

“A WORLD OF DIFFERENT COLORS”: TRYING TO TEACH SOLIDARITY AND GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN SIXTH GRADE

Aurora Lacueva (Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, Venezuela, *lacter@cantv.net*)
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Abstract

This is a case study of a teacher enacting project-based learning with his sixth grade students. The teacher Jaume Baras (not his real name) states that he uses projects as a way to break the barriers among subject-areas, give students a leading role, and develop creativity, initiative, collaborative work, solidarity and knowledge tied to action. During the project studied, I observed almost all the classes, interviewed the teacher at the beginning and end, interviewed six children at the end, collected didactic material and copies of children’s work. Also, the teacher agreed to keep a diary, using a form I gave him.

Mr. Baras wanted children to get ampler perspectives and invited them to study health in six regions of the world. The project lasted five months, meeting once a week, plus some extra classes towards the end. There were three phases during the work. In the first phase each team chose a region and did library research about it, using a comprehensive concept of health they had constructed in class. The teams presented their results to their classmates, utilizing strategies like posters, dramatizations, a “TV news report”, etcetera. In the second phase, Mr. Baras asked them to go beyond data and try to present a message. In the third phase Mr. Baras found a collection of books about “children of the world”: in each book a child presented his or her own country. He decided to center each team work in a single country instead of in a whole region. Each team chose a country among the ones in the collection. In this phase, work went more smoothly because the books were easy to read and the information was more focalized. The class presented their project (named by them “A world of different colors”) in an inter-schools event. Besides, the children talked about it in a regional radio station.

Baras thinks the project helped children “to get a new vision of the world”. And that the students also advanced in group work and independent search for information. To my question “What have you learned in this project?” children interviewed said: “Things about other countries we didn’t know, we thought everybody lived like us”, “Not all people live equally well... You have to respect others, no matter how different they are from you”. Other

learning: to read and write better, to have a deeper concept of health. From my perspective, it would have been better if the project had focus in specific countries from the beginning. Also, it could have been enriched with more empirical research. The general idea was powerful and formative.

Introduction

Globalization: a complex term which encompasses promises and threats and which receives very different interpretations, according to different interests and perspectives. Is it unavoidable a globalization marked by the dominance of a powerful few? Will “First World” poles of well-being turn into (or are they already) fortresses besieged by millions of disenfranchised who strive for a better life? Will the terrible shadow of terrorism cover the 21th. century? Or will it perhaps be possible, thanks to the efforts and struggles of diverse peoples and social groups throughout the world, to use present technologies and capabilities (and to develop new ones) in the attainment of a more inter-related, more prosperous planet, with opportunities for all?

These questions challenge educators: the school cannot stay away from so severe and pressing problems. In this paper, I present a teacher’s attempts to face some aspects of this challenge through a classroom project, where his students investigated health conditions around the world.

Aims and Methodology: An educative case-study

This research can be considered an *educative case-study* (Stenhouse, 1991) since its general purpose is to contribute to the improvement of educational practice and in this way of the condition of children and the professionalism of teachers. This kind of work aims at the development of educative theory and/or the refinement of prudence, through systematic and reflective documentation of experience. In this investigation, I focused on project-based learning (Manning, Manning & Long, 1994; Marx et al., 1997) and on the issue of “global consciousness”.

I observed the classroom project from beginning to end, and kept field notes. I also video-recorded three classroom periods and audio-recorded one, collected samples of pupils' work and all the didactic material given by the teacher, took photographs and sketched a plan of the classroom. Besides, I interviewed the teacher both at the beginning and at the end of the project, and interviewed three pairs of students at the end. The teacher kindly kept a weekly diary, using a form I supplied. Months later, he also read and made critical comments about the first draft of the research report.

In the interpretation of data, my intention has been to consider the most interesting facets of the case without losing its unicity. There are three kinds of text in the report: *particular descriptions*, *general descriptions*, and *assertions* or *orientative commentaries* (Erickson, 1998). The descriptions have taken a *narrative character*, with the advantages of straightforwardness and subtlety (Stenhouse, 1991): straightforwardness because of the readers' familiarity with narrative conventions, and also because the narrative forms forbid the author to impose her or his own logic against the resistance of the story; and subtlety because of the capacity of narrative to communicate ambiguity, selecting information that invites the reader to speculate with alternative interpretations.

The strategies followed in order to increase the trustworthiness of the research (Guba, 1981) included: lengthy work in the same place and persistent observation, triangulation, collection and use of referential material, participants' verification and structural corroboration.

Background information on the case

The school where the observations took place is a private, non-confessional institution, with a partial subsidy from the regional government of Catalonia (Spain). It is located in a small town very near Barcelona.

At the time of the observations (1998-1999), the teacher, Mr. Jaume Baras, had seven years of experience in formal education plus another five years in non-formal education. He had a three-year university degree in Magisterio (Teaching), and was studying for a five-year degree in Psychopedagogy. Mr. Baras had seven pedagogical publications, as author or co-author.

The class was a sixth grade, integrated by 26 students, 12 girls and 14 boys, all 11 or 12-years old. Most of these students were middle-class, third generation of Castilian-speaking emigrants to Catalonia from other regions of Spain. In very few cases the parents had higher-level education.

The project lasted five months, with 90 minutes class periods once a week. The classes were in Catalan, with occasional use of Castilian by some of the children. The names of teacher and pupils have been changed to guarantee confidentiality.

Origen and great objectives of the project observed

In this classroom, they develop a long project from October to March, which they then present at an Inter-Schools event in town. The theme of the project has to be in the area of Health and Environment, because that is the focus of the event. Besides, there are shorter, more limited, projects throughout the year. In parallel, Mr. Baras follows the textbook in a more traditional way, since this is a requirement in the school.

Projects are proposed by Mr. Baras, from what he thinks can generate a sustained and relevant work. However, the teacher considers it necessary to “transfer” the control of the project to the students during the first sessions.

This year, teacher Jaume wanted to approach health making comparisons among regions of the world. Jaume thought that studying the world the children could become familiar with other cultures, and in this way they could not only have a broader knowledge of health matters but, in the future, when they heard about Morocco or Sub-Saharan Africa they could say: “Yes, I remember a recipe from Morocco” or they could relate an African country with a music or a landscape, instead of the stereotype that they are the ones who come to take our jobs from us, or other negative images.

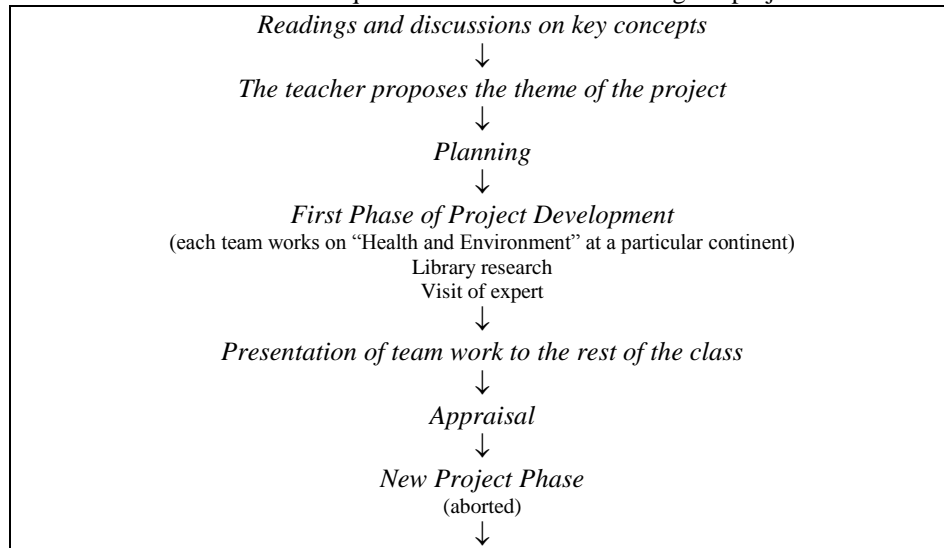
Another great objective of project work, according to Mr. Baras, is that pupils learn to reflect and to take a stand about what could be done in real life problematic situations (the “what would you do”, he says).

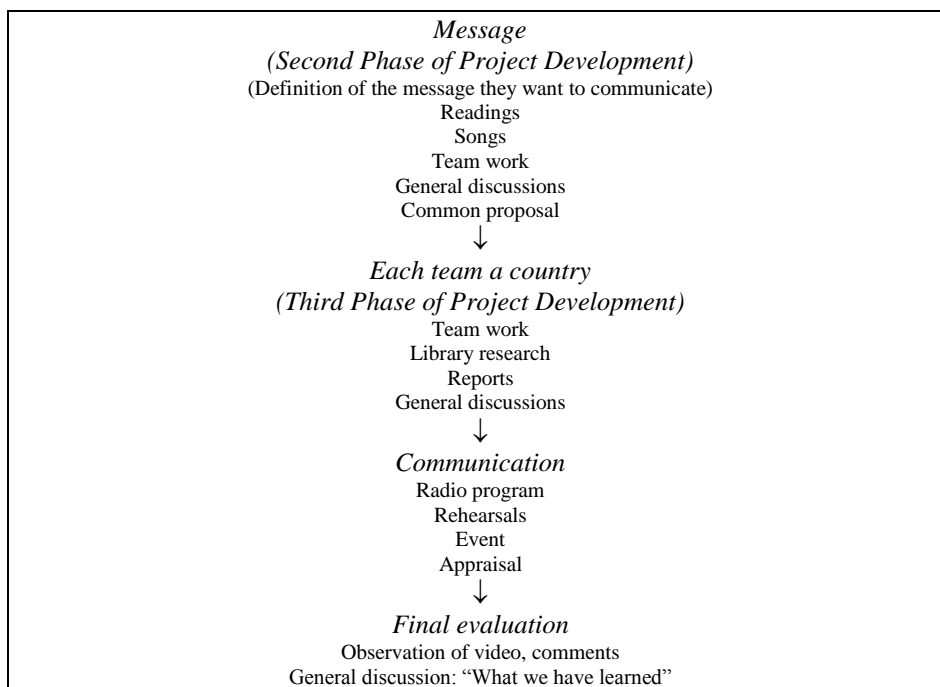
In general, through projects Mr. Baras wants to develop creativity, initiative, collaborative work, solidarity and knowledge tied to action. He considers it important that children, faced with a relevant issue, be able to look for information in different sources, analyze it and write a report. Metacognition is also a relevant aim for Mr. Baras. Besides, through projects he wants to break the barriers among the different school disciplines. And another important aspect, according to the teacher, is that with projects school work gains significance for the students, since they are protagonists and the contents are more related to real life issues.

Phases in the development of the project

This project was long and convoluted, developing through three distinct phases. After an initial theme proposal by the teacher and planning done in students’ teams, the First Phase of the work started, centered on library research by each team about health conditions in a particular region of the world (Europe, South America, North America...). The results of this work were presented and appraised in general classroom meetings.

Table No. 1. A sequence of the work done during the project





Then, it was decided to reorganize teams and topics, which implied a new phase of re-elaboration and completing of information collected. But this phase never took place. Instead, the teacher proposed a change: a Second Phase focused on the definition of a “message” from all the information compiled, and on the designing of the ways to communicate this message to the public.

The project continued through a Third Phase, where each team, practically rejecting what was done during the First Phase, undertook the study of a particular country, thanks to a new collection of children’s books.

All the effort ended with the participation in a radio program and the presentation in the Inter-School Event. Finally, there was an assessment of the work done and a closing session of evaluation based on the observation and critical commentary of a video about recent immigration to Spain.

The limits of this paper allow only a much summarized report of the whole process.

The beginning: theme proposal and planning

Mr. Baras began the work on the project distributing a hand-out, written by him, with faked interviews where four invented children (two boys and two girls) gave their own definitions of “health” and “environment”. Definitions ran from the simpler, more limited and individualistic to the more complex, elaborated and of solidarity character. The pupils studied the hand-out and made two tables at the blackboard classifying the definitions offered.

In following periods, they discussed about the factors that influence health and their variations throughout the world. The teacher raised the possibility of the project and the pupils accepted it and organized in teams, each team choosing a different continent for their study.

The teams planned their work, according to three questions posed by Mr. Baras: what are we going to do, how are we going to do it and who will do what. Each team explained to the rest of the class how they were organizing their work.

Table No. 2. Distribution of classroom periods during the project

<i>Kind of activity</i>		<i>Number of periods</i>	
Beginning: theme proposal and planning		4	
First Phase of Development	Library research	6	7
	Visit of expert		
	Team's presentations to the class	1	
Midway reorientation		2	
Second Phase of Development: The message and its communication		3	
Third Phase of Development: Each team a country	Focalized search	3	5
	Radio program	1	
	Rehearsal	1	
Culmination	Event	1	3
	Appraisal	1	
	Evaluation	1	
Activities outside project		1	
TOTAL		25	

First Phase of Development: Information search and classroom presentation

Children were familiar with the dynamic of projects, as understood by their teacher, so they set to work without hesitation, and during five periods, they brought to class, read and copied information from different sources: books, brochures, maps, CD-Roms, Internet...

The South America team interviewed me, I suspect at their teacher's request. And, following a suggestion by Mr. Baras, a student, Tatiana, explained to the class her experience as "godmother" to a Peruvian girl, giving money through a NGO.

In spite of the achievements, work during this phase was difficult, because of the magnitude of the teacher's proposal and the scarcity of suitable sources of information: those available were interesting and attractive but, often, of very high reading level. Well advanced this phase, Mr. Baras suggested to focus the search on the Catalonian Encyclopedia, which simplify things.

An enriching experience was the visit of a member of a NGO, invited by teacher Jaume. Her organization, of Catalan origin, works in Nepal, building schools for poor children. Jaume's students, in teams, prepared questions for their guest. The visitor gave us a short talk about Nepal and showed us a video of the work of her organization there. Several times she told us that those children "do not have anything". At the same time, she informed us that in Nepal there are also very rich people, whose children go in Mercedes Benz cars to luxurious schools, which may even have tennis courts. This information shocked the students,

who asked among themselves why was it then necessary to give help from Spain, and how come these rich people didn't help their own poor fellow countrymen.

At the end of this phase, each team prepared and then made a presentation to the rest of the class about their library research. The presentations took from five to twenty minutes, with an average of fifteen minutes. After each one, there were questions and an assessment, for another twelve to fifteen minutes.

Several teams made posters with maps, graphics and texts, but these were usually very small to be seen from the desks in the presentation. The North America team just read the information they had compiled, issue by issue: drugs, economy, health, diet... The rest of the groups tried to make more attractive presentations. For example, the Asia team invented a "TV news program", reading "news" (really general information took from books), interviewing "a lady who had been in Asia", giving a weather report on the continent, and even adding an advertisement break, during which they asked the audience to be "godparents" to Third World children.

Interview to Montse, "who has been in Asia". (...)

-How are living conditions in Asia?

-The rich very rich and the poor very poor.

-What do they eat in Asia?

-Mostly rice, lentils and legumes.

-How are the health conditions of the people?

-It depends if you are rich or poor.

(From the field notes of the observer).

The effort made was commendable, but there was need of a more careful development of good ideas, more rehearsal and a better command of information on the part of each student.

Midway reorientation

Mr. Baras organized an extra session to make an assessment of the work done until that point and to plan next phases. I was surprised when he proposed two alternatives: to continue as before, improving each team's work, or else to make a change of approach, establishing new teams, and working not by regions of the world but by issues (diet, medical attention...). A pupil proposed a third alternative, actually a combination of the two previous ones: to continue like before, but to organize also occasional meetings by issue with representatives of each team.

Children voted for the second option, which they would take on in January, after the Christmas holiday.

But at the end of the vacations, Mr. Baras told me he had been thinking: they needed a change of direction in the project; they could not go on as they had decided, because it was more of the same. Mr. Baras said that they had overlooked creativity, and added that he intended to discuss this problem with the students.

He actually did, in their first January class: the project has gone into too much information, he said. And remarked that there were two paths: either to explain information directly, or to start from an idea, a message that you want to convey, and use the information accordingly. He added that music could help focus the idea, and invited the children to listen

to two songs he had brought. Both songs stressed the need for peace, tolerance and brotherhood in the world.

After listening to the songs, Mr. Baras asked the students to think about two questions:

- Do you think that these two songs have something to do with our project? Explain what and why.

- Can you imagine some way of including these songs into our project?

After a while, the teacher wrote the students' answers in the blackboard, a column for each question:

War

Accompaniment

World situation

Background music

Peace, friendship

To compare

Wealth, poverty

TV news, pauses

Equity

Freedom

Rights of children

Racism

Mr. Baras added: "Can we take all these ideas we have mentioned and get a message out of them?"

At the beginning children were silent, but soon they began to participate: Why can't they all be equal, rich and poor?; in this way we have realized how the world is, there are more poor people every day; we realized there are differences among countries...

A girl, naively, broke the line and said: "Racism is not bad. I am a racist, but if someone introduces a black child to me, I shake hands with him".

"Then you are not a racist", replied Mr. Baras.

And the girl: "Yes, I am, because I don't want him in my country".

Other children started to discuss if their classmate was a racist or not, and about it is not your fault if you have to leave your country because there is a war... But the teacher postponed to "another day" this discussion and asked: "Do you agree that we have a message?"

"Yes!", said the children almost in unison.

Mr. Baras insisted: "What should we do: keep on explaining or look for the message?"

At first, some pupils answered "keep on explaining", but after a while, almost all participants favored the message.

Mr. Baras proposed to specify resources and ideas at the next session.

Second Phase of Project Development: a message and a proposal

But message specification was not immediate. Mr. Baras thought it useful first to read and discuss two texts, in subsequent sessions: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a news clipping on the experience of a group of young people from their town in an encounter

of “Meninos da Rua” (street children) in Brazil. The teacher even suggested students to ask this group of young people to come to the classroom, which the students did, but the youth group had problems of schedule.

During the next days children, in teams, wrote their proposals for “a message”, and presented them to the rest of the class. Teacher Jaime wrote the main ideas at the blackboard:

Environment
Human rights: school, health, life, work...
No prostitution, no drugs
All have rights

Inequalities
The world is not perfect

Songs can help us in our learning
We are privileged

Equity

Health
AIDS

Racism
Drugs
Health, Equity → *Implications*
Work
Future
Diet

Mr. Baras asked the children what they could do to sell their ideas. The students made suggestions: to explain them at the event, to join forces, to make posters... A child suggested going to the municipal magazine and putting an ad. Mr. Baras corrected: “Making a statement”. “And we will all appear on the magazine!”, said the child, generating enthusiasm in the class. Others proposed to go to the regional television station, but the teacher explained that the TV people receive a lot of requests and would not listen to them, then the children opted for the radio. Besides, Mr. Baras suggested and was accepted to visit the town major.

Third Phase of Project Development: each team, a country

In a new turn of the work, Mr. Baras showed up in class with a pile of books. He said they could be useful for the project. Each title dealt with a particular country, presented by a boy or a girl from that place: “*Minu. I am from India*”, “*Dana. I am from USA*”, “*Fátima. I am from El Salvador*”. The books were written for children, their language was simple and enjoyable, and they had good illustrations.

As there were six titles, and each country belonged to a different continent, the teacher proposed that each team worked with one of these countries for the presentation at the event. At first, no one wanted to be representative of small and poor countries like Gambia or El

Salvador or of the by then troubled Serbia, but little by little the children formed the new teams.

Work continued in following sessions: children read their new books with interest and extracted the information they deemed relevant. They also added notions from encyclopedias and encyclopedic dictionaries. The title of the presentation was decided by the whole class, selecting it among more than twenty proposals: “A world of different colors”.

Thanks to Mr. Baras efforts, they presented their project in a children’s program of a regional radio station. Their participation there was simply a shorter version of what they were going to say at the inter-schools event. Probably, it would have been more appropriate a conversation about the project, how they had worked on it and what they had accomplished, but that was the way the teacher planned it, perhaps because the aim was to transmit their message.

A day before the event they did a general rehearsal and appraised it.

Culmination: Final Presentation, Appraisal and Evaluation

After five months of work, the children and Mr. Baras (all quite nervous) went to the Inter-Schools Event. When the curtains of the auditorium opened, two presenters could be seen: a girl and a boy of the group, elegantly dressed. They announced the “physicians” who, with their spotless white coats, read the broad concept of health they had constructed in class. Then the representatives of the different countries appeared in order, all more or less accurately disguised.

Children read their speeches, some did it better than others but, as the texts were short and highlighted important issues, it was not tedious to listen to them.

Since the seventies, this region (Gambia) suffers the consequences of the advance of the desert, like many other regions of the Sahel. The progressive rain decrease has had very negative effects, mainly in agriculture, cattle raising, and in the availability of drinking water.

In this same decade and in conjunction with the ecological and economic deterioration, the young people from Gambia started emigrating towards Europe.

To write these texts, children relied too much on the books read during the Third Phase. However, the writing did involve an effort: the books were longer; students had to select and summarize.

At the end of their presentation, the representatives of the six countries, the presenters and the physicians gathered on stage holding hands, and sang one of the songs their teacher had brought to the class months before: “El món seria” (“The world would be”), accompanied on the piano by the cousin of one of the students. It was a little touching to see and hear them: “El món seria mes humà / si tots fossim germans...” (“The world would be more human / if we all were brothers and sisters...”). In total, twenty minutes. The audience applauded them. To finish, they distributed a hand-out.

This leaflet was well designed and had a pertinent content, showing a careful work on the children’s part. The first page indicated the title of the project: “A world of different colors”, the school and class and the name of the event. Each one of the following five faces of the hand-out presented a particular issue: Health, Rights of Children, The world (Data about the six countries researched at the Third Phase), “El món seria” (Lyrics of the song), Think that... (The message: “Health is a kind of chain with many links, and which makes everything

run... We have to think about the world, think about other people... We all have the right to live...”).

The same afternoon of the event, Mr. Baras and the children made an appraisal of their presentation. In general, they shared positive considerations of accomplishment, comradeship and pride.

Final Evaluation

Mr. Baras decided to add a special evaluation activity, which consisted in watching a video about immigration towards Spain and then answering in writing the following question: “If you were asked to write an article for the school magazine about immigration, what would you say?” Mr. Baras reminded the students to say positive and negative things and, above all, consider the “what would you do”.

Very few of the children’s answers summarized properly the issues presented in the video; they only repeated some of the statements heard. As for their opinion, fourteen children opted for a position of “All have right to a good life”, and therefore everybody should be allowed to move freely from one country to another. Only three students expressed clearly that immigrants should not come to Spain, because they take jobs from the Spaniards and besides some of them are delinquents. A student stated that he is not racist, but he thought immigrants could “get their feet wet” and fix their own country. Eight children had a mixed position: they were sorry that illegal immigrants were not allowed in Spain and so missed the chance for a better life, but remarked that one has to worry also about jobs and housing for the Spaniards.

About the “what would you do”, most students opted for solutions out of their reach, proposed with no consideration for real life situations or constraints: “I would make for everyone to have housing and jobs”, “If I were a person in power, I would change the laws, the world would be free”, “If I were famous or rich, I would give means to the poor, so they did not have to emigrate”. For many students, it was difficult to think about what they would do as common adult citizens or what they could do now as children. Maybe the very way of posing the assignment favored the escape to magical solutions. Even so, some students made proposals that coincide with ambitious but very reasonable ideas suggested by experts in the field: “If I had power, I would improve societies like Morocco, because they leave since they do not have jobs or means of life at home”.

The second half of this same class was used for a self-evaluation, considering eighteen aspects: eight proposed by the teacher and ten put forward by different students. Children assessment of their learning during the project was positive.

Conclusions

From the point of view of the teacher

Teacher Jaume Baras has, on the whole, a positive appreciation of the project. He remarks that group dynamics worked very well, and the children took charge of the project and drove it to a good end, with enthusiasm and motivation, making him enthusiastic too. He considers that children learned a lot and are conscious of it. Also, that they performed their work with few interpersonal conflicts, and developed good debates in the general sessions. Participation in the event went well. Mr. Baras also values that the group as well as himself reacted properly to difficult moments, like the impasse before Christmas, when it seemed that the project had reached a deadlock.

Mr. Baras started this project concerned about the themes of solidarity, globalization and multiculturalism, and he returns to them in his final consideration of the work done:

According to what I understand is a good person, and what I understand is the challenge of young people of the two thousand and something, which are going to be them (...) well, I think that this will have been useful. Because, at least, they will have received a volume of information in a direction different from usual. And that has had some usefulness already. To unbalance you a little and make you think...isn't it?

(From the final interview to the teacher).

With respect to what “did not work” in the project, Mr. Baras points out that the first phase was too dense, because they did not find adequate sources of information, adapted to the children’s age. He questions himself about if he should have foreseen this or if it is part of the education of children to face this kind of obstacle sometimes. Besides, this first phase, said teacher Jaume, revolved too much around library research and got into a stalemate in December, which was difficult to overcome.

From the point of view of the students

Thanks to the numerous (maybe too numerous) appraisal sessions done during the project, it is possible to say that the vast majority of the students expressed a very positive appreciation of the project, as a worthwhile activity useful for their future. They stated that they learned new notions, improved their group work abilities, had a good time and advanced in their self-management. Although in a lesser measure, children also considered that they had acquired a new vision of the world and of the relations among people and that they had advanced in their responsibility. It is good to add that these are answers to questions posed by the teacher or by themselves, and which guided the appraisal sessions.

But these considerations were corroborated in the more open interviews which I had with three pairs of students. What is more, here the great aim of Mr. Baras “to contribute to reach a new world vision” moves to the first plane, as all the children mention it in one way or another. For example, Berta remarked that what she liked most in the project was to learn more about the world, to know that others live differently. On his turn, Manuel said that the most interesting thing was to do the in-depth research of some countries, “because we did not know about them and now we do”. To the question: “What have you learned during the project?”, Tatiana commented: “(T)hat everybody has to be... has to be equal. No matter how different they can be, they have to be treated equally, because they are human beings”.

On his turn, Riqui V. stated that what he liked most was to work in group, although it was also the most difficult, because of the need to reach agreements. Berta shared his opinion since “(In a group) each one thinks that what he or she says is the best, but of course you have to think of the others too”. When asking Tatiana: “What has been the most difficult for you, during the project?”, she answered: “To reach agreements”. And then added: “And to know what we were going to do, to have everything clear”.

Children indicated that other things they learned were to read and write better, and to have a deeper concept of health.

The issue of the first phase of the project, with its difficult search for information in complex and dense books, was mentioned by several children during the interviews and in classroom appraisals. Magda, for example, said at the interview: “When we started we were

not doing very well, because the teams... we had a lot of information and it was very hard for us”.

From the point of view of the observer

Mr. Baras proposed a great theme: relevant and with considerable impact in these children’s present and future life. It is valid that some classroom projects arise from the reflection of the teacher, and not only from students’ initiatives.

However, children never really took the work in their own hands, as the teacher expected and presumed. Maybe they needed at the beginning more of what we could call “exploratory” or “unleashing” activities (Lacueva, 2000); and a more careful preparation of the work environment so that they could choose more and could propose more.

Besides, it took too much time to give the project the right direction. During the first weeks, the teacher’s proposal was too difficult for a sixth grade, both in terms of the topics to consider as in terms of the books and other resources available.

Also, the production of the “message” was too guided by the teacher: authentic debate was lacking.

It is fundamental not to center projects just on library research, but to combine this with empirical research of some kind. In this way, students can really act as direct investigators of reality. In a project like “A world of different colors”, for example, it would be possible to make more interviews to immigrants, experts and Spaniards who have lived abroad, to study videos of health and environmental problems in different parts of the world, to analyze statistics (something that this class started to do), to observe critically foreign television programs or films, to attend cultural events and fairs of foreign communities in town and reflect on them, to visit ethnological museums and artistic exhibitions from other parts of the world, among other initiatives that could contribute to study first-hand the topic under investigation. Without the empirical component, project-based learning loses investigative character and is limited to a respectable but more modest activity of search and organization of documentary information.

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