ADOLESCENT PARTICIPATION: A STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN DISADVANTAGED ENVIRONMENTS

PhD. Zuriñe Gaintza_ ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6192-0455
Department of Didactic and School Organization
Teacher Training Faculty
University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)
Barrio Sarriena, s/n, 48490 Leioa (Spain)
Tel: +34 946 014611; e-mail: zuri.gaintza@ehu.eus

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Abstract

Today, knowing the opinion of young students is a valuable instrument when introducing improvements to education centres. The objective of this research is, precisely, to investigate implementation of the first two stages of a process aimed at promoting the participation of adolescents and young people at the school age, when carried out in an education centre located in a disadvantaged context. The results tell us that, depending on the context surrounding the education centre, the participation of the students surpasses the school limits, meaning that the topics raised and discussed focus on problems and situations existing in the community. However, the study concludes that the strategy of promoting the participation of students constitutes a first step, among young people, in the process of community development.

Keywords: Adolescent; Participation; Community development; Disadvantaged environments

1. Current state of the matter

Education is a complex phenomenon that aims to educate the members of a society in regard to knowledge, attitudes, values, cultural guidelines and perception which enable them to respond to the demands of the environment (Campillo, 2000). To achieve said objective, i.e. to respond to the demands of the environment, adolescent participation is a fitting strategy; it constitutes not only a valuable instrument with respect to development and education in values and behaviours, but also when proposing and introducing improvements to the environment (Sandoval, Echeita & Simón, 2016).

Going further into the term giving voice to the young people, it refers to the initiative to increase the leading role played by adolescents in making decisions, achieving real participation and assigning them a privileged position from which to bring about change in the school context. The rise in this technique is relatively recent, meaning that the experiences carried out are highly up to date. We therefore find ourselves with the study of (Messiou, 2013). using the voice to address the marginalisation existing in the educational context or the experiences of (Parrilla, Martínez & Zabalza, 2012; Rojas, Haya & Lázaro, 2012; Sandoval, Echeita & Simón, 2016; Susinos, Rojas, & Lázaro, 2011), among others. Underlying all of these experiences are two ideas: a first one determining the areas of participation available to young students; and another defining the collectives whose participation must be a priority. Thus, for example, Susinos (2012) establishes that the participation encompasses all those initiatives undertaken by schools and which are aimed at increasing the part played by students in making decisions on the design, management and assessment of any aspect of school life. In this same line, Fielding (2011) considers pedagogy on adolescent voice to be the movement which seeks to promote the participation of boys and girls in

making decisions on any aspect of school life, while they also insist on students whom, for reasons of gender, age, capacity or race, have been traditionally silenced or marginalised. From this perspective, Fielding (2011) seeks to build democratic schools, where, listening to young people, understanding their concerns regarding the educational experience and creating spaces of joint work, improvements are promoted which bring quality to the teaching and learning process. Thus, on listening to the opinion of adolescents, a democratic culture is created based on the participation of all involved in the school environment. A participation which varies depending on the extent to which the adolescents are involved. Hence, according to Fielding (2011), there are four levels of protagonism: a) The adolescent as a data source; b) The adolescent as an active informer; c) The adolescent as a co-researcher; and e) The adolescent as a researcher.

To succeed in leading role to adolescent, the educators must draw up a plan for turning the young people into the researchers of their own reality. To succeed, the author himself indicates that action must be taken both by the education team and by the adolescent themselves. As far as the adolescent are concerned, they must, on the first hand, make a commitment to their teachers and to their fellow adolescents in order to go deeper into understanding and learning and, on the other, to identify the areas to be researched, while assuming the commitment to research. For their part, the educators must adopt more equalitarian stances, giving the leading role to the young people and thereby becoming agents who listen actively. Both the commitment and the responsibility acquired by the two sides are shared throughout the process. As indicated by Ceballos (2017), the idea is to create real opportunities to listen, participate and carry out shared action on any aspect of importance for the adolescents: their lives, their education, their district, their city, etc. And to succeed, it is necessary to promote spaces for dialogue, assuming a mutual commitment to participate and following a specific structure of action.

Lastly, Ceballos (2017) proposes four steps. The first consists of analysing and reflecting on the reality of each situation by asking the question: How can we promote participation in the classroom and at school? Secondly, during the consultation and deliberation stage, with the adolescents, a decision will be made as to the subjects that worry them, specifically choosing one of them. Once defined, stage three will lead us into the process of investigating the subject at hand, opening the way to the documentation and communication stage. Finally, we come to the evaluation stage whereby we can proceed with reflection on the experience and open new horizons.

Taking the described outline into account, the research presented here has the objective of studying implementation of the first two phases of a process intending to give adolescents a voice, when carried out in an education centre situated in a disadvantaged context.

2. Methodology
The research work carried out falls within the framework of participatory research action as a method of empowering and transforming social reality [11]. Thus, this method, typical of qualitative approaches, converts people into the active subjects of a research process aimed at

obtaining results which are reliable and useful for the purposes of improving the living conditions of the participants. This study particularly focusses on analysing a series of specific experiences, meaning that it also gives this research the self-same features of the educational research based on the case studies (Stake, 2007).

The study looks at the data of two education centres we will call Centre1 and Centre2 and the participation experience is carried out with adolescents between the ages of 14 and 16. Both centres are located in disadvantaged contexts and are attended by students in a situation of social marginalisation. Thus, the educators participating in the study give the following descriptions of the communities in which their centres are located:

Centre1_ Community seriously affected by the lack of gender equality, family violence, poverty, who live in dysfunctional homes, with parents who never completed their primary school studies. One of the leading problems in our community is domestic violence.

Centre2_ A strongly marginalised and discriminated colony given the delinquency generated, causing family migrations due to threats of extorsion. One of the main problems suffered by the community is the accumulation of rubbish in the streets, where the inhabitants generally dump their waste, thereby creating large piles of rubbish which has a knock-on effect on their health, with widespread populations of pests, blocked drains, and an ugly visual appearance.

The experience is designed and directed by each educator according to the stages proposed by Ceballos (2017). These educators are receiving support and advice from researchers throughout the process. This collaboration enables the educators to create different activities for each one of the stages with a view to facilitating their implementation in the classroom.

The results found were processed using qualitative data analysis techniques. At first, the relevant information associated to the core objective of the research was identified. This information was grouped around two major categories corresponding to the two stages of the programme: a) the promotion of participation; and b) consultation and deliberation. The information grouped in each category was then summarised and streamlined.

2.1.Results

STAGE 1 How can we promote participation in the classroom and in the school?

Both centres have moments and strategies that foster adolescent participation; all contain questionnaires and forums or tables where young people debate on different topics with educator guidance. Going a little deeper, Centre2 also has processes of dialogue for solving conflict, art spaces, and the constitution of a student council in order to deal with issues arising in the context.

Regarding the topics the young people may discuss, we found that these are already decided by the educators and that in both centres the discussions look at problems which extend beyond the formal education context. Thus, Centre1 focusses on domestic violence; while Centre2 looks at caring for the environment. Perhaps due to looking at this kind of topic, when reflecting on the people who are involved we see that the whole educational community is involved: educators, management, mothers and fathers. And one of these educators justifies this participation, saying that "the idea is to join forces and to achieve significant changes in the community".

Regarding the spaces, these too extend beyond the limits of the education centre. Meetings are therefore held in districts, there are guided discussions in the classroom, radio spaces, discussion tables, "teatime spaces", etc. The strategies too are varied in all of them: questionnaires, video recordings, etc. And as far as the people they hold their discussions with, while the figure of the educator appears in all of them, they are also joined by representatives of the adolescents collective or of the parents association.

STAGE 2. Consultation and deliberation

Once the topic has been defined, a decision must be taken as regards which aspect of the same we wish to look at deeper, research, improve or communicate to the others. To do this, the educator, by way of a guide, presents a series of questions, such as:

Centre1: What problems affect your home? Would you like to be part of a working group for finding a solution to the problems that affect your home? What do you propose as potential solutions to the problem? Do you consider violence to be a factor which affects your community and your home? Do you have a list of potential proposals for improvement? Would you like to be part of the group bringing about change in your community and especially in your home? Would you support the proposals of the empowerment group against domestic violence, and would you participate in its development? How?

Centre2. What environmental problems affect your community? What do you suggest as a way of improving these problems? Would you like to be an agent of change in your community? What will be your creative proposal? What resources will be needed? What other people or organisations can we invite to participate in the initiative? What tools will be used to register the action?

2.2. Discussion

As we can see from the data collected for these two initial stages, from the outset we can observe that, in this context, the adolescent participation is a strategy that serves as a catalyst for progressing with community development. Understanding community development as an educational process

intended to achieve qualitative changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the population (Nogueiras, 1996).

Specifically, the methodology described by Ceballos (2017) establishes that in Stage 2 adolescents should be prompted to come up with potential improvements to carry out in their school and in their classroom. On the other hand, the education team at both centres proposes as a starting point, topics which, although they extend beyond the actual school framework, must be dealt with by their students. It is this starting point which leads us to think that, in this case, the educational context becomes a space for exchange and meeting in order to foster community development. Thus, the simple fact of having a discussion for a time in the classroom on the subject of a social problem (drugs, climate change, pollution, abuse, health, etc.), as well as setting the foundations for generating situations which help to increase the connection of young people as members of the community, will also generate new values in the adolescents while similarly promoting a change in their behaviour and attitude in accordance with a particular problem.

One fundamental aspect for community development lies in obtaining the involvement of those affected in the processes of change. In this case we observe that the adolescents, as well as being students of the centre, are also the members of a community with a very specific problem, meaning that the possibilities of involvement increase considerably on dealing with the subject from the context of formal education.

3. Conclusions

This study encountered a reality which, on occasions, and depending on the context in which adolescent participation is promoted, the latter situate beyond the school. To start with, their concerns do not lie in the school context (in the methodology, the curriculum, the timetables, playing during the break, rules, etc.), but in their everyday lives, in their districts, in their homes. Their concerns are located outside of the educational sphere. We therefore see how the participation of young people is directed towards community development, acquiring a clearly transformative function in the context or community, the purpose of which is to improve the quality of life of both themselves, and of their nearest and dearest. This conclusion refers us to (Freire, 1997), when they suggest that we are not beings of adaptation, but of transformation. In the words of one of the educators: *"These are adolescents who seek to change their lives and their community environment"*.

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