

An analysis of the child's voice and their rights in school language interaction

Análisis de la voz de los niños y sus derechos en la interacción lingüística escolar

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and analyzes the expressions of language that materialize communication in the scope of children's education classes. Language interaction becomes more important than content planning. It is materialized in communicative dynamics inside the complex process of socialization developed in children's education as the first step of the formal educational system. The analysis focuses on different language expressions in the school environment and tries to understand the intricate network of meanings and senses shaped by this communicative interaction. We analyze the influence of teachers' intervention in their pupils learning to understand explicit and implicit purposes and contents and think of alternatives where language could „escape from some pedagogical controls. Also, we analyze the relationship between these discourses and the educational practices that have children in kindergartens as their protagonists. The main purpose of this paper is to contribute to considering language beyond its connotation as a communication and teaching-learning instrument. We believe language should also be

considered a constructor of social relations in preschool education and should have a relevant influence on the competencies of participation that children develop and the guarantee of their rights.

Keywords: *Language, Childhood Rights, Social Interaction, Student-teacher Relationship, Educational Interaction Process, Early Childhood Education*

RESUMEN

Este trabajo explora y analiza las expresiones del lenguaje que materializan la comunicación en el ámbito de las clases de educación infantil. Las interacciones lingüísticas cobran más importancia que la planificación de contenidos y se materializan en dinámicas comunicativas dentro del complejo proceso de socialización que se desarrolla en la educación infantil como primer paso del sistema educativo formal. El análisis que se presenta se centra en diferentes expresiones del lenguaje en el ámbito escolar y trata de comprender la intrincada red de significados y sentidos que se configuran en esta interacción comunicativa. Analizamos la influencia de la intervención

de los docentes en el aprendizaje de sus alumnos, con la intención de comprender propósitos y contenidos explícitos e implícitos y pensar alternativas donde el lenguaje podría 'escapar' de algunos controles pedagógicos. También se analiza la relación entre estos discursos y las prácticas educativas que tienen como protagonistas a los niños en la Educación Infantil. El propósito principal es contribuir en la consideración del lenguaje más allá de su connotación como instrumento de comunicación y de enseñanza-aprendizaje. El lenguaje también debe ser considerado como un constructor de relaciones sociales en la Educación Infantil y con una influencia relevante en las competencias de participación que desarrollan los niños y la garantía de sus derechos.

Palabras clave: Lenguaje, Derechos de la Infancia, Interacción Social, Relación Estudiante-maestro, Proceso de Interacción Educativa, Educación Infantil

INTRODUCTION

This paper resumes and explores the theoretical thought that began some years ago about the expressions of language that materialize communication in the scope of children's education classes.

In the educational environment, investigations and didactic offers presenting language as an *instrument of communication* and as a *didactic object* prevail. This relegates its social dimension and the question of what is communicated through that *instrument* and what this communication process implies in the class environment and the practice of subjects.

The most frequent reflections about the relation to language-education are focused on the school contents involved in the pedagogical practice – e.g., general outline, activity planning, and evaluation of learning results –. Although these are the main teaching concerns, it is also possible to approach language from a broader perspective that locates it as a constructor of social relations and claims the right to expression in the preschool class. This is the reason why it is imperative to recover information from school classes and, particularly, from the interactions and relations developed in the scope of learning activities planned by teachers as well as in other situations occurring daily as routines, which are also full of contents – explicit and implicit – and carry children learning.

All these elements take part in such a rich communicative context as it is the school class. In this way, languages become more important than the planning

of contents and are materialized in communicative dynamics inside the complex process of socialization developed in children's education as the first step of the formal educational system.

The analysis presented focuses on different expressions of language that materialize communication in the school environment and tries to understand the intricate network of meanings and senses shaped by this communicative interaction. We analyze the influence of teachers' intervention in their pupils' learning, intending to understand explicit and implicit purposes and contents, and think of alternatives where language could "escape" from some pedagogical controls.

Also, we analyze the relationship between these discourses and the educational practices that have children in kindergartens as their protagonists. We believe that education – as a public space and as social and political practice – becomes the base on which the possibility of large, full, and inclusive participation.

The analysis is based on participation and the capacity to make responsible decisions in different fields of life. The main purpose is to understand how those children establish interactions with their context, and how people influence their participation in training.

OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this paper is to contribute to the consideration of language beyond its connotation as a communication and teaching-learning instrument. We believe language should also be considered as a constructor of social relations in Preschool Education and with a relevant influence in the competences that children develop.

The need for understanding the dynamics established in class intercourses between teachers and pupils, the roles and the incidence in the learning being encouraged is inferred from this purpose.

We are also interested in examining the implicit forms and contents of pedagogical and didactic discourses displayed in this context.

Finally, it is necessary to make every effort to interpret the decisions guiding the different activity propositions offered to little children in the environment of Preschool Education.

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The first moment of the investigation recovers

thirty two class observations in kindergartens of *Alto Valle del Río Negro* (Argentina), recorded in the period 2001-2005. In 2008-2010, we observed fifteen other classes and interviewed ten teachers. The methodological perspective is a qualitative one, with an emphasis in the comprehension of processes, and the observations composing the analyzed corpus are of an ethnographic perspective. The interviews are semi-structured and focused on three points: teacher decisions with respect to language teaching, the reasons for interventions in classes with little children, and the importance given to socialization in childhood.

As regards class's observations, they took place in kindergartens of six cities of the region we are investigating. This revealed a sample of public-state institutions working with children from 3 to 5 years old in urban and rural areas. The records were taken considering the development of an activity or a sequence of activities (and so the duration is diverse) and respecting the dynamics of the class. In each educational institution, we made observations at least two times a year in order to obtain some information about the shared educational process in each group investigated. First, we analyzed the observation records obtained in the period 2001-2005. This analysis guided the planning of a series of interviews with seven teachers of the educational institutions.

The information brought by these interviews made it possible for us to go deep into the dimensions of the initial analysis, particularly those linked to the reasons of teachers' pedagogical intentions and didactic decisions. In 2010, the study was completely grounded in the need for actualizing and completing the corpus of information. Although we were dealing with different groups of teachers and pupils, and other educational institutions were included, the most outstanding features of the dynamics of the classes and language forms in the environment of pedagogical practice appeared as continuity.

It is worth mentioning that the processing of the information compiled was one of a qualitative kind, guided by a series of theoretical categories that we considered as the most relevant for the study. As we did not count with enough theoretical references specific to children's education, we built some temporary summaries based on the investigations accomplished in other levels of education. This implied an effort to consider the features of early childhood and those – not less peculiar – displayed in the educational processes of Preschool Education.

The second part of the study was made in 2019 and was completed in 2020 with new data about this topic in Pandemic context. This information comes from primary sources: virtual class records, home activities, and child and teachers interviews. Secondary sources were also recovered, such as records and evaluations carried out by initial-level teachers during the period of isolation due to the Pandemic.

The surveys were addressed to twenty teachers and focused on three topics: conceptions of participation and childhood's voices, activity suggestions and grounds for teachers' interventions which include the construction of an activity role that includes the child. It is worth mentioning that the processing of the information compiled was that of a qualitative kind, directed by a series of theoretical categories considered the most relevant for the study¹. The research in Pandemic is in line with the support of technology tools like Internet meets, email communication, digital surveys and remote activities helping for the mobile phone. Its work demanded innovation and a creative approach to research.

To expand the corpus of data, primary sources were surveyed in the province of Río Negro and Buenos Aires from digital surveys and communication by email and social networks. In the first instance, an online survey was prepared with Google Forms, and communication through social networks accessible to researchers and the participating community. A corpus of images provided by families about the educational process at home and drawings made by children during the quarantine were also collected.

The interviews and surveys were carried out with teachers and families with children, five teachers and eight families with children from 3 to 5 years old participated. A first contact was made in June 2020 and periodic communication was maintained for a year, recording comments and experiences. We also include in the investigation the information brought by surveys made to teachers and the reference to teaching documents: curriculum suggestions, class plans and children's productions created during the observed classes.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the educational environment, the classroom is the physical and social space where communication

1. Part of the analysis was performed with the assistance of the program ATLAS.ti (version 6.1 GmbH, Berlin).

between the participants of the pedagogical act is articulated. Architecture, furniture, resources, as well as the relations established in this space condition all possible ways of communication. "Relations of authority, communication and hierarchy that appear in the classroom as we know it and which are so basic at the time of teaching that many times are unnoticed" (Dussel and Caruso, 2003:31). Although there are significant differences in the *materiality* of kindergarten classrooms and those of primary and secondary schools, more traditional classroom relations show similar characteristics.

Classroom communication is basically hierarchic – e.g. it responds to delimitations typical of school culture which are shaped mainly from the role of the teacher. It is worth clarifying that, although teachers have more control over linguistic intercourses than their pupils, many speech rules are not determined by them: these are determined previously by the institutional context where those intercourses take place. It is necessary to consider that a great part of what are said and done at schools is permeated by "knowledge" as well as "power". This pair's knowledge-power is personified in the role that assumes the teacher in the class and is realized in the linguistic interventions he/she performs. In this way, there appears the need for analyzing the teacher's speech in the classroom minutely, considering him/her as the bearer of a discourse full of a power which blends with knowledge and which has a relevant role in the processes of socialization and education of little children.

Some studies developed since the 70s show the effect that teachers language produce on their students, particularly when they use terms and academic instructions revealing an abstract style, difficult to understand and not very significant (see Cazden et al., 1972; Stubbs, 1976; Mehan, 1977; Green y Wallat, 1981). Although these are investigations performed in primary and secondary schools, their results let us reach theoretical categories in order to examine what happens with the first education of little children in Preschool Education.

Stubbs's contributions (1976, 1984) turn out to be rich: these are in vogue if we consider the continuity in the ways that teachers use to perform their interventions. Teachers are basically worried about disciplinary terminology, the explanation of topics and contents, and academic strategies, leaving on a second place the importance of making explicit reference to the educational intentions and the values which are behind their speeches and their demands

on little children.

They stimulate language's intellectual purpose of expressing concepts in a way more or less adapted to disciplinary fields. But the language of the teacher also accomplishes a sociocultural function, since it supports his/her function as a teacher: the pupils must accept – in order to adapt themselves to the context of the class – each term their teacher pronounces, the style of his/her language and the conventions he/she uses to talk. It is necessary to refer to language as *met communication*: it is communication above communication; messages which refer back to the system of communication itself, checking if it works appropriately (Stubbs, 1976:105).

The use of language at school is highly asymmetric: being habitual that teachers – through their speech acts – monitor and control a great part of the dialogues taking place in the class, being these the *raw material* for teaching, "they are basic to the activity of teaching, since they are the acts whereby which a teacher controls the flow of information in the class and defines the relevance of what is said" (Stubbs, 1984: 106). It is worth saying that not only what is said is controlled, but also what is silenced (and how and when).

According to Mc Laren's perspective of analysis (1998), language embodies the ways through which we are immersed in the culture and the way in which we try, literally, of leaving our mark in the world. It is the medium through which we construct our experiences; it produces us as subjects, constituting our subjectivity based on a multiplicity of subject positions.

As part of meaning construction, language represents an essential force in the struggle for *being heard*. Pedagogically, language provides the auto-definitions with which people act, negotiate different subjective positions, and begin a process of naming and renaming relations among them, the others and the world. By means of language we name our experience and we act. When control is excessive, language can take the form of silence, *choke the word*, and leave a deep impression on the child's subjectivity in his first – and fundamental – relation with the world. However, everyone knows that standard advances are not enough to produce radical changes in the ways of regarding childhoods and dealing with them. It is necessary to mention that adult voices still prevail in discourse constructions talking about children.

If we pretend to put childhoods in the context of truly democratic societies, it is imperative to recover

their voices completely, making children become active participants of community life. Here, early education – considered as a social and political practice capable of becoming a privileged space for the construction of citizenship – plays an essential role. School practices, what happens in the educational space every day, the relations displayed, can foster and support this collective construction of citizenship. School is expected to be a democratic space showing every citizen's engaged and transforming social behavior just from childhood.

Transforming action is precisely the basis on which an emancipating civic education – with the purpose of widening the scope of pupils' autonomy – rests. As Giroux (2001) says,

Educational contexts should encourage young people's imaginations, passions and intellects, for them to be able to challenge the structural conditioning factors which oppress them. This form of education is essentially political and its goal is to achieve a true democratic society, a society able to answer for everyone's needs and not only for the needs of a few (p.202).

PRESCHOOL EDUCATION CLASSES AND LANGUAGES DISPLAYED

In the classes of Preschool Education observed, we analyzed mainly the features of *teacher speech* as a constructor of the pedagogical intercourse in the class. We noticed some very particular characteristics which give an account of a certain style formed by a precise terminology built on the basis of didactic traditions, typical of this level of education (vg. the use of diminutives, metaphors, rhymes, etc.) and close to the disciplinary logic which permeates every teaching process. This "name-teaching" (Stubbs, 1984) is not generally familiar for students, who must accomplish a complex learning process to acquire this structure: its codes, its meanings and the senses it assumes in different circumstances.

Recovering Stubbs's investigations, we notice that teachers display different strategies in the course of an activity, in order to adapt disciplinary terms and explain them (usually excessively, arriving even to some deformations in the specificity of the contents to be taught). This feature becomes more serious in Preschool Education classes, since the explanations must be extended when children are younger. The excessive worry about terminology leaves aside the reflection

on the use of language in a discursive context as particular as it is that of school and also the concern about the many senses constructed in communicative interaction. Another consequence of this feature of the teacher's speech is that it employs a great amount of the time devoted to linguistic intercourse, reducing the possibilities of children's communication.

Teacher *speech* in class is typically characterized by explanations, the correction of pupils appraising and editing their language, the summary of ideas to round up contents and to control the direction of the situation. From the teacher's role, constant control is emphasized on different aspects of the class communication system. Channels of communication are controlled by opening and closing them; the content of the conversation and the relevance of what is said are defined; at the same time, the forms of language employed and the level of understanding are controlled; and the amount of conversation is limited, demanding the pupils to speak or to be silent, and so generating limitations in children's possibilities of performance.

In a great part of the observations, we recorded similar phrases to "put the group in order" before the activities, during them and when they are being closed. Music is added to some phrases to disguise the orders they hide, resulting in an imperious way of relation with children (see Kantor, 1989).

From a very early age, children begin to learn the functions of "school terminology", beyond the particular meanings of each word. In different discourses, the pupils identify the characteristic aspects of their teacher's *speech* style, the conventions used in the school environment. No matter if they share these or not, they must accept them to succeed at school.

It has been possible to categorize the so-called IRF *educational exchange* structures¹ (I: teacher initiation; R: response; F: feedback). In a variety of dialogues recorded from class observations at all stages of the investigation, the IRF educational exchange structure is manifested. The elements of this structure are generally identified when the teacher presents the topic that is discussed to start the activity (I: Initiation). In eighty percent of the initiations it is an open question of the type (how are you today? why...? or other questions), this questions have few alternative answers (yes, no, I don't know). Other typical questions were identifies to Initiation (I) o Re initiation (RI): Do you feel like doing a little job today? What is this? (Presenting an image or object), generally looking for the correct term that defines what is shown into the pupil

Observation (2001). Preschool Class (5 years old)	
I	M: Did you like the story?
R	A: I didn't like it
F (-)	M: Nothing from the story?
R	A: Yes, the sun
F (+)	M: Fine! Then draw the sun!
RI	M: Now everyone draws what they liked the most about the story

Observation (2010). Preschool Class (5 years old)	
I	M: When we are sick, where do we go?
R	A1: To the doctor
F (-)	M: But where are we going?
R	A1: To the doctor's house
F (-)	M: To the doctor's house?
R	A2: To the hospital
F (+)	M: Good Matt! To the hospital

Observation (2020). Preschool Class via Zoom (5 years old)	
I	M: What is this? (The teacher shows the image of a mask)
R	A1: To take care of ourselves
F (-)	M: What is it called?
R	A2: Mask
F (+)	M: Good! And what is it for?
R	A2: To take care of ourselves
F (+)	Me: Good! To take care of COVID

Source: Own elaboration with data from observation records of selected classes from the analyzed corpus
Table 1. Examples of observations

response (R). If the student's answer is correct, there is positive Feedback (F+); if the Feedback results in another question, the children interpret that their answer was not correct (F-). Examples of observations from three periods of the investigation are extracted in Table 1.

The dynamics of the learning activities analyzed show a common pattern: all of them are introduced by the teachers, restraining performance possibilities in the context of the proposition. One of the typical phrases is: "Ok... now we'll work a little". Before giving the instruction, the teacher states that "teaching" (the lesson) is going to start and the direction it will take through the activity he/she will suggest. Some authors like Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) have referred to this process as a *boundary exchange* within which the class is fixed. In this case, it is an opening boundary exchange which prepares the situation in order to let learning begin and which is quite frequent in the classes observed.

Other kinds of teacher interventions during the task serve the purpose of avoiding its development from "escaping" the planned boundaries. Actually, the questions asked by the teacher play a decisive role, many of them appointed to keep the order and to guide the actions of the pupils. Children progressively acquire the sense of the different types of questions: those which demand some kind of information, those which demand some degree of reasoning and those which serve the function of control. But these categorizations prove to be limited since the same question may acquire different senses according to the communicative context in which it is asked. The intention of the inquirer and the interpretation of the one who must answer are negotiated. The question: *what?*

May be appointed to search information, to evaluate or to control behaviors, and may also be interpreted in any of those senses. It proves to be necessary the link between the form of the teacher question and the underlying intention or function.

Teachers usually "use" questions which are not real demands of information. Actually, they rarely ask with the intention of being informed. This reveals the artificial nature of a great part of teacher-pupil dialogues, quite different from the informal intercourse recorded in extra-school environments. The school is the only place where someone asks a question of which he/she already knows the answer.

According to Stubbs, in the dialogue of the class, "the teacher is the most active player and his primary role is solicitor, while the pupil's is respondent" (1984:

108). *Active questions* – i.e. challenging questions which go beyond its literal meaning –, for example: *what might this mean?* (instead of what is this?), are not very typical of Preschool Education, even when this kind of questions are the ones which can provide the richest possibilities of learning and which involve the underlying "pedagogical message" that many answers may be acceptable and not only those arranged by the teacher as the bearer of the knowledge (and the power) of the only right answer.

During some other situations recorded, children's capacity of making decisions is quite limited. Although some teachers consider that the primary criterion for the action should be to stimulate autonomy and to broaden the spaces for children participation in class, when we observed their classes and analyzed their experience registers (evaluations, class records), we noted some oppositions between their grounds on autonomy and the conception of childhood prevailing (children that have to be controlled and allowed by adults to act).

One teacher narrates the steps given with respect to her pupils' autonomy: "I let them explore (...) I offered them the freedom they needed (...) they were given the space for saying what they think (...) I broadened their chances to speak (...) I made them feel safe..." (Extract from an interview with a teacher in March 2012) Although there is a desire to change her classes' dynamics, children's actions are structured according to the teacher's decisions.

Teacher authority enables participation, but it fails to favor spaces for the collective construction of these capacities with true participation of children. They are left out in a secondary role which keeps vertical relationships: the teacher is the one who controls the situation completely.

Other activities have been observed, where children participation is explicitly encouraged in democratic contexts and from the perspective of rights (children's voice is heard, they can make decisions according to their interests and concerns and for the benefit of the others and of their environment).

During the activities observed, children not only had a wide scope of decision on what they were interested in learning about nature, but they were also guided by their teachers in order to express their knowledge and opinions on the problems they were trying to solve. Learning extended to other contexts, involving families and community, and children had an active participation in the development of each learning offer (they could choose among different

materials and spaces for the activity, and group work, solidarity and confidence were supported).

The teachers were attentive guides of their pupils' tasks, providing them with enough safety and making the dynamics of each stage easier. In these cases, the perspective of rights is adopted, reinforcing the right of "being an active part", participating, being informed, and building a judgment of their own in order to give opinions, have and demand the right of "being listened" and express their points of view so that they can be taken into account when considering common matters.

Educational practices are also influenced by these conceptions, treating the "child-pupil" as lacking something and not as an individual full of potential. Childhoods are locked in school; their voices are trapped in the rigid discourses of the teaching structure. Control is stressed, reinforcing heteronomy and so restraining the possibility of an open communication, of self-confidence in the construction of social bonds, of an interaction with spaces and individuals, running away from mechanic habits usually observed in some kindergartens.

In some of the institutions analyzed, times and spaces are organized mainly in a rigid way. The priority is not set on children's needs but on the demands of the institutional dynamics. In this way, children use "the free time and space they can find" and look for their own – but limited – spaces (for example, under a table, in a corner) in order to make up game situations which let them "escape from adult control". In those games, sometimes very short, they create once and again their rules, set roles, participate more actively and are able to control by themselves their behaviors according to the activity and to the interaction with their classmates.

In Pandemic at the initial level, a high percentage of teachers who recounted their experiences pointed out the excessive responsibility in their role, the lack of resources in the first stage and the lack of guidance from the education system, the other point they emphasized was that even with many communication difficulties, especially as they were young children, they managed to establish a link with them and with their families. "We really entered into their lives; we got to know them in a way that was not possible before" (Extract from an interview with a teacher in November 2020)

There is a consensus in the accounts of the exchange not only of activities, but also of dialogue with the teachers and between the children, especially focused

on sharing their worlds of life: they presented their toys, everything they produced and created not only on the basis of the teachers' proposals but also independently or with the guidance of their family group (drawing, writing and even play spaces created in a corner of the house which could be interpreted not only as another space for play but also as a remembrance of life in the Preschool materialized in that place. The analysis of photographs of classes via Zoom or Meet, considered the gestures, the interactions, the resources available and the collaborative work between all the participants in the virtual session.

PLAY: A POTENTIAL SPACE FOR THE CHILD'S VOICES

In all the institutions observed, *the space devoted to play promoted greater degrees of autonomy in children*, favoring practices with a more active participation and producing different possibilities for children to make decisions. We could set a parallelism between games as a free, pleasant activity – and usually with some fictional elements – and the practice of real participation.

The spaces devoted to play are privileged confidence environments for learning. Unlike other activities, games make it easier for children to integrate and become involved in what it suggests to them; it enables the emergence of imaginary situations which lead to creativity, to the enlargement of the limits of reality and to the escape of adult control. This space also requires the effort of creating, accepting and negotiating rules and adapting desires and impulses to the boundaries that these rules indicate. However, once immersed in the game dynamics, players experience the pleasure of their actions and the freedom of moving and acting in their own world.

Some other interviewees linked their rights to being *looked after, having a family and being loved*, and stressed *having the opportunity of playing*. These answers can be grouped basically into two focal points granted by children: care/affection and game. Affection and spaces for playing are essential to the complete human development and, according to children's discourses, their vital importance is reinforced. Care/affection and games give security and freedom respectively, two basic elements in the training of more autonomous individuals, capable of social action.

The drawings and paintings made by children express the importance that they grant to game si-

tuations (they represented game spaces like squares, parks and the kindergarten's playground; they also showed situations where different groups of children played in natural spaces, surrounded by plants and animals).

LANGUAGE AND CHILDREN SOCIALIZATION

Teachers concerns generally focus on discovering how to teach students in a better way, faster, emphasizing discussions about the most effective methods. But the matter of what is learnt has usually been left aside, leading to a poor reflection on the purposes of education we assume, assumptions which are behind the practices.

Inquiring into how social control and discipline are kept in class provides elements for a reflection on what little children learn in these situations and in the sense this learning acquires. The results of the investigation reveal how different ways of class communication imply some sociocultural relations among participants. These relations play a decisive role in the process through which "children become pupils". By examining these aspects of the class, it is possible to stop considering as natural the actual school dynamics and the condition of "pupil" as a constituent part of childhood. Children "learn" to be pupils and this identity strengthens as they move forward in the educational system. These kinds of studies let us understand how children learn what they do at school, and how their attention is focused on areas of knowledge that school considers as valuable, silencing and ignoring many others.

Most of the teachers' discourses analyzed in this paper refer to the conception of "one" childhood, omitting or excluding difference and diversity. This is clear in some situations observed in the kindergartens involved in the study: we recorded that teachers usually direct to the group-class by using the male gender instead of the female one; they give indications to all their pupils by means of a unique instruction and they pretend everyone to understand it in the same way and at the same time; they do not show alternatives in the solution of the task (everyone does the same and generally following the same process); they do not allow the raising of conflicts or silence them when they emerge.

DIVERSITY IS ACCENTUATED IN A PANDEMIC: NEW VOICES

This was another aspect of knowledge for the teachers: entering the homes through the zoom or through the mothers' stories, getting to know these limited and deprived spaces, the overcrowding doubled by having to spend more time inside, because while some of the children were doing homework others were watching TV or playing, a climate of concentration for studying was not possible.

The return to face-to-face classes was gradual, with each jurisdiction in the country adjusting to its possibilities, the health context and the conditions of the institutions. They attended in groups called bubbles, which allowed for a prudential distance in the institutional context. Each group - called a "bubble" - attended two or three times a week, depending on the possible organization of the institution (available space, size of classrooms, number of students per grade, cycle).

An early childhood teacher says: "it was very complex because the young children lost their routine; every day they had to attend was like starting all over again. I had to adapt the planning to follow logic of knowledge but especially in terms of the children's experiences, trying to find some possible continuity in these conditions. It was very difficult and it was only when I returned with the whole group that I felt that we started the pedagogical process and the strengthening of bonds".

Although a great part of what is taught is transmitted and evaluated through some kind of oral or written language, we must consider that linguistic communication is also social interaction where, beyond the explicit contents being transmitted, there are also some other contents that children have to learn in their role of pupils in order to succeed at school. It does not depend only on linguistic structures more or less appropriate or on a didactic transposition more or less faithful to the disciplinary knowledge. The way in which intercourses develop, the opportunities to negotiate meanings or the absence of them, the possibility of alternative answers, are also *learnt* from Preschool Education. If we denied this essential part of the educational event, we would be silencing our pupils voices, even when they had developed the linguistic competences to express themselves. If we "listened" also to the silences which break into the class, we would understand how these question the voices bearing a dominant pedagogical, didactic and

disciplinary discourse.

Language in class opens and closes different possibilities of learning for pupils. To consider it as a simple *instrument of communication or information bearer* confirms the socialization of children at school grounded on a certain dependence which limits and simplifies it. When we study the underlying discursive structure of school dialogues, we find an inner intricacy of meanings which are part of the culture shared by a class.

From a reflective perspective, we can design alternatives to help children construct communicative competences in contexts where, as speakers and listeners, they need knowledge beyond phonology, lexicon and abstract grammatical structures. As Gumperz J. says (1988:69), “language usage (...) is governed by culture and context-specific norms that constrain both the choice of communicative options and the interpretation of what is said”.

The use of linguistic forms that strengthen the asymmetry in class communication, far from favoring self-determination, confirms heteronomous relations between adults and children. It is worth wondering what kind of learning is being promoted by this asymmetry. We can analyze these aspects not only by considering what, how and when something is said; they are also present in what is silenced, in face expressions, in attitudes, in the distances set. All of these are communicative behaviors which acquire particular characteristics in school situations. We could also observe the way in which members of the class “use” the space in their communicative behavior, so setting certain relations. In the use of the space that subjects (pupils and teachers) do, the role of each of them is also determined.

There is a clear difference between the teacher’s space (generally set in the front of the class, near the blackboard or the desk) and the space of the pupils (in a round or in chairs and tables). From the *front of the class*, what must be done is determined and the ordinary life of the class is organized: in this way, it becomes a “power space”. In the observation records, we can see a high degree of situations where teachers appeal to the front of the class each time they have to explain something, give an instruction or order the group.

The teacher not only transmits this through his/her explanations or oral instructions. We could also observe how the look of the teacher conditions the activity of the pupils, for example favoring silences although these were not the intention of the person

who looks. The *response* is already incorporated in the pupils: in view of the *teacher’s look*, they have to keep “the order”, i.e. respect the rules of school dynamics. Children progressively adapt their relations with the space of the class and in the interaction with classmates and teachers. This helps the adaptation of the body to school: in fact, the *adaptation* period in kindergartens is the first step of a long and effective process of school socialization.

In these first months of Preschool Education classes, the teacher devotes a great part of the time to giving indications, especially through verbal language, for children to “learn” to conduct themselves in the environment of the class and the kindergarten, to recognize the spaces where they can be and how, to be quiet in their place of the round or in chairs and tables during certain activities, what they can touch, when and how. It is also important for them to conduct themselves according to some models and rules transmitted by the system and the institution through the teacher.

According to Tisciuzzi and Cambi (1993), children socialization is connected with language development, being the last a social product and at the same time a socialization agent. As the German philosopher Ernest Cassirer⁷ emphasizes, “by learning to name things, a child does not simply add a list of artificial signs to his previous knowledge of ready-made empirical objects. He learns rather to form the concepts of those objects, to come to terms with the objective world”, by using the name “as a fixed center, a focus of thought”.

The real child’s participation implies the individual and his ideas, his language and the action. It is about trying to integrate plurality, differences, voices right from the essence of real participation in common matters. In some of the cases analyzed, teachers raise the question on the relevance granted to the incorporation of values essential to citizenship, wondering even who decides what is valuable and for whom. Although these questions give account of a process of reflection on the goals and contents of education, we detected some difficulties linked to conceptual misunderstandings of citizenship in the context – and as an essential part – of rights and democratic relationships that can be favored by early education. One of the main obstacles lies in the persistence of a conception of childhood that has to be shaped by adults. The representations of children – infants (those who do not speak) – persist and go through school practices that locate pupils in the place of recipients,

listeners of their teachers. This influences teachers’ representations and knowledge, the social relationships displayed in the classroom and the form and content of the curricular materials with which children interact.

In the dynamics of the online classes, the structure of the class exchanges was initially maintained, always starting with an intervention by the teacher, followed by questions and activity instructions. The children’s answers were repeated by the teachers. Here it was used as a resource for correct understanding, given that the meetings were mediated by ICTs and the Internet, which worked according to the bandwidth available in each place, depending on the geographical location, the equipment of both the teachers and the families. In some cases it was difficult to hear or the sound was distorted, and there were also background sounds that were specific to the dynamics of each quarantined household.

As the children were young, the connection to the class and the interactions were largely mediated by a family member (sibling, parents, and grandparents). Here there was the particularity of incorporating more voices in the interaction, which marked a difference with the structure analyzed in the face-to-face classes. The exchange had to be flexible, the children’s attention span was taken into account and the teachers also considered the context. This was influenced by the need to communicate due to the pandemic situation that everyone shared, and the fact that the interaction groups were very small, between five and eight pupils. The number of students attending depended on several factors, the most relevant of which were: the possibility of accessing the virtual class (availability of connection, devices, accompaniment by a family member, family dynamics), and the organization established by each teacher according to the proposals that were feasible online (considering that it was very difficult to coordinate activities for large groups via the internet).

SOME ALTERNATIVES

To conclude, we suggest some lines of action that could help the linguistic intercourses and the pedagogical relations established by teachers working with early childhood.

It is essential to include reflective consecutive approaches to school dynamics in the plans for teacher training, guiding their analysis in order to restate them in the context of society which has been sub-

stantially modified and especially attending to the new interests and needs of children, taught under a system perpetuated with very few changes in decades. We must be concerned not only about the adaptation of methodologies and the approach to the new communication technologies, but also about a reformulation of communicative models developed in school classes.

It is necessary for *producers of knowledge* on teacher tasks to encourage the opening towards intense debates on school dynamics, in order to prevent control mechanisms displayed in Preschool Education classes from being strengthened. On the contrary, interventions granting self-determination (intellectual and moral) should be favored. Channels of communication should be more opened so that children could be the constructors of their own discourses and where their voices could be restored, together with creativity and expression. Language is essential in the pedagogical task, and it is time to think over its role in the educational environment, recovering its transformation potential.

Language – verbal and non-verbal – not only passes on emotions, thoughts and interpretations of reality; but it also constructs this reality through its allowances and limitations. So, when children learn to “use” language in interactions, they incorporate values, attitudes, knowledge and a particular way of organizing the world through words and silences, shouts and whispers, presences and absences, questions and answers.

Language not only incorporates children in the space of symbols and their relations with the objects they represent; it guides them to the world of culture as *symbolic production organized by means of language*. This language, with its complexity, is learnt through the communication with the world that people establish. In our culture, this process is determined mostly by systematized education.

When language is examined by pedagogical discourse, it results to be under its control and begins to be the most effective way of performing its purposes. If we know a little more about how school dialogues are organized, as well as teacher interventions, their purposes (explicit and implicit) and their influence on children activity, and if we discover “other” contents going around this communication, we would have more elements to state this possibility as the beginning of a different discursive structure.

We could say that children, from a very early age, are capable of perceiving what they need in order to

“live a good life”, so we should not only answer for this welfare from the adult role, but also provide them with the necessary safety for them to be able of looking for and demanding answers to their needs, interests and rights. It is not possible to ask for something that is not recognized or – worse – something that cannot be named. Thus, facilitating the experience of rights and their acknowledgement become an essential step in the training of children’s citizenship; this avoids limiting it only to adult life as it has been historically done.

If we refer to the rights expressed during the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, we should think about every dimension implied by their accomplishment: acknowledgement, pleasure, practice, claim and demand. Every day practices where children take part should stand out because of these features, so stressing the active protagonist of childhoods.

To guarantee certain coherence between what is said and what is done, offering children different models and examples about democratic participation and the respect of the other as an individual with rights.

To consider that, at an early age, conceptual abstractions are not part of children’s practices. Significant action in relation to the physical and social world is the one which facilitates learning. Shared and socialized actions, public dialogue and training in the “civic conversation” should be focal points of educational practices right from early childhood.

There should be an encouragement of different instances of collective reflection on everyday practices taking place in the classrooms, stressing a critical examination of the methods employed for teacher intervention in order to lay the foundations of actions tending to inspire children’s autonomy. It is essential to establish once again the adult role in the education of children since, grounded on hegemonic practices, the adult-teacher assumes the main place in the educational space and his/her voice fills school classes (explaining, guiding, controlling, evaluating). It is important to restore the value and the presence of games in school spaces. Thus, children’s permanent claims for their need and right to play would be considered.

To rebuild the social image of childhood/s, including the *uncertainty* implied by what is diverse, the *uneasiness* of the new and towards *the new ones*² that appear and question us. This is to think of and to be-

lieve in children who have identity and capacity, voice and word. To consider childhood’s voice as a common and public matter, as a real part of a society aspiring to true democracy. For children to be “eloquent”, we need an adult generation prepared to listen to them.

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2. Category taken from H. Arendt (2005), linked to her thesis on natality.