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Date of publication: February 24th, 2012

To cite this article: García, R. (2012). Out of the Ghetto: Psychological Bases of Dialogic Learning, *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, 1(1), 51-69. DOI: 10.4471/ijep.2012.04

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4471/ijep.2012.04>

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Out of the Ghetto: Psychological Bases of Dialogic Learning

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Abstract

The conception of learning in the information society has been affected by the dialogic turn of educational psychology. The effective teaching-learning processes respond more and more to the communicative conception of learning in which dialogue and interaction are key elements. In this framework, the dialogic learning emerges as an interdisciplinary conception that collects contributions from psychology of education, particularly from sociocultural theory, and from those contributions that have located learning as the result of social interaction. This article presents the psychological basis of dialogic learning on the basis of which it is developed this eminently communicative and transformative conception. Specifically, it focuses in five of the seven principles of the dialogic learning of which it is illustrated with the voices of teachers, families and students, by means of the collected data in an elementary school of an underprivileged area in the south of Europe.

Keywords: dialogue, interaction, dialogic learning, educational success

A conception of transformative education that tries to meet successfully the challenges presented in the 21st century cannot obviate the dialogic turn of societies (Flecha, Gómez, & Puigvert, 2001). The dialogic turn refers to the centrality that dialogue takes in all the social spheres, from institutions to the life of individuals and social groups. From the analysis conducted by the contemporary social sciences (Beck, 1998; Habermas, 1987; Touraine, 1997), issues on the old power relationships from the industrial society are questioned, and there is a major presence of dialogue in the current society and in the decisions that affect us. The dialogic trend that we live in is the result of social changes that have been produced and that we observe both in the construction of scientific knowledge such as in the academia, within the schools and the same classrooms. The centrality of dialogue and the interaction have gone through the current conceptions of learning that are located in the dialogic turn in educational psychology (Racionero & Padrós, 2010). According to Racionero and Padrós (2010) this dialogic turn has meant a prior change of paradigm that understands that the knowledge and believes are structured in mental sketches of thought, in order to facilitate the transition to the current perspective in which knowledge and thought are developed through dialogue and interaction. The dialogic construction of knowledge includes dialogue with people of the community (Tellado & Sava, 2010). Vicente shares this transformative learning conception that includes him and the diversity of people and cultures existent within the community in the teaching-learning processes. The dialogic orientation of learning becomes crucial to learn to think together (Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999) and to reach a point of thinking education from the diversity of cultures and experiences of the people in the community. These are a valuable guide for the students learning who are offered the possibility of acquiring a deeper comprehension of the world from the contributions of their knowledge.

In this sense, we observe that the dialogic dynamic of societies has been affected by the demonopolization of the expert knowledge (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1997). The increase of dialogue in the current information society includes the reflection of the individuals considered as “non experts”. More and more is accepted that there are no expert individuals that have all the social and cultural knowledge required to

respond to the needs of everyone. This process breaks with the monopoly traditionally given to the people considered “experts” in any of the fields such as health, politics or education, and leads to consider that all the individuals can contribute with arguments and cultural resources to dialogue. In the compulsory education stage, we can see this process, for example, in the teachers as monopolizers of knowledge. Students, family members and people in the community have more and more access to information, in a faster way and easy to get. They bring to the classroom the knowledge that has obtained in their houses, internet, in their own daily experience. In that sense, the classrooms stop being monological spaces to develop themselves in a chain of dialogues that are created together (Bakhtin, 1981). Therefore the thought and knowledge is created in an intersubjective approach. Teaching and learning processes are also affected since schools and classrooms are not at the margins of the dialogicism that is being included in how we teach and learn.

The international scientific community is developing theories that frame this dialogic turn and try to explain how this process define new guidelines for the interaction, learning, families’ involvement, in short for the transformation of the schools (Gatt, Ojala, & Soler, 2011). In fact, the only Integrated Project of the Research Framework Programme conducted on school education, INCLUD-ED. Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education (CREA 2006-2011), and that is the research with most resources and highest scientific rank ever done on education in Europe, has identified schools that are implementing Successful Educational Actions (INCLUD-ED Consortium, 2009) which are based on a communicative conception of learning. In this framework is located the conception of dialogic learning (Flecha, 2000) in which in this article will be studied in depth.

The dialogic learning requires of dialogue and interaction between the diversity of people of the school and of all the community to achieve learning. The seven principles on which this conception is based have an interdisciplinary basis of social sciences that share the centrality of dialogue and are aimed at the educational and social transformation. Among others, it gathers the contributions of Habermas from from the Communicative Action Theory (Habermas, 1987) in the field of sociology, the current developments of the symbolic interactionism

(Mead, 1934) and the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) in psychology, and the Dialogic Action Theory in education. Those theoretical contributions provide key elements that help to define dialogue as a fundamental tool to create optimum contexts for the development and learning and, to achieve higher levels of democracy and social equality.

In the first section of this article the theoretical conception of dialogic learning is presented. Second, several fundamental theories are presented that are in the psychological basis of dialogic learning, because these contribute especially to the development of a instructional process of top-quality that facilitates both the academic success as well as the emotional development of children of different ages, socioeconomic contexts and geographical areas. The dialogic learning principles are depicted including the voices of teachers, family members and students, from an elementary school located in a neighbourhood of very low socioeconomic level and with higher concentration of cultural minorities. The reflections that the people of this centre provide put in dialogue the theoretical basis of the dialogic learning with the experiences and lifeworld of children, teachers and families. Together all advance towards the maximum levels of instrumental learning and emotional development.

Dialogic Learning. Transforming the learning context and the sociocultural environment by means of dialogue

Dialogic learning overcomes the prior conceptions of learning, typical of the industrial society, such as the objectivist conception and the traditional learning or the constructivist conception of significative learning (Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha, & Racionero, 2008). The emphasis, here, is that learning not only depends of the experiences within the classroom but more and more depends on the coordination of the actions within the classroom, the school, the home and the streets (Aubert, García, & Racionero, 2009). We could hardly explain that all that a child learns depends on the time period spent in a classroom classroom in interaction with the teacher and the contents learned, as

many constructivist explanations stated. Now, we know that in the current information society, the learning depends more and more of the correlation of the child interactions with other people of his /her surrounding, besides the teachers. According to this communicative conception of education, the knowledge is created in situations of interaction between diverse individuals that may bring other knowledge, experiences, and feelings. Therefore, the learning resulting of these processes makes possible a deeper understanding of the world given that transforms the prior knowledge of individuals before participating in the dialogue; it widens and provides a more complex knowledge, promoting a personal transformation that also influences in the sociocultural environment (García, Duque, & Mircea, 2010).

The dialogic perspective in the teaching and learning processes is gathered in the educational research at the international level and analyses the central role of dialogue and interaction in the line presented by the dialogic learning. In agreement with Wells (1999) the communities of dialogic inquiry facilitate that all and each one of their participants create knowledge and obtain results that none of them could have achieved separately. This is possible by working together and in collaboration between all the individuals of the group.

Classrooms and the schools advance towards organizational forms that are more and more influenced by the dialogic dynamics for which the main tool of learning and thought is language. For example, the dialogic teaching involves the active participation of students in the use of language and in the communication processes avoiding the re-education of the classroom dynamic to the discourse of the teacher (Alexander, 2004). Evidences provided by prior research indicated that the quality of education in the classroom improves in the measure that communicative and reasoning abilities are promoted (Mercer et al., 1999; Wegerif, Mercer, & Dawes, 1999). If we pay attention to the type of classrooms that offer major opportunities to promote such abilities, we gathered the contributions of research pointing out that the organizations within the classroom in working groups is much more effective than the traditional organization in the classroom (Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell, 2009). With this kind of organisation of the classroom the interactions are richer, related to the question posing, offering explanations, making suggestions or expressing agreement or

disagreement (Galton et al., 2009).

But, what are the interactions and dialogues that promote the maximum learning and transform the sociocultural environment? what are the interactions that lead to the overcoming of inequalities? From the conception of dialogic learning, these are the ones that follow the seven principles that define it. Taking the definition given by Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha and Racionero (2008, p.167) states:

Dialogic learning takes place in “dialogues” that are “egalitarian”, in interactions in which is recognized the “cultural intelligence” of all people and are oriented to the “transformation” of the prior levels of knowledge and the sociocultural context to advance towards the success of all. Dialogic learning takes place in interactions that increase the “instrumental learning”, favor the personal and social “meaning creation”, are guided by principles of “solidarity” and in which “equality” and “difference” are compatible values and mutually enriching.

Therefore, in order for the schools to become authentic spaces of critical and transformative education, it cannot be avoid that human nature is eminently dialogic, as Freire presented (1970), as well as it is also the thought. The sociocultural psychology (Vygotsky, 1978) establishes the intrinsic union between mind and society, and supposes a fundamental basis of dialogic learning that is present in the seven principles that guide the theoretical development of the conception as well as its practices in the schools. The following section deepens in five of the seven principles –egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation, instrumental dimension, meaning creation, solidarity and equality of differences – which theoretical basis is illustrated with the voices of the main characters of the educational community: families, teachers and students form an educational centre of elementary and primary education. By means of their reflections is possible to observe the transformational potential that resides in the principles of the dialogic learning, given that is a school that has experiences a deep transformation going from a ghetto situation to a successful school (Aubert, 2011). It is a centre located in a neighbourhood in Spain with higher rates of poverty and exclusion, in which the population has low educational levels and higher rates of unemployment. In addition it has

a higher percentage of Roma population, merchera¹ and immigrants (Aubert, Elboj Saso, García Carrión, & García López, 2010). From a dialogic conception of learning, the public school of the neighbourhood has demonstrated to overcome a serious context of crisis, characterized by higher levels of school failure, absenteeism and school leaving, serious conflicts between students, with teachers, and teachers with families. It has demonstrated to achieve higher levels of learning that favor the educational success and social inclusion (Valls & Padrós, 2011). Specifically, in the following section are included the reflections obtained by means of two communicative daily live stories with a Roma mother and a Roma student of the last year of primary education. In addition, there are included the results of two semi structured interviews with a teacher course tutor and a teacher of elementary education.

Psychological Basis of Dialogic Learning: Transformative approach towards success and inclusion.

Dialogic learning is defined by its 7 principles in which are collected the main contributions of the current developments of social sciences such as sociology, philosophy, economy, anthropology, and others. We will dedicate this section to the development of the 5 first principles and its theoretical basis from the psychological aspect as a crucial fundamental conception of learning.

1. Egalitarian dialogue

Dialogue is egalitarian when the contributions of the people are considered according the validity of their statements and not the position of power of the one making them. Among the different contributions that reside at the basis of this principle, we gather the concept of the Communicative Action Theory of Habermas (Habermas, 1987) of power claims and validity claims: have the intention to impose an action by force or with violence (physical or symbolic). It is based on the “argument of strength”. We will say that the claims are of power when the actions are guided by the imposition of the interests, interpretations, norms and values of a group of people over another. On the other hand, the validity claims: have intentions of truth and target

the consensus and understanding. These are proposals of collective actions that depend on the arguments that each participant provide to the dialogue. In this case are based on the “strength of the arguments” that each person can provide to the dialogue.

The egalitarian dialogue starts from the idea that all individuals are capable of language and action, and therefore can reach an understanding and define agreements. The option decided by the substitution of power claims by validity claims points to the development of initiatives that promote egalitarian dialogue among all individuals and collectives involved in the educational task. The classrooms of dialogic organisation, such as the interactive groups, are an example of it in which predominates the validity claims not only among teachers and families, but also between teachers and students. From the interview held with Susana², teacher of sixth-grade primary school at the centre we can observe that the egalitarian dialogue guides the interactions in the groups both between students, and between students and teachers, volunteers, or between teachers and families that enter the classroom. Susana recreates in her words the habermasian concepts of validity claims and power claims, and demonstrates the dialogic dynamic of her classroom:

Each one can provide their arguments, yes. The most important is the validity of the arguments, not the status of “I am the teacher and I lead”, try a Little, because they are not used to have one speaking and the other listening, they want to do it all at the same time, they do not respect each other, then step by step, since we do it daily we achieve it (EM3, 2, 14).

2. Cultural intelligence

This wider concept of intelligence than the used frequently is not a simple cognitive dimension but considers a plurality of dimensions of the human interaction. The cultural intelligence considers that all individuals have the capability of participating in a dialogue and provide knowledge acquired through multiple forms. The cultural intelligence, also, includes the academic abilities, the practical abilities and the communicative abilities (Flecha, 2000).

Traditionally the school institution has valued the academic abilities as superior to others, considering as little “intelligent” the

underprivileged social groups. The use of tests of intelligence that pretended to measure it on the basis of the intellectual coefficient, contributed in a negative way. One of the most damaging consequences was the development of the “deficit” theories that associated diversity to inequalities, and attributed individual limitations to social causes (Martín Rojo & Alcalá Recuerda, 2003). Later, many researches overcame such limitations that had generated the traditional conception of intelligence, and made the difference between academic and practical intelligence (Sternberg & Wagner, 1986). The cultural intelligence includes the capability that all individuals have of communication and make use of language and search new forms of communication to collaborate with others and then solve problems. This orientation that provides the cultural intelligence offers the suitable framework to overcome the theories of deficits and provide us the possibility to transform our lives and especially, offers the possibility to overcome the situations of exclusion that live the most vulnerable groups, such as the Roma people and the immigrants. (Oliver, de Botton, Soler, & Merrill, 2011).

In the schools and multicultural communities families provide cultural, linguistic and religious knowledge (Alexiu & Sorde, 2011) that enrich the learning and promote the development. In this sense, Moll and collaborators (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Moll & González, 2004) demonstrate the richness that all communities may bring to the school by means of the funds of knowledge that they have. The concept of funds of knowledge makes reference to the “bodies of knowledge and abilities historically accumulated and culturally developed essential for the functioning of a home or individual and welfare” (Moll et al., 1992: 133).

On the basis of cultural intelligence, the educational centres can take advantage of the *funds of knowledge* (González et al., 2005) that families have in the decisive and educational participation of the community (Díez, Gatt, & Racionero, 2011). By means of the interactions given in the classrooms, children use them as a potential and a resource that favours a school instruction of quality. In addition, the teachers value the contributions that families form their cultural intelligence do, recognising their practical and communicative abilities.

From their experience as course tutor, Susana describes how a mother with a low educational level participates in the assembly, “she provides ideas, and explains how she sees the classroom”. In addition, she recognises that the families can bring certain knowledge that the teachers do not have. The knowledge of the families, including the one of illiterate people, provides an added value to the centre and she recognizes it: “She is good and surprising, maybe there is something I don’t see, she sees it”. This benefits both the learning of the students as well as the learning of the same participating people. The recognition of the cultural intelligence that all people have has facilitated that this wealth is taken advantage of in the classroom and that their academic identity of these women has become reinforced who once left the school and they only completed primary education. This is the case of a mother in the classroom of Susana, that participates in the decision making spaces such as the assembly and other spaces of the school in which it is recognised and valued her cultural intelligence.

Well, when we do the assembly she participates, giving ideas, explaining how she sees the classroom, she observes it, she may see it different to how I would see it, she is very good, and surprising, and maybe she sees something that I don’t, she sees it. She works on everything, on the rules, habits, classroom organization, spaces, times... And then in curricular topics she does not have much time since she has not returned to study. Then she helps on the curricular level up to what she can but she provides other knowledge... (EM3, 10, 23).

3. Transformation

This principle is based on the premises of Freire (1997) that people “are beings of transformation and not of adaptation”. For that reason the dialogic learning transform the relationships between people and their environment. The approach on education and learning towards change breaks with the fallacy of the impossibility of avoiding the reproduction of inequalities. Dialogic learning overcomes the remedial or adaptative orientation to break then with the circle of social inequality. It consists of developing a transformative action that improves the context in which the children live and improve at the same time their learning.

The influence that the expectations have on the students' performance and in the creation of the personal self-concept has been widely studied. Mead (1973) explains that this influence that other people has on each one of us by means of the concept of the other generalized. Each person includes within herself the other people with whom she or he is in relation with; not only have we included dialogues, but also gestures, looks. Then, we adapt our attitudes of "the other", we include them in our "self" and react before an influence of these attitudes with a "me". This is how we internalize the type of behaviour that is expected of us in a given social situation. Therefore, the power of the expectation in the interactionist conception of self that we find in Mead is huge. To believe that a child has more or less interest on studying or that is more or less capable of achieving certain learning, that is, the concept that we have of our students and their families, will be manifested in the interactions that we establish with them. The attitudes, the thoughts and looks and any interactions with the students is incorporated in the academic "self" of the students and then the students themselves respond to the expectations that the teacher projects.

The classrooms and schools that are organized around the dialogic learning generate transformational processes characterised by the higher expectations towards the academic possibilities of students and families. In the next, following Lucia's story, in which her words transmit the feeling that "raises your morale". Now their academic "me" is full of possibilities of being "wiser" and see oneself in secondary education. Now the "self" of many more children is the result of those interactions, as in consequence the absenteeism of the school is reduced and the registration increases:

Now what do they tell you?

Well, that if we want we can achieve it, that once we enter secondary education we will be wiser, they raise our morals.

Have you noticed that more children want to come to school?

Yes

Why?

I don't know, but for sure more children have come to school to register (RN4, 4, 11-16).

In the educational context, the transformation is generated in the measure that spaces of participation are opened and promote such dialogues and interactions for later develop new actions that promote change processes of change and transformation. Dialogue and interaction developed between individuals that collaborate in the development of an activity together, entails several changes and transformations at the individual level, that at the same time have been generated in at the social level. Equally, this process of transformation returns in the social sphere, creating a spiral of change. The metaphor of the spiral used by Wells regarding the creation of meanings is what the author explains by means of his called spiral of knowing (Wells, 2001). This process includes four dimensions and is initiated on the first place with the experience of the person in the individual context; this one is extended with the information from the interpretation of other people and the contexts on the same meaning. The process continues with the creation of knowledge in which a transformation of the collective comprehension takes place with regards to a specific aspect and with its use onto the public domain. Finally, takes place comprehension that occurs in a more personal level and will define the later action. This spiral of knowing assumes a transformation of the person and it is understood as metaeducational.

4. Instrumental dimension

Dialogic learning is not opposed to instrumental learning, it intensifies it. Adapting or reducing learning has no place in dialogic learning. Freire (1970, 1997) connects dialogue to epistemological curiosity. Dewey (1930) from democracy in education aims at providing the same learning opportunities for all. The concept of dialogic learning seeks to give maximum learning opportunities to all students, especially those most at risk of suffering exclusion. It avoids a double discourse that leads to curriculums of competence for some privileged students and a curriculum "of happiness" to those at risk of social exclusion. Mariana's experience, a Roma mother who has three children, illustrates the importance of the instrumental dimension of learning:

As you can see now, the school is very happy, they are learning, which is the most important thing. Because the fact that the school is doing well and children are learning, is crucial and you realize that and you think: "Look at the younger child knows a lot and the oldest one, who did not know anything before, now is doing very well (RF4, 4, 76).

Again, referring to Mead's interactionist person concept (1934), all learning, experience and human thought has its origins in social interaction with others. Actually, Habermas (1987) considers Mead's work as a fundamental contribution for the theory of communicative action action in sociology as well as for the concept of communicative rationality that promotes intersubjectivity. In this vein, dialogic learning also involves communication and intersubjective dialogue as a crucial force to engage in learning in all subjects, in primary and secondary education, and particularly in those instrumental subjects such as language, maths, etc. The instrumental dimension of dialogic learning is present in all the dialogues established in the school. It aims at having everyone achieving key competences to ensure that no child is excluded from the information society. For this reason, all the interactions that include the instrumental dimension of learning are promoted in the school. For example, Lucía, who is a sixth-grade student, participates in classroom meetings that rely on the participation of family members. There, students, teachers and family members share words and reflections by creating dialogic interactions (Soler & Flecha, 2011) and introducing curricular contents in the meeting:

What about meetings?

Now if we play a match, we talk about it all together, or about what we have done, but also we talk about mathematics, and we also have meetings in English.

Do you talk about the things you learn?

Yes, and we also talk about why we come to school and what we like and what we don't.

How does that affect?

Well because it influences if the teacher knows why children come to school, if they are doing well, they will do better for more children to come to school (RN4, 4, 39-44).

In these dialogues we can observe the use of language as a tool of

thinking that allows us to think and act together (Mercer, 2000). Through language we reach new understanding and interpretations of an event or relationship, and this serves people and communities to build a collective thought. From the instrumental dimension of dialogic learning, teachers incorporate learning aspects into the meetings and informal conversations with families and other community members.

5. Creation of meaning

The sense is the driving force of our actions, what lead us to be involved in school, in a social movement, or to participate in an activity or project. According to Bruner (1990), any action seeks to understand the culture and find the creation of meaning. Dialogic learning is developed to create meaning in all those people involved in the teaching and learning and, like all learning is situated in the context (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The challenge is therefore to overcome the loss of meaning that can have many academic experiences when there is no space or recreation opportunities for dialogic, hope or dream. The school cultivates beliefs, skills and feelings that are transmitted in the cultural forms that we have to interpret the social world in which we live (Bruner, 2000). In many cases the beliefs and skills that grow in the school are actually so remote from personal feelings that there is a loss of meaning; that is, there arises a gap between what is expected of the school and what the school actually is. This crisis of meaning especially affects the most vulnerable people, according to the context in which we find ourselves. Bruner explains that loss of meaning as follows:

School begins to present a vision of the world which appears so alien or remote that many learners can find no place in it for them or their friends. This is true not just for girls, or blacks, or Latinos, or Asians, or other kids we target for special attention as potentially at risk. There are also those restless, bored kids in our sprawling suburbs who suffer the pandemic syndrome of “What I am doing here anyway? What’s this to do with me?” (Bruner, 2000, p.115).

The principle of creation of meaning promotes the overcoming such breach. Dialogic learning promotes the development of schools that are part of the lifeworld of girls and boys and their families. Thus schools are achieving dialogic orientation and reaching deeper changes in

students' attitudes regarding the school, from rejection to acceptance and desire to attend. The re-enchantment in the communication between teachers, families, community members and students through egalitarian dialogue has facilitated the implementation of successful educational actions and has improved children and families' lives (Flecha, 2011). A collective dream done by the whole community is a way of re-enchantment and becomes a source of meaning to everyone involved (Sanchez, 1999). Desires, expectations, thoughts and feelings of the community are reflected in their dreams, and the whole community organizes themselves to make those dreams become true. In these cases, school feels closer to children and families' lifeworld, it becomes part of them and it is incorporated into their "me" (Mead, 1973). This is illustrated by Susana's experience, who is a teacher in the fourth-grade. She talked about the change that took place in the families' vision about the school:

Families have changed their vision about education. They have begun to value education and now you can hear comments from mothers who say "I really want that he continues studying and that he goes to high-school, going to college to have a better future, to have a good job, and for that, he has to come every day to school "And they [mothers] get to bring children to class every day and the absenteeism has been greatly reduced. Families are realizing that education is the tool to be included in society today and to have a better future (EM3, 6, 25).

Conclusions

The dialogic turn of educational psychology has framed the development of the concept of dialogic learning, which places dialogue and interaction with the community as key factors of learning. Dialogic learning principles provide the theoretical basis for addressing successful schooling, promoting complex and richer teaching-learning processes, generating a deeper understanding and facilitating better emotional development and values. The transformative orientation of dialogic learning transcends the individual vision of the development of the person and englobes the transformation of socio-cultural context, including the entire community into the learning spaces. It emerges as a conception of learning that successfully responds to the challenges of information society by providing students, families and communities the

skills and competencies needed to avoid falling into social exclusion. Hence, the emphasis on the instrumental dimension of learning that accounts for cultural intelligence and develops on the basis of an egalitarian dialogue, generating social transformation and creation of meaning. The dialogic turn of educational psychology has facilitated the shift from previous conceptions of learning such as the objectivist or the subjectivist ones, to the communicative conception of learning. As part of the communicative conception, dialogic learning has promoted moving from the adaptation to the context to the transformation of the context, including the entire community in the learning. That is the step which is collected in the words of Vicente with which the article starts, the transformation that more schools and communities are enabling, which from a dialogic conception are ensuring the educational success all children have the right to.

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Notes

¹ Mixed identity between Roma and non Roma. This is the way the same population defines themselves in the neighbourhood.

² All names included in the text are pseudonyms.

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