

AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT WITH BEGINNING TEACHERS IN COLOMBIA -SOUTH AMERICA

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Abstract

This paper presents a project that has been carried out at the University of Caldas, a public higher institution in Colombia, South America. The purpose of this presentation is to share with the audience an action research project with beginning teachers as well as the steps that can be followed by beginning teachers throughout their teaching practicum in a higher educational program. They are studying to be teachers especially in public high schools and basic state institutions. The audience will be informed about what beginning teachers do to deal with the action-research cycle. The main concern is: how can beginning teachers improve their teaching in the area of foreign language so that they learn to be reflective and transformers through the action-research cycle. The project was sponsored by COLCIENCIAS and was carried out by INACMES (Action-research, Curriculum and Multimedia in Higher Education) which is a group classified under Category A.

Introduction

At present in the Colombian higher educational programs, universities train students to become teachers of basic education through theory based courses or seminars and little practice. The history of the teacher training programs has been associated, to an important extent, to the exercise of teaching as a purely passive activity. Only in recent years, has research started to gain momentum. Of course, problems emerge from this type of training:

- Lack of integration of theory and practice
- Lack of time devoted to research work
- Frequent use of isolated techniques
- No use of field work
- Absence or philosophical paradigms
- Mechanical practice of step by step and instruments
- Instrumental use of research findings
- Few opportunities to improve professional skills to face the problems of real classroom situations.
- Teachers continue trying to adopt what others suggest is the best for their teaching-practice. However, most of the time it is difficult to transfer what experts suggest should be done in our classrooms.

What about INACMES (Action-research, Curriculum and Multimedia in Higher Education)?

In recent years, research is becoming to be the source and foundation of all educational processes (Muñoz & Quintero, 1999). Colombian universities have experienced the necessity to center their fundamental mission on research, leaving aside the simple transmission of knowledge. The new General Statute of the University of Caldas, in force since the last 10 years, raised research to the category of pivot of the academic life. It is very satisfactory for the University of Caldas to present today, the research activity of one of the most outstanding group in the institution: INACMES.

INACMES is a research group that has been labeled A, because it was selected after the summons made by the National System of Science and Technology, through COLCIENCIAS, in order to

choose the most outstanding research groups in the country. In Colombia, COLCIENCIAS has tried to give an impulse to research, by means of certain policies promoting research groups. Research groups are now being presented as the new paradigm on the basis of which the university should reconstruct its institutional life. In a first place comes the research groups considered to be A having been selected by a jury made up of investigators of renown, a jury that considered their production very significant.

About Colombia. Facts at a glance

The Republic of Colombia is a country located in the northwestern South America. Capital: Bogotá, Area: 439, 828 Square miles. Population: 39'000.000 approximately. Currency: Colombian peso. The most famous national flower is Orchid. The orchid and other exotic flowers are exported to other countries. National bird: Andean Cónдор (in danger of extinction). Coffee is the principal Colombian export; it is the softest in the world. Colombia also exports tropical fruits, flowers, minerals and crafts. Border countries: Brazil, Ecuador, Panamá, Perú, Venezuela. It is the only South American country with coasts on both North Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea. Its climate is tropical along coast and eastern plains; cooler in highlands. The average temperature varies little throughout the year. Temperature do, however, varies with altitude. Because of the country's complex geographical factors, there are only two seasons: rainy season and dry season. It has some wonderful towns, Caribbean beaches, cordilleras, mountains, lowlands, Andean valleys, Amazonian rainforest and some deserts, industry and trade.

Concerning its culture, the official language in Colombia is Spanish although Basic Education system includes English in its curriculum as a foreign language. The main purpose is to integrate the teaching of the English Language with the cultural and intercultural students' context. Colombia is an ethnic mosaic, reflected in its culture, folklore, arts and crafts, sculpture and music. Ethnic groups are Mestizo, White, Mulatto, Black and Amerindian. Roman Catholicism remains the dominant religion although there are various religious sects. It is inhabited by extremely spirited people, rich in history, culture, events, attractions, biodiversity, archaeology, stone relics, agriculture, and ancestral pre-Columbian customs. Thousands of Colombian children, women and men want to acquire knowledge and skills, and recognize themselves as responsible and productive citizens. They do not want to be mere recipients of foreign innovations.

Colombia is a country rich in resources. It has the highest number of species, plants, animals and minerals. Petroleum, natural gas, gold, coal mines, iron ore, nickel, copper, emeralds, wild animals, extensive jungles and forests. We can observe several species of birds and abundant marine life. Land use is arable land, permanent crops, permanent pastures, forest and woodland. Natural hazards are characterized by highlands subject to volcanic eruptions, occasional earthquakes, periodic droughts.

Just at the beginning of the third millennium, it may be said that, in economic, social and cultural terms, progress has brought in all over the world, given the advances in science and technology and the growing importance of knowledge. Colombia has emerged from underdevelopment. Standards of living have continued to rise, albeit there are considerable differences from country to country and from region to region.

Colombia participates in the race for competition under the pressure of technological progress and modernization. This fact causes tremendous implications. Let's see evidences such as:

unemployment, competition among nations, exclusion of growing numbers of people in the rich countries, uneven distribution of opportunities, the use of renewed knowledge, poverty and violence.

The Colombian educational system

Educational policies detach the importance of an integrated body of pedagogical knowledge for the present time in order to face new perspectives related to the development of science, technology, society, culture, learning, teaching and human values. Colombian educational systems must provide the vocational and scientific training of the future leaders if our country is to escape from its present poverty and underdevelopment. Higher education assumes greater responsibility in this commitment. Universities are learning to appreciate the role of education both as a way of achieving societal objectives and as a desirable quality of individuals' life.

Outlined in the educational policies are the expectations and possible strategies that enclose teachers, students, parents and community in order to understand the concept and practice of education as well as the role of the institutions in the construction of a new society. We can observe an endless effort: to transform the education system, in terms of magnitude and relevance, in order to guarantee the country's competitiveness while attaining a better quality of life and social equity.

Educational policies claim for a better world by contributing to sustainable human development, mutual understanding among individuals, the renewal of democracy and human values. Policies also claim for the improvement of skills in order to enable students to act effectively in a family, as a citizen or as a productive member of society. New skills are needed in the Colombian young people. Educational system is required to provide not only the minimum of schooling or professional development, but also training for scientists, innovators, leaders, politicians and high-level specialists in every area of knowledge.

Educational policies in Colombia promote peace and mutual understanding by emphasizing the value of education as a manifestation of the spirit of concord, self-stemming from the will to live together, as active members of our global village, thinking and organizing for the good of future generations. According to UNESCO (1996), it is in this way that education will contribute to a culture of peace.

Educational policies in our country define education not solely from the point of view of its impact on economic growth, but from the broader perspective of human development. Teacher training formation plays a crucial role in the quality of education. Education has a fundamental role to play in personal and social development. The demands made on teachers are considerable, at the very time when the outside world is increasingly invading the school, particularly through the new communication and information media. Colombian teachers are encouraged to plan, reflect, act, assess, and interpret their classroom practice in a systematic way sharing their findings with the academic community. In other words, they should get involved in classroom research as a way of becoming critical of their performance and, evolve professionally. Teachers invest precious time and talent discussing educational crisis or questioning traditional practices or solving curriculum problems or studying to improve the quality of teaching.

Higher Education in Colombia faces numerous challenges. Teachers attend the University to continue their studies both undergraduate and graduate modalities. They need to develop the creativity and empathy necessary to become actively participating and creative citizens. University

Institutions seek to function normally within a context of instability that has been the reality in Colombia for over thirty years. The reduction in government funding for education has restricted new research, particularly in science and technology. Following global trends, the academic communities are demanding more academic opportunities abroad in order to gain the skills required by an increasingly internationalized economy. At the same time, Colombian universities are competing to prepare the next generation of leaders with the entrepreneurial skills, ethical values, and social commitment needed in order to make Colombia a more just, competitive, and peaceful nation, following the principles of equity, quality, efficiency, coverage and autonomy. If education holds the key to Colombia's future, higher education should play a fundamental role in the recuperation of peace and economic normalization.

However, higher education institutions still face numerous obstacles. The higher education sector is relatively expensive. Inefficiency and low quality are also major problems in Colombia's university education. Undergraduate and graduate programs are concentrated in the principal urban areas; most of these are in Bogotá and a few other principal cities. Nonetheless, the rapid expansion of higher education had in general occurred at the expense of quality. Universities produce more graduates than the country can employ. The percentage of unemployed graduates increases every year. Thousands of Colombian professionals become frustrated by low pay and limited job opportunities.

Teacher formation is particularly invaluable for Colombia, where we encounter great challenges within our borders and around the world. Schools of Education at the universities are charged with preparing teachers, but they are heavily criticized for inflexible, irrelevant curriculum and poor quality. In the midst of Colombia's current challenges, the schools of education demonstrate the power of education to illuminate the road ahead.

Theoretical foundations

Taking into account that initial formation is a gradual process of personal, professional, and scientific development, this theoretical framework presents a brief review of theories that support an action-research project. It serves as a methodological contribution for integrating research with the curriculum programs. Scientific issues related to immediate and practical solutions in the formation of teachers as beginning researchers have concerned some theorists all over the world: Kemmis and McTaggart (1985), Stenhouse (1975), Schön (1983), Elliott (1993), Howe (1988), and Delors (1996). These authors emphasize the action research approach as an alternative for the renewal of curriculum plans. These paradigms of change and innovation have been well appreciated by Colombian educators.

Action theory is a branch of philosophy concerned with the analysis of what human beings do intentionally. This typically includes an effort to distinguish actions from mere events and some proposal concerning the ethical significance of actions. In recent years, the reflective approach (Lewin, 1946; Schön, 1983; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Nunan, 1997) support that every professional should improve his action when he reflects about what he does. Since the nineteenth century, these authors have helped researchers to better understand how school practitioners make sense of their experience and engage in professional learning. This is a way, how teachers as researchers can work scientifically in their classroom. It means that teachers are not only collectors of data but creators. Consequently, as Senge (2000) stated in "Schools that Learn", knowledge arises from a reflective experience; teachers are always solving problems, experimenting and reflecting in order to change their immediate environment.

Pedagogy, research and teaching are to be integrated with the purpose of preparing reflective and critical teachers, able to improve their own practices. According to Schön (1983:58) *“professional practitioners”, be they physicians, architects, or teachers –or, one might add, craftspersons or artists- face “situations of practice” characterized by complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict. The problems professionals face cannot be solved by the formulas of “technical rationality”.*

Several authors coined the term action research from different perspectives. The definitions given below refer directly to what can be done by the beginning teachers. These are the main quotations:

According to Kemmis & McTaggart, 1985:10), *“action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the productivity, rationality, and justice of their own social and educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out. Groups of participants can be teachers, students, principals, parents and other community members –any group with a shared concern. To do action research is to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life”.*

Nunan, (1997:229), argues that *“action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry carried out by practitioners, aimed at solving problems, improving practice, or enhancing understanding. It is often collaborative”.*

The terms action research and reflective thought are associated because they constitute a search for a kind of understanding that enable teachers to act wisely and intelligently in a changing world. According to Elliot (1998:140), *in doing so, teachers “associate theory from the immediacy of practical judgment and decision-making; an immediacy which stems from the need to respond to problems and issues as they arise in the practical experience of living”.*

Cohen and Manion, (1994:186) also argues that *“action research is a small scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention”.*

The authors above agree that the result is improvement in what happens in teaching practice, and better articulation and justification of the educational rationale for what goes on. They also present five steps of the action research cycle that can be followed by beginning teachers: a) to develop a plan of action; b) to improve what is already happening; c) to act to implement the plan; d) to observe the effects of action; in the context in which it occurs, and e) to reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent action, through a succession of cycles.

Research questions:

- Is it possible to introduce the action-research cycle in teaching practicum in order to initiate a gradual process of personal, professional, and scientific formation of beginning teachers?
- How can beginning teachers introduce action-research processes into real situations in the classroom?
- If beginning teachers transfer the reflective cycle into their classes, what are the main changes?

Objectives

- To enable beginning teachers to promote action research processes into the classroom in order to introduce changes and innovations regarding teaching and learning when necessary.
- To enhance self-awareness and reflective skills within teaching practices in order to understand the relationship between a specific contextual situation and its implications.

Target population and subjects:

The participants of this research project include 10 teacher trainers, from the Modern Languages Program. This group is developing the professional practice in public high schools and primary schools.

Instruments and techniques

Throughout the development of the project several instruments and techniques have been used such as: class observations, informal talks, life histories, autobiographies, diaries, audio and video recordings, fieldnotes, transcripts, documents, interviews, questionnaires and surveys.

Findings

-The participants (beginning teachers) in this study identified strengths and weaknesses of their own particular situations according to their perceptions about research processes, their experience and reflections involved in their pedagogical practice. They can become aware of the importance of research processes which will be applicable to any of their real teaching contexts.

-Beginning teachers became familiar with the action-research cycle, and with the difficult task of assimilating opportunities for both teaching-learning process and researching.

-During the action stage, the trainees have been designing and developing a series of lesson plans integrating the action research cycle. As they develop their lesson plans they evaluate and reflect upon the effectiveness of the class in such a way that they make decisions about how to improve and/or change the aspects they found unsatisfactory. At this stage, the trainees not only focus on the materials themselves, but also on the relationship between the learning of English and the action research cycle.

-It was noticed that beginning teachers were able to follow a logical sequence of content and they *referred to a methodological research process*. They tried to discover, by themselves what they supposed enhance their everyday practice.

-Participants realized that action-research is within their capacities and it encourages them not only to carry out projects but to improve their action as educators. Phrases such as reflective teacher, research teacher, pedagogical research, science, technology, solving problems, human inquiry, innovation, qualitative and quantitative approaches became part of beginning teachers' vocabulary.

-Beginning teachers have learnt to be problem solvers. They have promoted changes and improvements in the classroom. They have implemented some innovative methodologies centered on research process and have contributed with creative materials which have been designed by both the trainees themselves and their students. They have become skillful in designing creative activities that are more meaningful for the students. They have contributed with the updating of the school's curriculum. This way, action-research has been useful to introduce changes in the curriculum as a means to educate self-critical teachers in acting, collaborating and reflecting as intellectual members of the Colombian educational context.

-The classroom has become a space for reflection about the problems and limitations that the beginning teachers have. They have become more motivated since they have found that their classes are meaningful and include topics that are familiar to them. They have become sensitive about the problems that affect the students and their contexts.

-Beginning teachers have learned how to use research tools in a proper way (fieldnotes, diaries, surveys, observational registers, interviews, etc.). They have learned how to analyze and interpret information through, segmentation, codification, and categorization techniques. They have become more capable in making decisions and solving problems, and also they have become more reflective and critical.

-Beginning teachers have better developed their reading skills by using strategies such as selecting, interpreting, summarizing, and criticizing scientific literature related to their research problem.

- Finally, action-research has been useful to help beginning teachers engaged in research projects inside the classroom. They have learned how to work in groups and share their goals and frustrations as novice teachers and researchers.

Final outcomes

As a result of the research experience, we have:

- A pedagogical diary as didactic material.
- A set of papers to be published. (Pedagogical writings).
- A book or a handbook to be published aimed at teachers, students and educational researchers.
- A structural framework about educational research as a guideline to transform the curriculum of the Licenciatura program.
- A group of new graduate teachers which will be able to design projects and to transform pedagogical processes by translating research into practice.

Conclusions

After analyzing data from the perspective of the initial preparation of teachers at the university of Caldas in Colombia, we have come to the following conclusions:

So far, we have been able to conclude that following the educational reform, a group of beginning educators in Colombia began to rethink a new model of development, which would lead to integrate theory and practice, and pedagogy and research.

This early experience suggests new ways of thinking, teaching and researching. Thus, in this project it is detached the importance of doing action-research for the present time and to face new perspectives for the teaching training programs. It is of vital importance to integrate the action research cycle within the teaching-learning processes so that the students can learn in a more meaningful and reflective way.

The action-research cycle helped beginning teachers define the classroom as both a learning place and a social world where converge multiple cultures among students. The social world in the classroom is constantly changing. As a consequence, each classroom setting implies a different interpretation of the real world and demands different paths of action.

One of the most important aims of the curriculum is to prepare reflective teachers to identify real needs and to solve research problems. Then, it is necessary and possible to prepare beginning teachers to be researchers since their studies at the university.

Doing action-research helps to overcome the well known difficulties of higher educational programs. That is, the educational aim is to gain insights, rather than to master specific predefined tasks. The nature of such a model promotes greater and more thought-out participation than typically occurs in the traditional models.

This project has led us to conclude that throughout the development of the action-research cycle the trainees have had the opportunity to contribute to the development of institutional policies concerning the future professional's research formation.

Pedagogical implications

The findings and conclusions of this project concentrate on giving some principles, stages and strategies for developing the action-research cycle in order to make decisions for innovation, implementation and problem solving. The project includes the action-research model as a component in the curriculum of the teachers training programs in Colombia as it is a way of improving the quality of teaching and it combines different approaches, techniques and instruments.

Educators need to improve the conditions of learning and the quality of learning of increasingly large number of students. The kinds of necessary research, the required theoretical insights, and the ways that scientific findings should be translated into practice are issues that have not yet been resolved in the Colombian Schools of Education.

The participants in this study also shared the fact that there are serious time constraints. They often complain that they don't have enough time to accomplish what they want to investigate. Beginning teachers tried several other thematic concerns before they arrived at they action-research project. At the very beginning, it was a frustrating and difficult task to identify one issue that was relevant and manageable. Doing action research for the first time also had difficulties identifying a thematic concern. It is important to start small and focus on something beginning teachers can complete in a few months or during the academic year.

Accepting its critical point of view and practical limitations, action-research must help educators to identify problems and to illuminate new pathways that lead toward new educational goals. The problem of improving practical pedagogical situations is not a simple task. However, a variety of

different experiences for solving the beginning teachers' problems and concerns are arisen from the present project. In the same way, several attempts to derive useful applications from the action-research findings are emerged in order to improve educational practices.

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