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Notes From The Field

“We make coexistence stylish and in a fun way”: the need of students to get involved in and contribute through Human Rights Education projects

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The project

Education in Colombia—a country where violence is the rule for many, even in our daily lives—is a difficult task. Since the republican time from 1800 on, “normalization” was a key element of discipline: keeping order, maintaining hierarchy even among partners, and following rules with the consequence of punishment and exclusion. Fear, obedience and subordination created an artificial atmosphere in which the subject faced shame and guilt as the only routes for learning behavior (Saldarriaga, 2003, pp. 154, 155). Sometime later, into the 1900s, the hierarchical, strict and disciplined model remained, and little attention was paid to emotions.

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Human rights did not exist, and everything was shaped by the necessity of abiding by the good manners brought from Europe. El “Manual de urbanidad de Carreño” (Urban handbook by Carreño) was a book on how to behave in public spaces, attend to hygiene, and engage in moderation and composure (Soaje, 2015). Citizenship basically meant to abide by these values and maintain a sense of belonging to the nation. Though this may be the first step to citizenship, it has been without the active participation and critical thinking of modern times.

Shame and guilt are moral values that should not be underestimated. Such models of discipline were certainly incomplete and relied on total obedience, but they did contribute to showing clearly what could be right or wrong, though this is complicated and not always easy to assess. In the present time, shame has little space in a society “adrift without a moral compass” (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 175). Sanctions and shame may continue being used in school contexts, but in 1991 the Colombian State issued a New Constitution totally adherent to Human Rights. Education took a new turn under these principles and values. Free development of personality, freedom, rights, friendship and tolerance on a global scale were included (United Nations Organization, 1948).

After considering our beginnings, this moment in Colombian History is a fertile time for running a Human Rights Project. Now there are hopes for a changing country after the Peace agreement with the FARC, in which education for participation in democracy is a staple for involving citizens actively (Gobierno Nacional de Colombia, 2016, p. 54). To start a project is to go beyond “knowing” and “knowing how to do” (Quintero & Herrera, 2008, p. 233) and get into “doing”.

The start

A feeling of belonging is a key concept if we want our youngsters to make their school and community a part of their lives. They are naturally prone to collaborate and take part actively, and they should identify themselves as citizens and behave as such (Osler & Hugh, 2005, p. 102). Bearing this in mind, a decision was made to create a project with students

for promoting and addressing coexistence issues in the Cortijo Vianey School, located in the southern outskirts of Bogotá.

An idea was brought about to invite students to join a group promoting coexistence, human rights and citizenship. Only three students attended, but it was just the start of the proposal. The first activities had the goal of training these students on subjects like Human Rights History, Human rights violations and tips to be a good citizen. Training activities included watching videos, role playing, and reading excerpts from victims of the armed conflict in Colombia. Other students who misbehaved continuously or were involved in major incidents such as bullying, stealing and fighting were invited to reflect on their actions and link their situation with the reality of human rights. Little by little some of these boys and girls joined the group.

One of the first steps was to carry out a survey for analyzing the most frequent problems regarding incidents and offenses given by students. 50 questionnaires composed of ten questions were delivered to parents, and only eight were answered and handed in. Nevertheless, the findings were included later in the coming activities. Parents reported lack of tolerance, insults, and verbal aggression as the most common problems at the school.

Another step was to interview students at random during their break time about basic knowledge of human rights. Some were serious and gave answers of this sort: “human rights are some kind of warranty to protect you”, and “those things are intended to sue somebody for bad actions”. Few students were joking around but gave answers related to the topic: “the right to have sex”, and “the right to smoke marijuana”. Teachers and administrators were interviewed too, but their answers were closer to the best definitions: “they are warranties to protect your dignity”, and “they establish respect toward your life and well-being”.

After a shy start, the group started to grow: from three students in the first year to ten in the second one. Working with more than five students demands more from you when the group meetings are after the school journey, but letting them take part is a necessity in a country where education is “far from reality” (García Márquez, 2010). A Human rights education project has to invite those who need it most. In doing so, it may

be more helpful to have it as part of the school curriculum and supporting the Community Committee rather than having small split initiatives (Sthepens, Kyriacou, & Tonnessen, 2005, p. 204). Students who misbehaved were made to attend three or four sessions of the meetings in order to make empathy the first powerful tool to help them face and overcome their mistakes (Yilmaz & Sahincaya, 2010). During each session the main goals were to reflect and see the importance of redress (Shaw, 2016) for the fault they gave.

In 2016, another important moment for the group was a visit to a theater where two retired actors talked about their achievements and failures in life. The importance of storytelling is a key for going beyond students' actions. Listening to their lives is enriching and develops sensitivity, and both oral and written production gives way to feelings and emotions connecting them to compassion (Barreto, 2011). Storytelling has also taken place in the group sessions, as listening to the life experiences of every student builds up trust among the group (Bar-on, as cited in Salomon & Nevo, 2012). Anecdotes end up showing more similarities than differences in students' lives, reaffirm or break family ties, and in the end, link compassion, responsibility and guilt in sensible amounts (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 354). Listening to students' realities is motivating, opens interest and brings students closer to each other's suffering, happiness and dreams (Bedoya, 2013).

Taking action

By 2017, the group was more visible and became a part of the recognized school projects, which were awarded some money from the Department of Education of Bogotá through the School Academic Council.

A new goal that came along the way was the historical memory of the school. An opportunity arose to collect and file important moments in the everyday life of the community (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013) through audio, photos and articles. Difficult experiences in which a right was violated, or positive actions that exercise a right or show compassionate values, give us a chance to promote and educate about Human Rights. A teacher from the school died at the beginning of the year

due to an illness she had been suffering for a long time. Unfortunately the delay in some medical treatment aggravated her condition until little could be done. Her work mates went to protest to the teachers' health care institution, E.P.S¹. Connecting this sad situation and remembering the teacher by presenting a brief part of her life in classrooms, and not letting such a situation go unnoticed, made students reflect on the importance of health as a basic human right. As a follow-up activity, students were asked questions which brought attitudes and behaviors to the surface regarding others' health and possible dangers. Examples included "making teachers speak loud leads to possible throat cancer, laryngitis etc.", and "not taking care of tables, chairs and other furniture leads to general services staff spine ailments in the long run".

Reflection and redress continue to be the cornerstones of the project. Another goal is to interview teachers about alternative methods for dealing with behavior problems. Most teachers tend to show authority as power (Sanchez, 2016) and exercise such dominance by engaging parents instead of looking for solutions directly with the students. The boys and girls in the project have approached teachers and administrators to ask them the best way to cope with difficult students. Dialogue and listening to the versions of both participants (if there was a quarrel or verbal aggression) have been common answers. All of the recordings were uploaded to the school website, creating an archive with valuable material about coexistence, human rights and citizenship. This is an activity that makes students feel active and motivates them to contribute to both the project and their school.

An additional goal that may be considered more passive but is necessary is the creation of posters and messages that visualize rights, self-esteem phrases and give sense to the community handbook recommendations. It is important to say that the school has changed focus from only rules and sanctions to the respect of Human Rights aimed at reaching the best coexistence possible. Both posters and messages are

¹ EPS stands for Health Care Company.

drawn by students. Some will be printed on banners and handed out to teachers who display them in their classrooms. Just to show these messages is not enough, so the kids who give them will make a little reflection on what the banner says.

Dreams and hopes

There are big challenges for human rights and citizenship. Colombia is a country that has had much violence, corruption and discrimination. It is obvious that people do not rely on the government (Ospina, 2016); they try to make money the easy way. Though a new national police code was issued and major sanctions were approved, some Colombians continue to break the law for their own interests, and a great majority have not read it entirely (Bogota Post, 2017). These situations are reflected in school environments. Creating change will take some time, but taking action now is worth it.

In a country full of despair and hopelessness, education must provide some relief. This project makes a small but important contribution to change the world from our surroundings. If money from the city department of education is granted, there will be one or two field trips per year to museums, hiking (to connect Human rights and ecology) and conferences. The group will continue its weekly activities in the school, though a meaningful connection to the surrounding community would be important. This can be done through interviews with people in neighborhoods close to the school. Another possibility lies in the exchange of experiences with other schools in the area. It is necessary to learn from others, and this can be performed in the “Foro Local de Educación” (Local forum on education) conducted by the local education district that comprises schools from surrounding neighborhoods in Usme, Bogotá.

A recent drawback facing the group is a delay in the money delivery for activities, plus all the tasks teachers must perform. Compared to the challenges society poses us, this is a minor issue. The intention is to continue developing these activities despite any scarcity encountered.

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