

Dialogic Learning as a Strategy for Reflection and Development of Communication in Initial Teacher Training

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The dialogical literary gatherings are a methodological strategy that can enrich teacher training as they promote deep reading, thinking and communication among students. This paper aims to explore the perceptions the use of the dialogical literary gatherings as a strategy that favors communication and reflection in Higher Education students. The results show high benefits about the dialogical literary gatherings after having experienced its development in the university context, that are useful to develop communicative skills in educational contexts as teachers and education professionals and, specially, to teacher education in Early Childhood Education. After completing this experience, it is possible to conclude that the students' communicative competence has improved, and other abilities linked to the thinking process, such as reflection and metacognition, have been fostered, improving the practical skills of the teacher in training and, in addition, allowing him/her to overcome the training scenario in which he/she finds him/herself to prepare his/her work as a communicator and researcher- reflexive teacher of his/her educational practice.

Keywords: dialogical literary gatherings, communication skills, reflection, teacher training, learning communities

INTRODUCTION

The development of thinking in Higher Education students is key to fostering the skills of reflection, analysis, synthesis, decision making and practical problem solving necessary to face the daily challenges of their profession. In this sense, teachers in training need a practical preparation that enables them and allows them to develop, not only to learn thinking and reflecting as teachers, but also, and especially, to communicate by stimulating the cognitive processes of their students (Jaramillo-Baquerizo, Valcke & Vanderline, 2019; Khan et al., 2017; Orozco, Sosa & Martínez, 2018), in order to achieve the stage objectives proposed in the curriculum framework, as well as the acquisition of the fundamental key competencies.

In addition, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) proposes, among other relevant aspects, the training of teachers committed to the development of adequate communicative competence: an ability without which it is not possible to function in effective and efficient educational contexts, nor to provide opportunities for students to learn to learn in an environment of safety and positive experiences, training them for permanent or lifelong learning (González & Triviño, 2018; Orozco, Sosa & Martínez, 2018).

Teacher communication is key to quality training because it generates thought and promotes reflection, both in the teacher and in the students. However, it is often relegated to the background in the university training of teachers because it is considered a transversal skill, which, being basic in their professional activity, tends not to be exercised in a practical way in the classroom (Khan et al., 2017; Lozano et al., 2019).

In order to mitigate this problem and ensure that the didactic communication established in the classroom by the teacher generates thought and awakens curiosity, emotion and discovery, higher education teachers must design learning experiences in which teachers in training have the opportunity to use communication in order to reflect on their educational work (Fernández et al., 2021), exchange ideas and address problems related to their profession.

One of the successful actions that promote the application of their didactic-communicative abilities and skills and the process of reflection and elaboration of practical knowledge are the dialogical literary gatherings since they are based on the exchange of ideas and interpretations around a topic of group interest (Fernández et al., 2021; Lozano et al., 2019; Paksuniemi, 2021; Pérez et al., 2019). This communication exchange generates thought, and shared thought not only promotes the ability to reason and reflect in students, but also fosters the didactic-communicative skills that all teachers should have as a resource to develop their work in educational contexts.

In addition, communicative skills in teachers are essential for the development of their educational work in schools where they not only have to use dialogue to expose content, but also to promote students' thinking and motivation so that they learn to feel, to think, to be, to live in society and to improve it (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Fernández et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2017).

The teacher is a key element in the educational system, responsible for improving learning conditions and creating an environment for constructing, deconstructing and co-constructing knowledge in the classroom. Through dialogue and shared reflection, in other words, based on the fundamental principles of the communication pedagogy and learning communities based on dialogic learning and the development of dialogical literary gatherings, we train the Early Childhood and Elementary Education teacher to achieve an education focused on the process and transformation of knowledge based on dialogue and reflection (Fernández et al., 2021; Paksuniemi, 2021), inviting them to carry out this experience in the classrooms where they will exercise their professional activity, enriching their resources as a communicator teacher and promoter of thought in the students, although always adapted to the needs and stage of the students.

Higher Education teachers must train teachers prepared for the future, and the dialogical literacy gatherings are a strategy that can bring students in teacher training closer to the school reality and to their future professional work (Lozano et al., 2019; Pérez et al., 2019), achieving a professional training of quality and excellence.

For this reason, the purpose of this study is to analyze the conception that teachers in training have about dialogical literary gatherings as a successful performance of learning communities; to identify professional skills acquired in Higher Education students after the practical development in the classroom; to determine difficulties found by students when developed as a practice in the Higher Education classroom; to know the benefits as a professional training strategy for teachers; to delimit other didactic proposals that can be useful to develop communicative and thinking skills in educational contexts as teachers and educational professionals.

METHOD

This research has been carried out following a qualitative research methodology since our purpose is to search for meanings and analyze experiences related to dialogical literary gatherings as a communicative

resource that generates thought and reflection in teachers (Flick, 2004; Kelchtermans, 2014). Specifically, a biographical-narrative study is conducted whose goal is to understand how university professors perceive didactic communication as a key element in the development of university learning (Huber et al., 2013). The biographical-narrative approach is chosen because it provides an adequate understanding of the study phenomenon and is a specific strategy of qualitative methodology in education (Bolívar & Domingo, 2019).

Description of the Context and Participants

This study was conducted during the 2021-2022 academic year, with the participation of 32 students of the Early Childhood Education Degree at the University of Alicante. Out of the total, 75% were women (n=24), and 25% were men (n=08). In addition, the sample is purposive, not probabilistic.

Tools

For this study, we used an interview with open and preset questions where we analyzed, under the methodological line of qualitative research, the conception that teachers in training have about the dialogical literary gatherings after having experienced its development in the university context, the benefits and difficulties of using it in the Higher Education classroom and in Early Childhood Education and other didactic proposals that can be useful to develop communicative skills in educational contexts as teachers and education professionals.

Procedure

In order to obtain the sample of participants, we communicated with teachers in training of the Early Childhood Education Degree who are studying at the School of Education of the University of Alicante.

Likewise, considering the purpose of our study and the methodology employed, the semi-structured interview is used as a technique for data collection. This includes open and preset questions, in relation to the research objectives proposed for the work. Having informed the participants about the purpose of the study, we ensured their voluntary participation and the data anonymity, and then collected the interviews through questionnaires designed with Google Forms, with the consent of the teachers in training who took part in the study. Once the data were collected, we proceeded to the design of the coding system through the deductive method, which allowed us to analyze the narrative sequences using the AQUAD 7 software (Huber & Gürtler, 2012). Thus, each of the codes and subcodes obtained will be described in the results section.

RESULTS

The data have been compiled in 5 thematic areas organized according to our research objectives. They are also presented in tables showing the codes and subcodes found after the analysis of the 430 narrative sequences of the participants. In addition, it was necessary to evaluate the percentage of Absolute Frequency (%FA) for the analysis and detailed description of the results.

Conception of Dialogical Literary Gatherings as a Training Strategy for Teachers

Table 1 shows the codes referring to Topic 1 through which the conception of dialogical literary gatherings as a training strategy for teachers is analyzed.

TABLE 1
CONCEPTION OF DIALOGICAL LITERARY GATHERINGS AS A TRAINING
STRATEGY FOR TEACHERS

| <i>Codes</i> | <i>AF</i> | <i>%AF</i> |
|--|-----------|------------|
| 1.1. Didactic-pedagogical dialogue | 38 | 32.76% |
| 1.2. Critical reflection | 22 | 18.97% |
| 1.3. Shared discourse | 21 | 18.10% |
| 1.4. Significant learning | 19 | 16.38% |
| 1.5. Development of communication skills | 16 | 13.79% |

As can be seen, the teachers point out that the dialogical literary gatherings are a resource through which it is possible to exchange ideas about their profession based on a reading and to deepen aspects of interest based on a dialogue in which essential knowledge about their teaching work related to didactics and pedagogy is combined (1.1. Didactic-pedagogical dialogue):

It is a dialogue in which we share knowledge as teachers. (Participant 006)

It goes deeper by talking about reading and didactics. (Participant 026)

Code 1.2 is noteworthy. Critical reflection, which indicates that the participants state that one of the functions of holding dialogical literary gatherings in higher education classrooms is to promote critical reflection on a specific issue through which they learn to think in a real context and close to reality in the classroom:

We have to reflect critically, and that makes us think about school reality. (Participant 009)

We propose to think about something important and we reason critically. (Participant 022)

Furthermore, it is established that it is a successful performance that favors the elaboration of a shared oral discourse with which knowledge is constructed, becoming an enriching experience at a communicative level (1.3. Shared discourse):

As a successful performance, it allows us to make a speech among all of us. (Participant 003)

It is not a matter of talking and that's it, a discourse is created in which we are all included.
(Participant 028)

With code 1.4. Significant learning is found that, by promoting dialogical literary gatherings based on readings about their profession, the interest and functionality of what is learned in the classroom is awakened, since it is based on the practical reality that they must face in their future teaching activity, on which they must reflect and share ideas:

It is very useful because as a teacher you think about how to act in the classroom and you share it in a reading. (Participant 014)

What you read and discuss with your peers helps you see that what you learn is useful to you. (Participant 020)

Regarding code 1.5. Development of communicative skills, which gathers the findings through which it is shown that the participants assure that the development of dialogical literary gatherings in the classroom favors the development of their communicative skills:

You lose your fear of speaking, and you become more skilled at expressing your ideas. (Participant 005)

Literary gatherings are good because you can practice your oral expression. (Participant 017)

Professional Skills Acquired During the Development of Dialogical Literary Gatherings in the Higher Education Classroom

Topic 2 is shown in Table 2 and addresses the professional skills acquired during the development of the dialogical literary gatherings in the Higher Education classroom. These are distributed according to code 2.1. Cognitive skills, through which the cognitive processes that are promoted are detailed, and code 2.2. Communicative skills, which contemplates the communicative skills fostered in the teacher-in-training during the classroom dialogical literary gatherings.

TABLE 2
PROFESSIONAL SKILLS ACQUIRED DURING THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIALOGICAL LITERARY GATHERINGS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOM

| <i>Codes</i> | <i>AF</i> | <i>%AF</i> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| 2.1. Cognitive skills | 68 | 56.66% |
| 2.1.1. Critical thinking | 31 | 25.83% |
| 2.1.2. Creative thinking | 22 | 18.33% |
| 2.1.3. Metacognition | 15 | 12.50% |
| 2.2. Communicative skills | 52 | 43.34% |
| 2.2.1. Discourse logic | 36 | 30.00% |
| 2.2.2. Professional argumentation | 16 | 13.34% |

With the first subcode, it is shown that the development of the dialogical literary gatherings promotes critical thinking in the teachers in training, since in order to present the ideas extracted from the readings related to their professional performance, they must first have analyzed the information they provide and assessed their relevance in their professional field (2.1.1. Critical thinking):

We understand the reading, analyze it and later think about how to exchange this information. (Participant 003)

After reading, we go deeper into the ideas and place them in a real context of our profession to make sense of them (Participant 025).

Subcode 2.1.2. *Creative thinking* is also relevant and highlights that, by sharing ideas from the readings during the dialogical literary gatherings focused on their professional development, the teachers in training generate new ideas by interrelating concepts they have already acquired and the new ones they learn, being able to think about solving situations related to their professional field in different ways:

It helps you think about new ways to act in the classroom in the future by sharing our thinking. (Participant 014)

You can create new ideas from the ones you already have and relate new knowledge. (Participant 026)

It is significant, although less frequently, that the teachers mention, in a high number of narratives, that, with the development of the dialogical literary gatherings, the students think about how to improve their own reading comprehension and argumentation strategies, thus improving, in this way, their own processes related to learning or metacognition (2.1.3. *Metacognition*):

In order to deepen my reading I have to think about how to read well and improve this practice to make a good argument later on. (Participant 009)

It is necessary to have good reading resources and to improve them. (Participant 011)

For the findings related to the second code, it is recurrently observed that the realization of dialogical literary gatherings for teachers in training promotes their ability to logically order their oral discourse, thus improving their verbal expression and clarity in the exposition of ideas (2.2.1. *Discourse logic*):

When making the literary gathering, you have to think about how to organize what you are going to say so that it is clear. (Participant 011)

Following an order when speaking is important for them to understand well what you are saying, and you learn it (Participant 030).

Although less representative, it is stated that, in addition, we learn to argue using specific vocabulary related to the profession and to defend ideas related to classroom practices (2.2.2. *Professional argumentation*):

You can defend your ideas by using the vocabulary of your profession. (Participant 023)

You are most comfortable arguing your case for school improvement. (Participant 031)

Difficulties Perceived by Teachers in Training When Developing Dialogical Literary Gatherings in the Classroom

Table 3 shows the results for Topic 3 on the difficulties perceived by teachers in training when developing dialogical literary gatherings in the classroom.

TABLE 3
DIFFICULTIES PERCEIVED BY TEACHERS IN TRAINING WHEN DEVELOPING
DIALOGICAL LITERARY GATHERINGS IN THE CLASSROOM

| <i>Codes</i> | <i>AF</i> | <i>%AF</i> |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 3.1. Oral defense | 42 | 44.68 |
| 3.2. Stage fright | 27 | 28.72 |
| 3.3. Expression of opinion | 25 | 26.60 |

With code 3.1. Oral defense, the teachers notoriously state that, when developing the dialogical literary gatherings in the classroom, they have encountered difficulties in selecting the most relevant ideas that help them to defend them orally following the same common thread among all the classmates:

It was difficult for me to find the central topic in each presentation of ideas to talk about the same thing with the rest. (Participant 008)

Make a defense of the ideas you consider important. (Participant 010)

It is also noted that the fear related to public speaking was described as slowing down, on several occasions, their intervention in the classroom, making it brief and concise and avoiding prolonged participation (3.2. Stage fright):

I was afraid of having to talk a lot in front of everyone. (Participant 005)

The number of people and not knowing how to control the oral presentation made me self-conscious. (Participant 023)

Although there are fewer findings, it is established that, likewise, participants did not express their opinion with confidence for fear of error or making a mistake (3.3. Expression of opinion):

I was very neutral when it came to saying things in case I was wrong. (Participant 008)

My opinion was not very important I think, that's why I preferred to talk directly about the readings. (Participant 026)

Benefits of the Development of the Use of Dialogical Literary Gatherings as a Practice for Teachers in Training

Table 4 shows the codes related to Topic 4, which identifies the benefits of the development of the use of dialogical literary gatherings as a practice for teachers in training.

TABLE 4
BENEFITS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE USE OF DIALOGICAL LITERARY
GATHERINGS AS A PRACTICE FOR TEACHERS IN TRAINING

| <i>Codes</i> | <i>AF</i> | <i>%FAF</i> |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| 4.1. Reading comprehension strategies | 25 | 43.10% |
| 4.2. Oral presentation | 15 | 25.86% |
| 4.3. Practical teaching thinking | 10 | 17.24% |
| 4.4. Didactic-pedagogical vocabulary | 8 | 13.80% |

In the narratives collected for code 4.1. Reading comprehension strategies, teachers indicate that, when doing in-depth reading on topics related to their profession, they have to activate mechanisms that favor reading comprehension, improving this capacity, such as inferences, identification of key ideas and concepts.

Given that you have to read in order to understand and argue, you interpret much more and understand better. (Participant 007)

The readings have helped us to identify important ideas. (Participant 028)

It is also important to note that the teachers in training state that they have improved their communicative skills, specifically those related to oral presentation, through which they have had to express their opinions and ideas about the readings provided for the dialogical literary gathering related to aspects of their professional work (4.2. Oral presentation):

The ideas come together and the concept is understood. (Participant 007)

Everyone participates and makes connections between concepts. (Participant 024)

Although there are fewer findings for code 4.3. Practical teaching thinking, it is considered that the dialogical literary gatherings have promoted, to a great extent, practical teaching thinking since they have allowed teachers in training to relate the theory extracted from the readings with practical examples of the school reality in order to be able to argue and express their opinion on the matter:

You unintentionally repeat what you have learned, and you learn. (Participant 002)

Repeating each one with your words, you make the concept understandable. (Participant 017)

In a less representative but also valuable way, it is expressed that teachers in training have acquired specific vocabulary related to their profession, linked to the field of didactics and pedagogy, thus enriching their professional knowledge (4.4. Didactic-pedagogical vocabulary):

After the literay gathering, we handled new concepts and vocabulary about our field, education. (Participant 015)

We express ourselves more appropriately, with more vocabulary. (Participant 029)

Other Proposals That Promote Reflection and the Development of Didactic Communication in Student Teachers

Topic 5 addresses other proposals that promote reflection and the development of didactic communication in student teachers, which is shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5
OTHER PROPOSALS THAT PROMOTE REFLECTION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIDACTIC COMMUNICATION IN STUDENT TEACHERS

| <i>Topic 5. Inferential codes</i> | <i>AF</i> | <i>%AF</i> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 5.1. <i>Case studies</i> | 16 | 38.10% |
| 5.2. <i>Projects</i> | 15 | 35.71% |
| 5.3. <i>Research</i> | 7 | 16.67% |
| 5.4. <i>Debates</i> | 4 | 09.52% |

According to the participants, the case studies through which a situation related to real educational practice is presented promote reflection and communication among peers, given that they have to comment and share as a group, as happens in a teaching team, how to address the given case (5.1. Case studies):

A case study always makes you think more than the theory. (Participant 011)

You learn a lot when you have a situation to think through and solve (Participant 031).

Although to a lesser extent, it is stated that the realization of professional projects favors the ability to think and to know how to communicate and respond to the problems posed by the project (5.2. Projects):

A project also makes you think because there is a problem to think about. (Participant 015)

The projects pose challenges. (Participant 024)

It is understood that research work fosters their cognitive skills since they must delve into a topic, think about it and make decisions to learn more about it (5.3. Research):

The fact that they have us do research already makes us put thought to work. (Participant 021)

Research on issues related to our career. (Participant 026)

Finally, in some results, reference is made to debates as another way of promoting reflection and communication among teachers in training (5.4. Debates):

There is interaction and thought when we debate. (Participant 002)

A debate is always useful. (Participant 010)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that dialogical literary gatherings based on readings related to teaching practice and the didactic-pedagogical field are a key resource for developing reflection and communicative competence in teachers in training. Likewise, it has been possible to achieve the delimitation of the research objectives proposed for the same, classifying the results in five topics that emerge after collecting the data through interviews and having analyzed the opinions of the student teachers in Early Childhood Education.

According to the findings related to the first topic of this research, it was found that the dialogical literary gatherings are a significant resource for aspiring teachers, since they promote a didactic-pedagogical dialogue based on a deep reading related to their professional work that encourages significant learning, allowing them to closely analyze relevant and useful issues for their teaching practice, as well as to improve the development of their communicative skills in a shared teaching discourse. In other words, the teacher in training learns to go deeper into relevant topics through didactic-pedagogical readings, promoting his/her reflective and communicative teaching skills (Jaramillo-Baquerizo, Valcke & Vanderline, 2019; Orozco, Sosa & Martínez, 2018).

Regarding the second topic, it has been discovered that the participants in this research consider that the dialogical literary gatherings are a positive learning experience in that they favor the development of cognitive skills such as critical thinking, reflective thinking and processes related to metacognition, as well as communicative skills necessary for structuring the teaching discourse such as the logic of discourse and professional argumentation. As established in the learning communities, the dialogical interactions established in the literary gatherings are an element that favors thinking given that knowledge is constructed from a social and equitable level (Lozano, 2021; Valcke & Vanderline, 2019), which enriches the training of the teacher-in-training, who is nourished by each of the interventions of the participants in the literary gathering.

In addition, according to the results of topic three, it is evident that, in spite of being a formative practice for teachers in training, dialogical literary gatherings can generate difficulties in their realization due to the fact that, at times, participants experience difficulties in identifying which ideas are more convenient in the oral defense of their perceptions about the readings; They may experience sensations associated with stage fright due to having to publicly face the argumentation of ideas about which they must demonstrate professional validity through specific lexicon on their disciplinary field; and it is possible to detect insecurity in the personal expression of their opinion on the reality being dealt with if they do not question whether what they are going to say is valid and appropriate at the moment in which it is raised. In other words, we work on the basic communication skills that affect all teachers in training, and that are weakly promoted in university training situations (Ajajawi & Boud, 2017; Khan et al., 2017), overcoming this barrier through practice.

As can be seen in the findings on the fourth topic of our research, although these difficulties are experienced, the benefits of the literary gatherings compensate for their teacher training.

On the one hand, the readings that are carefully prepared prior to the shared dialogue in the classroom improve their reading comprehension strategies by having to analyze, in a concrete way, which ideas are more significant and enriching in order to share and co-construct knowledge about their profession. At the same time, they exercise their oral presentation capacity and improve their dialogical skills given that, verbally, a communicative interaction is established around a topic of interest that requires adequacy, coherence and cohesion to be understandable and valid (González & Triviño, 2018; Orozco, Sosa & Martínez, 2018).

It also builds teachers' practical thinking, so necessary to be able to reflect on their own classroom practice (Lozano et al., 2019; Pérez et al., 2019; Orozco, Sosa & Martínez, 2018), given that they share thoughts and ideas that invite them to reflect on their professional performance in the classroom. Finally, it is an excellent experience to train students to become teachers since, from the shared discourse and the in-depth readings carried out to develop the discussions, they acquire didactic-pedagogical vocabulary that helps them to be able to argue, properly and professionally, their opinions on how to improve the teaching/learning processes in the classrooms.

With the fifth topic, there are other proposals that favor reflection and communication in students who are preparing to become active teachers and committed to their work, such as projects, debates, research and case studies through which they have the opportunity to discover, reflect, analyze and think about educational situations related to their professional field that represent a challenge to be solved according to their training, acquiring a practical knowledge that helps them determine how they should act according to their theoretical knowledge (Jaramillo-Baquerizo, Valcke & Vanderline, 2019; Orozco, Sosa & Martínez, 2018). In other words, a relationship is established between the theoretical content of their profession and professional practice.

In short, dialogical literary gatherings as a strategy to promote reflection and communication in teachers in training are a fundamental resource in teacher training (Fernandez et al., 2021; Lozano et al., 2019; Paksuniemi, 2021; Perez et al, 2019;), since it has been proven that, after its development in the Higher Education classroom, the communicative competence of students has improved, and other skills linked to the thinking process, such as reflection and metacognition, and those linked to shared teacher dialogue, have been fostered.

Furthermore, it has been shown that this is a strategy that can be extrapolated to the educational context of the Early Childhood Education stage in which they will teach in the future, so that they would also enrich the communicative skills of the students with whom they would develop their teaching activity, as well as the thinking processes, always based on the characteristics that define them for their age range. Therefore, dialogical literary gatherings as a methodological strategy in Higher Education improve the practical competencies of the teacher in training and, in addition, allow him/her to transcend the training scenario in which he/she finds him/herself to prepare his/her work as a teacher, communicator and researcher-reflexive of his/her educational practice, favoring his/her training and, therefore, the quality and excellence of the training of teachers in teacher training.

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