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Developing Critical Thinking Skills.

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1. **Abstract**

Chilean education is in crisis. The main purpose of the whole educational system looks forward to obtaining high scores in standardized tests, comparing the results of the different schools that conform this system and fomenting the competition and segregation among all the schools of the system, without taking into account the Society's need of properly educated individuals in order to improve its quality and its citizens.

The consequences that this problem has had in society, which basically has been translated into forming individualist people without any kind of social awareness, are responding to market logics and political ideologies, which promote individualism and competence within all the areas of society.

We, teachers, have the responsibility of repairing and improving the society of the future by teaching our students how to do it. For this reason it is necessary to teach our students how to question critically the environment in which they are immersed and to spot the main problems that affect our society.

Cleary, the current educational system is not giving students enough tools for their development in the future society. Despite that, teachers can make a change by teaching our students how to face this sad reality. Teaching our students how to think critically and how to make connections between the problems that affect our society and their own personal experiences, allows us to make a big contribution to the future society, working from our small space of action.

It could be possible that the intention of improving the quality of future citizens was seen as a revolutionary idea, related to political and personal ideals, and it actually is. According to what Paulo Freire says, teaching cannot be a neutral activity,
due to the fact that it is a political act. Teachers who try to be neutral –Freire says- in their pedagogical practice, are ignoring the historical background that bases this way of teaching. In other words, teaching always has a purpose, and it depends on the teacher to decide who establishes that purpose, which can be defined by the teacher himself or by the ideology that lies behind the curriculum.

This project has been based on the work done and the experiences seen in a municipal public school, where it is possible to see how teachers and students ignore their position and role within society. For this reason I decided to work on this project, which mainly aims to change the reality of the low social class students and the environment that surrounds them, by using mechanisms that foster the critical thinking development in students. The main purpose of this is giving students tools for changing the society of tomorrow.
2. Abstracto.

La educación chilena se encuentra en crisis. El propósito del sistema educacional busca principalmente obtener buenos resultados en pruebas estandarizadas, comparar los resultados de las diferentes escuelas que conforman el sistema y fomentar la competencia y la segregación entre todas las escuelas, sin tomar en cuenta las necesidades de la sociedad de personas apropiadamente educadas, con el fin de mejorar la calidad de la sociedad y de sus ciudadanos.

Las consecuencias de este problema en la sociedad, las cuales básicamente se traducen en formar personas individualistas sin ningún tipo de conciencia social, responden a las lógicas de mercado y a ideologías políticas, las que promueven la competencia e individualismo dentro de todas las áreas de la sociedad.

Nosotros, los profesores, tenemos la responsabilidad de reparar y mejorar las sociedades del futuro, enseñándoles a nuestros estudiantes el camino a seguir para conseguirlo. Por esta razón es necesario mostrarles a nuestros alumnos la manera de mirar y cuestionar el contexto en el que se encuentran inmersos, para así identificar los problemas que afectan a nuestra sociedad.

Evidentemente, el actual sistema educacional no está entregándoles a los estudiantes las herramientas suficientes para su desarrollo en la sociedad del futuro. A pesar de eso, los profesores tienen la posibilidad de realizar importantes cambios, preparando a los estudiantes a enfrentar correctamente esta triste realidad. Ayudar a nuestros estudiantes a pensar críticamente y a establecer conexiones entre los problemas que afectan a nuestra sociedad y sus experiencias personales, nos permiten realizar una gran contribución para el desarrollo de las futuras generaciones, a partir de un pequeño espacio de acción.
Posiblemente, la intención de mejorar la calidad de los futuros ciudadanos sea vista como una idea revolucionaria, directamente relacionada con ideales políticos y personales. Efectivamente, así es. Tomando en cuenta lo que dice Paulo Freire, la labor de un profesor no puede ser una actividad neutral, debido a que necesariamente es un acto político. Los profesores quienes tratan ser neutrales en sus prácticas pedagógicas – dice Freire- ignoran el trasfondo histórico que fundamenta su forma de enseñar. En otras palabras, el enseñar siempre tiene un propósito, y depende exclusivamente del profesor decidir quién establece ese propósito, el cual puede ser definido por él mismo, o por la ideología que se encuentra detrás del curriculum.

Este proyecto se ha basado en el trabajo y en las experiencias vividas en una escuela municipal, donde es posible ver como algunos profesores ignoran su posición y su rol dentro de la sociedad. Por esta razón, decidí trabajar en esta propuesta, el cual principalmente apunta a cambiar la realidad de los estudiantes de las clases sociales más pobres y del ambiente que los rodea, usando mecanismos que fomentan el desarrollo de pensamiento crítico en los estudiantes. Siendo éste entonces el principal objetivo de este proyecto, el que principalmente consiste en entregar herramientas a los estudiantes para cambiar la sociedad del futuro.
3. **Introduction.**

Taking into account the intentions of a whole system that uses education as the main engine for working properly and my personal experiences within the public system, I decided to elaborate this action plan-proposal, which has as a main purpose to make my students aware of what is happening around them.

It is important to make students exercise their thinking skills in the classroom, so that they will be able to put them constantly into practice, in order to identify, question and solve problems that interfere with their development not only as a student, but also as an active member of society.

Throughout this action plan-proposal, I am trying to find the right strategies and activities that may be useful for my students to develop their thinking skills, supported by different authors that identify the main aspects that are necessary to be developed in order to stimulate and accelerate the critical thinking process in students.

4. **Context.**

During this semester I have been working with 4th graders in a municipal school called República de Israel in Santiago, where it is possible to find children from low social classes. The reality in this kind of schools is very sad. Students are treated as if they know nothing, the contents of the classes do not seem to have a clear purpose and students do not seem to be interested in learning.

In the main entrance of the school, it is possible to see a big announcement which says: “nuestro sello es la disciplina”. It makes me wonder about the main objectives of this school and all schools in general: Do schools really want to form
disciplined people for the future of the country? What is going to be the role of these students in the future society? Have students realized that their school is explicitly telling them how to behave properly, instead of teaching them how to think? Is it a coincidence that lower classes attend these schools?

Moreover, Chilean public education is in crisis. Most teachers immersed in this public system are tired of what they are doing, the reason being low salaries, bad working conditions, and poor academic results of students among others. Consequently, all those factors directly affect the learning process of students in those schools. This may be the reason why teachers teach what they are asked to teach, without real intentions towards students’ future role in society. It is important to give students tools not only to learn English properly, but also to define their role and their position in society.

As I have mentioned before, I have been working with 4th graders. They are still too little to tell them what I think about their school and the education they are receiving. Despite that, I look forward to giving them real tools so that they can become critically aware of their context through the use of English.

The main aim of this research proposal is to look for the right strategies and activities for my students to develop their critical thinking skills. In other words, I want my students not only to learn English during my lessons, but to receive knowledge which is going to be useful for their entire life and not only for school life.

William Graham, in his work called Folkway, states that:

*The critical habit of thought, if usual in society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded by stump orators ... They are slow to believe. They can hold*
things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made on one side or the other. They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices and all kinds of cajolery. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens (632).

According to Graham, critical thinking development allows us not only to be more critical in our daily lives, but also to be better citizens. I personally think that educating people who are able to analyze their position and condition in society and – as Graham correctly defines- people who are slow to believe, is one of the main objectives of education. Nowadays, education has been seen as a synonym of school, where children go and learn something that may be useful for the future. This wrong concept of education is what must be changed. Education is not something that uniquely happens at school, it is actually a responsibility of the whole society and for the whole society. In order to improve society we are living in, it is necessary to form better citizens.

5. **Questions**

Before starting to research about critical thinking development, it is necessary to establish some questions in order to guide the research. These questions are:

- How do I choose the best strategies and activities to stimulate the critical thinking development in my students?

- How do I make my students become aware of their own reality and relate it to their own experience of life?
6. **Rationale**

One of my personal goals as a teacher is to teach my students to use English as a tool for social progress. In other words, I want to give my students the tools to analyze the reality that surrounds them critically and to be able to express their own opinions. Students who think critically are a big contribution for the society of the future, due to the fact that people who is able to questions and identify the main problems in society, are the ones who are able to change them. I would consider an honor as a teacher to be part of the formation of the future generations, which have to work in order to build a better society.

A better society will in fact be able to deal more effectively with the problems it faces, or it encounters. Currently, we live in a world of unprecedented complexity and consequent challenging problems. In a democracy, society's actions should reflect the will of the people, so it follows that the people need to be capable of understanding the complex problems they face. Here is where education comes in; The more educated a population is the better equipped it will be to understand and solve the problems it faces, because education builds knowledge, thinking, and communication skills.

Clearly, that ambitious goal will not be reached overnight, it requires a long process of teaching and learning. Despite that, there are ways of contributing to this objective. Focusing on my small space of action, I will have to choose the right strategies to build the base for this huge personal project, which stands for improving the critical thinking development of the students from this kind of schools.
7. **Objectives.**

To carry out a critical thinking developing process, it is necessary to motivate students, so that they can participate actively and willingly in the class. Generating interaction among students is also a very important factor to consider when teaching English. Languages require interaction, not only for making children interact in a communicative context, but also to strengthen social relationships among them. I have had the opportunity to see how children enjoy interacting with each other, especially when using a foreign language. In one of my classes, I asked my students to write down the phone number of five classmates they had never talked to before. The response of the students was positive and enthusiastic. Once they had learned the numbers in English, they only wanted to put that knowledge into practice. By doing this activity, I also included students who are not really into the group, most of them seemed really glad to be taken into account.

My problem comes up when choosing the right strategies and activities to activate my students’ critical thinking development. It is difficult to work with students who are used to being treated as if they knew nothing and as if they were not able to do things by themselves. It is necessary to start working gradually. In other words, it is necessary to start using the tools they already know, in order to introduce the new strategies little by little.

While observing classes at República de Israel School I could realize that some teachers do not have a real purpose when teaching their classes. They try to be neutral all the time, without wanting to take their pedagogical practice beyond the limits imposed by the curriculum. According to Hilda Calcagno’s article about Paulo
Freire’s awareness pedagogy, teaching cannot be a neutral activity, due to the fact that this practice is political. Teachers who try to be neutral –Freire says- in their pedagogical practice, are ignoring the historical background that bases this way of teaching. In other words, teaching always has a purpose, and it depends on the teacher to decide who establishes that purpose, which can be defined by the teacher himself or by the ideology that lies behind the curriculum (3).

8. **Research methods**

One possible option for collecting data for a project like this one is to keep a journal with the reflections of the strategies and activities used and their results. Reflecting about my practices in the classroom gives me the chance to improve and change elements that may interfere in the main purpose of the research, which is to find a way of establishing the right strategies to make my students learn meaningfully.

Keeping a journal with the activities that have been used during a previously defined period of time, and making comments about them will allow me to contrast my own reality and the authors chosen to support my research.

Unfortunately, it will not be possible to do this project because of a matter of time. Although, the benefits of keeping a journal with personal reflections allows teachers to be able to back up what they have been working on, ask for different opinions and discuss with their peers about the project that is being done.

9.1. Being aware of the thinking process.

Putting my students into situations that require looking for solutions and making them participate among themselves cooperatively and actively are some of the main objectives of this proposal, which necessarily requires developing student’s thinking skills. Mike Fleetham, educational consultant and trainer, defines thinking skills as:

“The mental processes we use to do things like: solve problems, make decisions, ask questions, make plans, pass judgments, organize information and create new ideas. Often we’re not aware of our thinking - it happens automatically - but if we take time to ponder what’s going on then we can become more efficient and more creative with our minds.

According to what Fleetham says, it is necessary to make my students aware of their own thinking, so that they can develop a more creative and meaningful way of thinking. Putting students in “difficult” situations that need to be solved will help them to wonder constantly “why?” In other words, students will be developing their problem solving skills, which means that in a longer period of time, they will get used to questioning everything they consider that may have a possible answer.

9.2. The Importance of reasoning.

Mattew Allen, in his book *Smart Thinking* stands that the concept of *reasoning* is the basis of *thinking*. Allen defines *reasoning* as “the process of understanding and exploring the relationship among many events, objects and ideas in our world”; he also says that “an item can only be understood in relationship to the other ones”. In other words, reasoning is the ability to find and express these connections.
Considering Allen's point of view, it can be possible to identify the necessity of being in a constant relationship with others in order to understand ourselves within a group of people, and also to understand the environment we are immersed in. We create meaning according to the relationship we establish with other people, places and things. When students are immersed in a group of peers, it is easier for them to establish connections and create meaning, as long as they are motivated and interested in what is being discussed in the class.

This notion of reasoning, as explained by Allen, allows us to understand someone else's ideas, to explain your own ideas clearly, to generate reasons for viewpoints, to evaluate reasons given by others and accept and reject information according to our own criteria. What Allen is trying to tell us is that reasoning is the key concept for thinking critically. The only thing we have to do is to create connections among things. It may sound extremely easy, and we could say it is. We make connections all the time in day-to-day life. When we see a picture of one of our relatives, for example, we automatically relate that image with experiences, memories, feelings, etc. We would not be able to rely on facts of the past or making predictions if we were not able to make connections.

It is possible to illustrate the process of reasoning by looking at Paulo Freire's literacy teaching methodology, which basically consisted of showing the students images connected with their own reality. By doing this, students not only exercised their reading and writing skills, but also they generated discussions regarding the images. Freire defines this process as “awareness” –concientización, in Spanish-, in which students make connections, reflect and discuss about the image shown by the teacher. Most of the times these images were a representation of the student's reality, so that it was impossible for students not to be interested in the discussions generated in the classroom.

9.3. Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic relationships

Reasoning also allows us to know things with which we have no direct experience by creating structures to make connections among different facts. Matthew
Allen defines two categories for connections we usually make. These categories are **syntagmatic relationships**, and **paradigmatic relationships**. We speak about **syntagmatic relationships** when we refer to how things related to one another at any given moment. For example, if we stand that “an orange is a citrus fruit” or “citrus fruits are edible”, we are establishing a direct relationship (a syntagmatic one).

**Paradigmatic relationships** allow us to calculate consequences over time. For example, “eating too many oranges made me feel sick” or “if I want vitamin C, then I should eat an orange”.

Taking this example into the classroom context, we can say that syntagmatic relationships are the ones we create when two concepts are directly related. For example, the word *school* is directly related to the words *student*, *teacher*, *education*, *learn*, *etc*. Basically, what syntagmatic relationships allow us to connect all the concepts that are related with one big concept or idea. Paradigmatic relationships help us to make predictions by connecting ideas based on previous experiences. They also help stimulating students to give their opinion regarding a specific idea. For instance, if the teacher asks his students “why do you have to use a uniform and students who attend to the university do not have to?” probably students will start to connect ideas and thoughts in order to find a proper response to the question.

Allen also says that it is possible to identify relationships through patterns such as similarity and difference; Commonality and inconsistency; Necessity and Sufficiency. Presenting these patterns to my students will help them to argue, explain, making decisions, predict, explore, finding answers, justify, etc. The author also defines *reasoning* as a social act, due to the fact that everyone has different perspectives and opinions when facing a specific fact or event.
When opposing two different ideas, students have the opportunity of agreeing or disagreeing, depending on the connections and the previous experiences they have when facing two different arguments. For generating discussions and debates regarding a specific topic, it is necessary to be immersed in a social context, where the personal opinions and other’s opinions need to be discussed with others in order to get to an agreement.

9.4. Taking Children Seriously.

Herbert Puchta, Master Practitioner in Neurolinguistic Programming, postulates that thinking requires development by saying that “thinking needs to be developed, and people do not necessarily become wiser as they become older” (5). Puchta also says that kids’ thinking skills start being developed when they are taken seriously. In other words, involving children in meaningful conversations, inspiring their imagination, asking them questions that make them think, etc. will help children to develop their thinking skills.

It is common among adults to ignore or avoid small talking with children, it seems that adults are too busy to listen to children. Teachers tend to do the same, without knowing that listening to children and giving them proper answers to their questions will help them to develop thinking skills that will be useful in the future.

9.5. Identifying Problems

Thinking skills need to be worked and stimulated in order to be developed properly. Puchta states that not all children have had enough stimuli, and one way of leveling children thinking skills is putting them in problematic situations (6). When we try to solve problems, we first of all need to observe carefully what the symptoms of the problem are. It is important to accurately use our senses, in order to focus on what
we consider necessary for identifying those symptoms, for example, by hearing and seeing. We need to have the ability to focus our attention for longer periods of time, and we need to set ourselves a goal. We also need creative skills and the ability to look at a problem from different perspectives, and we need to think carefully what outcomes a planned chain of actions might possibly result in. When we have finally decided on what to do and how to go about it, we need to be able to evaluate what we have done and, if necessary, go back and undo what we have done or apply an alternative strategy. In other words, it is necessary to create connections that allow us to understand the fundamentals of the problem predict the possible consequences and reorganize our ideas when we realize that something was not right for the solution we were thinking on.

When children get used to systematically applying their thinking skills, they will go through positive learning experiences, and they will gradually learn to enjoy more challenging tasks. As a result, their self-confidence will grow.


Puchta suggests a model for applying these categories to the classroom context -especially applicable for young learners- (7). This model is based in the use of images for promoting imaginative thinking, which later will be useful for children to understand written and oral texts. For young children, there is no clear borderline between imagination and reality –Puchta says-, this fact can become a very important resource for teachers who want their students to develop thinking skills. As an example, if a teacher uses a glove-puppet, probably children will recognize it as a puppet, but as soon as the puppet starts talking through the teacher’s voice, children will go into a dream like state of mind, where the puppet has become alive.
Stories also play an essential role in cognitive development of children. The function of stories, however, is more than mere entertainment, they help children to develop an understanding of the world and their own life experiences (8). Basically, stories help children to create images in their minds, which are necessarily connected with their own way of seeing the world.

Helping children to develop their imagination through Puchta’s model, will allow them to exercise their ability to establish relations between what is being seen or heard and the images they produce in their minds. Being able to connect children’s own experiences, beliefs and thoughts with an external stimuli develops their thinking skills, which is the first stage of the critical thinking process.

Taking all these references into consideration, it would be possible to say that if I want my students to think critically, it is necessary to stimulate their imagination and their ability to make connections. Once students have developed their capability of making connections, they will be able to question the elements that surround them and relate those elements with their own reality and personal experiences. These factors will also allow students to give their own opinions regarding a specific topic. It is extremely important for students thinking development to be listened by everyone, so that respect is stimulated among students, in order to enrich the discussion and students’ self-esteem.

10. Action Plan – Proposal

Taking into account all the facts previously mentioned, it is possible to have some notions related to the possible strategies and activities that can be useful for implementation in the classroom.

It has been said that making connections and reasoning are the first steps for thinking critically. This action plan consists on using audiovisual material, in which students can establish relationships between social problems and their own reality reflected on those images. Using pictures or videos of indigenous children of the same age of my students will
allow them to compare themselves to the reality of indigenous children. The idea of this activity is to encourage students to establish syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships, which will allow them to start questioning the reasons why their reality and indigenous children's reality are so different. It is important that during this activity, students work in groups, due to the fact that it is easier for them to establish connections when they are immersed in a group.

Once they have found similarities between both realities –theirs and the children’s of the images- they will be able to continue with the second step, which consists of looking for differences. It is necessary that the teacher monitors this part of the activity, and corrects students if they establish racist or negative differences.

When students have already found similarities and differences between themselves and the people of the images, the will have to start looking for reasons why those differences exist by discussing with their classmates and giving their opinion to the whole class. It is very important that the teacher controls the environment of the discussion. In other words, it is necessary that the discussion goes on respectfully. The teacher must guarantee that the discussion in the groups is properly done.

One student previously selected by the group is going to take notes of every step of the activity, so that at the end of it students will have a record of the points discussed. At the end of the activity, one student in representation of the whole group will expose the point discussed to the whole class. Once they finish, the teacher will ask for other group’s opinions. When all groups had presented the points they had discussed, the teacher will sum up by highlighting the best comments during the activity.

It is important to highlight that we are working with kids, and this activity may be a quite difficult for them, but it is possible to readapt some components and materials of this activity in order to make it suitable for children.
11. **Conclusion.**

Teachers need to be aware of the importance of their role in society, which is not giving students meaningless information without any clear purpose, as Freire said. Those intentions necessarily need to be personified by the teacher and his pedagogical practice; otherwise teaching would not have any reason to be. Nowadays, information is everywhere and within reach for anyone, all the contents taught at school can be found on internet, TV, books and they can be easily explained by someone else, but all those contents do not have the *magic* that real teaching has.

Teaching is going beyond what your students expect from the teacher, is giving students knowledge they actually did not know, knowledge that they can feel and see. Teaching is showing my students that today's school is changing as well as teachers are changing, is showing them love for what they can reach, for what they are and do, is loving your students.

When a teacher impregnates his students with what he really believes, he is also actively fighting for his ideals. A teacher who dreams with a better society and educates his students for being part of that dream, he is at the same time wishing the best for his students.
That is why it is so important not to be neutral in the classroom, otherwise teaching would not have sense at all.

Sometimes little things are the ones that make big differences and it can be reflected on how we treat our students. Recalling Puchta words, it is important to take children seriously. When we listen to what they have to say or when they ask us a question—which it is—we are not only creating an affective connection with them, we are also helping them to develop their cognitive skills. It may sound like something extremely simple to do, but still we, adults, do not do it.

It seems like everything has been already created, like if there is nothing left that astonishes us, but actually children still have the capability of getting astonished when teachers show the new ways for seeing life. It depends uniquely on the teacher to look for the strategies for really helping students to learn and not to follow the regular style of teaching, which leads us to teach thing that do not have any impact in students' lives.

Teaching is a political act, it is a representation of fighting for what we believe, and it is an act of love. Teaching requires time and patience, it is a hard job to do and as everything in life, it also has an easy-way-to-do. Our society needs to change and it needs people for making it change. Clearly, the easy-way-to-do it is not going to change anything at all, for that reason teachers who consider themselves as agents of change are the ones who are committed to the real purpose of teaching, which is fighting for a better future.
Works Cited


