Who is the one I find different from me?

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Abstract

Difference and Diversity are concepts upon which inclusive school development should be rooted.

However, when one talks about difference, the meaning attributed to that concept assumes a great spectrum of possible explanations, certainly based on individual experience and one's framework of analysis, expressed through a particular world view.

The main goal of this research project is to understand how school children and youngsters conceive difference, in other words, what kind of characteristics are stressed when they describe someone they find much different from them and what kind of relationships they think possible to establish with that person.

The population was chosen among children and youngsters of all the public schools of Beja (Portugal), constituting three age groups of 9, 12 and 15 years old. In this research we used the written narrative as a method of analysis.

What is proposed in this paper is to discuss some of the preliminary results and reflect upon some questions raised, which may bring a different perspective on inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies are growing in heterogeneity and minority groups are conquering their space as their voice is being heard more often than in the past, but can we answer positively to the question this Conference wants us to reflect upon?

It seems that to be able to "celebrate diversity" through the inclusion movement we still need great changes in the way we think and the way we do things in educational settings.

For many, the educational field is seen as the ideal plot to develop inclusive ideology and practice that will have reflections upon society. The Salamanca Statement is very clear on this point and challenges us to restructure our concept of difference in school and society.

If Public School is a good mirror of social diversity and if one requires it to have an important role for social transformation, one should understand the perspective of the different actors in the educational system.

Usually, pupils are the less heard group and so, the present study focuses on children and youngsters' representation of difference. It aims to know and understand how they see it – what kind of characteristics are pointed out - if related to physical, ethnic, economic, cultural, linguistic, gender, handicap or any other, and how they foresee their relationship with the other who they describe as different from them.

Data was collected in all schools of Beja (from primary to secondary schools) and we ended up with a sample of 607 pupils of three age groups - 9, 12 and 15 years old.

Since the research project will, only, be finished in 2006, this presentation is based on some of the preliminary results, but we hope to contribute for the reflection on the theme of this Conference.

2- THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As the concept of difference in this work is approached in multiple dimensions, the literature review will cover a broad corpus of studies crossing human sciences such as Psychology, Sociology and Education. However, the object of study is the **representation of the difference** in a juvenile population. The concept of representation is here seen as the result of social cognitive and social affective processes the individual uses to make sense of his world, thus an effect of his personal elaboration based upon social experience (Vala, 1993).

The representation of the other is not independent of the personal identity and psychosocial development. The progressive autonomy and the recognition of individual uniqueness is a condition for this process of the recognition of the other as different (Coimbra, 1990; Costa, 1990).

Many researches stress the fact that the process of differentiation of the other is perceived by young children mainly based on physical attributes, evolving towards psychological characteristics in older children. Socio-Cognitive theory explains these cognitive changes and offers us a model to support our work in which respects some of the differences found among the three age groups (Selman, 1980 referred by Coimbra, 1991; Lewis, 2002; Nesdale et al. 2003).

Differences regarding gender or social related variables don't seem to get the same level of agreement among investigators. Nevertheless, we thought it would be important to take also those factors into account.

3- PROBLEM CONTEXT AND RESEARCH GOALS

Beja is situated in an inland and peripheral region (Baixo Alentejo) where population diversity is not that great as in big urban areas. For years the province was crossed by Gipsy and this was the most culturally different group, but many were nomads and did not "bother" the school system at all.

Today Portugal is receiving an increasing number of immigrants, particularly from Eastern Europe, but also from Asia, Africa, South America (Brazil) and Gipsies are becoming sedentary.

School had already integrated the social economic differences, the rural and urban origin of pupils, learning difficulties and handicap (physical, intellectual, sensory) and is now facing new challenges.

Inclusion is a goal expressed in the educational projects of many schools of Beja, but, as in the rest of the country, there is a great number of children abandoning school before finishing the compulsory educational period and also during secondary education. School failure is also an unsolved problem with rates that embarrass us, which means that there is still a lot to be done to build a really inclusive school.

Working as a teacher trainer (initial and in-service) I knew that for teachers the concept of difference would fit in one or more of the above categories and that their opinions would already be "marked" by an official and politically correct version.

So it was decided to do this research focusing school age children and young people in order to understand what they think when one talks about difference , how they see and relate to it.

Thus the objectives defined were:

- *To understand the representation of difference in children and youngsters of Beja school community ;*
- *To characterize the nature of that representation according to age, gender and parents' academic level;*
- *To know how relationships with the Other (the different one) are conceived.*

4 – METHODOLOGY

Rooted in a qualitative research approach, that tries to put in evidence the role of the individual and his experience as a main source of knowledge, we were not seeking for the confirmation of *a priori* hypothesis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

However, as one is dealing with different groups in age, gender and academic level of their parents (our independent variables) it was expected that differences would emerge from the analysis of children and youngsters' answers.

To collect data, we decided to use two instruments: the narrative and the interview.

The increasing interest in the narrative as a method of analysis and a broad number of studies published stressing the relevance of the material, either in the production of life stories or any other type (Lieblich et al. 1998; Pramling et al., 2001), inspired us to elaborate the instrument applied in the first phase of the project, from which we are now presenting the preliminary results.

Because of the written form it took, limitations such as writing skills would be obvious, therefore, in a second phase a semi-structured interview was the other instrument to apply to a smaller group of individuals of the initial sample (Ghiglione & Matalon, 1992).

The written task which pupils were invited to answer, besides some identification details, presented the following proposals:

1.   *"Think of a person much different from you and describe him/her"* (it was explained that it had to be someone they knew even if not too well, to avoid choices of public figures or fantastic beings)

2.   *"Create a story where you and the person you described play a role. You are free to imagine places, other characters and their actions"*

Procedures and data analysis

Before the application of this instrument it an exploratory study was conducted in three class groups where we got 29 individuals (9 of 9 years old; 6 of 12 years old and 14 of 15 years old).

This set up the basis for the reformulation of the language used, in order to make the proposals clear and easier to be interpreted by the population and gave also some indications for the first grid of content analysis.

Between March and June 2004, in the class setting, pupils were invited by the researcher to write the answers to the above proposals. Those who had difficulty in writing and wished, could ask for the teacher's or the researcher's help to write down his/her ideas.

Content Analysis was the main core of the work done and it took several steps, such as: reading and rereading the material; fragmenting the text into meaning units and proceeding to their categorization in a non pre-fixed grid. The analysis of the story was approached in a more holistic way than the answer to the first part of the task and is still being

finished (Bardin, 1991; Lieblich et al., 1998).

The analysis of the answers to the first task – **Description of the Other as Different** - was submitted to the appreciation of two colleagues whose level of agreement was 86,84% in the categories and 73,58% in the sub-categories. However, their opinion, as well as that of my supervisor, led to the elaboration of a lighter structure, based on the most relevant categories, contributing for a more consistent work.

So, seven categories were defined and most of them integrated also sub-categories. To better understand what kind of utterances fit in each, some examples are given:

Categories and Examples

1. **Physical Attributes** (Sub-Categories: **skin colour**; **face and headdetails**; **body aspects**)

Examples:

- o *"black as charcoal"*
- o *"very white skin"*
- o *"brown eyes"*
- o *"brown hair"*
- o *"fat as a whale"*
- o *"thin"*
- o *"tall"*

1. **Behaviour** (Sub-Categories: **good/adjusted** and **bad/maladjusted**)

Examples:

- *" behaves well"*
- *"does not like to get into trouble"*
- *"does not make mistakes"*
- *"is bad"*
- *"he steals"*
- *"does not respect anyone"*

1. **Skills** (Sub-Categories: **intellectual**; **motor**; **social**; **school**, in all were considered either **high or low level of performance**)

Examples:

- *"is intelligent"*
- *"very creative"*
- *"dull at school"*
- *"not very smart"*
- *"plays football much better than I do"*
- *"draws very well"*
- *"does not dance well"*
- *"makes friends easily"*

- *"shy"*
- *"gets good grades"*
- *"gets bad grades"*

1. **Likes and Dislikes** (Sub-Categories: **food**; **dressing**; **play and leisureactivities**)

Examples:

- *"his favourite dish is lasagne"*
- *"wears odd clothes …"*
- *"likes to play with dolls"*
- *"is fanatic of computers"*
- *"loves reading and writing"*

1. **Social and Cultural Aspects** (Sub-Categories: **Mother Tongue**; **Nationality**; **Ethnic**; **Economic Conditions**)

Examples:

- *"speaks differently"*
- *"is strange … the pronunciation in Portuguese"*
- *"is French"*
- *"came from Ucrania"*
- *"is gipsy"*
- *"has economic difficulties"*
- *"is rich"*

1. **Handicap**

Examples:

- *"is handicapped and has much difficulty in moving his legs"*
- *"he does not hear well"*

1. **Sexuality**

Examples:

- *"is a boy and would like to be a girl"*
- *" it seems to me he is homosexual"*

Due to the big sample and great amount of information, it was necessary to design a data base, for which SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was found to be the suitable tool (Maroco, 2003).

The results, here presented, are relative to the **Description of the Other as Different** and they are only descriptive.

5 – SAMPLE: CONSTITUTION AND CHARACTERIZATION

As said before, the sample was selected from all the school population (primary to secondary level) of Beja (Portugal) and was constituted by three age groups – of 9, 12 and 15 years old (those who were born in 1994, 1991 and 1988) in a total number of 607 pupils, characterized as shown in the following tables:

Table 1 – Age and Gender Distribution

Gender Age Group	Masculine	Feminine	Total
9 years old	107 **51,2%**	102 48,8%	209 34,4%*
12 years old	115 45,3%	139 **54,7%**	**254** 41,8%*
15 years old	66 45,8%	78 **54,2%**	144 23,7%*
Total	288 47,4%*	**319** 52,6%*	607

* Percentages calculated in relation to N = 607

The previous table (Table 1) shows, clearly, the pupils' distribution by age. The biggest group is that of 12 year-olds and the smallest that of 15 year-olds. The feminine group has more members, excepting for the youngest group.

Table 2 – Parents Academic Level

Parents Academic Level	Father	Mother
Basic (1st to 9th year)	168 **(27,7%)**	156 **(25,7%)**
Secondary (10th to 12th year)	101 (16,6%)	114 (18,8%)
High (> 12th year)	72 (11,9%)	103 (17%)
Unknown/Unanswered	266 **(43,8%)**	234 **(38,6%)**

In Table-2 it is visible the number of children and youngsters that don't know and do not answer the question. The academic level was taken separately for mother and father, since for many the level of studies presented great differences, but also some pupils knew the answer for one, but not for both.

6 – SOME RESULTS

When analysing the general results (Table 3), the **description of the other as different** is done by the great majority of individuals (64,7%) in **behavioural** terms, followed by the **physical attributes** (57%) and **skills** (45,3%).

Table 3 – Categorization: General Results

Categories	Number of individuals	%
Physical Attributes	346	**57%**
Behaviour	393	**64,7%**
Skills	275	**45,3%**
Likes and Dislikes	153	25,2%
Social and Cultural Aspects	30	5%
Handicap	8	1,3%
Sexuality	5	0,8%

Looking inside of each category, most of the utterances of **Physical Attributes** refer to **body structure** (42,5%) and **facial details** (40,2%) while **skin colour** gets only 7,6% of the descriptions. **Behavioural Aspects** most stressed are those related with **badbehaviour** (51,6%) against 18,6% for good behaviour. For the category **Skills,** the emphasis is put on **social skills**, either positive (22,1%) or negative (12,7%) followed by the **intellectual skills** (6,6% for high level and 3,3% for low level). In the category **Likes and Dislikes**, the majority of references are related to **play and leisure activities** (18,1%) followed by the **dressing** aspects (8,9%). In respect to **Social and CulturalAspects the** pupils' expression is higher in what concerns **nationality** (3,3%) and **economic conditions** (1,6%).

If one considers the age group (Table 4) it is evident that those who describe **the other** in **physical terms** are mainly the 9 year-olds (73,2%) and this decreases with age, while with **behaviour** and **skills** categories the opposite happens.

The younger ones tend also to describe the other for what he **likes or dislikes** and for **social and cultural aspects**.

The categories **handicap** and **sexuality,** though with residual expression, were found relevant (due to the possible relation with inclusion/exclusion factors) to illustrate also the concept of difference.

Table 4 – Categorization according to Age

Age group / Categories	9 years	12 years	15 years
Physical Attributes	(153) **73,2%**	(147) 57,9%	(46) 31,9%
Behaviour	(107) 51,2%	(175) 68,9%	(111) **77,1%**
Skills	(71) 34%	(130) 51,2%	(74) **51,4%**
Likes and Dislikes	(70) **33,5%**	(54) 21,3%	(29) 20,1%
Social and Cultural Aspects	(18) **8,6%**	(8) 3,1%	(4) 2,8%
Handicap	(3) 1,4%	(2) 0,8%	(3) **2,1%**
Sexuality	(0) 0%	(4) **1,6%**	(1) 0,7%

The results shown in Table 5 indicate some differences in the way boys and girls describe **the other**. Male elements tend to do it through **physical**, **likes and dislikes, handicap and sexuality** characteristics, while female elements seem to give more importance to **behaviour and skills**.

Table 5 – Categorization according to Gender

Gender / Categories	Masculine	Feminine
Physical Attributes	(174) **60,4%**	(172) 53,9%
Behaviour	(175) 60,8%	(218) **68,3%**
Skills	(117) 40,6%	(158) **49,5%**
Likes and Dislikes	(77) **26,7%**	(76) 23,8%
Social and Cultural Aspects	(14) **4,9%**	(16) **5%**
Handicap	(6) **2,1%**	(2) 0,6%
Sexuality	(5) **1,7%**	(0) 0%

The data presented in tables 6 and 7 consider the differences in categorization according to father's and mother's academic level. Percentages in bold give us the general picture that children and youngsters, whose parents have higher level of studies, use more indicators of most of the categories to describe the other and that those differences in the three groups (basic, secondary and high) are more visible in reference to father's academic level than to mother's.

Table 6 – Categorization according to Father's Academic Level

Academic Level Categories	Basic (1 st to 9 th year)	Secondary (10 th to 12 th year)	High (>12 th year)
Physical Attributes	(91) 54,2%	(49) 48,5%	(42) **58,3%**
Behaviour	(113) 61,3%	(73) **72,3%**	(49) 68,1%
Skills	(72) 42,9%	(51) 50,5%	(39) **54,2%**
Likes and Dislikes	(32) 19%	(26) 25,7%	(21) **29,2%**
Social and Cultural Aspects	(11) **6,5%**	(4) 4%	2 2,8%
Handicap	(1) 0,6%	(5) **5%**	(0) 0%
Sexuality	(2) 1,2%	(2) **2%**	(0) 0%

Table 7 – Categorization according to Mother's Academic Level

Academic Level Categories	Basic (1 st to 9 th year)	Secondary (10 th to 12 th year)	High (>12 th year)
Physical Attributes	(91) **58,7%**	(56) 48,7%	(59) 57,3%
Behaviour	(104) 67,1%	(71) 61,7%	(74) **74,8%**
Skills	(67) 43,2%	(58) **50,4%**	(49) 47,6%
Likes and Dislikes	(32) 20,6%	(22) 19,1%	(36) **35%**
Social and Cultural Aspects	(8) 5,2%	(8) 7%	(8) **7,8%**
Handicap	(2) 1,3%	(1) 0,9%	(2) **1,9%**
Sexuality	(1) 0,6%	(0) 0%	(3) **2,9%**

According to the research plan, we are now developing a more in-depth analysis of the data already collected. In this paper, we present the descriptive aspects of some of that corpus, which will certainly be enriched by pupils' stories and interviews and will make the interpretation process more reliable.

7 – DISCUSSION

Who is the one I find different from me? Is he/she that different?

Almost 1/3 of our sample expressed clearly they were describing a friend or a relative. A 9 year-olds boy said: "He is my friend. We are all different, but we are all good friends" and a girl of the same age wrote: "She is my best friend. We quarrel a lot, but we have a deep friendship".

It seems that the most important is not how the other is, but what he/she means to "me".

From the results described, we know that the **other is different** mainly in **physical, behavioural and skills** attributes. The more visible side of the person is then in focus, either through positive or negative characteristics.

The most negative image is given by the description of an inadequate behaviour and inadequate social skills, aspects that older pupils and female elements seem to be more critical of. Considering the importance for their integration in the peer group and the development of identity, this may not be a surprising result.

As expected, the answers of the oldest group were more elaborated and went beyond the strict classification of the other (e.g.: he/she is sincere; he/she is egoistic) trying to give examples of the other's attitudes that fitted into that classification. Interesting is the fact of describing the other both in positive and negative terms, showing his/her contradictions.

For many it was an opportunity to talk about themselves, to stress how different they were. A 15 year-olds boy wrote: "I cannot nominate anyone that is much different from me, because I'm the one who is different from everybody else". This type of opinions may lead us to think that a relevant aspect is that everyone should be recognized in his own difference and uniqueness. Is the school system prepared for that?

It was visible that in many classes where handicapped children or children with learning difficulties, who had some kind of support by special education teams, were integrated, they were not the person chosen as different by most of their colleagues. Aren't they seen as different or aren't they seen at all?

Reactions of extreme rejection and prejudice were not common, but we could see that in some classes a boy or a girl was picked up by a greater number of colleagues and, by the way she/he was pictured, it was obvious they were bullying victims and a scapegoats for the group. What is necessary to be different and accepted by peers?

We are conscious that the content of this paper is somehow limited, but we hope to be able to answer to these and other questions, as we accomplish the objectives of the research project. However, we think that educational specialists would develop a broader perspective if they listened to pupils' opinions and observed their attitudes. Certainly, school organization and classroom management would gain from such understandings.

8 - REFERENCES

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