

Exploring Students' Reflections about Values inside the Implementation of Storied Lessons Based on Students' Life Experiences

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This article informs on students' reflections about their life experiences and values based on the implementation of storied lessons compiled in a primer designed by the English teachers-researchers. Each storied lesson comes from some students' life stories, the values promoted by the school such as respect, honesty, responsibility, and solidarity, and the English topic for each class in order to allow students to feel comfortable reflecting and giving opinions regarding the issues mentioned above.

Key words: Values, social values, life experiences, storied lessons, reflection

Este artículo informa sobre las reflexiones de los estudiantes en torno a sus experiencias de vida y los valores a partir de la implementación de las clases basadas en historias que a su vez se encuentran compilados en una cartilla escrita por los profesores investigadores. Dicha cartilla surge de algunas historias de vida de los estudiantes, los valores promovidos por el colegio tales como: respeto, honestidad, responsabilidad, solidaridad y el tema correspondiente a cada clase de inglés para que los estudiantes se sientan cómodos reflexionando y expresando opiniones respecto a los tópicos mencionados anteriormente.

Palabras clave: Valores, valores sociales, experiencias de vida, clases basadas en historias, reflexión

Background

There are many problematic situations that teachers and students face in their daily classroom life which are relevant to study in order to improve the learning and teaching English process. During our practicum as pre service teachers at República de Costa Rica primary school, we experienced one suitable example of those problematic situations related to the understanding of social values in the classroom such as respect, honesty, responsibility and solidarity, which affect the appropriate environment relevant to the students' development as human beings.

Consequently, to study the values described before more deeply, we explored how the students' experiences were coherent with the values transmitted and promoted by the school, connecting them with the communicative abilities developed in the English class.

For achieving this purpose, we find short stories as an attractive and interesting means for teaching English to children. Stories offer good opportunities to look into the values mentioned before which are also included in the Proyecto Educativo Institucional (PEI or Institutional Educational Project) of the República de Costa Rica primary school (2007).

As a consequence, we integrated three main aspects, values, students' life experiences and English contents through storied lessons which were written in English by us and compiled in a primer, which is defined by Waters (1992) as a book that contains instructional material for teaching reading and writing to beginners. Additionally, we included some illustrations and activities focusing on values.

Our motivation for carrying out the design and application of the primer is the need of exploring the coexistence values inside the classroom in order to identify the way in which the students are dealing with them. At the same time, it contributes to the reflection on values in children, being a relevant part of the students' life development as integral human beings.

Research Problem

This research emerges from the classroom observations registered in the teacher journal¹ carried out at República de Costa Rica primary school with third graders. A

1 Teacher journal is a data collection tool. In this project it had two objectives: the first one was to provide us with information to write the stories; the second took place along the implementation of the storied lessons allowing us to describe students' reflections.

common issue in the students' behaviors linked with their life experiences and characterized by aggressiveness, intolerance and disrespectful attitudes toward their classmates was found to exist.

Trying to figure out why those behaviors took place inside the classroom and having in mind the school's values philosophy stated in the PEI (IED República de Costa Rica, 2007), we decided to include values such as respect, honesty, solidarity and responsibility in the English classes as an attempt to contribute to students' reflection on their performance in the school and their milieu.

As a result, the main question of this research project is as follows:

How do third graders at República de Costa Rica primary school relate the values promoted by the storied lessons to their life experiences?

In order to account for it, we posed the following sub-question:

What are the students' reflections concerning values through English storied lessons based on their life experiences?

Research Design

Taking into account that our main objective is to explore students' conceptions about values in their daily classroom relationships, we consider the qualitative approach as the most appropriate type of research to achieve our purpose. Sherman and Webb (1988) stated qualitative research as a tool to understand the meaning people have constructed or the sense given to the experiences that they have in their world.

Since we were going to explore students' conceptions about values, qualitative research gave us the opportunity to identify and understand values as a social phenomenon which students live daily.

In addition, it is necessary to cite case study as the research method to carry out this project considering the need to describe and analyze a specific problem, which is students' values reflection as explained in Yin (2002) in his definition of case study.

To be more specific, we developed a descriptive case study since it allowed us to describe in detail what students express and reflect about values when relating their life experiences in the English classroom regarding what Yin (2002) pointed out about descriptive case study: "It presents a complete description of a phenomenon within its context" (p.2).

Context

The population to be studied was 32 students in 3rd grade at the República de Costa Rica primary school, which is located in Fontibón. We designed the primer based specifically on 11 participants. They were 11 students, 5 boys and 6 girls with an average age of 8 to 10 years old. We chose these students because through the data gathered, we discovered some specifics in their life experiences that were affecting their coexistence in the English class.

Literature Review

Throughout the observations carried out inside the classroom, many questions emerged as a result of students' behaviors. One of those questions was addressed towards values as the core of living together relationships; however, this item was not taken in isolation since values are identified through the life experiences that students undergo. For that reason, we decided to link the above concepts having in mind storied lessons to reflect upon those values.

Consequently, we regard that the terms values, stories and life experience are the main constructs in which we support and obtain the relevant information to carry out the research exploration.

Values, Life Experiences, Storied Lessons

Current society has the need to strengthen social values, which are the pillar and support where the bases for fair and harmonious living together are constructed. These values allow individual and collective growth. Accordingly, Nieves (1997) considers values as an objective characteristic of all human beings which contribute to the growth and evolution of humankind.

Consequently, we define values as the positive attitudes which benefit the person in his or her development as an integral human being. These are inherent in each individual and are built through the society, the family, but also by the individual.

Those values have a polarity due to their having a negative and positive connotation that allows people to discern what is right and what is wrong. This aspect creates judgments of values which are related to the positions that people harbor toward certain situations. This position depends on cognitive dimension, affective dimension and behavioral dimension as stated by Colby and Kohlberg's moral

judgments statements (1987) and Bartolome and Cembranos' values judgments dimensions (1981).

However, the values that students internalized are quite varied just as Moron (1997) divided them: personal values, social values, work values and cultural values.

We are focused on social values which allow us to live in harmony, agreement and togetherness with the ones whom we share daily experiences. The appropriation of values such as solidarity, respect, tolerance, freedom, peace and justice, responsibility, honesty and equality permits personal and social growth as is mentioned by Moron (1997) in his article called "Educación en valores, transversalidad y medios de comunicación social".

Nevertheless, we decided to work with solidarity, respect, responsibility and honesty since these are part of the PEI (IED República de Costa Rica, 2007) proposed by the school where this research was carried out (referring to the development of the students' profile as integral human beings).

To obtain a successful values reflection, it is necessary that schools keep in mind the conflicts and experiences faced by students in their milieu. As Romero (2000) cites, there are two kinds of conflicts that affect our students. They are called "macroéticos and microéticos". Our research is focused on the second one, which refers to personal and daily problems related to family, peers, friends and their future.

The ideas expressed above lead us to present life experiences as the second construct of this project. The life experiences reflect students' values since the choices they make about what they wish to do and achieve are part of their values and have a direct impact on the way they deal with experiences.

We understand life experiences as all those situations that people live daily and which have a direct effect on our way of living and viewing the world. As Dewey (1938) mentioned, the experiential knowledge takes and assumes previous attitudes to face and relate them to the new ones.

For that reason, the aim of this project was to correlate students' life experiences and social values in order to involve them in a reflection on their actions and also events that surround them to create and assume moral judgments about their daily experiences.

In addition, life experiences make allowances for demanding the recognition of the diversity of needs as well as the cognitive, social and academic experiences of the child inasmuch as these must be valued as the foundation of successful academic achievement and social integration (Handscombe, 1994).

For us, it is essential to connect the educational programs with the situations that students experiment in their daily lives through stories. We think that they provide many benefits to children's knowledge since it is near their reality and in spite of the fictional characteristic that they contain, in this manner, students identify themselves in the story as a character using their imagination that motivates them to create their own perspective about the story and, at the same time, to understand and assume certain attitudes that help them in their current and future lives, as proposed by Ellis and Brewster (1991) through stories children can relate to in their daily life using their imagination.

Through our experience as pre-service teachers, we found stories to be the vehicle for connecting students' previous knowledge with the new knowledge which is not only limited to linguistic features, but also to their life experiences and imagination.

Furthermore, stories provide a means of developing students' communicative skills; for example, when the teacher reads stories, students are able to listen and repeat the correct pronunciation of the words following the reading. Moreover, they have the opportunity to discuss their impressions about the stories in writing or orally.

Keeping this order of ideas, we decided to use stories as the backbone of the English classes and have all the activities and reflections based on them. As Wajnryb (2003) stated, these kinds of lessons are called *storied lessons* in which teachers can bring the story into the classroom or it can emerge as a negotiation with students. The kind of story differs and it could be based on true or imaginary events. In our case, we took into account students' life experiences as the raw material of the stories, which also become the "raw material" of our classes where values are the social aim and English the content subject.

As a result, we defined storied lessons as classes which are developed from stories based on students' life experiences and values, in which activities to reflect on these aspects as well as reinforce English contents are carried out.

This learning from experience allows students to face a reflective practice. At the same time it promotes the development of students' autonomy by improving their self- knowledge and personal growth.

Neill (2004) proposed a model for a reflective practice divided into three stages: (1) to reflect on the situation in order to describe (2) To construct personal theory and knowledge about the situation in order to learn from it and (3), to reflect on

action and consider ways of improving the situation and reflecting on the consequences of these actions. In this research students followed these steps in order to reflect on the stories compiled in the primer.

Pedagogical Intervention

The data necessary to design the first part of this research were gathered through class observations, questionnaires, surveys and interviews at the beginning and end of the English classes. These instruments helped us to identify the students' experiences, interests and their notion about values inside the classroom.

With this information we wrote and designed 5 stories and their activities and compiled them in the primer. The first of these five short stories is called "Andy's Decision", having in mind honesty and solidarity as the main values to reflect on as well as children who work as an experience in which they help their parents in their jobs and, finally, occupations as the English topic.

The second one is "A New Beginning", considering responsibility and cooperation as the main values to discuss, different kinds of family members' composition as students' experience at home and family members as the English topic.

The third story, "Brother" referring to respect as the value presented in the story, students' problems with their siblings as a shared experience and adjectives as the English topic.

The fourth one, "My Imagination Is the Universe", was written based on imagination as an ordinary topic in the classroom and attractive one for being included in the story related to describing places as the English topic.

The last one, "Juno's Daily Routine", taking into account respect as a value to reflect upon, aggressiveness as students' behavior presented in the classroom and, finally, daily routines as the English topic.

Data Collection Instruments

For analyzing the effects of those implemented stories, we used video recording data in order to obtain a whole view of students' behaviors. Also, free and semi structured interviews were applied to complement the reflections and discussions that students revealed through their artifacts, which were the product of the primer's activities. Finally, we wrote a teacher journal to complete the triangulation process.

Findings

We divided the data collected into two central categories which describe the main constructs of the research question.

Reflecting On What Is Right and What Is Wrong

Our first category is called *Reflecting on what is right and what is wrong*. The main issue reflected on by the students was values experienced in their life. It encompassed students' understanding and revealed perceptions about values based on their short story reflections which are also promoted by the school.

These turned into in the following sub-categories: *I had never done what Freddy did, Helping people, Do what is right, Come what may and Keep your word*.

In order to explain the subcategory, *I had never done what Freddy did*, students related the short story "Andy's Decision" to honesty.

Taking into account the information obtained from the data, there are two ways of understanding honesty by students: the first way is related to what they do not have to do to others and the second is related to their personal principles as Romero (2000) stated, that for being honest, you first need to be sincere and genuine with yourself then you will be able to be honest with others. It is a value that is fostered through the family, the school and the environment for living together in harmony.

However, students began reflecting on the second aspect that Romero explained and they realized some things about honesty within themselves. Through this reflection, students concluded that "honesty is not lying, it is respecting and being sincere" (Journal October 24 lines 7, 8 and 9)².

Students learnt that it is important to be honest by telling the truth even in the most insignificant situation. Also, to the students, being honest means not taking things that belong to someone else.

During the activity where they had to write an ending for the first story, "Andy's Decision", they expressed their conception about honesty regarding the differentiation between what is right and what is wrong. The way they explained the meaning of the value was through its opposite, "I would never do what Freddy did"

2 Samples taken from data were translated by the authors.

(S2 artifact 1 lines 2, 3). As such, the title of this subcategory evidenced the perception students have about being honest.

Helping people

The name of this subcategory responds to the definition given by students who do not recognize the word solidarity promoted by the PEI of the school (IED República de Costa Rica, 2007) with its concept. Students name and identify solidarity as helping people or collaboration. "Solidarity is being kind and helping other people..., sharing, etc." (Students group work, artifact 2).

Additionally, students think that helping people and giving advice, especially to those who are close to them, is the best way to practice solidarity. Moreover, students consider they practice solidarity because they support their friends and listen to them when they have problems, in most cases with their families.

Do what is right, come what may

The name of this sub-category comes from what students consider to be a condition for living together well, highlighting respect as the main value to reflect on.

The students established a division between respect towards other people and self-respect. We realized this division when checking the data and after reading and reflecting on the third story, "Brothers", in which students looked at themselves and expressed what they thought about their own image and described how the relationship with their relatives and classmates should be.

Students defined respect toward other people in some of the reflective activities; for instance, in the following artifacts students expressed: "We kids, same as adults, have to respect and keep in mind honesty and respect for others' property; we have to be honest" (Student 5 artifact 5).

According to what students said in some discussions, we noticed that they identified respect through its opposite, disrespect. To define respect students explained what they do not have to do, as presented in the teacher's journal: "I asked student 5 about the definition of respect and she said: 'no hacer a los demás lo que uno no quiere'. Another student said 'no maltratar a nadie' (Journal # 9, lines 25-26).

On the other hand, the data provide us with information about what students think about self-respect referring to themselves. In this way self-esteem was the main

issue presented by most of the students. Its characteristics describe their physical appearance and personality.

In the following artifacts students reflected on what they like and dislike about themselves:

Student 6: “I like my feelings but not my bad moods”.

The data analysis showed a balance of the importance that students give between the physical and personality qualities as referred to in the previous artifacts where students expressed their happiness about how they look inside and outside.

However, there were a few cases in which students did not feel comfortable with their appearance because they felt rejected by their peers.

Keep your word

Do homework, take care of your children and help with the housework are examples of what students consider duties that they have to carry out to be responsible people. Most of the students’ reflection on responsibility comes from the second story, “A New Beginning”, as you can read in the next artifacts which are products of the general reflection on the stories. Some of the conclusions make reference to the moral that this story left for their lives. “I learned that one has to be responsible concerning others” (Student 7 artifact 6).

In this part of the analysis, we identify the common students’ opinion about responsibility: they think of this value as assuming the consequences of their actions, regardless of whether they are good or bad.

Students emphasize the role of responsibility within the family having in mind the plot of the second story, in which the father abandoned his daughter and wife.

Telling My Own Story

In this category students portrayed the meaning that their life experiences have for them. These life experiences are developed in different contexts such as the family, school or their social relationships. In this order of ideas, the sub-categories are my dear family and my imagination.

My dear family

During the classes we observed that most of what students experienced at home with their families is closely related to their actions at school.

According to the analysis of the data that we collected, some of those experiences at home are positive and others negative, which have had a big impact and influence on their school performance. For instance, through a letter that students wrote to their families, they revealed what they thought about their family regarding some problematic situations. "I ask them not to fight, not to say bad words and to value what we share (...) I am grateful to them because they are good, because they love me" (Student 8 artifact 2).

From what students expressed, we identified two reflective issues about their families. The first one deals with problematic situations such as divorce, bullying siblings, alcoholism, aggression among the members of the family and busy worker parents with no time for sharing with their children. And in the second one, students revealed the strengths of their families like union and love among the members of the family, the patient and the caring.

Many of the students expressed their desire to live in a most respectful environment at home, without shouting at each other, with no verbal and physical aggression and with more time to share together as a family.

One of the most common problems evidenced in one of the artifacts (mail box³) is the frequent fights among relatives. Students feel affected because they want to solve these problems, but they do not know how to do it. Besides, when they realize that their loved ones are suffering, they start feeling the same, especially those students with divorced parents, as Berry (2001) explained the effects of divorce in *Angry Kids*. One of the artifacts that exemplifies this situation says: "I am sad. At Christmas I will not be with my brother and my dad. My dad is now with my brother Diosed" (Student 3 mail box artifact).

Additionally, students feel an identity with the family characters presented in the plot of the stories "Brothers" and "A New Beginning", which include fights among the members of the family and divorce as the central problematic situations.

As we realized after the data analysis, students portrayed their life experiences identifying themselves and others after reading and listening to the stories.

3 The main idea of the mail box was that the students relieve their aggressive behaviors by writing the reasons of their aggressiveness and the commitment that we all agreed on was that instead of screaming or hitting their partners, we were going to open our hearts writing and putting the notes in the "*buzón del olvido*" (oblivion mailbox). This strategy was very effective, as well as giving us a lot of information to edit the stories with.

At the same time students recognized in the reflection that they were not the only ones who deal with family problems, which allowed them to regard their classmates' sharing of their situations and being united.

My imagination

During the data analysis we noticed that the fourth story had a big impact on the imagination of the students. Through this story students convey how they live their imagination daily since most of them have to stay alone for a long time while their parents are working and their siblings are studying.

That is why students created an imaginary world where some of them were accompanied by making up fantastic characters (imaginary friends) as was written in the teacher journal: "When students were asked about what they do when they are alone, they said: "I sing and play with Little Star, my imaginary friend (Student 4); I play with my imaginary friend, Andres' (Student 5)" (Teacher journal, August 11, 2007).

Another characteristic of this sub-category was the importance of students' reflections on the ability to imagine. They understood imagination as a way to have fun and as the possibility to do what they can not do in real life as we can see in the following students' artifacts: "Que nosotros los niños debemos tener imaginaciones, sueños, fantasías con las cuales nos podemos divertir si estamos aburridos o tristes" (Student 5 artifact 8).

Students revealed that imagination is an alternative for exploring the world and dreams as we saw in the different explanations of their imaginary worlds.

Additionally, students place emphasis on their desire to be in the world they created, sometimes preferring to be alone or with the people that they love.

Conclusions

According to the findings presented above and considering our research question, we concluded that students bring their life experiences and acts to exemplify and explain the definition of their values. Students assume values through samples of their daily life, even if these actions have not had a direct impact on them; however, they consider these actions to be a good way to support their ideas about values.

Students related story characters' behaviors to values identification. They gave their opinions about what was right and what was wrong in the characters' performance by means of reflections.

Furthermore, conceptualizing values with the students is done through examples which they can relate to with their life experiences because, sometimes, students do not have a clear definition of values without referring to their life experiences. We observed these situations in many of the students' reflections about values which are related to family as well as school situations.

In addition, reflective storied lessons give students opportunities to feel more comfortable at the moment of expressing their opinions and ideas since they can identify with the plot and characters of the stories. On the other hand, students realized that they were not the only ones who had to have those kinds of experiences. Besides, the reflection provided them with the opportunity to share and give vent to their partners' and teacher's feelings and thoughts.

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