



DIALOGUE AS A TOOL FOR INTERCULTURAL COEXISTENCE IN THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM: TEACHERS' VIEWS

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Abstract:

In the context of the present study, we attempted to explore teachers' views on the role of dialogue and intersubjective communication, both in the public sphere and in the ecology of the classroom. The theoretical framework of the research was the theory of communicative action of Habermas. The research was conducted in the framework of the qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews as a methodological tool for data collection. The sample of the research was fifteen (15) Greek primary school teachers and the questionnaire consisted of thirteen (13) questions. The findings of the research show that teachers: praised the role of dialogue, recognizing its value in the effort to peaceful coexistence between different cultures; appeared to attach great importance to the role of dialogue in the classroom, recognizing its importance and value; stressed the value of getting to know new cultures, which can enrich the "native culture" with new elements; stated that social change can come about through dialogue.

Keywords: dialogue, intercultural coexistence, multicultural classrooms, teachers' views

1. Introduction

Multiculturalism is one of the main characteristics of modern societies. Societies are being transformed in terms of their population, resulting in the coexistence of people belonging to different national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups in the same geographical area. This, of course, is not unprecedented, since societies have always been complex, but today there is an emphasis on diversity, especially cultural diversity, which is one of the contexts of postmodernity (Nikolaou, 2008, p. 368).

The above social changes could not leave education unaffected. Thus, school classes are transformed in terms of their composition and become multicultural. Teachers are therefore faced with new challenges, both in managing this new composition of the classroom and in finding effective teaching techniques and strategies for the smooth consolidation of teaching material by pupils - both native and foreign.

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In this context, the use and exploitation of dialogue, both as a teaching strategy and as a tool for achieving intercultural coexistence among students, becomes crucial. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the views of Greek teachers on the use of dialogue as a tool for achieving intercultural coexistence of students in the context of multicultural classrooms.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chosen to realize this qualitative research is Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, in which the concept of dialogue is prominent. Jurgen Habermas is considered the most important representative of the so-called second generation of the Frankfurt School. With his comprehensive critique, Habermas both enriches and diversifies the work of Critical Theory, as he theoretically unifies an entire tradition by giving it the title "*philosophy of the subject*" -which includes, among other things, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marx, Hegel, Heidegger and Derrida, among others and proposes the Theory of Communicative Action as a way out of the queries of a discourse that is exclusively focused on the subject, and, therefore, now, cognitively exhausted (Kontou, 2012, p. 49).

In the 1980s, then, this so-called "*linguistic turn*" in critical social theory took place, with Habermas presenting a new theoretical proposal for the normative grounding of critical theory in "*communicative ethics*", even proceeding to critically question the analyses of his predecessors (Kontou, 2012, p. 19-20). As Kontou (2012, p. 20) states, Habermas "*distinguishes in the Dialectic of Enlightenment the diagnosis, on the one hand of the omnipotence of a corrupt and totalizing discourse that, by failing to provide access to knowledge, effectively cripples theoretical reflection and, on the other, of the omnipresent domination of the subject over an 'objectified external' and a 'repressed internal' nature*". Moreover, Habermas interprets Adorno's "*negative dialectic*" as a generalized denial of the subject's ability to make a valid and positive conceptualization of the object of knowledge (Kontou, 2012, p. 20).

According to Kontou (2012, p. 20-21) this paradigm shift that Habermas inaugurates, which admittedly impresses for its inventiveness, its thematic range and the richness of its references, introduces new interpretative tools as well as new perspectives in Critical Theory, having, undoubtedly, shifted the theoretical focus from labor -or, otherwise, production- to communication and from the "*politics of the philosophy of the subject*" to that of "*radical intersubjectivity*", thus, setting new limits to Critical Theory that transform it, as the structures of social domination are now interpreted in the light of the outcome of processes of communicative agreement, putting forward a demand for the realization of intersubjective freedom -views that are consistent with Habermas' explicit self-identification as a "*liberal social democrat*".

Habermas seeks and wishes to relate the concept of intersubjectivity to the concept of understanding, which he achieves in the context of communicative action (Perperidis, 2008, p. 124). In the formation of this position, the influence of Weber must be considered

of major importance, which is why Habermas expresses the position that *“the determination of any social action cannot bypass the problematic of understanding meaning and that the concept of meaning, as it provides us with the necessary criterion for distinguishing between intelligible action and observable behavior, is a decisive condition for the formation of social reality”* (Perperidis, 2008, p. 76). However, he differs from Weber’s position that social action is a strongly subjective behavior and will point out that the understanding of the meaning of social action is linked to the understanding of symbols, i.e. the use of symbolic expressions and the existence of symbolic structures (Perperidis, 2008, p. 76). Therefore, no longer can social action be understood as an intellectual solitary *“process”* but as a dialogical practice which is based on the recognition of intersubjective social relations (Perperidis, 2008, p. 77).

With his Theory of Communicative Action Habermas proposes a project which aims to allow mutual understanding through a process of discussion, a process which is not predetermined by norms according to which social stratification is determined. On the contrary, it eliminates social distinctions, allowing the Self and the often underestimated Other to walk side by side in the belief that they cannot exist without each other, which is achieved because of the transcendent power of language and a commitment to truth, from which a new dialogical and reflective experience emerges for people (Dasli, 2011, p. 32).

However, this mutual understanding, that is sought to achieve a genuine dialogue towards intersubjective communication, should follow the following conditions according to Habermas (1984, p. 99):

- 1) The statement is true (or that the existential presuppositions of the propositional content that refers to reality are satisfied);
- 2) The speech action is appropriate with respect to the existing normative framework (or that the normative framework that is supposed to be satisfied is itself legitimate); and
- 3) The manifest intention of the speaker is understood as expressed.

Habermas, however, is not content merely to mention the above conditions, but adds and draws attention to the notion of the lifeworld, a transcendental space within which intersubjective consensus can be achieved (Habermas, 1989, p. 113).

As Kontou (2012, p. 54) states, Habermas proposes the conception of societies as *“systems”* and *“lifeworlds”* simultaneously, as he embraces the conceptual separation of the *“rationalization of the lifeworlds”* from the *“increasing complexity of social systems”*. Hence, he explicitly aims to understand the contemporary relationship between *“forms of social integration”* and *“stages of systemic differentiation”*. Moreover, he argues that the integration of society takes place in two different spheres: the lifeworld and the system, or social and systemic integration, respectively. The first sphere concerns the harmonization of the orientations of action through a consensus which either exists in the form of the normative guarantee of the rule of law or is achieved communicatively through the mechanism of mutual understanding. The second sphere concerns the

"functional networking" of the consequences of action through systemic mechanisms that regulate and stabilize the *"unintended interconnections of action"* (Kontou, 2012, p. 55).

Given the above, we infer that the concept of *"lifeworld"* concerns, according to Habermas (1989, p. 126), the *"transcendental place where speaker and listener meet, where they can mutually raise claims that their words agree with the world (objective, social or subjective), and where they can critique and confirm these claims of validity, settle their disagreements and reach agreements"*.

It is, therefore, evident that Habermas, by introducing the concept of the lifeworld, creates that transcendental space in which the Theory of Communicative Action can be utilized in the best possible way, satisfying the demand for achieving intersubjective communication. The Theory of Communicative Action, and Habermas' contribution to it, is of particular importance and constitutes a strong theoretical basis for this paper, as it matters greatly the Self's acquaintance with the Other, giving the *"Other"* the role of an existential necessity -since the Self cannot exist without the Other, and vice versa.

3. Material and Methods

The present research was conducted in the framework of the qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews as a methodological tool for data collection. We considered the use of interviews as the most appropriate method for the present study and its research object, as, firstly, the research focused on the meaning given by the subjects themselves, the teachers, to the concepts of cultural identity, social constructions, etc., and secondly, the personal narratives of the subjects on how they consider that the concept of diversity is developed, on the terms or characteristics that, in their opinion, define someone as different, the characteristics that define someone as *"different"*, the characteristics that define them as *"different"*, etc., were required (King, 1994, as cited in Robson, 2010).

As for the *"semi-structured"* format, this was chosen as it allowed us to modify the wording of the questions to obtain additional explanations, and to omit or add - depending on the situation- some questions (Robson, 2010, p. 321).

The use of the interview enabled us to collect *"rich and very illuminating material"* (Robson, 2010, p. 324), so that the research questions could be explored to the best of our ability. In addition, we had the opportunity to listen to non-verbal cues, which gave us a fuller and clearer picture of the meaning of the subjects' responses (Robson, 2010, p. 323).

The participants of the research were fifteen (15) teachers who work in Primary Education. The sample of teachers was selected randomly, and the questionnaire consisted of thirteen (13) questions. It goes without saying, of course, that since the data collection tool was semi-structured interviews, there were instances when either some questions were added or others were dropped, depending on the flow of each interview.

The groups as well as the distribution of questions per group was as follows: Personal data of teachers, 4 questions Exploration of views on foreign students, 5

questions Theoretical Framework - Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas), 4 questions.

4. Results and Discussion

In the context of the present study, we attempted to explore teachers' views on the role of dialogue and intersubjective communication, both in the social field and in the classroom. In this respect, the ideas of Habermas, who repositioned Critical Theory on a logocentric-communicative basis, highlighting the role and the weighty importance of "*mutual understanding between subjects capable of acting and speaking*" (Habermas, 1992, p. 295-296, as cited in Kontou, 2012, p. 49-50), play an important role. In our view, Habermas' particular perspective shows the practical possibility of achieving a genuine intercultural communication.

The first question was about teachers' views on the role of dialogue in the effort of peaceful coexistence between different cultures. In this case, all teachers praised the role of dialogue, recognizing its value in the effort to peaceful coexistence between different cultures. Indicatively, they mentioned:

"Ok, dialogue has a primary role... but (...) there has to be... dialogue from both sides, not only I say, the other one listens, and I feel that I have done a job, there has to be... reason and counter reason..." (p.2),

"Very important. I think if there's no dialogue you're not going anywhere. Definitely. Necessary..." (p.4),

"Well, well, if there is no dialogue (...) there will be no peace in the world. It is through dialogue that... individuals can coexist" (p.8),

"The role of dialogue is important, there should be dialogue, but real dialogue, where everyone listens to each other and does not think about what he has to say or what he wants to impose on the other" (p.13).

We obviously agree with the above views. However, we would like to highlight the emphasis that the teachers (p.2) and (p.13) put on the fact the dialogue should be real, pointing out the need for dialogue and the importance of listening to the other person's point of view in addition to expressing one's own opinion.

Thus, Habermas' view is updated and brought to the fore, arguing that insofar as mutual understanding is adopted in practice as a mechanism for coordinating action, communicative discourse constitutes the condition of constant control and constant potential revision of the worlds that language systems presuppose and reveal. In this way, the "*dialectic of knowledge and ignorance*" is recognized as embedded in the "*dialectic of successful and unsuccessful mutual understanding*", transferring, at the same time, and

consciously, the notion of agency into the sphere of communication (Kontou, 2012, p. 53). Adopting such a perspective, the value of communicative discourse in the effort to understand the “*different Other*” and his world becomes extremely important. This is because reflection takes place at the level of the communicative practice of everyday life; as dialogue through arguments, which entails that dialogue and doing dwell in communication, i.e. in a context where the relation of each speaker to himself is mediated by the intersubjective relation (Kontou, 2012, p. 53-54).

It is evident, therefore, that the success of genuine intercultural communication is intertwined with a “*real*” dialogue, in the light of Habermas’ intersubjective communication and the genuine intersubjective relation that is created through it.

In addition, an attempt was made to investigate teachers’ views on the role of dialogue in the classroom. Again, teachers appeared to attach great importance to the role of dialogue in the classroom, recognizing its importance and value. They mentioned:

“Uh, still... through dialogue you can even do the teaching, that is, to pass on a new concept to them very nicely and the children will (...) accept it, not be afraid of it (...)” (p.3),

“The basic thing, the Alpha and Omega (...)” (p.6),

“(...) I think it is the foundation stone. I don’t need to say anything else” (p.9),

“I think it’s extremely important and recently we were lucky (...) to have a briefing on the school ombudsman, which there... I don’t know too much, of course, but I liked very much this process based on dialogue. Children must learn to... to talk to each other and to solve their differences (...)” (p.11).

It is very important that teachers seem to have realized the great value of dialogue in the classroom. The teacher is one of the most important persons to his students, and, therefore, the way in which he resolves and manages the various issues or problems that arise gives an important direction to his students. Particularly, with regard to issues of diversity and getting to know the “*different Other*”, the teacher should promote constant communication between his students, always based on the construction of a genuine intersubjective relationship, as mentioned above, so that possible prejudices and stereotypes arbitrarily held by the individual are removed, and, ultimately, a form of genuine intercultural communication between students is developed, which will form the foundation on which constructive cooperation will be built.

Here, it is important to point out the major role played by intercultural communication in the classroom – “*intercultural*” because we refer to the multicultural classroom and “*communication*” because dialogue, to be “*genuine*”, presupposes a willingness to communicate between the subjects.

It is commonly accepted that communication is a dimension of life itself, and that the way in which an individual communicates -verbally or non-verbally- is called

behavior (Nikolaou, 2005, p. 246-247). As Nikolaou (2005, p. 248) states, behavior is, together with physical characteristics, the only visible side of the individual -as the unseen side is where motives, thoughts, values, emotions are inherent- which, in turn, suggests that understanding and interpreting human behavior contributes to improving communication. He goes on to point out that the communicative act takes place in stages:

- a) the conception, the formation of the idea;
- b) the encoding of the idea by the transmitter;
- c) its transmission;
- d) the decoding and assimilation of the idea by the receiver (Nikolaou, 2005, p. 248).

At this point it is very important to emphasize that *“the process of communication is cyclical, in the sense that the receiver’s response is communication to the transmitter, so, automatically, the receiver becomes a transmitter, and the transmitter becomes a receiver”* (Nikolaou, 2005, p. 248). This very interaction is the essence that keeps communication alive and best states the nature of dialogue-communication.

Habermas considers that one of the three building blocks from which communication is drawn is culture -the other two being society and personality- and it is precisely this connection between communication and culture that brings up both opportunities and problems (Nikolaou, 2005, p. 250-252). One of the main problems is the failure to understand and correctly use the language of the host country through which messages are transmitted, resulting in communication problems (Nikolaou, 2005, p. 252). Another problem is the ethnocentric nature of the educational system, which results from the social representations of the *“national self”* and *“national other”*, as revealed by the content analysis of textbooks (Nikolaou, 2005, p. 252-253).

According to Nikolaou (2005, p. 253-256) to achieve intercultural communication, the obstacles that arise due to linguistic differences and differences in behavior owing to cultural origin must be overcome, seeking for commonalities that unite, as in the classroom there are students with different prior linguistic structures and behaviors, who are called upon to overcome their dissimilarity and function effectively, depending on the requirements of the school. Thus, the value of dialogue within the classroom, with a simultaneous tendency towards intercultural communication, becomes clear.

The next question addressed to the teachers was about their views on whether people can get to know themselves better through meeting and communicating with the *“different Other”*. Again, the teachers’ opinion was unanimously in the affirmative. They particularly stressed the value of getting to know new cultures, which can enrich the *“native culture”* with new elements, as well as the benefits that the individual can gain through getting to know and communicating with the *“different Other”*. The teachers said:

“Yes, yes... uh, I believe... firmly, uh, as sometimes if we do not have contact with diversity, with something different, we may (...) not realize how we are ourselves, that is, through this contact we can see our own imperfections and adopt more... more positive elements for us or eliminate our negative elements” (p.3),

"Yes, of course he can get to know himself better. He is also testing the limits of his tolerance, of his patience, but also... how much he can open himself to another people, a world, different from the one he lives in. That is, how open his horizons are" (p.4),

"Of course. (...) I am not of the opinion that we should be one-sided, in all e... everywhere. Through dialogue we can only ... and communication we can be better (...)" (p.8),

"Of course. Of course. Because myself is me, why? Because I am different in something from someone else. How can I define myself if the other person is the same as me? There is no self when the other is like you (...)" (p.13).

In this case, we see that the teachers clearly defined the additive function that acquaintance and communication with the Other can have for the self, while, at the same time, they also pointed out the importance of communication and acquaintance with the different in the effort to approach the self, the identity of the individual. As the teacher very correctly noted (p.13), someone is himself because he is different from someone else.

We find again what we had noted above in the present research, that identity and otherness are two concepts that are highly interconnected, two sides of the same coin, and that one concept presupposes the other. As we mentioned above, the communicative practice of everyday life through arguments, realized in a context where the relation of the speaker in question to himself or herself is reflexively mediated by the intersubjective relation (Kontou, 2012, p. 53-54). Then it is that precisely the intersubjective relationship directs the acquaintance of the self and the Other into a relationship of interaction, through which the individual knows both the *"different Other"* and his own self. Obviously, therefore, we could say that through getting to know and communicating with the *"different Other"* man can get to know himself better, just as we could also reduce communication and getting to know the different as a necessary component in the effort to achieve of yourself knowledge (γνώθι σαυτόν).

The last question examined whether, in the teachers' opinion, social change can come about through dialogue. In this case, most teachers, twelve (12) out of fifteen (15), argued that changing society can come about through dialogue. Indicatively, they mentioned:

"Uh... I think it's the only way..." (p.1),

"Uh, I think, yes. Through dialogue and... harmonious coexistence." (p.3),

"Yes, yes. But there is no other solution. That is, war will bring war, blood will bring blood... there is no other solution (...)" (p. 6),

"Yes, I think it can come... come through dialogue." (p. 14)

However, there were also three (3) teachers who argued that the change of society cannot be brought about solely through dialogue. They characteristically stated:

"Society is not changing... (...) No. Sorry to say, but no. It doesn't change, no. (...) I believe that you, the youth, are not even fighting, my child. (...) I don't know, are you bored? (...) no one is fighting... anymore. (...) ...if we don't make a fight to change something, to go somewhere... I know 'go, we stay there'... the 'let's not get bored' and 'let's let the others go ahead' and what will happen? Nothing happens, even if we shout, nothing will happen... You must do something. The young people" (p.7),

"It is not enough... the dialogue also brings a small change, but there are many factors. And it is certainly not easy, it takes many years to change society, generations... And it is affected by many things... (...) by politics, political situations... educational system, it is affected by everything. I think only dialogue is not enough." (p.10), and

"Education is needed, in principle. It takes money to create structures and create, uh... all those elements that can help in... so that all people can live better, uh... it takes daily practice and anti-racist function... of everyone in society, it takes, basically, the everyone to change... to be willing to change himself. Society cannot change if everyone does not change a small part of themselves." (p.13)

A detailed analysis of the process of social change is not our aim at this stage, as this would go beyond the scope of this paper. However, we could briefly note that the change of society is a process that is constantly in progress, according to the Marxist perspective of History. By studying History one can see the continuous evolution of society, combined each time with the productive, economic, political, and ideological changes taking place. These changes, on the one hand, occupy a large space within the temporal continuum, and, on the other, there must be the appropriate direction, which is of a political and ideological nature -even in cases where such a thing is not obvious- to take place these changes. Therefore, we see that for society to change, the historical moment for such a thing must first have arrived, i.e., as is often said, the conditions must be ripe -something that is determined by the productive, economic, ideological, and political situation in which each society finds itself- and secondly, that there is a comparative direction towards which social change should aim.

When we say that the right historical moment for social change must come, this does not mean that every effort to change society is postponed for the distant and indefinite future. On the contrary, we believe that at every moment society should strive for social development and social transformation, through Education, dialogue and all the means available. Dialogue and the intersubjective relationship created through intersubjective communication is a step in the direction of social change. However, we should not ignore the fact that the means society must fight are not always the same: e.g. in cases of imposing dictatorships, it is doubtful whether intersubjective communication

will be able to “*work*”, since the most defining factor of communication, freedom of speech, is violated.

Therefore, the perspective we have on social change and on the possible ways it can come about must be considered in a more general light, with knowledge of History and social mechanisms and structures, as well as the means that can be used “*here and now*” in order not only to prepare the ground for the leap of social change and development but also to claim and satisfy, if possible, as many of the social demands.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we could say that Greek teachers emphasize the importance of dialogue for the intercultural coexistence of students. This condition is very important, especially if one considers the fact that the dialogical character of the pedagogical practice is the cornerstone of the educational process. Moreover, it is worth noting that teachers consider dialogue to be of utmost importance both in terms of the need for students' self-awareness and as a means of contributing to social change. In this light, dialogue is not only seen as an additional innovative teaching practice but is considered a key educational process with strong social implications. Finally, it is worth mentioning that teachers stressed the value of dialogue to get to know new cultures, which can enrich the “*local culture*” with new elements. Thus, dialogue becomes an important component for intercultural coexistence and understanding between people from different cultures.

Acknowledgements

I, the author of this paper, would like to express my deepest thanks to my colleague Athena Sevi, PhD Candidate at the University of Patras, for her contribution to the completion of this paper.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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