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**“To learn with” as an alternative voice
for children’s education.**

**Introduction to a European Project: Teaching for Holistic,
Relational and Inclusive Early Childhood Education
(THRIECE)**

Summary

The issue of the text focuses on the category of learning. The analysis of the term “learning” in the behaviouristic, humanistic and the interpretive aspects serves as a point of departure. The latter approach is exploited for further analyses in order to select the category “to learn with...”. This category is described in terms of the European Project THRIECE – Teaching for Holistic, Relational and Inclusive Early Childhood Education and presents its potential for children’s education in cognitive, emotional and social aspects.

Key words: learning as a process, the category “to learn with”, European Project THRIECE.

The category “to learn with...” can be interpreted in various ways depending on the adopted paradigmatic perspective. Its understanding in the objectivistic paradigm will differ from that of a constructivist-interpretive or transformative one (Klus-Stańska 2018). Each of them comprises a different set of concepts, theories and methodological assumptions influencing the way reality, including education, is described, explained, perceived or interpreted (Kuhn 2009). This means that “representatives of various paradigms not just evaluate differently what they see, not just prefer a different style of education, but looking at the same events in the classroom they can see something very different” (Klus-Stańska 2018). However, in recent years we have seen a move “towards recognition that we all do our work within a crisis of authority and legitimisation, proliferation and fragmentation of centers, and blurred genres” (Lather 2006: 47).

This text is an attempt at interpreting the category “to learn with...” by drawing our conceptualisation from the international Erasmus+ funded THRIECE (Teaching for Holistic, Relational and Inclusive Early Childhood Education) project¹. Within THRIECE, a constructivist-interpretative paradigm perspective underpins our work, but also the critical or transformative paradigms are important as they all problematise traditional ways of looking at educational processes and deconstruct the power relations involved. We argue that interpretivist and critical / transformative paradigms can exist in complementarity, finding common ground between discourses that were traditionally polarised, triangulating ideas from different aspects and in doing so creating a completely new perspective. Having examined processes of ‘good’ education through lenses provided by theorists as diverse as Bronfenbrenner, Bourdieu, Bernstein, Bowlby, Biesta, Bakhtin and many more, from psychological, sociological, pedagogical and philosophical perspectives, the common elements we have identified as important for quality in early education within a wide range of disciplines and paradigmatic frameworks are that it should be ‘holistic’, ‘inclusive’ and ‘relational’.

In Lather’s (2006) terms, THRIECE says “yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceeds versus tidy categories” (p. 48). Real-life research often spans traditional borders of paradigms and disciplines, and in keeping with Lather (2006: 36), we attempt to “trouble tidy binaries”, and recognise “the slides of inside and outside that so characterise the contemporary hybridity of positionalities and consequent knowledge forms”, because “linear, structural models reduce and tame the wild profusion of existing things” (Foucault 1970: xv). Dualistic

¹ See www.thriECE.eu / @ThriECEProject

categories are represented as pure breaks rather than as unstable oppositions that shift and collapse both within and between categories" (Lather 2006: 36). Thus, it may be that the perspective put forward by THRIECE represents the "shaky middle" between paradigms advocated by Spivak (1999: 29) within the "constellation of discourses" that Lather (2006: 42) suggests for educational research.

We will be accompanied by this very interesting thought in our further deliberations having accepted as a benchmark not only different disciplinary perspectives on education (psychology, sociology, pedagogy, philosophy) but also three distinct social-cultural contexts (Irish, Portuguese and Polish). Firstly, concepts of learning and quality education are analysed. Then, the assumptions of holistic, relational and inclusive education are explained in order to describe the category "to learn with..." taking into account these perspectives. It will be a good opportunity to have a multidimensional look at the matters discussed and analysed with a view to an in-depth insight and search for new perspectives in children's education.

Images of learning and 'quality' in education

There are various images, models and theories concerning the process of learning in the specialist literature. As F.W. Kron puts it,

on the one hand the process of learning can be perceived in behaviourist, positivist and materialistic ways as a process triggered out and steered by external circumstances. This outlook assumes a mechanistic concept of a human existence in the world, in which a person is just a cog in a big social and cultural machine. On the other hand, there is a humanistic, pneumatic and hermeneutic stand according to which learning is perceived as an interpersonal process of constructing and organising, and which being typical of humans, can be also expressed interpersonally, socially and culturally. A human being is recognised here as a constructor of the reality, a searcher of meanings of things – in the past, present and future – and at the same time he or she discloses their world and their attitude to it (Kron 2012: 62).

The latter outlook on the process of learning will be our benchmark for the analyses in this text and for the exploration of various perspectives of the learning process, which are included in the three versions of education: holistic, relational and inclusive. Their somehow dissimilar characteristics allow for widening the scope of new solutions in children's education since children are treated as active learning subjects, people with enormous cognitive potential and willingness to act. Not only do children then become constructors of their

own knowledge but also constructors of the reality in which they live. While absorbing new knowledge they learn more about themselves, others and the surrounding world. Holism, inclusion and relationality suggest plenty of interesting tools and methods of stimulating and boosting these activities as well as making them more attractive for children and in line with the needs and expectations of our 21st century world. They equally provide an opportunity for more nuanced understanding of what constitutes 'quality' in early education.

A number of recent European initiatives have attempted to define 'quality' in education, including the CoRe Report (Urban et al. 2011) and the European Commission's (2014) Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, identifying three key concepts:

1. Structural quality: rules for accreditation of settings, staff requirements, health and safety, etc;
2. Process quality: interactions and relationships within settings, including the role of play, relationships with families, between staff and children, and among children; and
3. Outcomes: measures of children's development, often with a focus on 'school readiness'.

While each of these may be equally important (depending on the paradigmatic perspective from which they are viewed), they are not equally measurable. Structural quality is easily measured through quantitative indicators, and many standardised tools exist to measure developmental outcomes. Traditional behaviourist, positivist, materialistic understandings of learning and quality education are therefore more likely to focus on these elements in educational settings. The quality of interactions and relationships is not so easily measured however, and so process quality is sometimes overlooked. For example, in the Irish context, quality systems in early education may be depending on 'crude indicators', emphasising structural factors rather than asking more difficult questions on process (O'Toole 2016). We argue that this is unfortunate and potentially damaging since relationships and interactions may be more influential for children than the contexts in which they take place (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006).

In contextualising our work, we note a discernible shift towards neoliberal approaches in European education (Sahlberg 2014), underpinned by three key pillars:

1. Narrowing of curriculum to prioritise so-called 'valuable' knowledge, generally literacy, numeracy and science, and devalue areas not seen to have utility in the global economy, such as the arts;

2. Standardisation of achievement through testing and international rankings; and
3. Focus on ‘accountability’ and quantitative measurement of ‘quality’.

These values are implicit in Ireland’s National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011). In Poland, the Balcerowicz plan and its transformation of the country after 1989 brought neoliberalism not just into politics, but also education (Kola & Kola 2015). The commodification of education has also been noted in Portugal (Lopes 2013). It may be argued that these approaches do not support quality education, and may lead to exclusion and poor educational attainment (Ó Breacháin & O’Toole 2013).

Developing a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to educational quality across Europe is unlikely to be successful, since structures vary widely cross-nationally and sub-nationally (Bruckauf & Hayes 2017). The prevailing neoliberalism within education in some European countries at present encourages a narrow focus on bringing settings (structure) and children (outcomes) to a predetermined fixed point, irrespective of experience, background or culture. Those who get to this point are applauded, while those who do not are, through a functionalist lens, seen to have failed (Ó Breacháin & O’Toole 2013). For example, the concept of ‘school readiness’ in early education is problematic because it moves the focus from learning through play – vital in developing self-regulation and attentiveness – to a more school-like pedagogy emphasising the development of ‘basic skills’ and literacy outcomes (Bruckauf & Hayes 2017). It also propagates a deficit model, with some children seen as insufficient, ‘unready’ for school, without any deconstruction of whether schools are ready for children (Brooker 2015). Thus, if treated uncritically, measures of ‘quality’ can just become instruments of social reproduction, excluding groups of children and their families based on social class, language and ethnic background.

We seek to problematise such understandings of learning and educational quality, and so we propose an alternative view of what learning is and what constitutes quality education. Inclusion is of high priority in Europe, and education has been identified as an important vehicle for transformation in this regard (European Commission 2014). At present, this concern is more pressing than ever, with the ongoing mass migration of displaced people, efforts to reduce early school leaving in Europe, and increasing challenges faced by educators negotiating the tension between meeting standardised indicators and ensuring inclusive educational environments. We echo the CoRe Report in foregrounding ‘process’ in discourse on quality in education in Europe. Our main objective is

to provide an alternative voice for European education based on three pillars to oppose the neoliberal conceptualisation:

1. **Holistic education:** The most up-to-date understandings of how children learn show the interrelatedness of domains of development, and the importance of drawing on children's own talents, emotions, experiences, cultures and interests (Hayes, O'Toole & Halpenny 2017). Holistic education values 'the thinking and the feeling life' and promotes a vision of children as active, competent and playful learners.
2. **Inclusive education:** Research identifies cultural bias in standardised approaches to understanding children's achievement (MacRuairc 2009). Inclusive practices, on the other hand, welcome sociocultural diversity, and oppose standardised, exclusive perspectives and methods that may feed into socially reproductive experiences for marginalised groups. Inclusive education values children's cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds.
3. **Relational education:** Positive interactions and relationships are more important for measuring quality in early education than narrow numerical indicators (Hayes & Filipović 2017). Relational education foregrounds relationships and interactions between early childhood educators and children, children and their peers, educators and parents, and settings and their communities.

We argue that such approaches could promote quality, transformative education that offers a powerful vehicle for social inclusion, supporting "provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity" (European Commission 2014: 9). For European educators to understand and meet the needs of children for high quality education, they need to hear an alternative voice to the neo-liberal agenda. This need is particularly salient for early education, since the downward pressure of 'accountability' is increasingly strong. For example, Moss et al. (2016) raise concerns about the assumptions, practices and possible effects of the OECD's International Early Learning and Child Wellbeing Study which extends the existing PISA international comparisons at secondary level to standardised measurement of five year olds. Early educators in Europe need support in legitimising a focus on relationships, intercultural communication and children's right to participation rather than test scores; holistic development rather than narrow learning outcomes; and inclusion and social and personal recognition rather than practices that exclude on the basis of ethnicity, social class and gender. Here we propose an innovative,

multi-disciplinary, inter-paradigmatic, transnational approach to understanding learning and quality in education.

In our opinion, it is a good opportunity to create a new version of education or, more widely, of a school. It means "schools of learning" in which we suggest resignation from one-size-fits-all approach and putting a special emphasis on active learning and building good educational space and good communication by relationships and interactions between participants of educational dialogue. It is understood as creating conditions for learning and self-development. It is also an opportunity for developing key competences by children since the idea of holistic, inclusive and relational education enables children to develop communicative, mathematical, technical and social competences as well as cultural awareness and expression.

It is possible because the category "to learn with..." can be understood as an example of education based on symmetrical relationships between teachers and students. This means that they can learn together, everyone from one another. Students don't "learn from..." but they "learn with...". They can build their knowledge, gain new skills with others: by working in groups, solving problems with others, discussing problems with others. This also means asking questions, active learning, creating learning nets among students and between students and teachers. This version of learning schools takes advantage from and is based on the category "learning with..." by putting special emphasis on communication, thinking, co-operation, good relationships, responsibility as well as reflection. Each of these skills can be developed by holistic, relational and inclusive education.

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