

Montserrat Yuste Munté

montseym@gmail.com

Title of the thesis:

Empathy and the teaching and learning of Social Sciences in Primary Education in Catalonia. A case study

Date of defense : February 10, 2017

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain)

Thesis supervisor

Dr. Montserrat Oller Freixa

Montserrat.oller@uab.cat

Key words: Empathy, Primary Education, Teaching and learning of social sciences, Critical Thinking, Social Sciences Education.

Summary:

Empathy is an indicator of social and critical thinking, and a capacity that not only conditions the social representation and understanding of the students but which also facilitates their development in the world. Besides, empathy is currently one of the most significant and essential educational demands, especially considering that an education that includes the development of empathy will allow us all to advance towards a more just and sustainable world.

Although empathy is essential in any of the existing areas of the educational curriculum, it is within the teaching and learning of social sciences where it should be given more prominence. Being able to adopt the perspectives of others will enable students to better understand their past and their present, as well as to participate in a democratic and plural society. However, little research has been conducted in this field thus far. Most of the research has focused on the discipline of history and mainly, on secondary education.

In this doctoral dissertation I propose to investigate the impact of empathy on the teaching and learning of social sciences in primary education. More specifically, I focussed on what happens in the classrooms regarding its development and how both empathy and the critical thinking of students in primary education are formed while learning social sciences.

This investigation has led me to identify the existing types of empathy, especially those most closely related to the teaching and learning of social sciences, which are social and historical empathy. I have also identified the characteristics of the main protagonists - students and teachers - as well as the strategies that teachers use in order to promote empathy and the barriers that hinder it. I have further studied how empathy is assessed, and finally, some of the investigations that have been developed related to the topic.

Framed within the educational research field, and specifically within the field of social science, this dissertation is based on a case study whose protagonists are teachers and students of the upper stage of primary education (a total of 148 students and 10 teachers participated during the diagnostic phase, and 27 students and 1 teacher participated during the experimental phase of the research). For the data analysis I used a mixed methods approach, with a predominance of qualitative over quantitative methods. The following research techniques were used during the research: participant

observation, questionnaires, interviews and various classroom activities.

The data collected and analyzed indicates that students show higher levels of cognitive and social empathy, and lower levels of emotional and communicative empathy, this being the historical the type of empathy in which students present more difficulties. As for the teachers, although they evaluate the promotion of empathy in the classroom positively, they work on empathy in an indirect and non-explicit way.

When I analyze how students form their social and critical thinking and empathy, I observed how working through relevant social problems and using interactive strategies enabled the development of these capacities, especially when the problems are identified by students and when students are the protagonists of their own learning. However, it is important that the work is carried out in a direct and explicit way, with the goal of promoting these capacities. I have also observed how the increase of the empathic ability of the students affects the achievement of certain skills related to their social and civic competences. Regarding the findings related to teachers, I have identified some of their qualities that can help develop the empathy of their students as it relates to them being empathetic people using strategies that foster this capacity.