperative conflict management, but do not equate the function of regulating learning paths. Some students had difficulty recognizing the tasks of the President and the Secretary [4], as well as the steps for solving

problems [6]. Considering the second objective, "describing the participation of students in the CCE", the difficulty of students in managing, with full autonomy, the moment of CCE is highlighted, although it improved with the changes implemented. Also, the low participation levels of students is evident, of which more than half does not participate in the CCE. With regard to the third objective, "Implement, with the cooperation of the students, strategies to improve the functioning of the CCE", the potential of the methodological design adopted is highlighted, given that, through the perceptions and suggestions of the participants, in a meta- reflective and dialogical, it was possible to implement changes in the CCE that made sense to the group and that allowed it to be improved. It was possible to improve the functioning and organization of the CCE, especially through changes in terms of clarifying and regulating the functions of the President and the Secretary. Regarding the fourth objective, "describing the evolution of student participation in the CCE", it is considered that it was not possible to fully achieve it with this study, as the changes made did not seem to significantly influence the number of students who participated in the CCE.

4. Conclusions

Through this research, it was attested that the CEC is, indeed, an excellent way for the students to cultivate values of active democratic participation, as well as to develop socio-moral and cognitive skills that allow them to live and prosper in their classroom and, later in life, replicate it into the community and society that they'll be a part of. This can be observed whenever they discuss and solve common problems, confront and accept different points of view or put themselves in other people's shoes and try to comprehend sympathetically other people's intentions and actions. Although this pedagogical strategy is widely practiced and accepted within the Modern School Movement in Portugal, having its own guidelines and recommendations as to how it should function, some adjustments must be made within each class to better meet their specificities and needs. Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning that the critical action-research model/paradigm used in this study is undoubtedly a great way to analyze, reflect on and perfect the practice in educational contexts, which involves the participation of students and teachers alike, in a cooperative, dialogic, and meta-reflective way.

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