

The researcher as a reflective participant in planning an intervention to ameliorate violence

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This paper is based on the first stage of my PhD research. I explore the social context in which the participants were immersed, fourth graders, to identify their needs and interests in order to design an intervention for the science class that aimed to promote compassionate attitudes and ameliorate aggression in children. The focus of this paper is on presenting how the intervention was framed using empirical data from the students, previous findings from relevant literature, and my observations. I present the process by which reflection upon the data I collected was used to generate the principles guiding the intervention.

Introduction

Action Research (AR) is characterized by a continuing self-evaluative process that leads to modifications for improvement of the practice. Its purpose is to change existing circumstances of participants (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). It contributes to practice as well as to creating a theory available and significant to others by identifying factors and their effects in context (Burns, 2000). The research study presented in this paper included the design of an intervention for a fourth grade science class which aimed at changing attitudes and developing pro-social skills and compassion towards animals for a group of disadvantaged children in Colombia. It involved several stages. In this paper I present part of the first stage, the process by which I designed the science learning environment for the intervention. This process followed the action research approach of an ongoing critical appraisal of the relationship between theory and practice in order to identify the appropriate pedagogical principles for the participant students, the relevant content and the specific role of the teacher and children. During two weeks I observed the participant students, interviewed each of them and their teacher and asked them to respond in written to some questions presented. Data from the students aimed at exploring their perceptions and conceptions regards the school, the science class, animals, nature and violence in the school and out of it. Together with the relevant literature and my

observations for those two weeks, the data from children were an input to take decisions about the practice; to design the intervention.

All data collected for this study was qualitative data and was characterized by my involvement with the school community and participants. Most of the research in education is still based in quantitative approaches in which the researcher's role is mostly neutral and detached from the objects or subjects of study (Burns, 2000). Despite this, several authors now agree that more qualitative and descriptive approaches that aim to promote education as a powerful tool for change should be applied in the educational field (e.g. Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Burns, 2000). Studies about new pedagogical perspectives like humane education call for approaches in which the researcher is involved with the community to understand it and reflect upon the dialogical process between practice and theory (e.g. Zasloff et al., 2003).

This research was conducted with a group of thirty eight (38) fourth grade students from a government school located in Usme that presents high levels of violence. Usme is a suburb at the southern part of Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, with an economically disadvantaged population and which is recognized as one of the suburbs with the higher levels of street violence in Bogotá. Thus, the participating children are at risk for involvement in antisocial behaviours in Colombia.

The Process for Framing the Intervention

For two weeks I planned to be a non-participant observer to learn and understand the social context, perceptions, needs and interests of the group of students I was going to work with. When I arrived to the school for the first time, I went and meet the children and their teacher. Students stopped doing the activity they were doing and went to ask me who I was and other questions that showed interest in knowing more about me. Some of them hugged me and kissed me and the teacher had to shout at them to sit and let me in. I went and sat in the last row of the classroom trying not to be noticed but several students kept coming to sit with me and ask me questions. I soon realized that my role as a researcher was going to be as an active member of the community rather than as a detached and neutral one.

During those first interactions with the students I started to observe high levels of aggression among them. For example, during the third day of visiting the school while one student was hugging me on another student, a boy, came and pulled her away violently while telling her "move away! Let me say hi to the teacher, do not be intense!". The girl pushed him back and told him "Idiot!". During those two first weeks was surprising the inconsistency between the levels of aggression I was observing and the students' need for affection I was experiencing. The rates of physical and verbal aggression were striking; every day several situations of aggression occurred during classes and most of the situations I recognized started with verbal aggression and escalated to physical aggression.

Besides the high levels of aggression among the participant students, while I observed classes I also noticed I did not hear any compliment or positive comment to any student. The threats and negative expressions such as "shut up!" directed toward the children exhibiting negative off-task behaviours were constant. Nevertheless, students never complained or presented any evident sign of discomfort towards the

negative responses from the teacher. It was as if they were used to it. This is consistent with literature on school violence which argues that a consequence of high occurrence of violence in schools is the response with aggression from teachers to punish violence in students, which perpetuate the cycle (Mayorga-Salas, 1997; Ohsako, 1997).

Despite the high levels of aggression, most classes did not offer opportunities for students to discuss what they were learning or share their opinions and experiences. They were mainly focus on teaching facts and offering activities that did not take into account the social context in which the students were immerse. I also observed students' science notebooks and they were full of graphs and charts of the food chain, the human body and other science topics. I asked students whether they have to research about these topics and they told me that they copied all the information from what the teacher writes on the board or from the science text books the teacher lends to each group during class.

I planned to ask students to respond to some written questions and interview a few of them to understand better their perceptions, motives and social context. However, when I started carrying the interviews all the students asked me to interview them since it made them feel important "no one has ever interviewed us". The social context and interactions of the students were complex, so I decided that it will be beneficial to both them and my research to interview each of them. The questions I decided to ask both in written form and during semi-structured interviews were:

- What have you learnt in science class during the last term?
- What is the science class for?
- Do you feel that science classes during these months have helped you in your relationship with your classmates or another aspect of your life?
- Have you fought or been aggressive the last week during class?
- Are there any specific science classes or science activities in which you feel you fight less than others?
- Have you witnessed or have been involved in any form of aggression inside or outside school?
- Have you witnessed aggression or have been aggressive with animals in the school or at home outside school?
- Are you living or had lived with animals before?
- Do you think humans should respect and care equally for other humans and non-human animals
- Write about (or do you want to share with me) any other aspect of the science class or about animals that you feel was relevant or interesting.

Students responded with enthusiasm during interviews. However, they were not interested in responding questions in written. Most students only responded a few questions in written. Reading the responses, observing the classes and reading their notebooks, I realized that their written and reading comprehension skills were not

appropriated for fourth grade which caused them to be reluctant to read and write. I was not expecting this, but, I had to take it into account for the design of the lessons for the intervention and the data collection.

Framing Principles for the Intervention

After the two weeks of observations and after interviewing the students and reading their written responses to my questions, I started to design the learning environment for the intervention. I spent four weeks identifying the pedagogical principles that were going to frame the intervention and designing the first three months of the intervention. Students were having two science classes per week, each of 45 minutes. Interventions for violence prevention that have shown positive impacts suggest that modifying attitudes of children need a significant amount of time. Programs like the Montreal Prevention program whose effects on participants can still be measured 15 years after participating in the program, lasted 19 sessions of 45 minutes each over a period of two years (Chaux, 2005). I decided to increase the number of science classes per week and started with classes of 90 minutes twice per week due to the specific and highly violent context of the participants.

When I started thinking about what I was going to teach, how and what the students should learn I realized there were so many complexities embedded in their own personal and social context that it was not going to be an easy task. I decided initially to think about what was relevant for them. Those children faced a reality that is not common for most children of these ages. They had witnessed and had been involved in violent acts both in the school and in their homes. Violence seemed to be a normal way of interacting among them and with adults. Trying to promote compassion towards animals, while they face all these problems, was not going to be an easy task, particularly when the school did not have the economic resources to support field trips. I decided the first three months of intervention were an *Introduction to Animal ethics and Animal welfare: Animals' need and their suffering*, so that it encourage students to connect the situations of animals with their own situations.

After reflecting upon the relevant literature, my field notes and the data collected from the students, I identified the diverse characteristics to include in the design of the intervention and the principles that guided the learning environment:

- Current conceptions and previous learning experiences are explored and taking into account for constructing new knowledge or modifying current views. Children already had ideas and had created concepts about the world, science and violence; they do not come 'empty', so I had to explore those conceptions and challenge them if needed.
- A learning process is an active process. Learners should be active in the construction of their knowledge and in making sense of what they are learning, so that they can connect what is presented with their life and previous experiences. All lessons were students centred and encourage them to make sense of what they were learning and form their own opinions.
- Learning process occurs while interacting with others and with the environment/context. Students should have the opportunity to discuss what

they are learning, share their opinions and personal experience. This might not only enhance their learning process of the science contents but also promote respect and tolerance, and will allow them to learn about the personal situations of each of them to understand what drives their behaviours.

- The pedagogy and content is responsive to the needs of the students and is relevant to them. Classes should take into account the complex social and personal situations in which the participant students were immerse. Their experiences and social context shape their attitudes, therefore if the intervention aimed at changing their behaviours, it should be relevant and present activities and a content which is close to their realities and challenge their attitudes and conceptions.

To sum up, the decisions I made about the initial design were based on my experiences during the two weeks of observations, the perceptions from students about their context, violence, nature and animals, and on the relevant literature. The social context in which the students were immersed was more complex than what I expected. The two weeks of observations and gathering data helped me understand the context and lives of the participant children. Been a participant observer and involved with the community I was going to work with gave me a better understanding of the situations that the children in those disadvantaged communities have to face daily. Following an action research approach, I reflected on my experience, on the data collected and the relevant literature to design an intervention that was relevant and adequate to the needs and interest of the participants and that could change their attitudes. The initial design of the intervention was subsequently revised and modified constantly based on the reactions and perceptions from students during each lesson.

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