

Childhood and humanization: the encounter of children with Tolstoy based on a historic cultural perspective

Presentation

The purpose of this text is to socialize an experience with dramatized storytelling, realized between 2011 and 2014 with 3 to 5 year-old children in a public school in Florianópolis, SC, Brazil.¹

Based on historic cultural theory, weekly storytelling sessions were conducted with stories by Leo Tolstoy, found in the book “Contos da Nova Cartilha” which includes 161 short stories for young children. Tolstoy was chosen because his stories use fables and metaphors to present experiences in life that problematize collective dilemmas. Contrary to classic European stories, whose moralizing nature emphasizes goodness, sacrifice, love, individual work and courtesy, Tolstoy emphasizes collective work, solidarity, cooperation, justice and questions that involve social equality among different peoples. We believe that these stories are opportune for addressing complex issues such as the exploitation of the labor of others, which is made possible by the stories presented in this text.

Historic cultural theory and dramatized story-telling

Dramatized story-telling is chosen as a privileged form of assisting the development of the capacity of abstraction of the child. With this type of story-telling the teacher favors the zone of eminent development, and that which children observe and do with the teacher's help, they will soon do alone.¹ We note that over time children become capable of enriching the scenes, raising new elements, improvising with new materials or following in detail what was dramatized by the teacher. We observed various situations in which children corrected other children or the teacher about details of a story and the dramatization that was forgotten when the narrative was repeated.

In our experiences with storytelling, the objects used to represent the narrative acquire a fundamental role. According to Vygotsky,² when children's play involves make believe, the objects should allow what is represented to gesture or move. We highlight that simple objects are best indicated for representation because they encourage the development of children's imagination. The more complete (in the sense of similarity/appearance) is the object that represents a character, the less is required of the child's imagination. For example, by representing an elephant with a large ball when telling a story, the children imagine the elephant in their heads, as they must do to deal with the codes and signs of written language.¹

Leontiev² highlights that the objective of play is not its result, but the action itself. Children's need to act in the world arises not only by means of the objects that are accessible to them, but also from the adult universe present in their context. At a certain time in their development children want to be like adults. The objects belonging to their world are transformed and come to mediate the satisfaction of their desire by means of a ludic and imaginary situation.

Fantasy is at the foundation of the human capacity for objectivation that is present in art, politics, science and ethics. There can be no

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objectivation without creative ability, fantasy and imagination. The creation of an imaginary situation is important to the development of abstract thinking, which is the essence of play, and an element that is fundamental to childhood education.¹

We emphasize the creative and subversive aspects that are present in play and make believe. By transforming pinecones into goats, sticks into horses and fabrics into streams, children learn that it is possible that something can be transformed into that which it usually is not. This revolutionary, humanizing and creative content of play is primordial to the formation of human beings who are capable of acting for a new world.

Methodological description, objects, materials and results

This paper reports on experiences with the use of two stories by Leo Tolstoy: “The Burro and the Horse” and “A Young Boy's Story of How a Storm Caught Him in the Forest”. We choose these stories because we believe that both address issues that are important to work with in the collective space of schools: cooperation, exploitation of labor, empathy and justice.

With the children sitting in a circle, we mount the scenery with fabric, stones, wood, a plant vase, pinecones, a roll of toilet paper and boxes. When the children are seated, the teacher begins to sing a song while she removes the cloth that covers the scene. She then begins the narrative of the fable “The Burro and the Horse”:

A man had a burro and a horse. They were walking on the road; the burro said to the horse: “It's heavy for me, - - I shall not be able to carry it all; take at least a part of my load.” The horse paid no attention to him. The burro collapsed from overexerting himself and died. When the master transferred the burro's load to the horse, and added the burro's hide, the horse began to complain: “Oh, woe is me, poor one, woe is me, unfortunate horse! I did not want to help him even a little, and now I have to carry everything, and his hide, too”³

The children hear the story and afterwards appear uncomfortable with the ending. The teacher covers the objects and characters used in the telling with a cloth, while singing the same music she sang at the beginning. She sits in a chair in the circle and asks what the children thought of the story. The indignation is implacable:

“This is not fair! The horse was bad to the donkey!” (N. 5-years-old).

“Poor donkey! “When we die we go to heaven” (M. 5).

“I think it was the horse that was really dumb!” (L. 5).

“But, why didn’t he help the donkey? We have to help our partners. When our mother is tired, we have to help. We have to help the teacher clean up the toys.” (S. 5).

“The donkey died and went to live in heaven with my grandmother’s chickens who also died and went to heaven”(P. 4).

“Look, when we die there is no heaven. Nothing, nothing like this! My father told me everything!!! We go into the ground and the insects eat everything! So we have to take advantage of life, there is only one my little friend!” (L. 5).

By storytelling inspires important discussions about complex problems in social life. The children perceive and denounce similar situations in which there is a need for cooperation among peers. The story denounces the fact that while some people work too much like the donkey, others work less like the horse. This social problematic in real life has unhappy endings that must be problematized so we can have an opportunity to envision a better world.

Moreover, the discussion among the children reveals different concepts about life. Some are from religious families and some from families that emphasize scientific and materialist explanations of life. This experience causes the children to deal with differences of opinion and exercise tolerance in an environment of respect with democratic debates where they must live together, share spaces, toys, snacks, materials, tasks and rights. Differing and contradictory opinions, with the dialectic as a presumption, are an inherent part of collective life, a fundamental aspect to be exercised in school.

The second story that we chose to present is “A Young Boy’s Story of How a Storm Caught Him in the Forest”. According to Tolstoy’s notes in the text, it is a true story.

To tell the story, the scenery is first mounted with stones, vases, fabrics, a wooden box, a shoe box, paper plates and rolls of toilet paper. After a moment of free play, the teacher invites all the children to sit in a circle lit with candles and when the children are seated begins to tell the story:

When I was little, mother sent me for mushrooms in the woods. I reached the woods, gathered some mushrooms and was just about to go home when all at once it turned dark, began to thunder, and rain came down. I was scared stiff and took shelter under a big oak tree. Such bright lightning flashed that it hurt my eyes and I had to screw them up. Above my head something began to creak and crack and I felt a sudden blow on the head. I fell forward and lay there until the rain stopped. When I came to, the whole forest was dripping water, the birds were singing and sunlight was dancing in the trees. The big oak had broken up and smoke was rising from the stump. All around me were pieces of oak. My smock was all wet and clinging to my body. I had a bump on my head and it ached a lot. When I found my hat, I picked up the mushrooms and ran home. The house was deserted, so I took some bread from the table, climbed on the stove, and fell asleep. When I awoke I could see that my mushrooms had already been fried and put on the table for tea. I shouted down, “What are you eating without me for?” And they said, “Why are you sleeping? Come and have your tea”.^{3,4}

This story, although short, has elements that are complex for the children to understand and debate. For this reason, after telling it the first time, the teacher does not begin the conversation, but provides some objects so that the children can then play, explore the objects and review the story their own way. Immediately after telling the story for a third time she sits in the circle with the children and asks what they thought of the story. Once again the responses indicate the potential of literature to express complex issues of collective life.^{5,6}

“Were they going to eat without him? He was more polite and waited for everyone to arrive” (N. 5).

“Poor boy! They weren’t polite! I didn’t like this story” (L. 5).

“Teacher, that’s ugly. It’s not fair! He was sleeping because he was tired after getting the mushrooms in the rain” (M. 5).

The children see the injustice, criticize it and analyze the plot from the perspective of young children. This story is suggestive for working with social criticism with young children. The one who picks the mushrooms gets hurt and makes a big effort for the food, is not always the one who enjoys it. This is very similar to what happens in society: those who work do not always enjoy what they produce and are even considered lazy and no-good.⁷⁻⁹

Academic considerations

Based on the experiences presented, we can perceive that Tolstoy’s stories offer an important contribution to the education of children. They stand out for their simple form that is rich in metaphors that address complex social, popular and human issues. They allow discussing uncommon themes found in contradictory social relations such as social inequality and the exploitation of labor.

The dramatized story telling stands out for the combination of literary work in a circle with a previously prepared environment. This experience helps young children develop a capacity for concentration, creativity, fantasy and make believe, which are essential to the process of humanization and intellectual development provided by the public schools that we want.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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¹We emphasize that this institution is characterized by the articulated work of teaching, research and extension in early childhood education. All of the children in the school, as well as the participants in this study, signed a free and informed consent form, as is required by the Research Ethics Committee.

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