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The school and 'popular education'

Can popular education be
carried out in a system of
formal education?

"I am absolutely convinced that education, as an experience of liberty, is an act of understanding, a critical approach to reality"

(Freire, 2002, p.22)

– Does your establishment show concern for the experiences of the young people in the neighbourhood?

What procedures are in place with regard to this?

What initiatives do you take yourselves?

– The lives of the young people (family, relations, media, fashion, interests, preoccupations...):

- are these the realities which inspire your educational initiatives? How do you take account of this in a practical way?

- How does your educational team take account of this?

Introduction

An education community in the Argentine Malvinas set themselves the challenge of planning a school which would mean something to the poor people of the area and improve their lives. They wanted it to be a school which avoided the defects of the modern school. It would have to be a new type of school which would offer a service for both the children and their 'barrio' trying to build a better present and future for them. To create this school we thought in terms of 'popular education' - through which each child would be educated for their own good and for the good of the wider community. We felt that the key to creating a formal education project in this context was to think in terms of a **social space and a social practice**.

- This "space" would be appropriate and be recognized by the local population as their own. This school would have to be a "space" or "place" with something to say; an integral part of the history, the struggles, and the searches of these impoverished people. It would have to be linked with their struggles for a better life and speak for them.
- It would not be a 'talk-shop', where we would merely talk about what is being lived, but rather it would be a place that would transmit significant elements of the culture recognized and valued by all. The question would not be so much the content of what is taught but the form in which it is taught and learnt, who is to learn it, for the benefit of whom and against whom. It would be a place for **negotiation** between, on the one hand, the words, life, culture and popular wisdom of the people and, on the other hand, systematized culture, scientific knowledge, the body of knowledge which has been entrusted to the school for transmission. Therefore it would be a place for the critical transmission of this culture and the critical re-creating of the popular culture itself. It would be a question of building a link between the school and daily life, with the barrio, with the community into which it is inserted (c.f. Paulo Freire, 1987, p.70). In this process of 'cultural negotiation', the work of critical transmission and appropriation of the culture would be a process which allows pupils, teachers,

parents and neighbors to **read, interpret and transform** their world - i.e. where they live, work, love and dream with others.

- Therefore we understand that to educate is to **make one aware** - to analyze and transform one's own conscience with regard to the world and, from this perspective, to build bridges towards transforming reality. This would enable the uncovering of existing interpretations that are oppressive, alienating and exclusive.
- All of this is to be seen from a community perspective - working in groups, building teams. It is a process which educates for living together, for citizenship and for **grass-roots organization**. This calls for a capacity for living and working with others, creating networks, accepting each other with differences that are recognized and valued.
- This capacity implies education in **empowerment, self-esteem, and the recognition of every human being**. It involves seeing and fostering what is most human and gives worth in each person.

In summary, we understand education as a process of development, creation and re-creation, and not merely the passive transmission of knowledge. Education for freedom is a pre-condition for democracy and is contrary to any inkling of authoritarianism, manipulation or invasive ideology. Education involves dialogue, grass-roots organization and the recognition of the struggle for human rights in working-class areas. It aims at the transformation of conscience and reality as a result of analyzing our own conscience and the reality of the world in which we live.

All of the above has been part of a development and evaluation process which has been going on for a year and a half in the Hector Valdivielso School in Maldivas, Argentine.

Chapter 1: How are we going to do this?

“Life only needs the space of a crevice to be born”

(Ernesto Sábato)

In order that what we have discussed above can happen we have to learn and unlearn many things, abandon elements and incorporate others. Here we would like to present one of the elements we have planned. It is **a new process for developing the Institutional Curriculum Project.**

According to our concept of education, this ICP should be a process which:

- Starts from a reading and analysis of reality
- With a key role for community, it facilitates a process of raising awareness and transforming the environment
- Favors the “cultural negotiation” already mentioned
- Involves the teaching-learning of socially significant content which will empower all who participate actively so that they become thinking, reflective, and dialoguing persons

To enable us to achieve this goal we have designed a thematic network and curriculum based on a thought-provoking sentence or phrase.

The presentation of this experience involves two steps:

- The development of the thematic network
- The planning process for teaching-learning starting from the source sentence or phrase

First Step: To develop a map of the collective conscience of the place - the thematic network.

“Education is much more than instruction - to be transforming, to transform the conditions of oppression, it must root itself in the culture of the poor”

(Gadotti, 2001).

In discussing the thematic network, we will refer here to the organization that exists in the Hector Valdivielso School. **The thematic**

network is a collection of remarks made by pupils, parents, neighbors and teachers in the school. These sentences have been recorded during visits to the poor in their barrio. The sentences are then grouped together and those with widest semantic content are picked out and organized into a kind of semantic map representing the collective conscience of the place - the local idiosyncrasies, the needs, desires and expectations of the people. These sentences are then connected with the daily life of the locality - i.e. how and why people get to know things. Reading over these sentences helps to orientate the teaching community in its work with the people. One of these sentences is chosen each school term and is used to work with pupils, teachers, parents and neighbors.

In drawing up our Institutional Curriculum we developed a method using the keys of 'popular education' and Christian education which we have mentioned: i.e. local reality, social transformation and empowerment, cultural negotiation, re-creation of culture, awareness, and transformation of conscience. Faced with reality, education practice becomes a dialogue of active individuals where various forms of knowledge interact - popular knowledge, common sense, school knowledge, Gospel, Church, and science. Culture is the backdrop of educational practice.

The process of drawing up the ICP develops the identity of the teaching community along with that of the educational community (parents, pupils, and neighborhood). In this process we become involved and commit ourselves as an educational community. There is an ethical, political and religious option which emerges from previous experience - from formation, community exchanges and reflection. This is not a finished process but rather it is open to the dynamic of permanent organization, reflection, analysis and formation.

Stages in the development of the thematic network

A. What is a thematic network?

In our view the thematic network is the conscious and deliberate "blocking out" from our minds, at a given moment in time, of the cultural, political, social and religious understanding of the school community which we have grown up with in our organization of meaning. It is a deliberate response, answering to an ethical, political and religious option of the educational community, and it

implies the concept of a curriculum that is always developing. It is an instrument that permits cultural synthesis through the dialogue between local knowledge, the realities of daily life and the knowledge transmitted by the school. What is said by the wider community motivates and directs us in our educational task. It is based on a community commitment.

B. Getting in touch with the local situation

The educational community goes into the barrio and listens to the experience of the people.

C. Our interpretation of that reality

We then reflect on what we have heard, interpret it and group the sentences. This enables us to devise a plan which allows us to read the context, understand the present situation in the barrio, its link with the school, with knowledge, with teachers, with dreams, expectations, and fears. We select the most significant sentences in each group.

D. Reading the tensions in our thematic network

This plan indicated the different ways that the teachers viewed the poor, the school, educational and cultural activity, and the educational mission. In sharing these we opted for points of view that were more liberating and more in line with 'popular education.'

E. Our options

Once our thematic network had been defined we opted for those sentences (and the reality behind them) on which we wanted to concentrate this year. This in turn led to the definition of criteria for options and to the choice of those criteria most in line with our mandate as a school.

Examples of themes that inspired our work in 2002:

1st Term - "The children have suffered much in order to go to school".

2nd Term - "The school is important, it is a source of life. I don't want my child to have to put up with what we, as parents, endured through lack of education".

3rd Term - "No one pays attention to us here. We are poor".

In considering these phrases or sentences we reflect on our personal lives, our task as educators, and our teaching community. Questions arise such as: From what do we need to be converted? To what do we need to be converted?

F. Looking for theoretical support to help us move forward

In this process we look for theoretical support to help us better understand the network we have produced as well as our reading of it. This search helps us position ourselves more critically close to the people, to overcome our defensive and uncritical views. It also helps us to discover the purpose behind the chosen sentences or phrases.

G. Organization

The process is written up continually throughout the year. Each process gives rise to integrated classroom projects.

H. Communication

We inform parents, students, and other educational institutions in the area of the steps that we are taking. We do the same with Class projects and our Institutional projects that underpin our reading, our choices and our structures of transformation.

Second step: The planning of “cultural negotiation” and the transformation of self-awareness

“The more I am rooted in my locality, the more possibilities I have for spreading myself out, for feeling myself a citizen of the world”
(Freire, 1997, p.29).

Thinking about a process of teaching-learning containing the characteristics indicated above implies planning processes which are simultaneous:

– The process of teaching-learning - involving the taking on board of conceptual, procedural and attitude contents which the school, as a social function, has to transmit. The development of mediation-dialogue to ensure that the above process be significant.

– The process by which the teacher leads and evaluates the classroom process that helps the transformation of awareness. The development of mediation dialogue to ensure that the transformation be significant and possible. It is a process which, starting out from the initial awareness of the pupil, his family etc., aims at transformation through a **pedagogical purpose defined in advance**. What do we want to transform in the awareness of the pupils, in the barrio, etc.? How far will we go with what we want to work on with the pupils, their families...? The pedagogical purpose has to do with making explicit "what needs to be known, how and why it should be known, for whose benefit it should be known and, consequently, against whom" (Freire, 1987, p.134). This purpose is tied in with a project of the barrio and its people. In a wider perspective, this purpose needs to be linked to popular projects and lines of action, to the dreams of the people, to their hopes etc. This is the political act of education: defining the direction of what we claim to be doing with our work, with what we are doing together - as pupils, family, teachers, NGOs etc. The definition of this purpose strips bare the apparent dishonest neutrality of educational action. Not to spell out the educational purpose is to permit the dominant and dominating aim of a given moment in time to be the one that prevails.

– What is the dominant purpose in education in 2003? In my opinion it is the selection of those who are most apt for the economical, social, political and cultural system. It is the triumph of a system which teaches that "if you don't study you must stay outside, you are nothing...poverty is your option not to study". It is the imposition of the idea that each one should try to incorporate as quickly as possible, and in the most detailed and literal manner, the contents transmitted by the teacher, in order to reproduce them later. They are 'scholarised' contents, that is to say their usefulness is purely to keep the student within the educational system. Defining the pedagogical purpose and contents defines the "how" of teaching, i.e. the methodology. It is a process which should "stimulate the pupil to question, criticize, and create; where the development of collective knowledge is proposed, formulating 'popular' knowledge and critical, scientific knowledge, influenced by the experiences of the world" (Freire, 1999, p.96). To do this we have opted for the methodology of **integrated classroom projects and integrated institutional projects**. We feel that

with both there is a possibility of unity between theory and practice which makes critical reflection possible, unity between experience and knowledge, between daily life and scientific knowledge (c.f. Freire, 1987 p. 32). It is practice because it refers to a practical experience of daily life. It doesn't just mean "doing for the sake of doing", moralizing or always talking about "our barrio", which is a criticism often leveled by those who do not understand 'popular education'. **This last process, that of the specific methodological project, is the one on which the other processes are formulated.** We opted for working in a classroom project so as to link concrete action with acquiring knowledge. This facilitated our experience of relationships out of which developed solidarity, social responsibility, the taste for working freely, co-operation, and creativity - all the elements indispensable in the formation of a critical individual.

In summary we have opted for: the choice of a classroom project for transforming awareness with the following parameters: age of pupils/ situation of class or group/contents of official curriculum/taste and skills of teacher/possibilities available in the institution, from parents etc/the experience to which pupils will be invited to live based on their transformed awareness.

The plan is outlined schematically below:

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| Thought-provoking phrase or sentence: implied collective conscience. | Pedagogical purpose; awareness to be transformed; attention to be paid to local needs. |
| Common, "official" basic contents. | Expectation of success; learning to be achieved; conceptual contents; attitudes and procedures to be achieved. |
| Methodological design | Integrated classroom projects which incorporate the previous elements, which allow for 'reading' and listing of awareness and previous knowledge; which allow for acquisition of a new awareness and of a new cognitive structure. |

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| The role of the teacher | Permanent mediation through dialogue for transformation of awareness; the significant learning of contents. |
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Steps to be followed in the classroom:

1. Presentation to the pupils of the thought-provoking sentence or phrase, of the pedagogical purpose to be worked on, and the project to be carried out. After this is done it is the pupils who really develop the project.
2. A reading by pupils of the sentence, purpose and project. The teacher interprets the initial awareness of pupils, their experience and knowledge. Extra resources may be needed here.
3. Putting this new awareness into the context of the classroom, the barrio, etc.
4. A reading of the tensions present in the situation just presented. Picking out the most significant tensions to work on them with the pupils.
5. Carrying out the project, permanent mediation through dialogue, recording knowledge worked on, awareness shown, changes produced.
6. Communication of what has been achieved and the experience lived.
7. Re-examining, narrating and evaluating the experience lived.
8. Transformation of awareness and new things learned.

Chapter 2: A new educational subject - the pupil in his or her environment

“Developing awareness is a historic commitment. It is also historical awareness. It is a critical insertion in history. It implies that people assume the role of individuals who make and remake the world”.

(Freire 2002, pp.22-23)

In the light of the above, the following question needs to be posed: Who should be the “subjects” of the school? The pupils as individuals? The pupils as a class group? Each pupil and his family? The group of pupils, their families and the barrio? Our present answer is: The subject of ‘popular education’ is the class group as a whole while respecting the individuality of each person. We say the class group since they are the recipients of a pedagogical experience which we wish them to live: an experience of teaching-learning, a community experience of reading the world, analyzing it and changing it. But this cannot be done alone. Therefore, the parents of the pupils are also the subject and part of the teaching-learning experience, both as parents and as adults living in the barrio. To them we add other neighbors from the barrio.

It is necessary to change the dominating model of the school today, which is a meritocratic, individual system. To conceive a new model of school from the viewpoint of ‘popular education’ is to think of the school as the suitable tool for the transmission, recreation and appropriation of the culture with a view to acquiring greater rights for the poor, to give them a greater sense of dignity and humanity. This cannot be done in a meritocratic manner. It requires a plural approach. Therefore, at this point, we need to talk of a new relationship between school, parents, barrio etc. How do we work with the parents? At the moment we are working in class with the pupils on the following sentence, *“If we work together we can emerge from poverty”.*

Parents participate in the following ways:

1. In workshops for discussion and educational agreement. From time to time the teachers meet with parents to present to them the

aims of the classroom projects. At these meetings we try to enrich the plans, fine-tune them, look for support, and link the work of the school with that of the home. It is also an opportunity for agreeing on criteria.

2. Each grade in the school can count on one or two supporting families who have offered their services during the first meeting of the year. With this group of adults from the barrio we work on the same sentence. To them we propose that the project be an opportunity for strengthening links as neighbors, as adults of the barrio, as citizens, in other words, that it be an educational “space” for all, a place for arguing, listening, promoting and attending to basic necessities.

3. Community school assemblies - held to evaluate projects and propose new ones.

4. Networking with other schools in the neighborhood. During planning, the institutions of the area (government, religious, NGOs), as well as neighbors, are invited to the presentation of projects and to listen to reflections, criticisms, corrections, suggestions etc.

5. Non-formal educational projects: optional curriculum material is offered to parents, pupils etc., who have to work on the same sentence as the rest of the school. At present there are workshops on the tango, folklore, modern dance, football, chess painting etc. which are aimed at diverse groups in the barrio.

6. To bring consistency to the diverse fields of the Institutional Education Project the school focuses on four areas:

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| The central pillar of institutional learning | Foundational, historical and didactic contracts, the culture, routines, leadership and communication of the institute. |
| The ethical tone which defines the school | The axis, themes, transversal contents Nature of pedagogy and methodology |
| The network of activities that give a sense of direction to what is being offered | The compulsory and optional curriculum spaces, the scholastic knowledge being taught |

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| The 'place' or 'space' for explaining the Gospel | Announcing the Gospel during catechesis, working on a biblical symbol which corresponds with classroom project, morning prayer etc. |
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The phrase or sentence on which the work of the various groups will be based is integrated and developed in all of the above areas so that, in the widest sense, there will be consistency across the curriculum.

Chapter 3: The central role of dialogue and the classroom as a cultural space

“Nobody educates another. A person cannot even educate himself. People educate themselves in communion, influenced by the world”

(Freire)

A process of teaching-learning, such as we have been discussing, implies a classroom ‘space’ that is conceived in a distinct manner. It is a place in which dialogue and mediation between pupils and teachers is possible. According to Freire: “...Giving priority to dialogue in teaching, allowing respect for the culture of the pupil, valuing the knowledge brought by the one being educated, and working from his vision of the world is, without doubt, one of the fundamental supports on which the pedagogical practice of teachers should be based” (Freire, 1999, p.95).

Some elements that characterize this process of mediation-dialogue:

1. Changing the present day didactic contract

“It is the other who always saves us”

(Ernesto Sábató)

“Nobody teaches anything to anybody - we all learn in community starting from the collective reading of the world” (Freire). To do this we need to break away from the mental models and structures of hierarchical relations, as well as the authoritarian models which we usually find in classrooms. We need to re-educate ourselves and know that it is possible to change from didactic contracts which create "jungle" situations in the classroom where the teacher is shouted down. We have to move away from tyrannical situations - whether of the teacher’s dogmatism, the pupil’s caprice, or the experience of confrontation. We need to create a space where we meet and recognize each other as thinking individuals, learning together around a common object - the world around us.

We need to create a dialogue-mediation which allows the permanent linking of the affective and the cognitive, a dialogue

which is humanizing and loving, a process which enables reflection on the world and dialogue on the possibilities of transforming it. The transformation of awareness comes in a process of active dialogue, allowing the individual to write his own biography, affirming personal dignity, transforming himself into a critical individual, organizing his life responsibly and forming himself to take responsibility for his life. It is in this way that he acquires the awareness of influencing culture. It is a dialogue which empowers by giving people the capacity to make their own decisions (Gadotti, 2001). It helps to develop potential, to bring out what is most human in the other, to place ourselves in history, telling our story from our present perspective (c.f. Freire, 1999, p.20). It develops a thinking presence and enables one to speak, dream, decide, and evaluate in a responsible way.

This dialogue facilitates teaching and learning with the other and not for the other, and gives dignity to the other through empowerment. Putting it another way, in our school we say it is necessary that dialogue be at the centre of our classroom - dialogue about the subject to be learned, about our experience when faced with it, about feelings and about learning together.

2. Changing methodology

To speak of the classroom as a cultural space does not mean an informal meeting where 'life' is spoken about pejoratively as sometimes happens in classrooms. It is a planned 'space', with clear pedagogical purpose and methodology, which facilitates the transformation and the success hoped for. It is based on clear methodology, which starts from reality, implies community investigation, and recognizes the culture of those for whom it is intended.

3. Changing the emphasis - the central role of developing awareness

"Liberty is not a question of privileges but rather a question of duties" (Camus)

It is not a question of emphasis being put on a list of concepts made into objects - dead, standardized, apparently neutral - which need to be transmitted "because there is nothing else". It is not a question of fragmented contents with no significance, taken out of context, which have to be 'rapidly' memorized, joined to a

whole process of rationalization which justifies this arbitrary behavior: “if you don’t study this tomorrow you will not be able to get a job”, or “things will go badly for you at university”. It is a question of placing emphasis on transforming those who are participating in this learning space - an exercise requiring our commitment, our affections, our knowledge, our ideas, our lives. We learn and, as we learn, we commit ourselves.

It means developing an educational mediation which is non-manipulative. But neither does it leave pupils to their own devices. The opposite of manipulation is not “letting everything go” which is to shirk responsibility for education. Nor does it mean authoritarianism. It means directing a serious study of a particular subject. It is a radical democratic position that combines freedom with authority.

To develop awareness implies creating a reality together which gives greater freedom and happiness. In our teaching and learning space, the teacher is with his pupils, rather than doing something for them. The teacher teaches but it is not a paternal offering. Rather it is a clear offering of our competence and our direction of the educational process. Convincing the teachers that they have to be neutral, that they cannot transform the conscience of the “free subjects” who are their pupils, is nothing other than the interest of the dominant ideology. This type of neutrality is false and constitutes a real lack of respect for the pupils. It should not be a question of leaving the dominant ideology in peace! It is clear that, in dialoguing with pupils, we envisage some possibility of changing their way of understanding reality. But we must realize that we are not simply intellectualizing, as if the transformation of conscience is a game of words, sentences, or intellectual debates. We change our understanding and our conscience in the measure in which we reflect on the real conflicts of history and our role in them; and on our mental, affective and intellectual positioning with respect to them. A liberating education can do this. It can change the understanding of reality, but changing reality itself is quite another matter. Only political action can achieve the transformation of reality (c.f. Freire, 1986).

4. Rethinking what we understand by knowledge in a cultural space

We understand that in ‘popular education’, as in formal education, there are some contents which cannot be omitted. They are

not negotiable since they form an indispensable part of our work. These contents are, for example, those which correspond to the particular school year. They are those contents which are worked on in the same grade in all schools. They are the basic curricular contents selected at national level for each province. But it is not merely a question of just working on these contents. Rather it involves being able to co-ordinate them with other contents (local knowledge etc.) for a clearly defined purpose by the teachers: What do we want to teach? What transformation do we want to see produced in the pupils, in their awareness? From the response to these questions we choose, arrange and give priority to a selection of contents. But it must be clear that knowledge, in itself, is not liberating. There must be a pedagogical process which generates in the subjects a political commitment in favor of the excluded, of life, truth, beauty, and goodness. It ought to be a process which, starting from a given reality, allows one to understand, interpret and transform this world. Knowledge is not an end in itself but a tool which allows us to take part in the world and give it meaning and happiness.

To speak of knowledge in a cultural space (a classroom) is to refer to a dynamic in which knowledge is not transferred but is developed in an integrative and inter-active form. It is not something that one appropriates quickly. To know is to discover and create. The process of development is active, participatory and permits the empowerment of the neediest persons so that they can make their own decisions.

In a cultural space one learns why one is participating in a common environment (context, needs, and problems) and how that knowledge is significant for the particular culture. The individual learns through his own transforming action in his world. He develops his own thought categories, organizes and transforms his world.

The cultural space is an exercise in democracy and critical dialogue, a search for the reason for much of what we live, an education for community and participative planning, an opportunity in which science opens up and interprets things on the basis of the needs of the people. This science is linked to work, forms of poverty, struggles, sufferings and joys - the daily lives of the poor. It is linked to common planetary demands such as the ecology - for example, cleaning up water, the air, and the land. It is linked

to all forms of social discrimination and exclusion, to the struggle for human rights, and world peace.

All this is not a mere interchange of ideas. It helps us interpret the world. It is a basic tool for our involvement in the world; it helps us understand our personal and community life, our struggles, needs, searches, and problems (c.f. Freire, 1999, p.95).

5. Investigation involving participation

The teacher, like the pupil, is also searching. Questioning, therefore, is the starting point in the learning situation. This is what is meant by teaching to think critically: questioning oneself about the world in which we live. The coding and the decoding, and the dialogue on the reality to be transformed, allows us to put problems concerning the world into categories, to demystify and look for new meanings which challenge us.

This is the final aim of our permanent dialogue with our students. We set out for them the thought-provoking sentence or phrase, the project which we want to develop. We explain the problem-situations that this project will present to us along with the contents we need to learn. From these initial explanations we seek to develop together a set of approaches which challenge us all, motivating us to learn and to seek solutions in our search for knowledge.

Para sharing:

- What surprises you in this experience of a practice lived throughout an entire school?
- What innovatory practices have you discovered in this experience?
- Do you think some of these practices could be adapted to the context in which you work? Why? How?
- Does this inspire you towards a different way of working:
 - with families, in your neighbourhood, in social institutions, with your teaching colleagues?

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Los textos de Gadotti son especialmente usados en el punto cuatro del capítulo tres.

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