Role-Playing as A Method of Teaching Social Sciences to Limit Bias and Discrimination in the School Environment

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Abstract

The present study examines the use of role-playing in the context of teaching social sciences aiming at the limitation of bias and discrimination in the school environment. Role-playing is widely used throughout the scope of activities and subject matters included in curricula. It facilitates communication, comprehension, decrease of bias and discrimination, while aiding learning in a variety of learning environments. Role-playing is a popular technique; however, there is only a few publications with reference to its use for the management of discrimination. The present study attempts a critical literature review focusing on the advantages, limitations and challenges of role playing, as well as the requirements needed for its application. Moreover, it explores the effectiveness, the critique and the reservations expressed regarding role-playing applications.

Key words: role playing, bias, discrimination, teaching social sciences

1. Introduction

Role-playing is among those strategies and methods of teaching that develop critical reflection, self-comprehension, and social problems as well (Cherif & Adams,1993; Ruiter, Massar, van Vugt, Kok, de Zavala, & Cichocka, 2012; Willemsen & Van Vianen, 2008). The teaching value of role-playing is considered remarkable, as is its effectiveness in curriculum implementation (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). It has been utilized in the teaching practice in order to study issues related to racism, ethnicity, social inequality, gender, social exclusion, and other social problems (Monchinsky, 2008). In specific, children may explore roles of individuals who are part of a minority or other social groups such as people of colour, homeless, unemployed, disabled etc. In this process, educators are not only coordinators but also participants, as they can participate in role-playing themselves, which has a positive, beneficial effect both on educators and the school community at large. Thus, education using role-playing can contribute to better perception and fighting of discrimination and bias (Lamb & Lerner, 2015).

Several studies have shown that a considerable percentage of children and adolescents are recipients or targets of discrimination, rejection etc. in the school environment, which causes problems in their participation in the learning and social processes of the school (Szalacha, Erkut, Garcia Coll, Alarcon Fields, & Ceder, 2004; Stone & Han, 2005). Research studies on students' reminiscences and traumatic memories have shown the crucial role of the school and educators in controlling discrimination (Morina Diez, 2010a; Moriña Díez, 2010b). Role-playing and some of its specialized techniques, such as role reversal, can contribute to changing the culture of silence and to including individuals facing discrimination and bias because of their being different (Cook, 2000; Gibson, 2006; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Stephan & Finlay, 1999).

Role-playing is used not only as part of the teaching methodology but also in empathy training programs, aiming at the limitation of discrimination and bias, with individuals of any age and ethnical background (Aboud & Levy 1999).

Through role-playing, participants put themselves in someone else's place, they experience feelings and see the world through the eyes of others, they approximate the others' way of thinking and living (Levesque, 2015). Exercises and role-playing are effective in decreasing verbal expression of discrimination and bias (Plous 2000; Lawson, McDonough, & Bodle, 2010). Furthermore, it is important to use role-playing in anti-bias education, programmes developed in the context of antiracist or multicultural education or even independently in curricula (McGregor,1993). Such programmes include lectures, discussion, etc., in addition to role-playing (Whitley & Kite, 2016).

2. The concept of role-playing

There is no "clear and generally accepted definition of role-playing" and, according to certain specialists, this is due to the specific "characteristics that describe" this method (Ruiz, Doreste, & Mediero, 2016). Many definitions are "ambiguous and too general", whereas there is a confusion observed regarding certain types of teaching methods such as simulation games (Randel, Morris, Wetzel, & Whitehill, 1992). Therefore, even though role-playing is widely used, it is nevertheless quite difficult to offer a complete definition (Shapiro & Leopold, 2012).

In a more descriptive and comprehensive aspect, role-playing is a game-like activity based on the interpretation/performance of one or more characters in a story. As a game, it is free as regards its choice and it is subject to rules, which are specific for each roleplay. As regards the interpretation level, it constitutes an effort of one to not be oneself but make decisions and try to act as the character in the game would. Besides, as a narration, it is an interactive story in an imaginary setting, where one will meet other characters in various scripts (Roda, 2010, p. 192).

"In a role–play, the participants take on a "role" in a specific situation or scenario" (Greco, 2009,p.157).The participants may assume to represent themselves or another person in a different situation, condition, etc., in a safe environment, where they can act, experiment, learn and teach without running the risk of suffering irreversible consequences (Ladousse, 1989).

Currently, role-playing is perceived by many writers as a bunch or set of techniques and, in this sense, it is used as a general term that refers to and signifies a broad range of simulation techniques, as well as various role techniques (Wieringa,1968), which aims at approximating "aspects of life", events or experiences in "controlled conditions" (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997).

Role-playing is a reliable teaching method for psychosocial intervention, as well as a research method of data collection in the fields of psychology, social work, educational sciences and social sciences at large (Alexander & Scriven, 1977).

In literature, role-playing has been classified in various categories, some of which are:

- *Single role-playing:* it is applied in small groups because members are highly likely to participate
- *in vivo* (el juego de rol en vivo): it is applied in big groups, in a natural environment, while it assumes direct interaction among participants. It favours deep insight into a role and is a useful tool for offering support
- *Video role-playing (videojuegos de rol)*
- *Writing a role-playing script* (juego de rol por escrito) that can be performed afterwards
- *multiple role plays:* all trainees/students are participating simultaneously taking on a role
- *role rotational role play:* in this case, participants take roles in rotation so that everyone participates in the game, with each one showing how they handle the specific issue or problem (Roda, 2010, pp. 193-199; Mate, 2015; Wohlking & Gill,1980).

Role-playing is ideal for small groups. It reinforces verbal interaction among participants, encourages narration of personal stories and experiences, as well as cooperation among members; in other words, it facilitates the teacher in accommodating students' special needs.

3.The characteristics of role-playing

Much has been written about the characteristics of role-playing, with the following being fundamental:

- Role-playing belongs in participative, collaborative methodologies, as it triggers and increases participation of the individual in social interactions.
- It is a permissive method that encourages experimentation as regards new ways of participation, pursuit of solutions or alternative directions in communication with other individuals at school.
- Role-playing creates a lively and informal atmosphere, which frees the members of the school group from tensions or other emotional or social limitations.

- It allows examination of specific behaviours and situations as they occur in everyday life, which makes it a lively process (Van Ments, 1999).

4. The procedures of role-playing

Role-playing favours acquisition of skills and knowledge from various cognitive subjects and areas of the curriculum (Shaftel & Shaftel, 1982; Briggs & Hansen, 2012), reinforces students' creativity and, above all, it broadens their repertoire of social skills and behaviours (Kellermann, 1992). As a teaching strategy, it is applied in the teaching of social sciences in education to elaborate on and learn about important social problems, decision or issues concerning the community and social life in all its aspects and expressions. Role-playing is usually a team thing; in special cases, however, it can be applied individually.

There are three basic phases in the process of role-playing:

I. Preparing for the roleplay

Role-playing requires special psychological and physical preparation of both the participants and the coordinating educator. First, an issue or a problem is chosen to explore its possible solutions. It is also important that students have a good knowledge of the matter. Next, a script is formed, and the roles are assigned to the participants. Often, before starting role-playing, students may search for information and tips about their role in the social issue to explore, aiming at an in-depth study and analysis of a social problem (van Ments, 1999; Fine, 2002). Among those that must be defined at this phase is the specific nature of roleplay, i.e., a public speech, a council, a forensic case, the relationships among students in the class and school, etc. (Blatner, 1996).

II. Role-playing

At this phase when role-playing is being carried out, the set is arranged accordingly: the space for action and dramatic representation of the roles is distinguished from the space of the participant attendees. The place must have been arranged in such a way as to accommodate the requirements of the role-playing (furniture, equipment, etc.). The educator coordinates the game and can interrupt it, if needed, to discuss issues, clarify attitudes or behaviours (Moreno, 2007).

III. After the roleplay: Discussion and assessment

Upon completion of the roleplay, there is a discussion for participant students to gain insight into the learning experience. During this phase, students get gradually out of the roles they had assumed while role-playing and are encouraged to express their feelings and their thoughts during the group/class discussion. The educator coordinates the procedure of the discussion, focusing on how the students have changed their attitudes and what they have learned from the roleplay, the demands of their roles, the contradiction of their attitudes and their problems. Frequently, during this phase, other complementary activities may be used, i.e., games, artistic creations, etc., to enhance processing of the things that happened while role-playing (Wieringa, 1968).

The above distinction of the phases in the process of role-playing is based on psychodrama, where role-playing stems from. Many writers suggest a different conception regarding the distinction of the phases of role-playing, taking various aspects of the teaching-learning process into consideration. Burnard (1989, p. 19) suggests the following distinction:

A.   *Setting the scene*
B.   *Acting out the role-playing*
C.   *Reflection and feedback*
D.   *Integration of new learning*

Role-playing sets the appropriate conditions to create a wide range of learning experiences, interaction and communication in the classroom setting. Besides, it is a pleasant, playful and appealing activity, which reinforces children to assume personal responsibility in the learning process and further develop their sense of social responsibility (Doorn & Kroesen, 2013). It evades many obstacles concerning the participation in group activities of those children with emotional inhibition, who are reserved or withdrawn, because participation through a persona, the role of someone else, creates a sense of security and liberation (Ladousse, 1989).

5.Advantages, educational value, and limitations of role-playing

Role-playing is popular with children of pre-school and primary education during the social interaction among them both in the school setting and the wider social environment (Corsaro, 2005).

It is a teaching method that facilitates and prepares the child for learning and acquisition of new skills, while also affects and improves emotional responses and deepens the learning process (Maier, 1989).

According to Sue Rogers and Julie Evans, "children demonstrate an inherent capacity to engage in role-play, and that is a central feature during their early development" (Rogers & Evans, 2008,p.52). That is why role-playing constitutes a fundamental pedagogical activity, especially for primary school children.

According to Johan Huizinga (2002), play maximizes the child's contentment/pleasure, while ensuring the child's autonomy and self-direction and, consequently, the developmental process. Role-playing is the dominant type of play among children of younger age (Singer, 2013).

6.Role-playing in teaching social sciences in the classroom

Ultimately, the goal of teaching social sciences at school is the development of citizens who will understand and participate in the formation of a "local, national and international reality" (Insaurralde, 2009), with a view to a world where equality, social justice, stability and solidarity will prevail (Insaurralde, 2009).

A significant development in the field of teaching social sciences in primary and secondary education is observed worldwide. However, this development is not reflected at the level of applied teaching (Susskind, 1984) with relevant teaching applications. In this context, new methodological and teaching approaches are suggested for the achievement of the goals of teaching social sciences, with role-playing being one of them (Shaftel & Shaftel, 1982). Through role-playing, students can explore the ethical dimensions of social problems, and develop skills of social participation (Cherif & Somervill, 1995).

It is also used in many subjects such as History, Language, etc,, which can be exploited to teach and highlight various social issues and problems in a cross-thematic perspective. In this sense, highlighting and discussing various social problems can be disseminated throughout the curriculum, just as the use of role-playing can be integrated in multiple activities in all school subjects.

"Role-playing as a social teaching model is rooted in the personal and social dimensions of education. It attempts to help individuals find personal meanings in the personal worlds and resolve personal dilemmas assisted by social groups. As for its social dimensions, it allows individuals to work together to analyse various social situations, especially on interpersonal problems, and develop decent and democratic ways to cope with them "(Joyce & Well, 1986, pp. 241-242, as cited in Cherif & Somervill,1995**).**

Role-playing, as applied both in the teaching of social sciences and in social problems at large, facilitates the development of a set of skills such as the following:

- Critical reflection
- Communication and participation
- Intervention in social issues
- Development of social dimensions, aspects of the self
- Understanding others and otherness
- Social solidarity
- Insightfulness during the educational process and learning experience
- Role-playing as a constant source of learning and education

(Cherif, & Somervill, 1995)

Such skills are valuable for the management of social problems, especially those related to discrimination and bias.

7. Discrimination and bias in the school

There are many different definitions of discrimination and bias. Discrimination has two dimensions, the positive regard of an individual or group of people and the negative attitude towards other individuals or groups of people (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). Discrimination and bias are often observed among students and peers, as well as between educators and students. However, their role in the context of the educational system internationally has not been studied sufficiently (Farkas, 2003).

Discrimination and bias are complex psychological issues encountered by children and adults, students, parents, and educators (Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

At schools and other social spaces alike, considerable discrimination can be observed against individuals from various social groups, with different racial, ethnical background (Rivas-Drake, Hughes & Way, 2008), or on the grounds of their gender and other parameters such as disability, religion, and other characteristics too.

Racial discrimination has negative effects on the students subjected to it; it causes pain and stigmatization, and is associated with unfair treatment (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006). It prevents the formation of a cultural identity and cause problems in relationships among peers (Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2009; Bellmore, Nishina, You, & Ma, 2012). In these cases, the student's performance problems are interpreted and understood on the basis of the relationship between the educator and the student as this is developed according to their categorization in terms of their belonging to a majority/minority (Dee, 2004, 2007).

The school is a social space that can function as a real-life laboratory, a laboratory for the management of discrimination and bias and the development of healthy attitudes and behaviours, by preparing responsible citizens.

8. Role-playing in the management of discrimination and bias

Role-playing is a vehicle which, through action and representation, highlights the discrimination and bias experienced by students. During role-playing, students interchange roles of individuals whose behaviour display discrimination and bias against others, as well as roles of individuals who are subjected to discrimination (McGregor,1993).

Even though we do not yet have sufficient or systematic research data on the use of role-playing for the management of discrimination at school, its application so far has been encouraging, according to Stuart Oskamp. The goal is not only to decrease discrimination and bias, but also to handle the relevant intergroup behavior (Oskamp, 2000, p.286). Additionally, the development of empathy through dramatic role-playing can contribute to the management of behavioural issues and to the modification of students' attitudes.

Role-playing has a significant impact on another category of discrimination: the one against individuals with some kind of disability (Flynn, 1997), as well as the advocacy and defence of this category inside and outside the school environment. Role-playing and simulation games reinforce the pedagogical dynamics of teaching and the strategies used for the integration and inclusion of children (Gore, 2010).

Besides, role-playing is traditionally considered to be a method to teach difficult learning contents (Tyas & Cabott, 1999) and also to organize complex teaching experiences, since it resembles live experience, life itself. It helps comprehension of the processes that give shape to discrimination and bias, and clarification of social roles and social experiences (Gore, 2010). It reinforces cross-cultural communication, change, and the limitation of problems of communication between individuals, and makes the learning and teaching experience appealing.

Role-playing can be combined with other teaching methods and strategies such as watching films and videos with relevant content in every classroom (Fishbein,1996). Colca, Lowen, Colca, & Lord (1982) combined role-playing with group discussions, watching films, and other experiential exercises and activities, in a six-month programme, which resulted in reduction of discrimination and distance between Afro-American and white American students, and also contributed to a change of negative attitudes (Colca, Lowen, Colca, & Lord, 1982). Role-playing fosters cooperative interaction, especially when discrimination and bias are gender-related (Stephan & Finlay,1999).

Role-playing is a powerful form of intervention, whose dramatic form and structure contributes to the management and prevention of educational, social and emotional obstacles and problems rooted in discrimination in the school setting (Fishbein,1996). Along with other drama creative activities, it offers a basis for dialogue, a vehicle to bring forth the personal voice of individuals who are "voiceless" or unable to assert equal participation in social processes. Lopez, Gurin, & Nagda, (1998) report using role-playing in dialogue groups with positive results, with participant students achieving better understanding of issues related to racism, poverty and inequality.

Role-playing enhances students' mental resilience and awareness of social conditions, behaviours, and attitudes that weaken social solidarity (Blatner, 1995). It is especially valuable in anti-racist and cross-cultural education since, through the development of empathy, it introduces new dimensions and enriches the pedagogical experience (Nelson, 2009).

9. Problems, limitations and difficulties

Certain difficulties and problems related to the application of role-playing in teaching social sciences have been discussed in the relevant literature. Students often cannot discern those situations that require expression of empathy or it is likely that role-playing is limited to showing victims as helpless individuals unable to overcome their difficulties.

In this sense, role-playing may have a negative impact on the self-esteem of people from minority groups or it may produce reverse outcomes from those expected .In addition, role-playing has often been criticized as likely to foster rather than eliminate discrimination and bias, since it projects racist and other negative behaviours (Ijaz, & Ijaz,1984).

To handle such problems, it is suggested that role-playing be used in combination with simulation games, which are more structured and offer the participants a safe context for action. As such, simulation games are used for the representation of social processes, inequalities, etc., aiming at better understanding of the problems and discrimination (Chapman, 1974). Simulation games are applied with more participants and few, if any, observers, whereas in role-playing a sufficient number of viewers-observers is required (Dorn, 1989). In simulation games, roles and rules are clearer and action is clearly defined in a comprehensible sequence of actions (Dorn, 1989).Another type of difficulties and limitations refers to the lack of skills and systematic training of educators concerning the use of role-playing (McGregor, 1993).

10. Conclusions

Role-playing is a powerful methodological tool that can contribute to the management of social problems, especially interpersonal ones, in the context of a Creative Pedagogy. It can enhance awareness of the social world and its problems and facilitate the examination of the role of power structures and suppression of individuals who are different. It is also a tool for educators to realize their participation in power systems (Alemanji, 2017; Mikander, & Hummelstedt-Djedou, 2018).

Role-playing can be used with positive results to change students' attitudes towards discrimination, to experientially understand and access its content. It strengthens human relations, facilitates comprehension of the role of others, aids learning of positive values and sets boundaries to personal behaviour (Chamizo-Sanchez, & Fernandez-Torres, 2013).

A review of the relevant literature shows that role-playing is more effective in the management of discrimination among school-age children, and to a lesser degree in other age groups. On the other hand, the use of role-playing as a method to manage discrimination and bias or to explore and teach in the context of social sciences teaching is considered limited and non-systematic despite its effectiveness (McGregor, 1993).

Role-playing resembles a laboratory for the representation and processing of emotions, ideas, social behaviours and problems (Blatner, 1995), and also a laboratory for the production and creation of new ideas and solutions to such problems. It promotes modern, post-modern modes of reflection, placing emphasis on interaction rather than just a linear rational process of communication. As a creative pedagogical method (Toivanen, Halkilahti, & Ruismäki, 2013), it reinforces metacognitive skills by directing thought to how we think (Blatner, 1995), while it supports students' process of awareness.

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