



Reflecting on School through the Voice of Children

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Abstract

School is a place for learning and, at the same time, for individual and social growth. But what do children think of this space for socialising and learning? In order to understand this first-person experience, an investigation was carried out as part of the Teaching and Learning Practices for the Master's Degree in Teaching the 1st Cycle of Basic Education (CEB) and Maths and Natural Sciences in the 2nd CEB at the Polytechnic School of Education in Porto, with a group of 50 students aged between 8 and 12, belonging to one class in the 1st CEB and two in the 2nd CEB. Given the pandemic period, in which the school existed in E@D mode, the aim was to give the child a voice, understanding "what do children think of the school?". The focus of the study was on the concept of school, encompassing three dimensions: i) the building; ii) the school institution; iii) the classroom, in a close relationship between pupils and teachers. This is a case study that includes qualitative and quantitative approaches, using various information gathering resources to enable data triangulation: direct and participant observation; supported narrative diaries; (in)formal dialogues with the children; questionnaire surveys; individual and collective interviews and duly planned and implemented classroom moments. The discussion of results reveals that the concept of school, from the children's point of view, is quite comprehensive, identifying the building as a place to play, socialise and grow interpersonally and intellectually. The children see it as their mission to search for places within the school to study and learn what the teachers are teaching.

Keywords: Education; Listen to children; Learn; School; Relations

1. Introduction

The role of teacher is often associated only with their ability to teach, leaving the learning process exclusively to the student. However, for [1] the centre of the educational process lies in the learning of the child and the teacher, as both learn and teach. This author adds that teachers need to be able to reflect individually and collectively on the stories, the experiences that exist and the things that mobilize them in order to improve the process of teaching and learning to learn and to humanize the school more [2] [3]. This reflection should lead to shared writing, from which new dynamics and lessons can be learnt, and this is the way forward for the future of education [1]. In this context, it is necessary to realise that there is symbiotic learning between children and teachers, and the better teachers know their context, the more they can adjust and improve their practices. In this sense, there is an urgent need to make education research a structural axis of initial teacher training and a continuous learning process, creating the need to problematize teaching practice, enabling an understanding of the complexity of the educational reality in order to improve that same practice [4]. According to [5] "teachers are human professionals, interveners who are more or less aware of and critical of their social role, whose actions take place in interaction with other people, especially children (...) and only make sense if they are strongly imbued with a social commitment to the people in the contexts they inhabit on a daily basis" (p. 72). The right of every child to be heard, as explained in the resource guide - General Comment No. 12 (2011) of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child published by UNICEF and Save the Children [6], as well as the recent guidelines of the Council of Europe [7], through the CP4Europe project: "Listen - Act - Change - A handbook on children's participation" call for the participation of children in educational activity, with responsibility



and co-operation. UNESCO, through the Declaration of Human Rights [8], the World Declaration on Education for All and in an inclusive way [9] and [10] also reminds us of the need to listen to and communicate with children, as they are developing beings with their own needs and motivations. In addition to the learning process intrinsic to educational action, [1] mentions that in António Damásio latest book on "Feeling & Knowing" you can't know without feeling and that in the practice of feeling there is also knowledge. For [1] the cognitive, empathetic, healing, caring and treating dimensions are essential for the future of the school. To do this, we need to get to know the context in which we operate and carry out our educational activities better, listening to all the players in order to rethink their experiences and values and share principles to create a new educational reality [2] [3]. In this study, we listened to the children in their own moments and spaces in order to get to know them better in this educational interaction.

2. Problematic situation and objectives

Since children are active agents in the school process, their opinion is rarely taken into account: we think about them and for them, but we rarely think with them. However, the advantages of involving children in the educational process and making them active agents in the classroom, builders of their own knowledge, are recognized. The following question arose: what do children think and what do they have to say about the educational process? Giving freedom is synonymous with giving responsibility and the school's mission is to train and develop active, reflective, critical, responsible, autonomous and supportive citizens [6][7][8][9][10]. With this in mind, and with the global COVID-19 pandemic forcing the teaching-learning process to take place in the E@D mode (for the year 2021, it ended on 15 March), it made even more sense to listen to the children.

Based on the problematic situation identified, this study centred on the children's voices, on what they think about education, focusing on three dimensions: the school (as a building - physical space - and as an entity); the teacher and the lessons. Questions were therefore posed, which will be explained in the section on "Analysing and Discussing Results", and the following objectives were set: i) to find out what children think about compulsory attendance and permanence at school; ii) to get to know the concept of school from their perspective; iii) to understand the importance of the teacher-student connection in their relationship with school; iv) to get to know the meaning of lessons from the children's point of view.

3. Literature review

In the context of initial teacher training, the teacher's stance in investigative trials should be autonomous, but always aimed at studying and improving processes in order to realize more in-depth understandings of contexts. It is therefore necessary to "interpret what you see being done, to imitate without copying, to recreate, to transform. You can only do this if you reflect on what you do and what you see done." [11] (p.20). It is therefore clear that a research process is based on the ability to analyze, "read" and think about the situations experienced. School plays an extremely important role in society and is the biggest part of a child's life, accompanying them until they reach adulthood. Many children have already been to kindergarten or even nursery school before entering the first year of school.

In this way, and given the number of hours a day that children spend at school, it is safe to say that children spend most of their childhood in a school context, where school plays an extremely important role in the development of intellectual, cognitive, social and emotional skills. School thus becomes the stage for the construction of each person's identity, their being and belonging in the world. Along with the family, school is the social institution with the greatest repercussions for children, as it is there that they develop their emotional relationships, take part in social situations, acquire communication skills and develop their social behavior [12]. At the same time, most of the development and acquisition of these skills comes from the relationships and interactions they establish with their peers, where children are and feel like children and not merely pupils. It is by being children that they see themselves as "beings of now" and not just "beings of the future" [13]. Children have an active way of being in the world, participating in the creation of social relationships, learning processes and the production of knowledge. Based on this observation and in this line of thought, [14] argues that integrating the student into the educational dynamic "revolutionises pedagogy and, consequently, the very concept of the student. They are now conceived as subjects who (...) think critically about the school and what they are required to do in it - which is incompatible with the idea of the student as a mere 'recipient' of information" [14] (p. 119). Furthermore, it has been noted that students who participate in school decisions see it in a completely different light, since if they feel listened to and their opinions valued, they are more motivated and have more positive attitudes towards learning [15].



The interest in listening to pupils' voices is not something new [16], as back in the late 1960s and 1970s some educational researchers set out to learn about the classroom and the school through pupils' experiences. However, [15] states that "few studies have yet examined this construct in either empirical or theoretical terms" (p. 651). Thus, [14] alludes to the need to develop more studies on student voice, because "student opinion continues to be the great ignored in the reforms of the education system!" (p. 118).

4. Research methodology

This research was carried out in two classes, with a group of 50 students aged between 8 and 12. Given the characteristics of the problem and the objectives formulated, the data collection techniques and the methods used to analyse the data, we followed a case study methodology, with a social paradigm, of an interpretative and qualitative nature. A case study is "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined" [17]. Furthermore, case study research differs from other research processes in that it has intrinsic characteristics, such as the nature of the research, its holistic nature, the context and its relationship with the study of a constant interpretative nature. In this respect, the case study is only possible when the researcher knows the context in which they will be working and developing their research, and is considered a strategy for building knowledge and innovating in the field of education [18]. In this study, various data collection instruments were designed and drawn up, including the children's productions, field notes, questionnaire surveys, naturalistic participant and active observation, which allowed us to observe the children at school, inside and outside the classroom, and to make important readings for this research. Considering the aim of the research, the interview was also used, since it is a form of interaction between two or more people that allows objective and subjective data to be collected, since for [19] "interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways of trying to understand other human beings" (p. 361).

When all the students and guardians became aware of the research being carried out, they signed an informed consent form in accordance with the ethical rules in force at the Ethics Committee of the ESEPP Centre for Research and Innovation in Education (inED). These aspects of the research are crucial as advocated by [23].

5. Analysis and Discussion of Results

The reflections shared in this article are the result of reading and interpreting the information and data collected by a research team, based on the different data collection techniques and instruments identified above and situations observed/experienced with the children, recorded by photos or videos, with the appropriate informed consent.

Regarding the School dimension, the questionnaire survey had different questions and the results are shown in Table 1.

With regard to question 1, it can be inferred that school plays a decisive role in children's social lives, serving as a stage for the interactions they establish with others, followed by the importance of learning, but as something very important for their future and for their relationship with their teacher. From the justifications given, it can be concluded that the teacher plays an important role in a child's school life (in and out of school), because learning doesn't just happen through curriculum content, but above all in the relationship that is established between the teacher and the child, taking into account the affective dimension in the pedagogical relationship, the cognitive, emotional and social aspects [1]. Analyzing the responses, it was possible to see that the word fun is also associated with school, which, from the research team's perspective, is very gratifying. School is a place where children spend a large part of their lives, more time than at home and with their families, and so the fact that it's fun to go to school makes children establish positive relationships and emotions with the educational process [2] [3].

Table 1 - School Dimension

Questions	Results	Comments
Teama I - School 1. Do you like coming to school?	93% - "Yes" 7% - "No", 2 answers, "has a brother in School"; "has a lot of classes and little break ti"	"Yes", because: 56% to be with friends 52% to learn for the future 19% to be with teacher 17% is fun
2. What you would change	44% changed the	The children wanted to increase breaks



about the school	number/duration of breaks 23% change the time of classes	time for its social and playful components.
3. The perfect school for me was/is...	47% increased breaks times 37%, would like a swimming pool, more fun activities 70% wanted to have more fun lessons, with more games, technology and robotics	The answers are consistent with the previous question: - the length of breaks between subjects - the playground with a swimming pool, different activities and more games - classes being more playful, with more technology and robotics
4.1. If you had the choice between going to school or not, what would you choose?	23% chose not to go to school	They don't find it fun, they feel tired and even insecure.
4.2. Justify your answer. What would you do if you didn't go to school?	53% choose to go to school 43% do not justify	They chose the social factor (50 %) The importance of school for learning (50%) 82% if they didn't go to school, they would play and do fun and enjoyable activities.
5.1. Do you think school is important?	100% - "YES"	In this question, all the children were aware of the intrinsic value of school: social and learning.
5.2. Why?	90% say that school is important for learning 50% choose learning and to be important for their future life	No child indicated that it was important to go to school to make friends, or to be with other children, or for any other social factor.

Combining the answers to the first two questions reveals the social importance that children attribute to school, because it is during break times that they can interact with their peers, and they want these to be longer than 10 minutes, reinforcing school as the predominant (and often only) social stage for children. In fact, children need time and space to be themselves, to play with each other, to fully enjoy this stage of life and not be seen merely as pupils.

With regard to question 3, the answers are coherent and consistent, because the children would like to change the school so that they can be more like children to play, in open spaces, with playful activities in the playground and with more creative lessons, using gamification, technology and robotics.

With regard to question 4, almost a quarter of the children chose not to go to school. Comparing the answers to this question with those to question 1, where only two pupils said they didn't like going to school, we can see that there are pupils who, even though they liked going to school, chose not to. Looking at the children's justifications, we can see the negative feelings they associate with school: how tiredness, lack of rest and insecurity are impediments to learning and development. Children don't learn if they don't feel well, safe and have their basic needs met. These circumstances are reflected in the health promotion of intellectual, social and emotional competences. Thus, these kinds of negative emotions associated with school can contribute to a feeling of obligation when it comes to their willingness to attend.

With regard to the last two questions, table 1 shows that it is indisputable that school plays a fundamental and very important role, as it enables children to acquire the skills and competences that are fundamental to the development and training of citizens. However, as it is seen as a condition for a successful life, children can feel an obligation to attend school, focusing on the future part of the adult version, forgetting the present part, that they are children. This vision of school as pupils in the classroom working towards a distant future in their adult version doesn't seem to be in balance with the essence of "being a child" in class breaks, where the social factor prevails and where they can play and socialize with friends and teachers. If they didn't go to school, that's what they would like to do: "play and do fun and enjoyable activities", as one child put it. This playful activity is natural, because "It is in playing, and only in playing, that the individual, child or adult, can be creative and use his or her integral personality; and it is only by being creative that the individual discovers his or her Self". [20] (p. 80) and "play is the fundamental condition for being serious" (Archimedes, 282-212 BC).

A tabela 2 seguinte sintetiza as questões colocadas sobre a dimensão professor e a dimensão aulas e as respetivas respostas das crianças.



Table 2 - Teacher Dimension and Classes Dimension

Questions	Results	Comments
Team II – Teacher 1. For you, what is a teacher?	97% use terms such as "teaching" and "lecturing" to define a teacher	They also used other terms related to personal characteristics, associated with the personality, way of being and character of "being a teacher".
2. What characteristics do you think a teacher should have?	97% defined a teacher as "someone who teaches", they focus on personal characteristics	They mention 11 characteristics inherent to the profession and 64 characteristics to the personality of "being a teacher". Being intelligent (47%), fun (43%), friendly (33%) and patient (3%) 100% say that teachers have to be patient, have "lots and lots" of patience
Team III –Classes 1. Select the words that you think relate to the lessons	The most chosen verbs: "Learn" (97%); "Study" (93%); "Work" (90%) and "Think" (76%)	The children were shown the words they could select. The least chosen verbs: "Play" (40%), "Play" (37%), "Laugh"(33%), "Build" (33%) and "Debate"(3%).
2. In your opinion, what are classes and what are they for?	87% for learn	They understand the purpose of the lessons, but it is not clear to understand the influence in the compulsory school.
3. Would you prefer online or face-to-face classes? Justify your answer	13% would prefer online classes (a.o.) 87% would prefer to have face-to-face lessons (a.p.)	Reasons for preferring classes (a.o.): tiredness, needing more rest and sleep and the weight of rucksacks. Reason for preferring p.a.: - socialising with friends and teachers (81%); the quality of learning (37%) is "more, better and they learn more easily"
4. For you, is school a right or an obligation?	46% reported a right, 19% an obligation 35% both a right and an obligation	15% - 4 children do not understand the question.

In the group of teacher-related questions, the children associated "being a teacher" with teaching and pointed out certain human characteristics to be a "good teacher": intelligent, funny, friendly and patient. In fact, the children recognize that a teacher has to know, but also have patience, empathy and teach with joy. In this way, in the holistic development of the child and their intellectual and emotional abilities and competences, the child calls for a sense of well-being in the teacher-student relationship. This openness on the part of the child to express themselves to the teacher allows them to develop critical and reflective thinking, positively influencing the learning and teaching process.

In the question 6 the team investigation suggested drawing a picture: "Draw a picture about the school and what it means to you." The children were given the opportunity to represent the school through a drawing because it's a good way of collecting data without resorting to writing, and sometimes it's easier to convey an idea through a drawing than with words, since drawing recognises an intimate connection between the self and reality. In fact, the information obtained reveals data that is consistent with the previous responses, where the social factor is what children like most about school. In this vein, 44 per cent depict friends and various children, some in the playground (9) and others just people together (one child even drew two figures holding hands) without alluding to a specific space. Furthermore, 35% of the children depicted the school building, its façade, which could mean that they see the school as a place, a location, a physical space. A curious fact is that five of the children drew a building very similar to a house, while the other four clearly drew a structure closer to the structure and façade of their school.

Given that these children are on average 11 years old, could it be that they see the school as a second home? Also 35% of the children drew the playground, the playing field and the outdoor space, showing that this is what the school represents, or what they like most about it, revealing, once again, consistency with what has been seen so far: children like (and need!) to play and socialize with each other, and the playground is a space created specifically for these situations. The next piece of data to



analyse is the children who represented the school by drawing the classroom (30%). These children see school as the place they go to have lessons, as the main process that takes place there. In addition, 8 children represented the teacher, both in the classroom and in the playground, identifying him or her as the main and basic entity in the teaching process and as a figure with whom they establish a relationship. We will now analyze the children who made abstract representations of the school. There are two children who draw large, abstract pictures, using geometric shapes and free drawing, with lots of cheerful colors. According to child psychology, children who draw large, colorful pictures show that they feel safe and, as such, see school as a safe place.

6. Conclusions

In this case study, we tried to listen to the children in order to get to know them better and understand their thoughts and what they have to say about education and educational processes, based on three axes: the school (as a building - physical space - and as an entity); the teacher and the classroom. By analyzing and interpreting the data collected, it was possible to make a reading of each dimension studied. Starting with school, the study reveals that the social factor is what most motivates them to go to school, followed by their love of learning, which they see as an important stage in their future lives. School is the place where most children make friends and have the opportunity to socialize and interact with their peers. However, despite this, the biggest criticism that the children point to is the short break time, as this is when the children can play, which is consistent with what the children like best about school. On the other hand, school is a space for cognitive and intellectual learning that they acquire and develop as useful for their professional future. This possibility of knowledge being important for the present is not felt by the children, as [21] argues: "Education is a social process, it is development. It is not preparation for life, it is life itself". In this way, there is a feeling of obligation on the part of children towards their adult version, because their future, their work, their jobs depend on what they do today, and this can contribute to them seeing school as compulsory. In fact, what children (adults and society in general) say, school can no longer provide as many guarantees of a stable future as it once did, because the future has become increasingly uncertain and unstable. Therefore, rather than teaching and learning, school should teach learning how to learn [2]. The children like and want to go to school because of its social factor, but they don't consider it important for their lives. None of the children said that school was important because of the social factor, to play, to make friends and socialize with them. They only mentioned that school was important for learning and for the future, from a perspective mostly based on knowing rather than being.

In his latest research, [22] also concluded that children considered school to be important, essential for a promising future and a place to socialize. However, he adds that children and young people experience it as an institution that provides unsatisfactory learning, meaningless lessons, too much content, creating demotivation to learn. When we include children and give them the opportunity to participate and intervene in the process of constructing knowledge, we can expand thinking and knowledge, both theirs and ours. In fact, the teaching-learning process is a symbiotic process, without watertight roles, which does not define the teacher as the only one to teach, nor the child as the only one to learn and harmoniously develop the mental health of children and teachers. There is also a need for more case studies and research in the field of education, especially in terms of listening to students and teachers in order to find more interpersonal and cultural proposals for the school. The existence of studies that give a voice to those who give life and make life in the school is considered pertinent. Recognizing the limitations of this study, both in terms of time and the number of participants, it was possible to obtain relevant information and interpret the reality of the school from a different perspective: that of the child. It is considered a good starting point for research on a larger scale, working co-operatively with various professionals from different areas (Psychology, Pedagogy, Sociology, etc.) who can contribute to a deeper and more complete reading, which can translate into more significant readings, reflections and transformations. As Maxine Greene argues [1], we have to be able to imagine a coherent purpose for education, something common that takes place in a public space par excellence, which is the school: a more humane public place [2] [3] where we can produce knowledge and emotions, today, yesterday and tomorrow.

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