

GENDER, DIVERSITY AND ETHNICITY: RETHINKING THE EARLY EDUCATION LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Ethnic diversity has increased over time. A stimulating factor was the founding of the European Union, which facilitated the movement between the various countries belonging to it. With a drastic increase in migration in recent years, due to factors such as political conflicts, talk of diversity, multiculturalism and integration policies becomes increasingly important. This paper discusses the impact that issues around socio-economic diversity, gender and ethnicity have on children in a socio-educational context. It reflects on the importance of creating inclusive educational environments in their different aspects and with different actors, children, professionals, and families. It assumes a qualitative methodology, which intends to access the authors' conceptions through heuristic and hermeneutic processes. The research process followed the following steps: (i) research and systematization of literature, collected from databases; (ii) organization of the papers by dimension; (iii) collection of relevant ideas about educational environments that promote respect, diversity, multiculturalism, and gender inclusion; and (iv) integration of the different conceptions. Through the literature, practical examples of how the space should be organized are revealed, highlighting for example materials to be included, the role of educators and teachers, and the organization of time. The finding shows the importance of reconsidering the educational environment, family support and the multidisciplinary approaches to gender, ethnicity, and people on poverty inclusion.

Keywords: Learning environments, early childhood education, gender, ethnicity, poverty.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, society has undergone significant changes, leading to increased migration and diversity. This has resulted in an increase in multiculturalism, but social roles, beliefs, and stereotypes associated with men and women are still deeply rooted in culture. The need for research in this area is clear.

Janeva and Stojanosca (2014) highlight the different types of diversity, including age, sex, sexual orientation, religion, ethnic origin, and disability. Multiculturalism refers to the diversity of cultures present in a region, which UNESCO (2007) recognizes as a "characteristic inherent to humanity" and a "common heritage". It can lead to an extension of possibilities and choices and improve human capacities and values.

Ethnic diversity is defined as the presence of a wide range of ethnic groups in a region and can be a source of richness and vibrancy in a community. However, it can also lead to increased tensions and friction between different groups if there is a lack of understanding and respect for cultural differences.

Gender equality is the state in which access to rights or opportunities is not affected by gender. It is a fundamental human right and is considered a key factor in achieving social justice and creating a sustainable, peaceful society. Gender equality does not mean that men and women should be treated the same, but rather that people should be treated with respect and given equitable opportunities.

The diversity of social roles that individuals occupy is a key element of society. Social roles can shape an individual's identity and behaviour in a variety of ways, and they can change over time. The adoption of the "Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions" by UNESCO in 2005 represents a significant step towards valuing, accepting and implementing multiculturalism.

Diversity must be addressed from an early age to prevent harm to individuals throughout different stages of life. Education for diversity, which focuses on knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to respect and appreciation of different cultures, ethnicities, and religions, is necessary.

This paper discusses the impact of issues related to socio-economic diversity, gender, culture, and ethnicity on children in a socio-educational context. It reflects the importance of creating inclusive educational environments with different actors, such as children, professionals, and families.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology to gain insight into the authors' perspectives through heuristic and hermeneutic processes. The research process involved the following steps: (i) researching and synthesizing literature from databases; (ii) organizing the papers by dimension; (iii) collecting relevant ideas about educational environments that promote respect, diversity, multiculturalism, and gender inclusion; and (iv) integrating the different perspectives.

The literature also provides practical examples of how the learning environment should be organized, such as the materials to be used, the role of educators and teachers, and the organization of time.

3 RESULTS

As stated by UNESCO and cited by the European Communities (2005), "cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature" (p.13). This emphasizes the importance of diversity as a shared heritage of humanity that should be recognized and strengthened for the benefit of current and future generations. The following section will explore the impact of diversity on children and the characteristics of educational settings that promote and respect diversity.

3.1 The social and economic impact of diversity

When discussing the impact of multiculturalism and diversity in economic terms for a specific country or region, it is important to analyse not only the costs but also the benefits. These benefits are not only economic but can also include social benefits such as conflict management, inclusion, and sharing. According to Triandafyllido and Ulasiuk (2013), approximately 750 million people face socioeconomic discrimination due to their cultural identity and more than 800 million people experience political harm to their ethnicity, religion, language, or identity. Factors that contribute to this issue can range from racial discrimination to a lack of knowledge and information about available resources and minority populations. The family also plays a significant role in shaping a child's understanding of themselves and the world around them, including gender roles.

In terms of education for children and young people, significant spending is required, particularly for disadvantaged children, including general education and inclusion projects. However, there are long-term benefits, including improved educational performance and decreased rates of crime, drug use, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment. The net benefits of inclusion programs tend to be greater than the expenses.

One of the most significant discriminatory issues with significant economic impact is related to employment. Members of ethnic minorities often need to invest 40-50% more in a job search compared to the majority population. This factor, in addition to the social costs mentioned, has a significant impact on the national economy, as more productive workers from disadvantaged groups may not be able to secure jobs, leading to increased spending on subsidies and support for poverty and social exclusion.

In addition to the economic impact, discrimination against disadvantaged groups can also have a significant impact on mental health, family stability, and societal discontent, leading to conflicts and a negative impact on a country's security. These costs, which are often overlooked, can have an even greater impact than direct economic costs.

Diversity brings many benefits to a country and ultimately has a positive impact on its economy. This diversity leads to national development, as it can attract new markets and improve the products and services offered. Berry and Ward (2006) also report that diversity has a positive impact on national culture.

The impact of diversity in the workplace is also positive and can bring indirect economic benefits. The diversity of cultures brings a variety of ideas and perspectives that can be valuable for a company. Studies, including those by UNESCO, show a positive relationship between diversity in the workplace and economic and financial development, positively impacting scholarship.

To fully realize the benefits of diversity, it is important to invest in policies of positive action, understanding that change does not happen overnight and that it is a time-consuming but rewarding process. (Berry & Ward, 2006; Triandafyllido & Ulasiuk, 2013).

3.2 Impact of diversity on children

According to Janeva and Stojanosca (2014) the pivotal period in the life of a child is between 0 and 8 years, called early childhood. It is during this phase that the child achieves the first and main results of development. It is during this period that the child develops not only gait and speech but also awareness about diversity in relation to other children. Abdullah (2009) extends this period until the age of 12, stating that it is at this stage that the main emotional and social development of the child occurs. Aspects such as awareness of others, empathy and trust are some of the important skills in the work of multiculturalism that must be developed and worked on at these ages.

The first great contact with children with diversity is at the entrance to kindergarten. It is in this context that children can have their first most direct contact with other cultures and ethnicities, but also with rejection and discrimination. It is expected that from an early age, in an educational context, respect and contact with diversity will be worked on, whether in relation to customs, traditions, languages, ethnicities, places, sex, capacities and developments (Janeva & Stojanosca, 2014).

Refuting the ideas of Triandafyllido and Ulasiuk (2013), in the educational context are several factors influencing the success of students, among them are the relationships between student-teacher, peer standards and diversity in the classroom context. In this referral, Juvonen, Nishina and Graham (2006) point out that "diversity is known to have positive consequences for ethnic minority students who feel less vulnerable and lonely and experience greater feelings of self-worth in more diverse classrooms" (p.443).

In a comparative study between two kindergartens, one monolingual and the other mixed, regarding the multiculturalism and acceptance of the other, Janeva and Stojanosca (2014) observed that, still with some gaps, the mixed group presents more encouraging results. While the monolingual group did not even have the perception of the existence of other ethnic groups in their country, on the same was not the case with the mixed group, although it identifies it as a separate ethnic community. Another point to highlight is that, only in the mixed group, the memory of work and sharing of other cultures observed, especially regarding gastronomy. Nevertheless, in both groups gender stereotypes were a reality and, about the acceptance of children with some type of disability, there was no revulsion, but there was also no inclusion.

Still, in the same study focusing on acceptance and socialization with others, language becomes a decisive factor. Children tend to avoid socializing with children who speak other languages than their own because, in a dialogue, they do not understand them and are not understood. We highlight language as an aspect that makes the difference in the acceptance of the other, an aspect that is to be worked on from an early age.

Recent studies have demonstrated the importance of gender diversity in children. According to a study by Walsh-Messinger (2019), children who have exposure to gender diversity in their environment have higher levels of self-esteem and an increased sense of belonging than those who do not. Similarly, research conducted by Hofman (2020), found that children with gender-diverse peers had higher levels of empathy and better social skills. This research highlights the importance of providing children with a safe, diverse, and supportive environment to foster their well-being.

3.3 Educational context promoting diversity

At this point, we reflect on some aspects that can contribute to an improvement, both at the level of educators and spaces, since they communicate with the physical and social environment and, therefore, should be well thought out (Cleveland & Fisher, 2014).

Janeva and Stojanosca (2014) mention important aspects to be worked on. First, they emphasize the importance of heterogeneous groups (including in language) as a form of recognition and acceptance of each other. Second, since educators and teachers often serve as an example for children, they praise the importance of them being prepared, with vast knowledge on the subject and with attitudes, behaviours, actions, and practices thought of inclusion.

The disposition and variation of materials in an educational context can also promote cultural diversity. Materials relating to different cultures should be introduced in all educational areas. If we have as an example the space of the kitchen, different instruments can be introduced used in meals, such as cutlery

and chopsticks, as well as other household items. In one room you can enter collections of photographs and various clothes. An area dedicated to disguise can be enriched with ornaments and costumes referring to different cultures (e.g., folk). In the library, the area can be introduced tales and stories in different languages (preferably with short subtitles and accompanied with descriptive images of the action so that they can be understood). Posters, books, CDs, stories, and songs can be a rich source of knowledge about multiple cultures. This variety can stimulate rich discussions that lead to meaningful learning. This may be the motto for the exploitation and valorization of other crops. This also leads to children from ethnic minorities experiencing feelings of belonging and acceptance of the group (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009; Abdullah, 2009).

Language is one of the main problems in the work of multiculturalism, on the one hand, because it is a major obstacle to acceptance, and on the other, because it is not always easy to get a team of multilingual professionals. Some solutions pointed out are to use pictorial cards with subtitles in several languages (native and non-native) and invite families to share stories in their mother tongues with other children and the educational community. Both children of linguistic majorities benefit from this option. They get to know more about other languages which helps them understand the others, such as minority children because they feel included (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009; Abdullah, 2009).

Time management, more specifically the time spent on each child gives information to the group of which individuals are most valued. In this sense, the time must be very well thought out, so that children of other ethnicities are interpreted as equals. Dispensing identical timeshares to all children without distinction is an asset (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009). Learning moments should be thought about in detail and planned by the kindergarten teacher and focused on the sharing of cultures, music and even life history of children of other ethnicities (present or not in the group) is an incentive to accept the other as someone different from me, but equally important and interesting. In this sense, we warn of the importance of adult knowledge (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009; Janeva & Stojanosca, 2014).

Ramirez and Dutton (2016) warn that the introduction of materials is not enough, it is necessary to plan projects, collecting for example what children already know and what they want to know. This leads not only to the introduction of materials but also to the withdrawal or replacement of others, through an effective method of constant reflection and evaluation. In the same context, we are once again alerts warn of the attitudes and behaviours of education professionals (Abdullah, 2009).

Several studies have highlighted the impact of space on children's understanding and expression of gender in early childhood education. A study by Raikes and colleagues (2006) found that a classroom environment that is inclusive and gender-neutral can help to reduce children's endorsement of gender stereotypes. This can include providing a variety of play materials that are not gender-specific, such as blocks and kitchen sets, and using inclusive language and imagery in classroom decor.

Another study by Leaper and Ayres (2007) found that providing children with a variety of activities that challenge gender stereotypes, such as encouraging boys to play with dolls and girls to play with building blocks, can help to reduce children's endorsement of these stereotypes.

A study by Lury (2011) suggests that the physical layout of the classroom and the organization of the materials can influence the way children interact with their peers and the activities they engage in, and can either reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes.

Additionally, a study by Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, Colburne, Sen, and Eichstedt (2001) shows that the physical layout of the classroom and the organization of materials can lead to children becoming more aware of gender differences and may reinforce gender stereotypes.

4 CONCLUSIONS

As highlighted, diversity brings numerous economic and social benefits to a country. By implementing specific policies such as positive action, it is possible to ensure that all individuals in society have equal opportunities, resulting in a stronger economy and a more cohesive society.

Research indicates that in early childhood, children learn to accept and embrace diversity, including gender, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, as well as an understanding of people with disabilities. It is crucial for the educational setting to provide children with the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of peers and learn the skills necessary to promote their social and emotional well-being. Providing a safe, diverse, and supportive environment is essential for a child's development.

Furthermore, studies suggest that the space and layout of early childhood education settings can have a significant impact on children's understanding and expression of gender. It is important to create an inclusive and gender-neutral space in early childhood education settings to reduce the impact of gender stereotypes on children's beliefs and behaviors. The space, materials, and language used in the classroom all play a role in creating an environment that is inclusive and gender-neutral, and that challenges gender stereotypes. With the right strategies, it is possible to create an environment that fosters acceptance and inclusion of diversity.

In conclusion, educators and teachers must be well-prepared, with a thorough understanding of the subject matter and attitudes, behaviors, actions, and practices that promote the acceptance and inclusion of diversity.

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