PREVENTING HOMOPHOBIA THROUGH ENGLISH
IN YEAR 6 OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Homophobia is the most common hate crime in our current society and it also exists in the schools. The Spanish educational system is sensitive to this issue: the law recognizes affective-sexual diversity and highlights the importance of overcoming sexist behaviour, so that the students learn to respect and value diversity. There is also homophobic bullying in the last years of Primary education, such as the group of students this project focuses on: twenty-seven sixth graders who study in a bilingual state school located in a working class area of Madrid. Given that this school runs a bilingual program, the objective of this action research project is double: both linguistic and attitudinal: to improve the students' linguistic skills in the target language (English) while carrying out cross-curricular activities referred to the prevention of homophobia and acceptance of diversity. The results show that homophobic attitudes register a lower acceptance from the group of students at the end of the project, which also demonstrates that a foreign language can be used to teach values effectively.

Keywords*: homophobia, bilingualism, values, diversity, primary education, ESL.

Resumen

La homofobia es el delito de odio más común en nuestra sociedad actual y también existe en la escuela. A pesar de que el sistema educativo español es sensible a esta materia e introduce conceptos como la valoración de la diversidad y la necesidad de vencer los comportamientos sexistas, los comportamientos homófobos también se han extendido a los últimos cursos de Educación Primaria, como ocurre en el grupo de alumnos en el que se centra este trabajo de investigación: veintisiete alumnos de 6º de Primaria matriculados en un colegio público que sigue el proyecto bilingüe de la Comunidad de Madrid. El objetivo de este trabajo de investigación es tanto lingüístico como actitudinal: proporcionar al alumnado oportunidades para mejorar sus destrezas en la lengua inglesa a la vez que se incluyen actividades dirigidas a la prevención de la homofobia y aceptación de la diversidad. Los resultados muestran que las actitudes homófobas registraron una menor aceptación entre los alumnos al final del proyecto, lo que demuestra que una lengua extranjera puede emplearse para la enseñanza de valores de forma efectiva.

Palabras clave: homofobia, bilingüismo, valores, diversidad, Educación Primaria, ESL.

1. Introduction

Hate crime is not a mere anecdote in current Spanish society. The number of incidents linked to hate crime has risen in 2013 up to 1,172 cases, according to the Security Office (Duva, 2014, n.p.) in a report where data from all police groups were gathered, except the Basque autonomous police. Moreover, this report shows that most incidents are related to the sexual orientation of the victim (452 cases), followed by racism (381) disability (290), religion (42), homelessness (4) and anti-Semitism (3). This only refers to situations where the crime has been reported to the police, which is by no

means the mainstream tendency in homophobic attacks: just one person out of 10 (10 %) had reported to the authorities the most recent incident of discrimination that they had experienced, as revealed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (Fundamental Rights Agency, 2013, 20).

In the report, this organization suggests two reasons that could explain why victims do not denounce homophobic attacks: they fear the Security forces and also because they are not openly homosexual. The most dangerous consequence is the impunity of attackers and distrust of victims (Fundamental Rights Agency, 2013, 21).

Dealing with this problem is a must in Primary education, especially if the teacher identifies verbal attacks from some students directed at other children who are thought to be gay or lesbian. In the case of the group of students this project focuses on – twenty-seven sixth graders in a bilingual state school in Madrid– the insult preceded the reality: one boy was identified as gay and received offensive words concerning homosexuality, even if he did not recognize himself as gay.

Tutorial action was needed and carried out, although it did not work at the beginning, and some other measures were necessary. In the context of a bilingual school, implementing a program to teach values through English was a possibility which could be explored. Therefore, the main objective of this action research project is to analyse if a foreign language can be useful to teach values effectively and provide our students with opportunities to acquire a more respectful attitude towards sexual and affective diversity.

2. Focus of the action research project

The main objective of this action research project is to use English to carry out a number of activities aimed at preventing homophobia in a group of students in Year 6 of Primary education, in the context of a bilingual state school located in a working class area in Madrid. At the same time, these activities should enable them to improve their linguistic skills –listening, speaking, reading and writing– in order to succeed in the external examinations they have to take at the end of the academic year.

The reason why this topic was chosen within the context of teaching values in the English class is that some homophobic insults were noticed by the tutor, an issue which was addressed at that moment, by holding a discussion with the students and coming to a double agreement: insulting others is a form of disrespect which every member of the school should avoid and disrespectful words used to refer to homosexuals should not be used in any context. Although the situation was dealt with immediately with apparent success, a new approach was necessary in the long term, both to prevent homophobia and help these students with a deeper understanding and valuing of diversity and respect for others' opinions and tendencies, such as those concerning sexual orientation.

In terms of the curricular objectives, Year 6 students in a bilingual school have to take an external examination at the end of the year to demonstrate level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to be able to join a bilingual section in Secondary education. At this level, users are acquiring the ability to communicate in a limited number of the most familiar situations in which language is used in everyday life. Users at this level need to be able to understand the main

points of simple texts, many of which are of the kind needed for survival when travelling or going about in public in a foreign country. At this level, they are expected to use the language for survival and to gain basic points of information (Cambridge English Teaching Support, 2013).

Therefore, the purpose of this action research project is double: linguistic and attitudinal: to improve the students' linguistic skills while carrying out cross-curricular activities related to the prevention of homophobic bullying so that they learn to adopt more respectful attitudes towards diversity.

2.1 The school

This action research project has been carried out in a bilingual state school named CEIP Santo Domingo, where the bilingual programme was implemented in 2007 and gradually reached Year 6 in 2013. This means that all Primary students are immersed in the bilingual programme and receive ten hours of lessons in English per week: English, Science and Arts & Crafts. There is a staff of twenty-eight teachers and the bilingual programme is developed by eight teachers plus four language assistants.

2.2 The group of students

This project is focused on a group of twenty-seven pupils who study Year 6 of Primary education. There are twenty-three students who have been learning English since they were three years old. It can be described as a multi-ethnic and multicultural group due to the fact that there are fifteen students born to Spanish parents and six from South American families (Ecuador and Bolivia). Three students have a Spanish parent and the other one was born in a foreign country (Colombia and United Kingdom). In addition to this, there are three gypsy students who do not come to school on a regular basis and have some learning difficulties even in their mother tongue.

As far as the level of English is concerned, only one student failed the subject of English in the first term and all of them passed Science and Arts and Crafts. In general terms, it can be said that there are eight fast learners, eleven average, three slow learners and five students who repeated year 6 and are not integrated in the bilingual program. The English teacher, who is also the manager of the bilingual programme in the school, carries out activities aimed at the development of the four basic skills on a weekly basis.

As mentioned above, some homophobic insults among students had been noticed in class, and they were always addressed to one student whose level of integration in the group is not bad. The verbal attackers are three boys and the victim is another boy who has some 'queer' or affected manners when talking and interacting with others. He does not like football and all his friends are girls. From the teacher's point of view, he is happy and feels quite relaxed in class. However, despite being the focus of homophobic insults, he is not openly gay.

Before implementing this program, the teacher used to deal with this issue by stopping the class and having a talk with the whole group. The victim was not singled out in front of the class, although he used to feel more relieved afterwards. The problem was only managed by the teacher in the context of the class, and it did not reach other stages such as the headmaster or head of studies. However, the teacher realised that this procedure lacked long-term effectiveness, due to the fact that the students'

role in this case was very passive: they just had to listen/pretend they were listening to the teacher's talk, and appear to acquiesce. Nevertheless, a deeper understanding and change of values and attitudes was not being achieved.

3. Objectives

3.1 General aim

Under our current educational law, teachers are asked to work on values such as diversity and respect, as well as to develop our students' affective capacities in all aspects of their personality and their relationships with others, as well as develop an attitude against violence, prejudices of any kind and sexist stereotypes (LOE, 2006). The new Spanish educational law, LOMCE, enacted by the Popular party, has eliminated from the legal text certain expressions which were included in the previous law, such as "affective capacities", "sexist stereotypes" and the recognition of affective-sexual diversity. However, the LOMCE still includes in its introduction concepts such as "equality of rights and opportunities which help to overcome any kind of discrimination (…) education to prevent conflicts and the pacific resolution of these (…) non-violence in all scenarios: personal, family, social and, especially, bullying (…) development of values aimed at the effective equality between men and women; prevention of gender violence" (Preámbulo LOMCE, 2013; my translation).

The nature of our subject, English, allows teachers to include a wide variety of topics in the class so that the students can improve their communicative skills. Therefore this project pursues promoting the students' abilities in English at the same time as teaching values and preventing homophobia.

3.2 Educational objectives

This general aim can be subdivided into more concrete objectives:
- Using the target language in a bilingual school where students learn in English and Spanish, to teach values and cultural awareness (prevention of homophobic attitudes and acceptance of diversity) in a real and effective way, by carrying out a variety of activities in the context of the English class.
- Collecting and analyzing some data about the level of homophobia in a group of 23 students aged 11-12 who study in a state school in Madrid, both at the beginning and at the end of the action research project.
- Helping this group of students develop their linguistic skills in English as a foreign language as well as preparing them for the external examinations they are taking at the end of the year.
- Developing a sense of community in the group of students by making them reflect, discuss and talk about concepts such as diversity, acceptance and respect, among others.

4. Development

4.1 Initial evaluation

Students were handed out a survey containing questions about acceptance of other cultures and people coming from different countries, religions, races and sexual diversity. They did it on February

3rd, 2014. They had to say if they totally agree/agree/ disagree/ totally disagree with a list of statements, which enabled the teacher to measure the level of acceptance of diversity in the group before carrying out this project. Moreover, the same survey was handed out again after having done all the activities, to see if there were any changes in their opinions.

Concerning the contents of the survey, it not only contains questions related to homosexuality but also other aspects linked with diversity (religion, races, other cultures and countries…), since sexual diversity is only one among many issues concerning the acceptance of differences.

4.1.1 Results of the initial evaluation

The survey shows some interesting data about the students' acceptance of other cultures and diversity in general. This was used to plan the different activities aimed at helping our students develop their personality and affective skills. Some results must be highlighted, as follows: 75% of students disagree with the idea that a girl can have a girlfriend, and 60% of them have the same opinion about homosexual boys. 80% of students would not tell their family if they were gay/lesbian and 66% think that homosexuals cannot have a family and be as good parents as heterosexual people. 45% agree with the idea that gay people are likely to be insulted, kicked or abused. In addition to this, 45% of students feel that insulting others might be correct if we feel the necessity or find a reason to do it.

Nonetheless, most students appear to feel very happy in a multicultural environment: 83% of students feel curious about other cultures, countries and lifestyles and 71% do not mind if another person is black, Asian or South American, or has a different religion. 60% think that people can have different opinions which should be respected by the rest, and most of them do not think they are always right (74%).

These results show us that, in general terms, racism and xenophobia have been overcome in this group of students, although other aspects need some reinforcement, such as homophobia. One reason could be that the school provides the students with many opportunities to meet children from different cultures from the time they enter the school at the age of three. Furthermore, cultural diversity is present in the coursebook; although affective diversity is not a common topic at school even if the students start to perceive gender stereotypes when they are very young.

4.2 Activities

Once results from the initial evaluation were obtained, the whole lesson plan started a week later, February 10th, 2014. The tasks were carried out on a regular basis, once every week (in an English class) and finished on May 5th, 2014. Most activities planned for the project were not new for the teacher, since they had been also put into practice the year before with fourth graders in the same school. Provided that the students' opinions are an important part of this project, which requires flexibility when dealing with the time, most activities would require half an hour but it actually took a longer time to carry them out because of the discussions held in class. There are seven activities in total, although the last one, devoted to the improvement of the students' writing skills, is divided into three different parts.

The activities which form part of this project are divided in four groups, according to the main linguistic skills they promote: listening, reading, writing and speaking. As far as the groupings are concerned, the activities were carried out individually, in pairs, small groups and the whole class, because it is important that students practise different ways of interaction. These different groupings may differ in the objectives: for example, communication will be more promoted in pairwork and groupwork rather than in individual tasks, whereas accuracy in writing may be better achieved in individual activities. The grouping system depended on the kind of skill that is promoted in each activity. In order to meet the objectives, the activities have to be clear, varied and sufficient; well balanced (adapted to the children's level, to their learning stage and to their interests) and appropriate, being adjusted to the students' individual needs.

Furthermore, this project aims at providing the students with opportunities to enjoy learning and activate their thinking skills, which is why certain games and videos have been also included. Given that communication in the class is of paramount importance, reflections were always followed by a discussion where the students could share their ideas and learn from one another.

Concerning the different activities, the students played two games (an ice-breaker and a revision game to clarify contents), saw a movie after which they had to write a script and they held a discussion after watching another video. They also participated in a role play about different types of families, learnt about the gypsy culture by means of a text and another discussion and, at the end, wrote a letter and a story where they were asked to reflect about all the ideas they had been working on.

5. Qualitative impressions

Observation and an analysis of the students' performance in the different activities can also clarify their level of achievement in this action research project, from the teacher's point of view. To do so, it is essential to study how they carried out each task, as follows:

In the first activity, 'Step Forward', students had to identify roles of people who might suffer different kinds of discrimination. The discussion held afterwards was the most important step of the task, and it was necessary that they share their opinions with the rest of the class. They were able to identify discrimination in the cases of poverty (beggar) and handicapped people (the person who has a wheel chair): "They cannot go to the Eiffel tower because the beggar has no money and the handicapped person cannot go upstairs", a student said.

Concerning the remaining roles, they linked the situation of the illegal immigrant with poverty more and found it difficult to identify gender discrimination (the case of the successful businesswoman, who was not allowed to run a company where only men worked, according to the students' thoughts). From their point of view, a gay boy can visit a small town holding hands with his partner, but they are sure he will suffer attacks by other people. When they were asked to step into these people's shoes in each situation, some adjectives popped in, such as "sad", "angry" and "scared". To finish, the teacher's impression is that they felt bad but were not able to explain the

reason: a common answer was "I would feel bad, but I don't know why", especially in the cases of the businesswoman and the gay boy.

In the second activity, 'Gender Backpack' they had to come up with different ideas and thoughts which promote gender discrimination, such as 'blue is for boys, pink is for girls. This activity was great fun for them, much more than the previous game. They found it difficult to mention gender stereotypes, which had to be prompted by the teacher: colours blue/pink, aggressive, relaxed, clean, football, videogames, cry, sensitive… They were perfectly able to associate each stereotype with the correct gender, which is the basis of the task. When the teacher (a man) circled several characteristics from each gender (blue, sensitive, relaxed), when describing himself, they were able to understand that a person can have characteristics from both genders.

An issue can be highlighted: all students agreed on the idea that cleaning is more typical of women than men, but the teacher asked the girls: 'Do you like cleaning?' And all of them said: 'No!' So the teacher wondered: 'Why do we always associate cleaning with women if, for example, no girls in this group like cleaning?' And they understood it was only a stereotype which had to be tackled.

They also showed a good attitude towards the following task, which involved watching a scene from the film *Billy Elliot*, which the students loved. In fact, they asked the teacher to watch the whole movie in other sessions. Most students considered that Billy should be allowed to dance, although it is thought to be a girlish hobby. In fact, some students raised their hands in class to give examples about their families: a boy said that his mother used to be a runner when she was younger. There was one student who did not like that Billy was a ballet dancer, "because that's for girls". The teacher asked the class if they thought the same, and some students said that anyone should be allowed to be a ballet dancer. "You have to do what you like", a male student answered.

Nonetheless, they also understood the position of the father: 'he is older', they said. The adjective 'old-fashioned' was uttered more than once that day. Another issue was discussed in class: girls who like playing football. A girl said that a student in Year 5 plays football very well, whereas some other boys do not like that sport. The teacher also mentioned that he is a boy and does not like football. To sum up, a majority of students thought that all hobbies were good for both boys and girls, and they were able to deal with stereotyped conceptions in this context.

The following activity, 'Stand up', was not very close to the students' reality. They watched the video about homophobic bullying and analyzed the different roles in it, but no one knew any cases of homophobic bullying in their environment. The teacher said that there was some sort of homophobic bullying when they call each other *'marica', 'maricón',* etcetera, but it was hard for them to see any similarities. Then, the teacher had to talk about verbal violence, and some of them understood. The problem is that many students only identify violence with physical attacks.

In the video, they perfectly understood the absence of the figure of the teacher, because they all agreed on the idea that these situations are not told to adults. They liked the reaction of the students who gave support to the gay boys, and in that moment the teacher introduced a new idea: there are very few homophobic students in schools, but they normally show that they do not like gay people. Then, the vast majority of students kept quiet. The teacher insisted on the importance of defending

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classmates who are suffering unfair situations (like homophobic bullying), but they said that it was not easy to be brave enough to do so, "because the bully can also kick you".

One student said that two boys should not be allowed to walk holding hands because "that's not correct". This means that he was not able to give a good reason, only that it was not correct. He showed some more homophobic reactions in other activities and the teacher used to stop the class and use his comment to show and give examples of more respectful points of view. However, he was not singled out by the rest of the class, which might appear to be wrong but it was actually positive, since a relaxed and warm atmosphere is essential to carrying out this project and, moreover, all the pupils understood that their answers were accepted and respected. In fact, these 'homophobic' attitudes are the ones which must appear in class and be discussed within the context of the session, with the rest of the students. It is really hard to make the students change some fossilized thoughts and ideas but, at least, they realized that there are more points of view concerning certain topics such as homophobia and gender stereotypes, not only theirs, which have to be respected.

In the following task, 'Coloured families'[1] students were asked to identify different types of families (monoparental, heteroparental, homoparental) on a poster. It was an easy activity for the students, in terms of the objectives concerning diversity. There are very few 'traditional' families' in the class, because many parents are divorced or have drifted apart. However, some students found it strange to have two fathers or two mothers, and the teacher highlighted "the importance of being loved, no matter who's loving you". They could perfectly see which gender stereotypes were broken by the characters of the poster; however, surprisingly, they reproduced most gender stereotypes in the following part of the task, role plays: angry and strong fathers, caring mothers, very active boys and quiet girls… The impression of the teacher is that gender stereotypes were fossilized in their minds so it would take some time to help the students get rid of them. This can be approached with further action in the future, as explained in another chapter of this project.

The following activity, 'Gypsy Boy', which consisted of reading a text about two gypsy boys who loved each other, was a very interesting one for the students, because they got to know a little bit more about the culture of the three gypsy students in the class. Given the fact that these gypsy students do not belong to the bilingual program, it was necessary to use Spanish. As far as the gypsy culture is concerned, the students confessed certain prejudices against that culture, although they showed a very respectful attitude towards their gypsy classmates, not well integrated in the group. Two students did not like the idea of seeing a gay couple kissing one another, 'because it's disgusting', they said in Spanish. This situation is perfect to tackle homophobia. The teacher asked if their parents are allowed to kiss one another in the street, and they agreed. Then, the teacher added: "So, if your parents are allowed to kiss the person they love, why can't a gay boy or a lesbian girl kiss the person they love? Is that fair?" Those students confessed it was not fair, but they found it awkward.

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[1] Material educativo titulado 'Familias de Colores' en español, desarrollado de forma conjunta por el sindicato Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) y la Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gays, Transexuales y Bisexuales (FLGTB).

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The overall impression of the teacher is that the students who show a more homophobic attitude are starting to see other points of view, which is a great achievement, although it will take a little bit longer to erase that attitude forever. An example of that initial change is that they did not complain about working on this project and also they started to accept others' opinions and, at least, listen to them and react respectfully.

To finish the whole project, the students carried out a writing task which they did not like very much, because they feel lazy when they have to write in English (also in Spanish). It was hard for them to give a definition in English of some words such as *stereotype* or *homophobia*. They preferred to give examples, which also allowed the teacher to check if they had understood the word. They also had to write a note to a boy who is suffering homophobic bullying in class and no students complained about having to give support to a gay classmate. All of them showed a sympathetic attitude. When asked to give him a piece of advice, most students encouraged him to feel free to do what he wanted to do, and added that he should call the police, a teacher or his parents if he notices a bad reaction from other students. "You are good", some students wrote. The students who had shown homophobic attitudes during the whole project also achieved the objectives: they gave Matt some support and invited him home for dinner. However, they struggled at giving advice.

6. Assessment

Apart from the initial and final evaluation, assessment and formative feedback are of paramount importance in this action research project, since they will help the students react against their homophobic comments and beliefs and, therefore, change their minds to a more open and respectful perspective.

The assessment criteria for each activity are essential because they will help the teacher understand and bear in mind which objectives the students need to achieve. As a teaching technique, he ticked in his notebook which students had not achieved certain assessment criteria in each activity, especially those ones referred to diversity. Given that the initial evaluation consisted of an anonymous survey, this procedure helped him to identify the most homophobic attitudes in the class.

In general, the objectives were rather realistic and most students were able to achieve them. Nevertheless, some homophobic attitudes appeared in the class –not very often– and those occasions were suitable to start teaching values, as follows: the teacher stopped the class and the focus of the lesson was the homophobic comment at that moment. The teacher repeated the comment aloud, always in a respectful way, because it is very important that the students feel free and comfortable to say whatever they think. Then the teacher asked other students if they shared that idea, and let the class discuss the issue, keeping quiet if possible and allowing the children to share their thoughts. He always concluded the discussion with a positive and tolerant comment, for example: "Opinions are free, but we have to respect other opinions so that everyone feels happy and accepted".

Another useful technique was to revise previous activities and talk about feelings, which are much more instinctive, especially when dealing with gender stereotypes and gay couples, for example: "Can you remember when we watched the video *'Stand up'*? How would you feel if the rest of students

laughed at you because you're holding hands with another boy?" By making the students step into somebody else's shoes and asking them how they would feel in certain situation, they are starting to be more sympathetic and sensitive to other realities.

Finally, the teacher gave a second opportunity to those students who were not on the right track to pass a certain assessment criterion in the activity. They normally understood what answer the teacher wanted and, to be honest, the teacher is not sure if their more positive reaction was real. Nevertheless, changing a very homophobic attitude is hard and takes a very long time.

7. Final evaluation

After carrying out all the activities in class, the same survey was handed out to the students in order to see if their opinions concerning affective diversity had changed. They did it on May 12th, 2014. They had some days in between to assimilate some concepts and come out with their own thoughts and perspectives. The results are presented below:

There is a tendency to accept homosexual relationships: Only 30% of students disagree/ totally disagree with the idea that a girl can have a girlfriend (before the project was carried out, 75% of the students had this thought). Concerning boys, 25% do not approve gay relationships (60% before the project). Nevertheless, homophobia is present in their environment, since most students (70%) would not tell their families if they were gay/lesbian. This aspect has not changed if compared to the beginning of the process.

As far as homoparental families are concerned, a change can be noticed: most students (62%) consider that homosexuals can make a family and be as good parents as heterosexual people. Only 38% of students disagree/totally disagree with this idea, 28 percentage points less than before starting the project. It is remarkable that no one totally disagrees with the statement and 5 students did so in the initial evaluation.

An important issue was the students' attitude concerning homophobia at school. Only 9% of students agree/totally agree with the idea that gay people can be insulted, kicked or abused (45% expressed this idea in the initial evaluation). It is also interesting to highlight that 12% consider that insulting others might be correct if they feel the necessity or find a reason to do it (45% expressed this idea in the initial evaluation).

Summing up, all the statements presenting homophobic attitudes registered a lower acceptance from the group of students, which was the key objective of this project. An issue which needs further work would be the acceptance of affective diversity in the family framework.

Other aspects linked with diversity (religion, races, other cultures and countries…) were fairly well accepted at the beginning of the project. In the initial evaluation, 83% of students felt curious about other cultures, countries and lifestyles and most of them did not think they were always right (74%). 60% thought that people could have different opinions which should be respected by the rest, and 71% did not mind if another person was black, Asian or South American, or has a different religion. In the final evaluation, these results do not undergo a significant change.

Although the results obtained in the final evaluation make sense if compared with the initial survey, it is also possible that a number of students did not show what they really think in their answers, but gave the answer the teacher expected them to mark. The condition of anonymity pursues authentic answers; however, personal interviews with every student could be also held to check the results obtained in the final evaluation. Another option might be to develop other questions which indirectly address the same issue, to cross check.

8. Conclusions

An analysis of the level of achievement of the educational objectives which were set at the beginning leads to the conclusions of this action research project. To start with, the students were able to reflect individually in class and, which is even more important, express their own ideas in the target language. While carrying out every single activity, key issues such as diversity, acceptance, respect and homophobia were raised and the students had many opportunities to talk about them, either in small groups or with the whole class. It is notable that the general behaviour of the students improved, in comparison with the previous period of the year. One reason might be that the students got used to respecting others and others' opinions and points of view while carrying out the project. They reflected on their feelings and the whole group talked about equality of opportunities, diversity in different contexts and the importance of creating a warm atmosphere where everyone feels happy and relaxed.

Regarding the development of the linguistic skills and the students' preparation for Cambridge examinations, the activities included in this action research project made all the pupils write, listen, speak and read in English. Different groupings were involved in order to help the students practise English in a variety of situations. The chronological and logical development of the four skills was followed: listening at the beginning, reading and speaking and, at the end, writing activities where the students could reflect on the whole project and organize all the information on a piece of paper.

Concerning the external examinations (KET/PET), twenty students of this group took them in order to demonstrate an A2/B1 level of English, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. As explained before, both exams test the students' abilities in terms of the four skills. Seven students took PET exam (higher level than KET) and thirteen took KET. It was the English teacher who decided the exam each student would take.

In the test, four students demonstrated level B1 and twelve demonstrated level A2, which allowed all of them to join a bilingual section next year in 1° ESO. The remaining four students demonstrated level A1, but two of them are going to repeat Year 6. The results in Cambridge examinations cannot be compared with other years, since this is the first group which has reached Year 6 on the bilingual track. However, according to the Education Council of Madrid, around 80% of students demonstrated at least level A2 in these examinations, which is exactly the percentage of students in this school.

Moreover, all the activities were carried out according to the planning, no incidents were registered during the sessions and the students' attitude and behaviour in class was correct and respectful. As far as the organization of the project is concerned, some aspects might be changed in

the future: asking the students to create definitions is a very hard task, even in their native language. Instead of that, they can be asked to put examples or brainstorm words regarding that concept. Peer-pressure is also an aspect which needs to be taken into account in the future: some students might not feel free to say what they really think in the sessions, because they are afraid of their classmates' reactions if, for example, they defend a gay friend or have a relative who is not heterosexual (contagion of the stigma). This can be solved by creating a very warm atmosphere where all interventions by the students are respectful, accepted and praised, since they are helping to build knowledge. Approaching this problem from a different perspective, for example, forcing the students to give an opinion or guiding the content of their answers, would only raise the pupils' affective filter and they might be afraid of giving their real opinions.

The most important conclusions are those linked with the results of the final evaluation: the level of homophobia has seemed to decrease in this group of students after having carried out an action research project focusing on affective diversity. Homosexuality was avoided by 67.5% of students at the beginning of the project, a percentage which seemed to reduce 40 points at the end of it (27.5% of the students did not accept that a boy can have a boyfriend or a girl can have a girlfriend). In the context of the school, homophobic attacks are supported only by 9% of students after carrying out the project, versus 45% of students who supported this at the beginning.

Finally, the results of this action research project show that a foreign language –English, in the case of most bilingual schools in Madrid and many other places– can be used to teach values effectively and deal with homophobic attitudes in class. By working in English, students not only had the opportunity to improve their communicative skills in the target language, but also went a step further: they were able to assimilate a new perspective concerning social values and respect towards diversity. Through English, they learnt that there is a wide variety of types of families: not only heterosexual, but also homoparental, among others. The key idea is to respect other lifestyles and treat those people the same as 'we' want to be treated. In addition to this, the students' homophobic attitude at school seemed to have been changed by working on this project. As mentioned above in the final evaluation, more students seemed to censure homophobic attacks at school than at the beginning of the project.

9. Reflections for the future

Teaching values effectively requires time and work for years. Transforming someone's criteria to face reality is a hard task which cannot be finished in weeks or months. Therefore, this action research project was only the first step to help this group of students become more open minded and value diversity in general as well as avoid homophobic attacks and attitudes in particular. Certain issues will need to be reinforced in the future, such as gender stereotypes and the concept of violence. The first one is hard to be dealt with, since the current society provides citizens with many examples of gender stereotypes in publicity, politics, TV programs and series, for example. Moreover, the Spanish society used to be much more male chauvinist decades ago and that conception still survives in the current generations.

The second topic, violence, is crucial to be analyzed in class in the future, due to the fact that many students only identify violence with physical attacks, not bad words or insults which are addressed to someone, and might cause harm as well. Working on this will be of paramount importance and there are a wide range of activities aiming at this issue: role plays, techniques to react assertively, analysis of videos, among others, which could help the students realize that words can be as harmful as punches.

There is also room for improvement of the techniques used to analyze the students' final evaluation. Provided that some pupils might be tempted to answer 'what the teacher wants me to answer', some other tools could be used in further studies: individual in-depth interviews to the students at the beginning and end of the project might help to identify who is homophobic under which circumstances and the level of that homophobia, whereas a different survey including a wider variety of questions would help to cross check answers.

Nevertheless, and given that homophobia is not a common topic to deal with in class, the important issue is to raise such a big problem at school: pronouncing such taboo words at school like gay, lesbian, homophobia or talking about gender stereotypes imply a huge step in the context of the current society. Some students will probably continue to feel homophobia, but they will also realize that their point of view is not unique anymore: some other perspectives, much more respectful, are becoming important and widespread as well, and that is also a huge step. Teaching values and changing people's minds to a more diverse reality requires time. Being aware of that obstacle and taking it into account is the first step to being successful when carrying out any projects of this nature.

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APPENDIX A:

LESSON PLAN: 'GENDER BACKPACK'

- <u>Linguistic objective</u>: To express external and internal obligation by using *have to* and *must.* To express reasons and cause/ effect by using *because* and *so*. To use *however, but* and *on the other hand* to express adversative ideas.

- <u>Objectives concerning diversity</u>: To identify traditional roles of boys and girls and understand that anyone can have characteristics which traditionally belong to the other sex. The main aim is to see that gender roles are essentially false because nobody fulfils 100% the features of his/her gender. Everyone has his/her own personality and that has to be respected, the same way we should respect and accept other behaviours and attitudes, no matter if they are performed by a girl or a boy.

- <u>Topics</u>: Features of gender; male, female. External and internal obligation: *have to* and *must.* Cause/ effect and expression of reasons: *so* and *because*. Opposite ideas: *however, on the other hand*.

- <u>Procedure</u>:

A) STAGE 1: The teacher drew on the blackboard two big circles and the headings 'boys' and 'girls'. Afterwards he told the class that they had to brainstorm features and characteristics which are traditionally associated with boys or girls, and gave four examples to check if the class has understood the task: blue clothes, pink clothes, brave, caring. Students had to say in which circle they could classify these four ideas and why. Moreover, they had to write down on a piece of paper eight more examples for each gender. Their ideas were shared with the whole class afterwards. Some examples were: aggressive, playing football, playing with dolls, relaxed, active, doing the chores, playing videogames, earning money, taking care of the family, crying (see Appendix B).

B) STAGE 2: When the choral list was ready, the teacher told the class his own characteristics from the ones written on the blackboard, and tried to choose some from each circle. For example, "I am a boy but I don't like playing football, but I am active… I like blue clothes but I also have a pink T-shirt". Two volunteers (a girl and a boy) did the same: describe themselves as accurately as possible, no matter if they chose features which are linked with the opposite gender. The teacher highlighted the importance of realising that most people have features which traditionally belong to the other gender, for example: girls who like playing football, boys who have cried, girls who don't like doing the chores, boys who have played with dolls. Concerning this issue, some students gave interesting information about themselves: for example, a boy said that he used to play with dolls with his female cousin when they were younger.

C) STAGE 3: In the end, most students understood that the two circles are false, because all boys have some female characteristics the same way that all girls will have male characteristics. The most important thing is that we accept others and do not become gender policemen/women: people who call the attention of a person who performs an action that is traditionally associated with the other gender.

- Assessment criteria: Students have to be able to:

  - Identify three actions which are traditionally associated with boys/ girls.   - Recognise one of his/her own characteristics which is traditionally associated with the other gender.
  - Show a respectful attitude towards people who are 'breaking' gender laws, by focusing on the importance of feeling free and being loyal to oneself.

APPENDIX B:

BOYS	GIRLS
Play videogames	Clean and do the chores
Active	Relaxed
Aggressive	Sensitive – cry
Football	Basketball
Blue	Pink
Play with cars	Play with dolls
Earn money	Take care of the family