

# Exploring the Impact of Dialogic Literary Gatherings on Students' Relationships With a Communicative Approach

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## Abstract

Taking a communicative approach in a qualitative inquiry entails including people's voices through dialogues that are egalitarian and oriented toward transformation. This approach aligns with the transformative paradigm in the pursuit of ensuring the inclusion of the most vulnerable groups. This article explores the role of the communicative approach when conducting a case study in an elementary school to study the impact of dialogic literary gatherings (DLGs) on students' relationships, particularly for those students most at risk of being marginalized. For that purpose, dialogic encounters with teachers and students occurred in the school to jointly develop the research. During the DLGs, researchers engaged in egalitarian dialogues with the students, and these dialogues facilitated getting to know each other and building relationships of trust. The communicative approach in this study allowed us to establish a profound dialogue with 9-year-old girls to grasp the transformative impact they experienced in their relationships with others. Students' voices are considered essential in communicative research to provide socially useful results and to measure transformative social impacts beyond the educational establishment.

## Keywords

communicative approach, dialogic literary gatherings, qualitative inquiry, social impact

Manuel: Well, the first day you came here, we did not know each other, and now it is different.

Carmen: Yes, it has been different since you came; since you came, my life has changed (. . .) because I have not seen these people as I see them now.

Researcher: Which people do you mean, Carmen?

Carmen: I mean my mates, you and her (pointing to the researchers), my life has really changed since you came.

Qualitative research can be a transformative experience. Dialogues between researchers and those who systematically are affected by social injustice may be catalysts for those most vulnerable to engage in personal and social transformation (Gomez et al., 2011; Mertens, 2012). Hence, inquiry into the impacts of engaging in transformative dialogues with the people we do research with, rather than on, is at the heart of this article. When a child such as Carmen shares the feeling that since the research started, her "life has really changed," the inquirer's life also changes. The dialogue we used to introduce this article had an impact not only on ourselves as researchers but also on the participant children, such as Carmen, an immigrant 9-year-old girl who also has special educational needs.

Dialogue, then, is a powerful tool that shapes our thinking and our lived experience; it promotes an inclusive pedagogy (Kershner, 2016) and mobilizes communities to act as agents of change (Freire, 2004). This description echoes Denzin and Lincoln's (2013) words about qualitative research as a tool for advancing social justice where those who traditionally were silenced are heard. Similarly, Carmen's voice was always placed at the center of the inquiry in our study. In doing so, we take action against injustice. However, as qualitative researchers, we face global challenges in the current times of neoliberalism in which any social justice-oriented approach is threatened and only what can be quantified in narrow models of measurement is valued (Denzin & Giardina, 2017).

Nonetheless, there is also a key concern in contemporary social sciences research worldwide regarding the value of research with and for society, what and how

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research is done, and for whom. This questioning of social sciences is bringing to light the fact that traditional standards and measures of evaluation, such as citations or impact scores, are not enough (Reale et al., 2017). Measures such as social improvements so that those who are most vulnerable can have better lives are essential to legitimize why we do research. For that purpose, critical scholars are envisioning new and open models of accountability to measure the social impact of research, which include alternative indicators such as social improvements and the transferability and sustainability of those actions promoted by research (Flecha et al., 2015). Those indicators inform our study with the purpose of advancing knowledge in education through qualitative research that achieves social impact.

### Seeking Impact Through Dialogic Literary Gatherings

Aiming at achieving social impact, our research draws on a success story in educational research in Europe, the INCLUD-ED project, Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe From Education (Flecha, 2015). Through a series of naturalistic studies conducted with communicative research methodology, the main findings have been transferred and extrapolated. According to Tracy (2010), transferability and naturalistic generalizations characterize *resonance*, which is one criterion for excellent qualitative research. Indeed, what the INCLUD-ED research defined as successful educational actions have led to improvements in schools and communities across cultural and national boundaries, being transferable and sustainable actions throughout time (Flecha, 2015). One of those actions is dialogic literary gatherings (DLGs), a dialogic-based learning environment where participants share and discuss readings of the greatest works of universal literature. With the purpose of expanding and understanding the impact of DLGs in our context, we conducted case studies in nine elementary schools in Spain as part of a 2-year nationally funded research project to explore the impact of DLGs on academic achievement and prosocial behavior (García-Carrión, 2016–2018).

Although previous communicative research conducted with the most vulnerable people showed the power of dialogic gatherings to transform lives and enhance social transformation (Soler, 2015), the potential impact of this dialogic learning environment on students' prosocial behavior has been underresearched. In particular, interactions that might affect dimensions such as help, sharing, and altruism can play a crucial role in redressing inequalities among the most disadvantaged children. Consequently, this article aims at conducting ethically responsible research that explores the role of using a communicative research approach to unveil the impact that DLGs have on children's relationships. We

focus on two disadvantaged 9-year-old girls. Carmen, as we have already introduced, is an immigrant child with special educational needs. Celia is one of the growing numbers of children who are bullied at school.

First, we provide an account of the role of dialogue in DLGs and how the dialogic approach guides our study. Second, we reflect on the process of creating dialogic spaces in the school within a communicative approach that includes the voices of the most vulnerable to jointly develop social justice-oriented learning environments. Egalitarian and transformative dialogues with Carmen and Celia, their peers, and their teacher and the follow-up discussions during the interviews revealed the impact of the DLGs on fostering solidarity-based relationships that transformed the lives of these two girls for whom this qualitative research had an impact and that changed their everyday lives in the school.

### Dialogue as a Tool for Transformative Research

DLGs exemplify how people use language effectively to learn and think together and engage in meaningful interactions oriented toward personal and social transformations (Alvarez et al., 2018; Hargreaves & García-Carrión, 2016). Some of the roots of this approach rely on cultural-historical theory (Vygotsky, 1978), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), and dialogic action theory (Freire, 1970). The Vygotskian dialectic relation between the social and the individual and mediated by cultural tools—language—explains that learning and development occur first at the social level between people (the *interpsychological plane*) and then at the individual level (the *intrapsychological plane*). It is in a particular social and cultural space and time where the Self is constructed through interaction with Others as a result of conversation between the “I” and the “me” (Mead, 1934).

In DLGs, the participants' self is constructed as a result of absorbing other people's perspectives when they discuss their views on previous readings. This process, in Mead's words, entails that “we only have ideas in so far as we are able to take the attitude of the community and then respond to it” (Mead, 1934, p. 180). This idea denotes that bringing up the attitude of the group toward one self and that responding to it occurs in a conversation of gestures in which verbal language is prevalent. However, not all forms of conversation are equally transformative for oneself or others; it is vital to promote dialogues that raise awareness and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). That is why DLGs, similar to cultural circles, develop a radical form of pedagogy that differs from the passive forms of education in a *banking model*. Instead, it becomes an opportunity for transforming life experiences into knowledge as a process of unveiling new knowledge (Freire, 1970).

Such transformation affects not only the participants but the researchers who also have experienced this dialogic turn in qualitative research, which has been understood as an interconnected and mutually influential series of dialogic processes (Russell & Kelly, 2002). From such a perspective in qualitative research, meaning is created in the dialogic encounter between the researcher and the participants, which is understood as a dynamic that can be generated and transformed through interaction with others (Freeman, 2011; Korth, 2002). Similarly, the communicative methodology starts with the premise that scientific knowledge is jointly created in those encounters through egalitarian dialogue. By including the voices of the socially oppressed at the center of the entire research process, the communicative approach is oriented to transforming the social reality (Gomez et al., 2011). This approach aligns with the transformative paradigm in the pursuit of ensuring the inclusion of the most vulnerable groups. According to Mertens (2012), “the transformative paradigm also focuses on the strengths that reside in communities that experience discrimination and oppression on the basis of their cultural values and experiences” (Mertens, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, dialogue plays a crucial role in bringing to light the knowledge that oppressed people have, situating the most vulnerable at the center of the dialogue as sources of legitimate knowledge. Therefore, the communicative approach challenges “monological research” and enables researchers to resituate themselves when using the dialogue as a tool for transformation.

### **Creating Dialogic Spaces to Achieve Social Impact**

The current culture of testing forces schools and teachers to choose between educating children for the test or for life. As researchers using a communicative approach, we took those tensions and concerns into account in our study when discussing with teachers how and why research about DLGs is conducted. In a series of meetings with the staff and the children in the case study school participating in this research, we contributed our knowledge based on previous research on and experience with implementing DLGs and reported the benefits for children in very diverse contexts, such as rural schools in the United Kingdom (García-Carrión, 2015) or children in child care in Spain (García Yeste et al., 2017). Teachers contributed their everyday experience in the school, especially the limitations they envisioned with regard to involving Carmen in reading the book and participating in the DLG. The teachers suggested she could not be involved or, alternatively, required an adaptation of the reading. We asked more about Carmen to reflect together on the actual extent of the limitations she may have, as we could not accept leaving Carmen out of the DLG. Within a transformative axiological assumption, we

argue the need to know how discrimination affects Carmen to understand and to challenge the current situation and provide a basis for improving it (Mertens, 2012). Acknowledging the teachers’ views and worries, we provided arguments and counterarguments through egalitarian dialogue to reach a joint agreement on her involvement in the research. We decided to give her the opportunity to try it and eventually provide more support if needed.

Likewise, we met the children and shared with them our knowledge about other schools and children in many diverse settings related to reading, enjoying, and making sense of books such as *The Odyssey*, *Don Quixote*, or *Arabian Nights*. Then, decisions about the book, the organization of the DLG, and the difficulties and possibilities related to this intervention were brought into the dialogue and discussed so that the children could make a decision about whether to participate. This dialogic approach allowed us to transform the intervention so that the children, teachers, and school could perceive it as legitimate (Mertens, 2012).

### **Embracing the Transformative Paradigm**

DLGs occurred every Thursday afternoon from December until March 2017. Children started to read *The Odyssey*, challenging all kinds of reductionist and deficit thinking approaches in which children “are not able” to do something at a certain age. Those “silent” children started to participate from the very beginning, creating a world of possibilities beyond the educational establishment. Because we embrace the transformative ontological assumption that the educational reality should not be as it has very often been, excluding systematically disadvantaged children, we did believe Carmen and Celia would find the space to talk, be listened to and respected. Indeed, we could gradually observe their improvements as they read the same adapted version of the book, participated in almost every session of the DLGs, and shared comments and ideas. However, this does not mean that we ignored the power differences between us as researchers and the children or the teacher and among the children themselves. Once again, egalitarian dialogue serves as a tool for promoting equitable participation in DLGs and for including everyone’s voices in the discussion based on the arguments provided and not based on position in the social structure.

Every session lasted an hour. During that time, we observed and video-recorded the discussions prompted by the children themselves, who made sense of the values, morals, and emotions they felt and perceived when reading *The Odyssey*. We also participated and contributed, while paying special attention to those children who looked shy or more reluctant to express themselves. One of the principles of the DLGs is to allow the inclusion of all the voices and give priority to those who usually do not speak. We made that point explicit on several occasions. Meaningful dialogues emerged,

especially for children such as Carmen and Celia; issues related to equal rights, respect for diversity, bullying, and friendship raised a critical consciousness in many of them. Through our weekly interactions with the children in the DLGs, we observed power differences in the class, established an interactive link with the class and built trust relationships among us. Therefore, we adopted the epistemological assumption within the transformative paradigm that “leads to establishing relationships in order to determine ways that the study can be more culturally responsive” (Mertens, 2012, p. 7). This communicative approach was crucial during the entire research process to unveil the impact of the DLGs on the children’s relationships.

### Uncovering the Impact of DLGs Using the Communicative Approach

Through the entire research process, during our weekly 1-hr bus trip to the school, our meetings at the university, at every interaction among the research team and those with the school—teachers, children, and families—we reflected on and made explicit the transformative orientation of our research. This aligns with the transformative paradigm in which we situated ourselves because it “provides an umbrella for researchers who view their roles as agents to further social justice” (Mertens, 2012, p. 10). In this section, we illustrate the ways in which we engaged with the children in the DLGs, following the communicative approach within the transformative paradigm, as explained above. Particularly, we focused on the role this approach has in uncovering some impacts that probably would not have been gathered in a quantitative study.

We conducted six communicative observations during the DLG sessions and eight dialogic interviews with children in pairs. We decided together who they wanted to be interviewed with. Interviews were carried out at the beginning, toward the middle and at the end of the intervention through egalitarian dialogue seeking to break with traditional hierarchy and placing both actors—researchers and children—on an equal epistemological level. These interactions allowed us to overcome barriers and jointly advance knowledge about the impact the DLGs had on the children’s life experience.

The stories of Carmen and Celia exemplify the ways in which this research made a difference in their lives; without their voices, those impacts would have not likely been revealed to us.

#### *Humanity Toward Others: I Am Because You Are*

In our first DLG in December 2016, nobody expected Carmen to talk. Prejudices and low expectations have confirmed the self-fulfilling prophecy for many children such as

her. Indeed, she did not share any ideas from her reading. So, having an identity as a child with “special needs” was a barrier for her to participate. However, she came with the book, and she was eager to follow the conversation. In our recordings, she is actively listening to other people’s comments. On that occasion, one of us—R.G.-C.—acted as facilitator, ensured that everyone took turns in the dialogue, made it explicit that there was no wrong or right answer, and invited every child to contribute to the discussion. Having met the children before and having shared the purpose of the research and made decisions together about the DLGs, the children did not perceive us as strangers, and they were keen on having a conversation with us. At the end of that session, we had a quick chat with Carmen; she had read the book, although she had not commented on it. One of us said, “You can share your ideas, if you want to, we would love to know,” and she smiled. Egalitarian dialogue does not refer only to the appropriate use of language; it involves not only verbal interaction—what we say—but also nonverbal interaction—how we say it—and, even more importantly, what we do really think and feel. Transformative interactions in the construction of the “Self” involve those nuances. By making those decisions consciously, we interacted with Carmen in an authentic way in which our verbal and nonverbal interactions expressed what we really meant and felt.

From one week to another, Carmen started to overcome barriers to dialogue that had been imposed on her by injustice and discrimination. Her first contributions were mainly questions asking for clarification or for support about words or ideas she did not understand in the reading. Simply the fact that she dared to ask questions and talk in front of the whole class was a great jump for her that also impacted others. Nobody laughed at her; the teacher opened the weekly discussion by reminding everyone about the agreements and principles that guide the interaction in the DLGs. One day, she added an additional principle to the briefing: “there are no wrong ideas.” We also contributed to those introductions, making explicit what we were observing every week.

Two months after the start of the DLGs, the children discussed a passage that impressed them and brought the issue of racism into the debate. Toward the end of *The Odyssey*, after 20 years of being challenged by the Gods, Odysseus, King of Ithaca, returned home. However, he does not look like a King, and instead, he has the appearance of a poor stranger in rags who is treated very badly by his countrymen. Carmen joined the conversation and said,

Imagine that you are a Mexican who goes into this city and . . . then they would kill you. I would feel very, very sad. If I was that person, I would not see my family any more. At the beginning when I arrived [in Spain], I thought they were people who would hurt me, but in the end, when I am here with them [classmates], I think they are nice.

The way she interpreted the story and made sense of it in relation to her own life astonished the class. We realized this experience might shape the meaning Carmen has given to her life here and the everyday life in the school, and we wanted to explore any effects on her and on other children.

Carmen was interviewed along with Manuel, who was supportive and helped her to express and communicate their views and feelings during the interview. In the conversation, they referred to having experienced help and supportive relationships, which were behaviors that the other children perceived and we observed. Carmen mentioned that the “[DLGs] help me to learn a lot and to study. So, I learn more new words (. . .) because you help me learn a lot, and I try harder.” This experience had impacted other children such as Manuel: “I have learned that Carmen has some difficulties saying the words, and whenever I can, I will try to help her.”

The children’s dialogues and reflections during our observations and in the interviews impacted their behaviors somehow. Carmen acknowledged that she perceived those positive changes and expressed that her classmates had been very helpful in supporting her desire to talk and overcome her difficulties in communicating. Interestingly, without asking specifically about Carmen during the interviews, all the children interviewed mentioned her as an example of the positive impact the DLGs promoted. The children highlighted positive impacts on Carmen and on themselves, such as

- Friendship: improvements in their relationship with her, becoming better friends, for example, “we have exchanged some drawings.” Some of the children mentioned that they sit next to her during the gatherings.
- Kindness: Several of the children asked her to forgive behaviors such as having discriminated against her or laughing at her because of the way she dressed.
- Learning: improvements in learning outcomes, particularly in reading and vocabulary not only during the DLGs but also in other subjects.

### ***Breaking the Silence: Dialogue Against Aggression***

Celia had been bullied a year ago. She was still suffering the consequences of it when we started the DLGs. Her brother had also faced similar situations, being hit and insulted. Bullying is often a small piece of a larger iceberg; the iceberg is a phenomenon that is pervasive worldwide, affecting children and adolescents (Jara et al., 2017). Although these children had never talked about it before, when relating *The Odyssey* to their life experiences, this issue entered the discussion. For the first time, Celia spoke up, and that dialogue had an impact on other children and on ourselves as researchers: “at the DLG we discussed the issue of

the bullying, and Celia started to cry,” Maria remembered during the interview. We provided space to talk and reflect with the whole class, as involving the entire community in an egalitarian dialogue has been shown to be an effective approach to prevent bullying (Duque Sanchez & Teixido, 2016).

Our observations recorded a respectful climate, and the children were supportive in their meeting with Celia. Indeed, we discussed those observations with Maria and Ander during the final interview. One of the greatest impacts of the DLG was to make the children talk about important topics and issues, such as the several discussions they had about bullying. Both Maria and Ander referred to Celia’s case.

Maria: “someone talked about bullying, and we went on and on. Then, the issue of Celia came up. I did not have a clue! Then, others told me that happened a year ago.” (. . .) There were many people that beat her and insulted her.

Ander: I have to admit I was one of those.

One of the impacts emerging from this interview referred to the children’s changing behaviors with their friends. Ander acknowledged bullying Celia and her brother and reflected on the ways in which the dialogues in the DLGs raised awareness and encouraged him to change. Breaking the silence in the class facilitated those personal and social changes.

The climate of respect in the DLGs was a recurrent aspect that positively encouraged Celia to participate: “I used to say nothing before, and I was very embarrassed. But now in the DLG, I participate more.” Consequently, Celia perceived the DLGs as a space of trust where they learned to read, to speak, and to think as prompted by *The Odyssey*. The dialogic dynamic enabled children to discuss morals and values that help to make sense of their everyday life: “in the gathering, only discussing one chapter helped me a lot to share my personal issues and then it gave me ‘tricks’ to overcome them.” The ways in which that space had an impact on Celia and other children in the class was jointly reconstructed through dialogue with them in the interviews. Celia emphasized the importance of including everyone’s voices when putting egalitarian dialogue into practice:

Everyone has a turn to speak. . . . That is what I liked the most, that everyone can talk (. . .) You are not allowed to laugh at the rest of the class, and everybody respects other people’s opinions. Well, I already knew that, but now I am more respectful.

Reflecting with Celia and her friend Susana during the interview, they remembered how Athena helped Odysseus on his way back home. They related those dialogues to a change in their attitudes toward others and decided to help their siblings. Celia explained that her bother suffered

through a similar situation, and she now knew how to help him: “It occurs to me in the same chapter that I learned that I had to help my brother not to hit others, and now he’s getting there.” Reflection and action were intertwined by these 9-year-old children to improve their relationships and their behavior. In doing so, they acted as agents of change and extended these interactions to other spaces in the school.

## Discussion and Conclusions

For many children such as Carmen and Celia, everyday experience in school can be an *Odyssey* marked by segregation and exclusion. Often, educators and professionals only see the tip of the iceberg. This situation should urge us to address those inequalities through transformative research. This article has been an attempt to tackle the challenge in a twofold way. On the one hand, we have contributed our knowledge about DLGs to schools serving children at risk of marginalization and exclusion. In an intersubjective dialogue with teachers and students, we considered this a worthy topic for research (Tracy, 2010) since we built on the social improvements resulting from it in diverse populations (Alvarez et al., 2018; Garcia Yeste et al., 2017). On the other hand, the communicative methodology within the transformative paradigm guided our research so that we engage in egalitarian dialogues with the people we do research with rather than on (Gómez, 2016).

Ultimately, the inclusion of the voices of the most vulnerable is oriented toward seeking transformation by breaking with the traditional hierarchy and placing both actors on an equal epistemological level. In doing so, we seek to create a space where transformative dialogues can provide a basis for social improvements because knowledge is created including—at that equal epistemological level—the meanings and experiences of the people most heavily affected, such as Carmen and Celia in our study. This approach has enabled us to shed light on an impact on their life experience that we would probably not have found using a questionnaire. This finding resonates with the ways in which qualitative inquiry contributes to social justice.

If as qualitative researchers, we are called to change the world, numbers and narrow models of measurement alone cannot shape our work or judge the quality of an individual’s life without taking into account the voices of those people. If a child who is being bullied does not find a space to talk with others, how can we understand and find ways to protect him or her? The measuring of the impact of research that seeks to make a difference in people’s lives cannot underestimate the power of qualitative research to include the views and perceptions of those who are going to be affected by the results. In our attempt to disclose the impacts of DLGs on the lives of the most vulnerable children by using a communicative approach, we have been able to uncover and address, to some extent, situations of

segregation and exclusion affecting those children. Thus, working as a global community of qualitative researchers committed to social justice, we have a unique opportunity to demonstrate to society the ways in which qualitative research may empower people, transform despair into hope, and injustice into fairness (Denzin, 2009) while finding new models of measurement and accountability that show how research can make a difference in people’s lives. The improvements revealed in children such as Carmen and Celia cannot be a privilege of a few but a right of every child. This justifies all our efforts.

## Authors’ note

Rocío García-Carrión is also affiliated to Ikerbasque Science Foundation.

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