

Original Paper

On Puppets and Literary Education in Diverse Schools: A Review from Spain

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Abstract

Intercultural education and the attention to diversity have become two of the most important aspects of education in recent decades. There are many areas of diversity that can be addressed in the classroom, always based on tolerance and the acceptance of difference. However, intercultural education is destined to go one step further: from an inalienable foundation of respect and tolerance for everyone, we aim to develop diversity as a positive value that must be understood and accepted. There is no doubt that we are faced with one of the great challenges of education.

Literature and theatre, on the other hand, is always a meeting point, first and foremost between the author and the recipient, often separated by temporal, spatial, linguistic, and cultural factors. In this sense, as Josep Ballester (2015) reminds us that the different sets of values and worldviews presented by the different human communities, as well as certain patterns of conduct and folk wisdom developed over generations, are stored and alive in language and literature. We will focus our educational approach precisely in this capacity of literature and drama -puppets specifically- to confront different human cultures and bring them to dialogue.

Keywords

diversity, theatre, puppets, literary education

1. Diversity and Education

Most of Spanish authors (Aguado, 2003; Bernabé, 2016; Coronel, 2017, Peñalva & Leiva, 2019) emphasise that the term intercultural education, which is widespread in the European context, refers to a reforming tendency in educational practice that is broad and varied in terms of goals. The aim is to respond to the diversity arising from the coexistence of different cultural groups within a society,

overcoming old and inefficient models. Intercultural education involves interaction, exchange, reciprocity, objective solidarity and the rupture of isolation between cultures, as well as recognition and acceptance of the values and ways of life of others.

Olga María Alegre (2004; 2010) stresses that the basis of inclusive education is to value the norms, culture and forms of coexistence of students belonging to ethnic or cultural minorities. Inclusive education would imply, as a basic element, joint learning regardless of the personal, social and cultural situation of learners, including individuals with disabilities. These are measures that concern the whole student body, and not only minorities, because interculturality concerns society as a whole and not only minority groups. As Margarita Bartolomé explains, awareness of the need for all learners to receive this education is yet to be general among the teaching community, which often confuses intercultural education with compensatory measures for immigrant students (especially linguistic ones):

What teachers perceived as urgent was the need for immigrant students to acquire an acceptable competence in the school language. The rest of cultural differences and, especially, the consideration that intercultural education affects all students and not only those we consider “different”, were relegated to a secondary level or were not clearly present in the conscience of teachers (Bartolomé, 2008, p. 14).

Likewise, as far as cultural diversity is concerned, this means incorporating linguistic, social, cultural, and other aspects or elements from minorities in teaching, as items to help them feel positively identified and esteemed, in addition to being useful for the personal enrichment of the rest of the students. From here we turn to the idea of interculturality, which should not be confused with the simple acculturation of the weaker party by the majority sector; in this regard, as Oller and Colomé (2010) emphasise, respecting diversity and working from diversity means transmitting the idea that all human beings are different and valuable in themselves.

It is obvious that a sense of belonging is essential in order to generate an active citizenry, and it is necessary, in order to progress in the construction of a world citizenship, to study in depth the feelings of identification with one's own community, and also to take into account the importance of the collective identity. Likewise, it is necessary to remember that every person needs to belong to a social and cultural community that provides a cultural referent; this referent is necessary to grant order and give meaning to the surrounding reality. A sense of identity comes from belonging to a culture and nation, therefore becoming a source of trust; however, if we take the defence of tradition, of one's identity and difference, to the extreme, we could end up with conflicts that are impossible to resolve. It is therefore necessary to maintain an always unstable balance between the particular and the universal, between tradition and change, etc.

The process of mundialization must involve plurality and diversity. The value of this cultural diversity is not presented as differentiation, but as an opportunity to access the cultures of groups other than one's own. Thus, the affirmation of an immutable identity acquired at birth is no longer a natural attitude. Rather, identity becomes a choice among a whole range of possibilities. On the other hand, learning about

other cultures allows us to appreciate the uniqueness and also the strengths and limitations of our own. Finally, no single life form can express the full range of human potentials by itself.

The great value of cultural diversity -which needs to be promoted in educational settings- is not just the difference, but the fact that it provides opportunities for communication between different forms of life. On the other hand, one must be aware that the possibility of conflict exists, as does the ability to resolve it peacefully and to learn in the process—this being one of the main objectives of intercultural education. Therefore, working towards ensuring that all people can accept their multiple feelings of belonging, in order to reconcile their need to have their own identity with being open to what is different, is one of the tasks of education: whoever can fully assume their diversity can be a link between the different cultures and communities around them, an indispensable and fundamental function in today's societies.

2. The School Context

It is important to highlight the need for dialogue between cultures as an instrument of knowledge and mutual enrichment beyond geographical borders or any other boundaries. This is so because we are talking about coexistence between cultures that share the same physical space, based on respect for the fundamental rights of human beings. Similarly, the contribution of different cultures to the creation of a common heritage, of a collective imaginary shared by all citizens, should also be highlighted.

We are therefore talking about the acquisition of intercultural competencies: the cognitive, affective and practical skills necessary to move effectively in an intercultural environment (Aguado, 2003, p. 141). This would be one of the main objectives of intercultural education, involving students, but also teachers, families and the rest of people around them. This intercultural competence is one of the elements that constitute citizenship competence—and, therefore, an unavoidable element in education if we are to achieve this competence.

Among intercultural competences, we should pay special attention to intercultural attitudes, knowledge about the other and interpretation and comparison skills, on the one hand, and to learning and interaction skills, on the other. Intercultural attitudes would refer to the capacity to accept cultural differences and develop empathy in an open-minded way. As for knowledge, it is a matter of being interested in the rest of social groups with which we coexist, in their concerns, customs, productions and how they see themselves and others in the new culture in which they are inserted. Finally, the capacity to interpret and compare has to do with what we know about the other culture, and with the ability to relate and compare that information to our own culture and identify cultural misunderstandings; learning and interaction skills relate to the acquisition of knowledge from other cultures and the ability to put it into practice in real-life communication situations.

The need to develop strategies and techniques to educate in intercultural attitudes and values has been the subject of reflections by specialists such as Garc á and Sales. These authors consider it very important for teachers to have adequate tools so that learning activities generate forms of interaction and communication among students that “result in an emotional approach based on empathic dialogue,

respectful listening and the free expression of different points of view, but at the same time an enriching approach to communication” (García & Sales, 2003, p. 47). This is above all a task of mutual rapprochement between different cultures, and the work of ethnic, cultural and linguistic stereotypes and prejudices in the classroom.

Curricular development enables a range of plans and applications for intercultural work in the specific context of schools and classrooms. The key element for this adaptation task is the Educational Centre Project (PEC), which can become a basic tool for the introduction of an intercultural perspective to modulate the curriculum. As Sales points out, this curriculum must be common, open and plural, seeking a balance between comprehensiveness and difference, between the representativeness of diversity in learning content and classroom strategies and the transformation of schools into spaces for the creation of shared projects and inclusive democratic participation.

Apart from the different content units of the subjects in the curriculum, other suitable materials could be texts that provide proposals for dealing with some specific cultures. Despite their specificity, these texts can produce good results if they are used in conjunction with other materials, as Lluch points out. Other possible resources could include materials related to the work on attitudes and values, and methodologies such as cooperative approaches, interaction, diversification, simulation, etc. (Lluch, 2003).

3. Creativity

Creativity is undoubtedly an essential element for an educational process to exist; what is more, without it, human beings would lack one of the elements that shape them as such. We understand creativity as a primary need (Guilford, 1994; Menchén, 1998, 2009, 2019; Elisondo, 2018). The absence of creativity generates demotivation, dissatisfaction and boredom. Decades ago, Menchén warned against the danger that the choice to include creativity in the curricula will remain a mere intention:

New schools, avant-garde pedagogical movements, active schools in every country (including our own), have responded to this message and now defend that creativity is a skill that needs to be developed. Consequently, at least in great principles, they include proposals and objectives to make creative talent flourish. But it would be a serious mistake to keep it merely as a declaration of intent, as general and generous as it is sterile, instead of putting it into practice with adequate measures, methods and materials (Menchén, 1998, p. 15).

Thus, the author demands education systems that stimulate and encourage curiosity from the start, and organise teaching in such a way that each lesson is rewarded. This logically implies a profound change in educational structures generally designed to provide the child with the “right way” to do things, rather than interested in the joy of touching, discovering, experiencing and creating. Pupils must reinvent their reality and teachers must offer them opportunities to do so.

From all these assumptions, Menchén (2009, 2019) proposes a learning model based on the stimulation of creativity: the IOE model (Imagination, Originality, Expression), suggested as an optimal model for any discipline of the artistic area, although it has been developed mainly in the subjects of plastic

expression and music (leaving inexplicably out activities such as literary expression, dramatization or puppet theatre). Most of the curricular developments that have taken place in recent years based on the IOE model continue neglecting this aspect, which clearly marginalises any literary or dramatic activity in spite of the fact that the model is clearly applicable to these fields, as stated in the theoretical model. We therefore consider that both classroom dramatizations and theatre should be developed within this model (directly linked to the artistic area and also to linguistic and literary work, from a perspective of production rather than merely reception). Taking a series of basic elements as a starting point, the IOE model proposes a taxonomy of objectives and creative capabilities in which the three dimensions involved in the teaching-learning process are combined: the areas of the curriculum, the strategies for teachers and the skills that need to be stimulated in the learner. This starting point articulates imagination, originality and expression with one another and with creativity.

This approach, which undoubtedly entails a new conception of the educational process and the actors who participate in it, involves especially teachers, who must be aware of the educational obstacles and habits that prevent children from being creative, and who must also review some of their own uncritical habits and attitudes; it is also necessary to overcome the fear of change that always prevents students and teachers from developing their own skills. For the practical development of the model for creative programming, we start from specific objectives and creative capacities, and relate them to the curricular framework and to various creative strategies that the teacher can implement in relation to the group-class. The interactions that may result have proven to be very successful in practice.

Although it is not the objective of this work to develop the theoretical bases of the model, it is important to remember that it is based on the abilities required from the student for each area of the curriculum, in order to stimulate creativity. These abilities can be projected in thoughts, feelings and actions, with the final objective that the student can think creatively, feel creatively and act creatively. As we will see in the following section, the literary work with puppets from an intercultural perspective emerges as an optimal intervention space from the point of view of creative education.

4. From Literature to Puppets

So far we have seen some basic aspects of intercultural education and its objectives, as well as the importance to develop an educational action that respects and enhances the freedom and creativity of learners; we have also pointed out some basic elements to take into account for a sort of classroom work that addresses the creativity and imagination of students. There is no doubt that literature can be very valuable to achieve these objectives, since it is a source of knowledge about other cultures and a tool for intercultural coexistence, and also plays an important role in the acquisition and development of basic competences, especially linguistic communication, cultural and artistic competence, and social and citizenship competences:

Ultimately, the goal is to train citizens in the critical sense of the term, i.e., people who can exercise their citizenship in a committed and responsible manner, and contribute decisively to improving coexistence and respect between cultures (Ballester, Ibarra, & Devís, 2010, p. 550).

The aim of literary education is for the student to acquire what is known as literary competence (Ballester, 2015), understood as a human capability that makes the production and reception of literature possible. This ability is not innate and is shaped by a number of factors, among which education is one of the most important. On the other hand, literature is also a source of knowledge and acts as a transmitter of the values, norms and systems of a community and its members: these functions, together with the transmission of culture, its liberating and gratifying function, and its commitment to reality, among many others, contribute to the integral formation of the person.

Years ago, Antonio Mendoza (1994; 2013) insisted on the potential of literature, especially comparative literature, to serve as a link between common and diverse cultural aspects. Artistic works in general -and literature in particular- are cultural products with diverse relationships and different kinds of connections. Neither civilisations nor art and literature evolve in isolation, but through relationships that foster their development in a complementary way, in parallel, by contrast, influence, assimilation, imitation, rejection, transformation, disintegration, etc. An approach to teaching literature in accordance with contemporary times and the multicultural context should take into account all these aspects and also the cultural connections in literature: references, historical and social data and metaliterary influences:

We are convinced that the educational objective of identifying and pointing out causal links and connections between cultural productions should be the primary one if we aim to ensure respect, acceptance and positive appreciation of other cultures, since in many cases the awareness about cultural feedback can smooth out the unevenness of appreciation (Mendoza, 1994, p. 13).

Therefore, Mendoza considers that this comparative approach to literature teaching has several advantages: thanks to appreciation for cultural interconnections, we can expect students to develop favourable and positive attitudes towards literary productions from other languages and cultures; furthermore, proposals based on comparative procedures can be applicable to all levels of education (the author suggests using productions related to oral, popular and folk literature in children's education), in order to achieve positive attitudes towards diversity.

Many specialists (Álvarez-Álvarez & Pascual-Díez, 2019; Devís Arbona, 2015, Ibarra & Ballester, 2010) state the intercultural potential of literature as well. According to them, we are dealing with a powerful instrument of knowledge about ourselves and the world, a tool for the discovery of otherness, for social cohesion and the creation of plural identities:

We are essentially faced with the discovery of the other, based on the knowledge of ourselves and the world through a dialogue in which literature plays an essential role from the very first stages of life.

(...)

The ultimate goal of literary education, shaping the reader, is the seed of active citizenship and of a sense of belonging through the acquisition of written code and literature, which become a privileged instrument in terms of socialisation and cohesion. Literary education from an intercultural perspective allows us to read the world and gradually transform ourselves into universal inhabitants who understand the artificiality of geographical or linguistic boundaries and the fact that we belong to multiple identities (Ibarra & Ballester, 2010, p. 12).

What we affirm about literature in general and its educational, aesthetic and recreational possibilities, we can highlight in particular in the case of theatre, and specifically puppet theatre, which, due to its nature, offers us the opportunity to reflect on the understanding of different cultures, diversity and our pluralistic societies.

Regarding theatre, Mendoza (2013) investigates in depth the fact that, in the case of performed theatre, the spectator who receives the literature does not read the text, but contemplates a show, which results in a series of particularities that are not present in the reception of a written text: involving a competent spectator requires a good deal of knowledge about the conventions of this genre. Moreover, the dramatic work needs a process -which starts with the initial text- before it arrives to the stage; several mediators intervene in this process -which, as we shall see, offers great educational possibilities- not only those who act or direct the show, but also many other indispensable roles related to the different professions in theatre.

Dramatic texts are subjected to a series of successive readings by the different agents involved, and the result merges back into the dramatic representation offered to the spectators (which is new, different and unrepeatable in each session). Starting there, the members of the audience develop their own interpretation, not only of the text but of all of the elements of the theatrical event (acting, direction, staging, costumes, etc.). As we have said, the educational possibilities of this process are innumerable, and continuing to relegate performed theatre to the background in literary (and intercultural) training would be a serious mistake.

Juan Cervera (1987) warned many years ago about the danger of forgetting any of the two central aspects of theatre, which should be present in all educational processes: initiation into literature (drama, in this case) and initiation into theatrical practice. Of course, we cannot forget that a dramatic text is written to be performed, and that work related to theatre as a performance offers possibilities for the acquisition of literary competence that are not negligible from the educator's point of view.

Within the world of theatre, the potential of Puppet theatre in education was previously highlighted by Argentine Specialist Mane Bernardo, starting precisely from the universality of this form of theatre. The specialist from Argentina based the educational and knowledge potential for children of different ages and contexts on this universal presence. This element, so deeply rooted in the human being, must necessarily help us to know people better:

Every primitive thing is imperishable; it comes from the deepest part of instinct and takes all its experiences to the outside world. Psychological data can be fully utilised when well developed

and applied at the right time and in the right way. It follows that in the different types of modern education, puppetry is a weapon that effectively helps children of all ages, appearances and conditions to further their knowledge (Bernardo, 1962, p. 13).

According to Bernardo, this deep-rooted belief is the basis of the educational potential of puppets, a potential that is barely recognised by educators today. On the other hand, an additional source of educational possibilities is the multidisciplinary treatment required for puppetry, in a school that constantly asks to consider reality as a whole and not fragmented in different isolated “study subjects” with no connection to each other: especially in the first educational levels, we are increasingly aware of the need for an inclusive, globalising and multidisciplinary treatment that transcends theory.

Many specialists defend puppetry as an educational tool, criticises some school uses of puppetry and warned about the need for teachers to receive adequate training to fulfil their educational functions. As Bernardo 60 years ago, they insist on patience and the free pedagogical spirit as essential ingredients in puppet education, together with the assessment of contributions derived from students’ creativity. They vehemently criticise any work that ignores the potential of puppetry as a tool and of children as the central element of the educational process: such ignorance, arising from a lack of technical training and from disregarding children as artistic recipients and producers, would be the cause of the unfortunate situation of puppetry in school, and denouncing the lack of teacher training will be a constant over time in the work of different specialists in the field (Cebrian Velasco, 2016; Oltra Albiach, 2011; Delpeux, 2017; Zeinali, 2017).

From the ideas we have put forward so far, we can establish that puppet theatre as a vehicle of literary communication offers a world representation that corresponds to the values of the society that produced it, and a source of knowledge about this society for others; it is, in short, an excellent starting point for working on otherness, diversity and the positive appreciation of different people and their contributions. A great start for a large number of educational proposals based on the various traditions of puppet theatre around the world and covering the entire process of creation: research, documentation, organisation, distribution of roles, rehearsals, performances, etc., adaptable to all levels of education and to different school realities (Hulburd, 2020; Kröger & Nupponen, 2019; Todolí, 2002).

The multiple techniques and approaches to puppetry have come into contact over the centuries, and have shaped a complex network, a web of mutual influences that enriched -and continues to enrich- today’s scenario everywhere. Puppets are an unbeatable instrument for educating in interculturality because of this history, based on diverse traditions that influence each other and create new formats (Oltra Albiach, 2014; Rumbau, 2020; Santa Cruz, 2020). In a way, we could say that puppets symbolise and summarise the dynamics of interaction between different cultures and civilisations in a perfect way. They are an interweaving of relationships that has always been present throughout human history, perhaps accentuated during the twentieth century and at the beginnings of the twenty-first century by a series of political, economic and cultural circumstances. This symbolism is very important, as Henry Jurkowski points out when he talks about the exchange of referents and mutual enrichment through puppets between

different cultures. The Polish author insists on the possibilities and opportunities presented by the mutual knowledge and interaction between puppeteers from all over the world:

(...) Because the exchange of spiritual values, the relationship with other mythologies, religions and philosophies, occurs today also within the framework of puppet theatre. It is to be expected, therefore, that Asian, African and Latin American puppeteers will not only be sensitive to European rationalism and pragmatism, but will also perceive the European culture's interest in the common destiny of humanity, and vice versa: that Westerners, always sensitive to the formal differences of other cultures, will not be content with recovering the riches of ornamentation, but will also recognise the universal ideas and representations on these realities. (Jurkowski, 1993, p. 41).

Puppet theatre offers us the possibility of developing different classroom activities which we can use to work with very different contents, competencies and attitudes, researching into national puppetry traditions, folklore and oral literature, types and methods of construction and manipulation, script writing, staging, theatrical direction, group dynamics, organisation, etc., always taking into account the age of the students, as well as other circumstances. On the other hand, by focusing on aspects of diversity and the potential that it offers for mutual enrichment, we can develop positive attitudes and progress in the acquisition of intercultural competence.

The starting point is the introduction of puppetry as an element that enriches dramatization and theatre, and also makes the latter accessible to students who, because of their age or other circumstances, might find the world of acting difficult to access. The other important aspect is developing creativity, for which we must promote productive activities and work in many cases from dramatic improvisation, in order to shape the final play without leaving any activity from the creative process aside, always from the perspective of formative education and evaluation of the process, rather than the final product.

When it comes to establishing a starting point for the work on cultural diversity through puppetry, we can carry out research on the different types of puppets, on systems of manipulation, on the characters belonging to the different national traditions, on the names and characteristics of the protagonists in each case, etc. (Oltra Albiach, 2011), or start from the texts (usually based on oral tradition) represented in the various cultures, or even adapt traditional stories from around the world to the different systems of puppet manipulation and encourage creativity through the mixing, synthesis and development of new styles, techniques and stories, to be performed either in front of an audience or as a drama in which the participants are simultaneously performers and spectators.

Thus, as we have seen, the two forces operating in the field of multiculturalism are particularly present in the world of puppetry: the tendency to mix, on the one hand, and the effort to preserve their own cultural identities, on the other. The success or failure of the attempts to develop a genuine education for interculturality depends largely on how we solve this apparent paradox. In any case, puppet theatre, with its millenary tradition of intercultural exchange and communication, still has a lot to say. This has been understood by a good number of educators who have considered puppetry a useful educational tool for

their schools, which increasingly embrace children from diverse backgrounds, ideologies, religions and family configurations. Puppets, with their enormous suggestive capacity and their potential as a metaphor for the human being, have great didactic potential in a context of permanent exchange such as today's, in which an educational effort must be made so that students learn to value difference -in every possible sense- as a source of humanisation and mutual enrichment.

5. Conclusions

We have tried to take a look at the educational implications of interculturality and the pedagogical possibilities of puppet theatre. Thanks to the contributions of various authors to intercultural education and the treatment of diversity in the classroom, we have come to some basic conclusions on how such an educational process should develop. Secondly, we have approached the concept of creativity and its importance in school; finally we have presented puppet theatre and literature as possibilities for intercultural and diverse work in the classroom from a flexible, open and creative approach: the intercommunication of techniques and theatrical forms throughout history was the basis for a reflection on intercultural education, on diversity and the way it is addressed in schools, conceived not as a space for homogenisation but as an area of freedom, and on the use and potential of puppets in a new educational approach to equality based on respecting differences and valuing everything new, stimulating and enriching about it.

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