Promoting Teacher Autonomy through Educational Innovation*

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In this paper, a teacher-researcher and his advisor report on an action research project aimed at developing teacher autonomy through collaborative work on the redesign and implementation of a new English syllabus in a high school in Medellín. Educational innovation, collaborative work, and autonomy development emerged as the main themes related to changing teacher and school practices. Teacher autonomy development requires certain conditions, but the process of change can create these conditions. With this paper we aim at a better understanding of and a discussion on the field of teacher autonomy, especially about the conditions required to begin educational innovations in our institutions, and how these conditions are related to teacher autonomy.

Key words: teacher autonomy, collaboration, educational innovation, professional development, action research

En este artículo, un profesor-investigador y su asesora informan acerca de un proyecto de investigación acción llevado a cabo en un colegio de Medellín, el cual buscaba desarrollar la autonomía profesoral por medio del trabajo colaborativo en torno al diseño e implementación de un nuevo currículo de inglés. En el análisis de la información emergieron como temas centrales la innovación educativa, el trabajo colaborativo y el desarrollo de la autonomía, la cual requiere ciertas condiciones que surgen en el proceso de cambio. Con este artículo buscamos contribuir a la comprensión y a la discusión en torno a las condiciones necesarias para iniciar innovaciones educativas en nuestras instituciones y cómo estas condiciones se relacionan con la autonomía del profesorado.

Palabras claves: autonomía del profesor, colaboración, innovación educativa, desarrollo profesional, investigación acción

Dans cet article, le professeur-chercheur et son tuteur rendent compte d'un projet de recherche-action ayant pour objectif le développement de l'autonomie du professeur par le travail coopératif dans la planification et l'application d'un plan d'étude basé sur le contenu, en anglais, prenant place dans un établissement d'enseignement secondaire de Medellin. L'innovation éducative, le travail collaboratif et le développement de l'autonomie, et ces conditions particulières, émergèrent comme étant les principaux thèmes développés; dans le processus de changement du professeur et de l'école. Avec ce travail, le but des auteurs est de participer à l'amélioration de la compréhension et à la discussion dans le domaine de l'autonomie du professeur; plus spécifiquement au niveau des conditions requises pour engranger les innovations éducatives au sein de nos institutions, et comment ces conditions sont liées à l'autonomie du professeur.

Mots clés : autonomie du professeur, collaboration, innovation éducative, développement professionnel, recherche-action.

INTRODUCTION

This action research is part of a multi-site case study carried out by four teacher-researchers interested in the development of learner and teacher autonomy in different institutions around the city. In our research group, we understand autonomy as the human capacity to be in charge of one's own life, including the academic and political fields where we belong. This capacity includes the ability and possibility to access knowledge on one's own, the cognitive development that makes being independent possible, and the willingness and preparation that is required in order to participate in decision making in a democratic society.

Even though in our research group we had been mainly concerned with learner autonomy, we realized that in order for teachers to develop students' autonomy, teachers themselves had to be autonomous. Therefore, in the process of changing the English syllabus so that students could take a more active part in their learning, I invited the school English teachers to participate in this action research in order to develop their own autonomy.[1]

In this paper, I will report the process of autonomy development for two English teachers in a high school in Medellín. First, I will provide a brief description of the school and the participants in the research; second, I will explain the problem that prompted this research; third, I will narrate the experience of implementing actions to promote teacher autonomy, fourth, I will explain how I monitored that experience; and fifth, I will discuss the findings, relating them to theory. Finally, I will reflect on the experience of carrying out action research and draw some conclusions.

1. THE CONTEXT

The school where I conducted the research is a public secondary school for girls with a very good reputation due to the lack of students' serious discipline problems,

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1. When we use the first person singular we refer to Jaime Usma, who was the teacher directly involved in the high school. Cristina Frodden was the research advisor and as such gave constant support and feedback to Jaime in all phases of the research, including the writing of this article.

its high academic level and because it was recently acknowledged by the government as the public school with the city's highest score in the National Examination. This could be attributed to the Catholic nuns who administer the school and the environment where it is located—a residential, fairly quiet, lower and middle class neighborhood.

I first came to the school as one of three English student-teachers who started the teaching practicum in January 2001. Amparo,[2] the English teacher for grades 9, 10 and 11, was my cooperating teacher. I observed her classes and gradually began to teach to one of her groups while she observed my classes and gave me feedback on my performance. Besides Amparo there were two other English teachers in the school: Esperanza, who taught 6, 7 and an eighth grade, and William, a Spanish teacher who knew English and taught the other eighth grade.

Amparo was an open-minded, reflective and sociable person who was part of the academic committee of the school. She was very active and participated in the different activities and celebrations of the school. On the other hand, Esperanza was isolated from the other teachers. She did not participate in cultural or academic events or belong to any committee. In 2001, I did not have much contact with William because he worked with the school's Spanish teachers. However, I could see that he was sociable and active. Amparo and Esperanza were receiving a pension but continued working while William was planning to retire in two years.

The 700 students of the school were distributed among 16 groups, with 35 to 50 students per group from the sixth grade to the eleventh. Due to the fact that English teachers put special emphasis on grammar, pupils had many difficulties when they were asked to communicate orally or in written form. Therefore, for my practicum project, which was to be implemented in the second semester of that year, I proposed to redesign the English curriculum in order to promote students' productive skills and take into account their interests and needs. The other two student-teachers and Amparo joined me in the design and implementation of a topic-based syllabus—later named "Syllabus I"—for grades 9 to 11, which Amparo was teaching. In this kind of syllabus, the focus is on topics related to real-life contexts of language use. In our case the topics were related to students'

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2. Proper names have been substituted by pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity.

lives. For example, in a unit like "My City Life" students learned to communicate on topics such as hobbies and entertainment, and food and drink.

By the end of the year, we found that these students had improved their receptiveness towards the English class, which was reflected in their grades in English, in their participation in project work, and in their poster presentations in school celebrations. The school administration, the teachers, the students and their parents all expressed their satisfaction with the new syllabus, and we presented our work in different conferences where it was well received.

However, every time we talked about our project and the good results that we had obtained, people asked us why this endeavor was only being carried out in the senior grades. We also wondered what would happen to students who passed from the grammar-oriented syllabus in the junior grades to the new one, which required students to communicate, in the senior grades. This problem triggered my decision to continue working in that school after I had graduated, in order to continue the action research process I had started in my teaching practicum, but focusing on these new issues.

2. THE STARTING POINT

While in the senior grades we were promoting students' productive skills, in the junior grades William continued emphasizing grammar with the activities and materials that he had designed. Esperanza was still mainly using the grammar and vocabulary exercises from a textbook she had chosen for the courses, paying a lot of attention to formal aspects such as bringing a dictionary to class, and repeating and learning lists of words, phrases or prayers. Besides, since Esperanza was isolated from the other teachers, it was difficult to try to work together with her in order to design and implement a coherent syllabus for English. I had even tried to show her what we were doing in our classes but she had not paid much attention. When students passed from grade 8 to 9, even though they knew a great deal of vocabulary, they lacked confidence in their knowledge of the language; they felt they did not know English because they could not use the language. Esperanza's students frequently complained about her teaching and her way of assessing them, which worsened the rapport between her and the

students. The director had received complaints from parents and had talked to Esperanza in order for her to improve, but to no avail.

At that time I was participating in an action research group and we were planning to do research on student and teacher development of autonomy in the following year. I thought that proposing a project to the administration would be a good opportunity to integrate Esperanza into the new way of teaching, and a good strategy to give continuity to the process once I had finished my practicum in December. I also thought that redesigning the English syllabus in a collaborative way would help teachers to develop their reflective skills by engaging in collegial dialogue. This would expand their pedagogical knowledge and contribute to the development of their professional autonomy.

I mentioned the project to Amparo and to the administration, and they showed great interest and decided to support it by hiring me to teach one group of students in 2002. Besides, seeing the good results that the new syllabus had had in the senior levels, the director asked Esperanza to work together with Amparo, the incoming student-teachers and me in redesigning the syllabus for the junior grades the following year. Esperanza agreed, perhaps afraid of the new work regulations which were starting to be enforced, and which implied that two teachers should be transferred for 2003.

3. TAKING ACTIONS

In January 2002, I presented the research project to the administration, the English teachers and the student-teachers. In order to solve the problem of lack of continuity and coherence between what was taught in the junior and in the senior grades, I proposed the implementation of Syllabus I in the junior grades. As I wanted to develop autonomy in teachers, I included a weekly meeting where the English teachers would plan lessons and school activities together and would share ideas. Taking into account that Amparo was interested in how to develop students' autonomy, I had planned to take over one of her groups so she could observe and replicate my actions. However, when I finished the presentation, Esperanza mentioned that she was interested in participating in the project and we agreed to her proposal that I should take a sixth grade in order to work

hand in hand with her in the implementation of the new syllabus. William excused himself from working with us, because even though he had to teach English in one group, he was a Spanish teacher and had to participate in the meetings of that area.

In order to develop teacher autonomy I defined two major strategies: to work collaboratively in the redesign and implementation of Syllabus I in the junior grades, and to work closely with Esperanza in a sixth grade. The redesign of Syllabus I consisted of four complementary aspects: weekly planning meetings with English teachers, keeping a similar pace in all the junior grades, sharing materials and activities, and changing the achievements (*logros*).

3.1. Collaborative Redesign and Implementation of Syllabus I

Every Monday we met to plan how we would implement Syllabus I in the junior grades. Taking into account all of our ideas, we decided to change some topics and add others, we defined the dates for each unit, and we talked about the materials and activities that could be meaningful for the students. I could observe how, day by day, Amparo and Esperanza were sharing ideas more and more and how those meetings were an opportunity to listen to the others, and talk about our experiences in the classroom.

> *In the meetings we have talked about the materials and the way of using them. We have defined and discussed the achievements for the first term and we have talked about how we are doing. (…) There has been a good relationship among Esperanza, Amparo and me. (…) during the planning for the Language Day, (Esperanza) looked at me and immediately asked me to work together in the stand [JJ Apr. 17-17].[3]*

However, some problems began to affect our meetings. First of all, due to the fact that many Mondays were holidays, many of them could not be held and we had to hurriedly plan in the little free time we had during the week. Besides, Esperanza did not attend some meetings so Amparo and I had to plan together

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3. JJ: Jaime´s journal; IA: Interview with Amparo; JR: Jaime´s reflection; IR: Interview with Ricardo; IE: Interview with Esperanza; date and page number.

and then inform her about our decisions, causing misunderstandings and making her feel that we were imposing things on her. Furthermore, we had difficulties regarding the number of activities to be done in a tight schedule. Some meetings had to be devoted to preparing urgent tasks such as end of term paperwork, correcting a large number of exams and organizing final grade reports. Having extra meetings during the rest of the week was not possible because teachers had very little time out of class, and at that time I was working in different institutions and could not arrange extra meetings. Amparo and I were willing to meet on weekends but Esperanza was not available. This is shown in an interview with Amparo:

> *That was the success in the work last year. All of us met during extra hours and there was a lot of availability, and that is why we are picking up good fruits this year. But if we only have one hour to plan with Esperanza, we are going to take a lot of time [IA Aug. 6-9].*

Based on our experience in 2001, we thought that having the same syllabus and teaching similar topics at the same time would allow us to plan activities for school celebrations which were related to units of the syllabus or the class activities. We tried to keep a similar pace but it was really difficult because all the groups and grades had different linguistic levels, and also because Amparo knew the syllabus and worked quickly while Esperanza was getting used to teaching with a communicative approach. Besides, Esperanza spent time on formal and disciplinary aspects and emphasized vocabulary a lot, which made her progress with the syllabus slower than Amparo's. Although we planned activities in the meeting, Esperanza brought different activities to her classes. Amparo and I questioned Esperanza and she said that we were imposing our ideas on her, so we asked her to propose more ideas with the materials and activities that she knew. From that moment on she began to participate more in the meetings, and carried out in her classes what all of us had defined in our meetings. I kept a record of this process in my journal:

> I see the problem in this way:
> —Esperanza accepts working with me.
> —Esperanza asks me to tell her what to do.
> —I tell her what to do and she accepts.
> —Esperanza works as she has always worked.

—Esperanza and I do not work together.

—I get exasperated and tell her that she is too closed to the change.

—Esperanza says that everything is excellent and that she is used to doing activities like the ones that I do and that she does not see anything new in the proposal.

—Everything is a disaster and Amparo and I decide to talk to the director of the school.

—There is a solution which is working based on Esperanza's textbooks.

—We have a meeting and confront Esperanza and she has no more option than accept.

—Esperanza begins to use the materials [JJ Mar. 11-16].

Another problem associated with this action emerged in one of Esperanza's groups. Since she was teaching the topics of the new syllabus but using activities which did not encourage students' communication, students said that they were not learning anything new. Students complained to the director and did not want Esperanza as their teacher anymore. Esperanza felt uncertain about the new syllabus:

> *Esperanza tells me that maybe it would be better to use the textbook again in that group to avoid problems [JJ Apr. 17-25].*

We talked about the problem in the meeting and we decided that Fernando, one of the student-teachers who had been working with us since the previous year, and I would teach that group once a week for one month to improve the situation. We observed that students had a poor proficiency level and their behavior was not good. We talked to students but we could not get them to improve their behavior. They did not like the teacher and wanted her to be changed. Besides, they had the support of the director, who wanted to start a disciplinary process against her and have her leave the school. Fernando and I reported what we had observed in that group, and students continued with Esperanza as their teacher.

Despite the fact that most of the topics in Syllabus I had been taught the previous year, many new activities and materials were introduced. At the beginning, many activities proposed by Esperanza were grammar-oriented and emphasized

vocabulary, but she was gradually able to implement more communicative tasks. She even risked using audio-visual materials, which were new for her because she did not know how to use the video cassette recorder.

> *Today, Esperanza was trying out the video again and reviewing how to work with it. She had some problems because she forwarded it too much but she is working well with it [JJ Jul. 15-37].*

Towards the end of the project, she adapted materials from her old textbook to the new syllabus and proposed new ideas to the team. Amparo agreed on the new ideas and also taught according to what we had defined in the meetings.

3.2. Working Hand in Hand with Esperanza

I had not planned to work so closely with Esperanza. It was during the presentation of the project when we decided that her idea of taking one of her groups could ease the innovation process. She had allocated time in her academic workload where she could attend my classes, give me feedback, observe how I taught and see what she could apply in her own classes.

We considered that working with Esperanza in the same grade would be the best way to integrate her into the school and develop her autonomy, since it was not just a matter of planning together, but accompanying her in the process and being a support to her. However, some problems began to appear which made my task more difficult than I had hoped. Esperanza said that she did not see anything different or new to apply in her classes and that the new syllabus was similar to what she was used to doing. I was aware of her difficulties in accepting new ideas, as well as the time we needed to show results. Sometimes I had to confront Esperanza and this caused difficulties between us, but I tried to be patient and continued trying to encourage her to change her technique.

We thought that Esperanza's observations of my classes could help her in the implementation of the syllabus and could prompt the sharing of ideas about our joint

feelings, positive efforts and difficulties. From the very beginning of the year I felt frustrated because Esperanza observed only a few of my classes and when she did, she came late, did not pay attention to what I was doing and graded assignments instead, or left the classroom when I had just started the lesson. This is reflected in my journal:

I have to say that in the previous weeks, Esperanza has been attending my classes just to be polite. She attends the classes much later than me. She does not observe what I do, but instead she begins to grade assignments. When I do an activity that is not related to language learning, she leaves the classroom [JJ Jun. 2-32].

Besides, when I observed her classes I did not feel comfortable enough with her to give her feedback, because she was not open to new ideas or criticism. Amparo commented that Esperanza had told her that she was bored working with me, because she did not like to have someone controlling her all the time.

Amparo tells me that Esperanza has told her that she is bored with the work she is doing with me because she does not like to have like a policeman beside her all the time. I asked Amparo about the reasons why Esperanza perceives me as a policeman. Amparo tells me that Esperanza is accustomed to doing all that she wants; to get out of the class when she wants, to get out of the school, to dismiss students, to teach what she wants, not to plan and follow a plan so the simple fact that someone is observing her makes her feel that she has a policeman beside [JJ Jun. 2-32].

Esperanza said that everything she did was excellent. She knew she had problems with the students but she ignored them. She gave me feedback on my classroom management but it was always negative. As she emphasized formal aspects, which I did not do, she criticized me and asked me to do the same in my group. I did not get any positive feedback. She never gave me good comments on the activities I brought to class, but then she used them in her classes. I could not make her realize the importance of observing each other's classes and she continued not being very reflective.

While the English teachers worked with me in the collaborative redesign and implementation of Syllabus I, and I tried to work hand in hand with Esperanza, new regulations were starting to be applied in the school. In June, Amparo and I knew that Esperanza would be one of the teachers to be transferred for 2003. We continued working for the rest of the year and, in August, I arranged a meeting with the administration, the English teachers, and my research advisor in order to show the process that we had had up to now. Unfortunately, by the end of the year we were officially informed that Esperanza was going to be transferred from the school and William would take her courses for 2003.

4. MONITORING THE EXPERIENCE

In order to monitor the experience I collected data, mainly through observations, field notes, interviews and my journal. In order to facilitate the recording of what went on in the meetings while I was chairing them, I designed a form with three columns. In the left column, I wrote ideas about the different tasks derived from the syllabus design and implementation; in the middle column, I registered the actions and behavior related to the development of the teacher's autonomy, and in the right column, I wrote comments which I expanded on in the journal. Besides this format, I had a notebook where I registered the different meetings, observations, reflections and questions that I had throughout the year. These ideas also fed my journal, in which I tried to write every week, but sometimes it was quite difficult, so I wrote in it when something noteworthy happened.

I also interviewed Amparo as well as Ricardo, a colleague from the school who had been really interested in what we were doing, and I considered his opinions important to know what teachers thought about our work. I recorded and transcribed these interviews. I tried to interview Esperanza but she did not want to have her voice recorded. After much persuasion, she agreed to answer my questions on a piece of paper.

To analyze the data I followed the stages proposed by Burns (1999). I read the data several times throughout the year and each time I tried to state some preliminary findings which would reflect what was happening. This analysis was presented to the participants in order to validate my interpretations. A second analysis was

done with a member of the research group in order to validate what I had perceived. These are the stages that we followed: each of us read the data in order to get the whole picture and underlined the information that caught our attention or that we considered relevant, taking into account my research questions. While we read, we wrote questions and ideas as well. Each of us coded the underlined parts, trying to keep close to the original wording of the text (Altrichter et al., 1999) and then we discussed and agreed on the names of the categories. After that, I met with my research advisor in order to review what we had done. Then I defined the categories using Boyatzis (1996) as the basis for this process. While I defined the categories, I checked my data in order to see the difference among the categories and I considered the possibility of deleting some. Once I had the list of categories with their definitions and examples, I organized a frequency chart with the data from the different sources to help me determine which information could be triangulated and which could be considered as salient. With this list of triangulated and salient categories, I established relationships among them and stated the hypotheses, which are the basis for the following findings.

5. FINDINGS

I started this research with the following question in mind: How does collaborative work on the redesign and implementation of a syllabus improve teacher autonomy? However, after analyzing the data and reflecting on the whole experience, I have found three themes I would like to present and discuss in this section: the educational innovation in the school, the process of working collaboratively, and the development of teachers' autonomy through this innovation.

5.1. Educational Innovation

Carbonell (2001) states that innovation is a synonym of pedagogical renovation, i.e. a set of more or less systematized ideas, processes and strategies that aim at introducing and provoking changes in the current educational practices. These also include an analysis of the classroom, the organization of the institution, the educational community dynamics and the professional culture of the teachers. In our case the innovation affected the classroom dynamics by changing the methodology from teaching grammar to teaching students how to communicate in the foreign language, and choosing the content of the syllabus based on the students'

lives. It also affected the dynamics of the educational community because we started working collaboratively among the English teachers in the design and implementation of this new syllabus. In addition, the professional culture was affected by teachers' participation in an action research project.

According to Daoud (1999) there are different approaches to introducing innovation in educational institutions. Innovation can be seen as a system, as a campaign, as "interactive professionalism", and as teacher initiated action research. The systemic view of innovation is one that has traditionally been used in our country, where theory feeds practice and change is hierarchically introduced. Here, teachers are not consulted and are blamed when the innovation does not lead to the expected results. Innovation as campaigning involves the participation of a leader with strong beliefs and passion who will inspire people and propel changes. Interactive professionalism, according to Fullan and Hargreaves, emphasizes the role of collaborative work among teachers in order to improve "their expertise as a community" (1992: 7). Teachers are encouraged to follow their inner voice, to reflect on their practice, to take risks and to make decisions. The fourth approach, teacher-initiated action research, draws on interactive professionalism and adds the systematic and participatory character of action research. Innovations are brought about by theory based on teachers' reflection on their practice, as they identify and reflect on issues that are relevant to them, try out new ideas and evaluate them collaboratively. According to Daoud (1999), this approach seems to be the most appropriate one if we want to develop teacher autonomy, since it is self-initiated or encouraged and democratic. For example, relationships are equal, not hierarchical, and shared, so colleagues act as critical friends to help explore each others' theories and practices. This is the approach we wanted to take in our school.

In this action research, the two English teachers joined the research project in different ways. While Amparo had been working collaboratively with student-teachers for three years and was willing to participate in the endeavor, Esperanza joined the project when she received a warning from the administration because the director was not satisfied with her work. I was aware of this fact, but I considered that during the process, Esperanza would realize the importance of innovating her methodology and the content of her courses, would improve her teaching, and would improve her relationship with the other teachers as a result of our collaboration.

Even though since last year I had tried to involve her in the work on the syllabus so that we could start from sixth grade, where she teaches, I hadn't been able to involve her, perhaps because I hadn't had time and/or she had not been given the ultimatum. Anyway, my task is to make her forget that she has been threatened and to make her enjoy the work and take it as if it were voluntary [JJ Feb. 4-5].

I found that although she improved her teaching, worked with the other teachers and accepted the new methodology, because she was forced to participate in the process, it strongly affected her performance and attitude towards the whole innovation. She saw me as a judge or a watchman and regretted having accepted to work with me in this research. Even so, she did not quit, maybe because she feared being transferred if she did.

Amparo, on the other hand, had a completely different attitude. For her, being involved in this research project meant developing professionally, something that she had been eager to do:

> I tried to study; I have always tried to study, to be updated on new technologies and to put them in practice. But this is new, what you propose is new, and the important thing is not to be closed to change, on the contrary, to be willing and to accept that we have made mistakes and that we can be better each day [IA May 4-5].

Amparo saw me as a campaigner (Daoud, 2000), the person who had given her the impulse to promote the changes that she considered necessary in the school.

> Jaime's work is excellent, more so since Jaime was the person who had the great idea to change the syllabus and who motivated us all to start the work and he has given it continuity. It is his responsibility, his commitment, his ideas, everything. I feel it is extremely worthy, and without Jaime I think it wouldn't be possible for us to be carrying out this work [IA Aug. 6-9].

The difference in attitude towards the innovation may be one of the reasons why, despite the progress made by Esperanza in her courses, she was still transferred to another school. Amparo, on the contrary, has continued working,

even on Saturdays, in the development and improvement of the syllabus with the new student teachers. We have found that if the teacher is forced to work collaboratively, then she can reject or show indifference and lack of commitment towards the endeavor.

Different factors played a role in being able to initiate collaborative work. First, there was a common goal—improving the syllabus—which integrated the teachers; second, I mediated between Esperanza and Amparo to facilitate communication; third, Amparo accepted to work with Esperanza despite the mistrust and prejudices she had against her, and finally, Esperanza saw this work as her only chance for not being transferred from the school. Even with such a start, and sometimes after painful discussions, the relationship between teachers improved as a result of this collaboration. Amparo referred to this fact, saying:

> *(The relationship with Esperanza) has improved a lot because now I can approach her to tell her things, and before I couldn't. (…) I did not look for the opportunity or I didn't think that we had or that I had anything to give to her, but now that we are working with you, I think I have, we can help each other a lot [IA May 6-6].*

Carbonell (2001) states that an obstacle of innovation is the lack of a climate of trust and consensus among participants. However, we can conclude that even if this condition does not exist in the institution for collaborative work, if teachers work collaboratively, the relationships between them will be improved.

Alwright (1997) mentions that teachers may be threatened and their self-esteem may be affected if they are asked to identify a problem in their own work. In our experience, Amparo's self-esteem increased as well as her commitment, with the different tasks as a consequence of perceiving the success of the innovation.

> *I feel more secure… some time ago I said I felt it was a pity that I hadn't lived this experience many years ago… this has increased my self-esteem. I'm also happier working. I enjoy my classes more because there isn't that tension because some students aren't satisfied; just on the contrary, we are all much synchronized in the joy of sharing a very good class, which is what we have seen [IA May 6-3].*

Instead of using action research to promote teachers' professional development, Alwright proposes carrying out Exploratory Practice, a "softer" version of action research, because instead of trying to solve problems, its aim is just to understand pedagogical practice better. However, we found that the satisfaction of having taken the risk to work on problems found in Amparo's practice and arriving at a solution enhanced Amparo's self-esteem.

Another obstacle of innovation found in our school was the teachers' lack of time. Innovations require a lot of energy and extra work for which there is no time in the teachers' tight schedule, nor is it paid for (Crookes, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994; Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1997; Contreras, 1997). None of the teachers in our school were given extra time in order for them to participate in this research. On the contrary, every day new bureaucratic tasks were brought to the meetings, which were supposed to be devoted to the research. Teachers are asked to change education to fit the new societal demands, and many of them want to propose and carry out new ideas. However, every day they have to take over more paper work that does not let them think about their pedagogical practice, and does not leave them time for their students (Carbonell, 2001). Besides, they have no time to interact with other teachers (Nias, 1987, in Crookes, 1997), all of which causes the deskilling (Crookes, 1997) and proletarization of teachers (Hargreaves, 1994).

Time constraints also limited the participants' involvement in the research. They participated mainly in the design and implementation of the syllabus, which was related to the pedagogical intervention, but they did not participate in the systematization of the experience, i.e. in the definition of the research problem or in the data collection and analysis process. Seeing all the tasks that they were doing regarding the new syllabus, I did not dare ask them to keep a journal, help me conduct interviews, or analyze data.

Although the aim that I had at the beginning was to have a more participatory type of innovation, due to the conditions mentioned above, what we did in the school could be associated with innovation as a campaign (Daoud, 2000). There was a leader or campaigner who helped the teachers realize the importance of taking some actions in order to improve the problematic situation, and his strong beliefs and commitment moved the other teachers to engage in the endeavor, and gave

continuity to the process. Despite the fact that our type of work may not completely match the type of collaborative work that we had aimed at, we will use the term "collaboration" to differentiate the type of work that we did in the school from the one that we had observed when defining the problem, which consisted of teachers working in isolation.

5.2. Collaborative Work

Hargreaves (1991, in Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1997) opposes "superficial collegiality" in favor of a "culture of collaboration". Superficial collegiality is characterized, among other things, by teachers working together on a specific task, supervising each other, planning together, and being supported by a mentor. I would have liked to achieve a culture of collaboration where teachers engage in work that does not just involve a specific task like the redesign of the syllabus, but a long term process that includes a professional and personal relationship among the colleagues (Hargreaves, 1991). Aware of how difficult it is for teachers to engage in work with these characteristics, I tried to improve their rapport and communication at least to avoid the individual work that I had perceived in the school.

Our concept of collaboration is related to Fullan and Stiegelbauer's (1997) idea of interactive professionalism. In this approach to innovation, teachers work in small groups, interacting frequently in planning, in trying out new ideas, in attempting to solve different problems, in evaluating the effectiveness, etc. as we did in our school. We also aimed at negotiation (Ellis in Daoud, 2000), since it was not an individual in charge of making the decisions, but instead the group of teachers decided what to do. Teachers contributed to each other's work and development and supported each other.

Since June 14 when we answered the letter to the school board referring to the problem expressed by the students in one of the eighth grades in the English classes, all the English teachers are committed to giving a solution to the students and parents' concerns. In so doing we have agreed that Fernando and I are going to teach two of the three weekly classes and that Esperanza is going to observe the classes in order to detect the causes for the students' concerns [JR Sep. 21].

Working collaboratively is, in a sense, more demanding than working alone because teachers have to confront what they believe with others, be able to support what they do, and receive feedback; therefore, it is favored when teachers have certain characteristics. The degree of commitment to a common goal and their motivation to qualify themselves, determined teachers' engagement in the tasks derived from the work in which they were participating, i.e. the redesign and implementation of the syllabus and the action research project. Amparo, who was more reflective, open-minded and sensitive towards her students' needs, was more willing to question her own beliefs and practices in order to work on her own strengths and weaknesses than Esperanza was. She was also more open to uncertainty and to sharing her experiences in the group, and was not afraid of showing her failures in order to jointly look for solutions. On the other hand, Esperanza had difficulties with receiving feedback on her teaching, and evaluating her own work, even though she accepted suggestions and tried out new ideas in her classes.

At the beginning, Esperanza was not used to proposing ideas. However, since Amparo was sensitive towards Esperanza's weaknesses, little by little, Esperanza reacted and changed her attitude to be more participative and proactive, taking initiative in carrying out the tasks derived from the group meetings. We can see Amparo's patience towards this process of change in her interview:

I think that Esperanza is more engaged every day. We have to be patient because the process of change is difficult at the beginning. For us, old teachers at a certain age, it is kind of difficult to change our methodology, so we have to give her more time for her to approach these new methodologies now that she has realized and all of us have realized that they are very productive [IA Aug. 6-8].

And we can see Esperanza's improvement in my journal:

I have seen that Esperanza is engaged in the planning. When we attend the meetings, she takes notes, she proposes materials, gives ideas, pushes us to start on time, makes copies when she needs more, and accepts suggestions [JJ Aug. 4-59].

We have found that some personal characteristics of teachers made it easier to work collaboratively, but we also think that collaboration among teachers contributed to the development of those personal conditions.

I define my role in this teacher research group as a facilitator. Birchak et al. (1998) list the following functions of a facilitator: to support the members of the group so they share their ideas in the meetings, to establish credibility between theory and practice, to create an appropriate environment for discussions, to develop negotiated agendas in the meetings, to encourage team members to speak, to ask questions, and to orient the conversations. Wijesundera (2002) clarifies that even though the facilitator has her own objectives, she does not impose them but promotes reflection on teachers' actions by asking critical questions and negotiating strategies with participants.

Even though I had had contact with the staff as a student-teacher for a year when we started this research project, I see myself as an external facilitator because I did not have all the teaching responsibilities the other teachers had, nor did I have an administrative link to the school. Being relatively new to the school helped me to be less prejudiced against any of the teachers, which facilitated the process of engaging in collegial dialogue and establishing relations of confidence with them. Besides, I could be more patient than I normally was with colleagues because I was very aware of the difficulties that could be encountered and was persistent in order to reach our goals. This can be seen in one of my journal entries:

> *(Esperanza and I) were watching the video and proposing ideas about how to work with it. Then we agreed on a plan for the class and then we began to work with the copy for vocabulary. Then Esperanza asked me for more ideas and I told her that I had a reading so she asked me to bring it [JJ Apr. 26-24].*

Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1997), speak of the teacher being a leader, the teacher who is more interested in assuming a position of guide, or as Hamilton (1996, in Daoud, 1999) states "an individual propelled… by passionate belief" who has "a vision to put something new in place" (4). I associate my work with this concept as I was convinced that a change in the content and methodology of the English courses would lead to students' improved motivation and achievement,

and I was aware of the fact that in order to do this, teachers had to work collaboratively. I proposed this action research project to them with the aim of developing their autonomy so that the changes could be sustainable. I also mediated among participants in order to reach consensus about the teaching strategies we would use to reach the goals I had presented.

5.3. Teacher Autonomy

According to Papacchini (1998), autonomy, solidarity and dignity constitute superior values that guide individuals' moral conduct beyond the legislative orderings of post-modernity. However, autonomy is the highest expression of liberty and plays the most prominent role as a moral guide. The first requisite for autonomous behavior is the individual's decision to take responsibility for her own life and not let others decide instead. It makes no sense to talk about autonomy when the individual does not have the wish and the will to conduct her life according to her own view of the world and projects. Autonomous conduct is identified by the individual's determination to set and prioritize her goals, by the persistence and coherence in her commitment to those goals and by consistency with the use of the most appropriate means.

For Gimeno (2000), autonomy is a means of reaching human dignity. An autonomous being is dignified by exercising her freedom because the social context allows it, because she is endowed with the capacity to act for herself, and is free from external coactions. However, in the case of teachers, autonomy is limited by the autonomy of those affected by education. Teacher autonomy should be linked to responsibility and commitment to an educational project that is accepted by all the educational community.

This limitation is what Contreras (1997) refers to as commitment with the community, one of the three dimensions of teacher professionality. The other two dimensions are: professional competence, which refers to the skills, principles and awareness of the meaning and consequences of our pedagogical practices, and moral obligation—the duty teachers have to go beyond academic achievement and form free human beings. These three dimensions are related to autonomy because the way every teacher assumes each of those dimensions will determine three different models of teachers, and at the same

time different perspectives to perceive teacher autonomy. For the first model of teachers, the technical expert, autonomy will be assumed as a status, where the teacher depends on the experts and the policies that come from above. Teachers make little use of creativity to solve the different problems found in the classroom and depend on what the experts say. For the reflective practitioner, which is the second model of teachers, autonomy will be assumed as the moral responsibility to solve problems, taking into account different perspectives and the teachers' social responsibility with the community. Finally, for the critical intellectual, autonomy will be assumed as the collective process through which educational communities transform their reality and liberate themselves from external oppressions.

We are aware of the necessity to work on the three dimensions of teacher professionality in order to have a model of teacher that can perceive autonomy from a critical perspective. All of us have the possibility to change our reality and we need to be competent in what we do, take account of the educational community where we work, and know the direction and implications of our actions. We are aware of the difficulties that we can encounter, but at the same time we are convinced of the necessity to create new conditions for this process to be done.

In this project, two important issues emerged, relating to teacher autonomy: teacher's awareness of autonomy, and anomy. Amparo was well aware of the three dimensions of teacher professionality and related those dimensions to teacher autonomy, as can be seen in her responses in the interviews.

Commitment with the community:

An autonomous teacher is the one who is able to make correct and timely decisions which will affect their students positively [IA May 6-1].

Professional competence:

When one is in the classroom things happen where one sees the importance of working on autonomy. How you as a teacher behave in front of your students in specific situations. And this is what makes it valid. It's not just the fact that you are teaching the knowledge of the language. No, many elements come together [IA Aug. 6-12].

Moral obligation:

(Teacher autonomy) manifests itself in many ways: being flexible, feeling free to take into account students' interests as soon as they manifest them, permitting them to be very creative and appreciating their work, helping them to go beyond what one can give them in the classroom so that they can provide constructive criticism [IA May 6-1].

Besides knowing what autonomy entails, Amparo acted consequently. We can see a reciprocal influence between what students did and what the she did:

Now we can sit with the girls and question ourselves about some tasks that they are not doing properly and they don't get angry. On the contrary, they understand, they thank you and they try to improve. And if they tell us something, it's the same thing because we also make a lot of mistakes and they tell us, and we accept it willingly [IA May 6-4].

Amparo was sensitive to her students' preferences and needs, thought of new ideas to enhance students' learning and took appropriate actions. We can see here how two dimensions of teacher professionality interact: a teacher who is committed to her community will make an effort to improve her professional competence in order to cater for her students' needs. Rosenholtz (1989 in Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1997) observed that commitment and certitude about decisions regarding instruction topics and management of problems feed each other and increase teacher motivation, leading to improved teacher performance.

According to Pennington (1995), in response to a teaching problem, teachers look for assistance, or information to solve it. Only the information which is cognitively accessible and passes the teacher's cognitive-affective filter becomes intake and starts the teacher change cycle. "Through reflection, this intake is processed at an increasingly deep level, moving through change cycles, to become uptake to the individual teacher's system of values and classroom behaviors" (722). Amparo's exposure to new ideas helped her reflect on her teaching and enter into the teacher change cycle. This is how Ricardo perceived the impact:

We have seen how (the) company (of the student-teachers) as young people who are learning in the English department at the University of Antioquia has contributed to giving oxygen to pedagogical processes that were ages old. The English teachers hadn't had the opportunity to get in touch with new pedagogical proposals, to new styles, to the new practices that you are introducing [IR Dec. 9-1].

Freeman and Freeman (1994, in Crookes, 1997: 67) mention exposure to new ideas as a factor that determines how and what teachers teach. Even if Esperanza was also exposed to these new ideas, her personal views of learners and learning, another factor mentioned by Freeman and Freeman, acted as a cognitive-affective filter, which did not permit these new ideas to be taken in and to start a change cycle. Besides, if Esperanza had the idea that autonomy implied making independent decisions inside the classroom (materials selection, structure of the lesson, and choice of teaching procedures), a common feature of school culture (Goodlad, 1984, in Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1997), she may have thought that we were actually interfering with her autonomy, not enhancing it.

In this endeavor, we had proposed collaborative work as a means to enhance teacher autonomy. We wanted Esperanza to develop her autonomy, but since she ended up deciding to participate in this project only under the threat of being transferred, we wonder if the changes in behavior that we observed show real autonomy or just apparent autonomy. Was she acting out of conviction? Did she have similar intentions as we had when she introduced new activities in her class? Was she just doing things in order to keep her job?

Regarding professional autonomy, she showed some progress:

I have observed that she uses more varied activities in class, she has taken some activities that I have done to implement them in her classes, for example, Halloween, school presentations, and written projects on Medellín. In the assessment procedures she has also implemented changes and she takes into account all these activities when she grades her students [JJ Nov. 27-53].

However, her commitment to the research project and to school activities is questionable:

> *I am worried about the fact that she didn't stay in my classes and that she has taken this research as a way of discharging some of her work, and that she left the classroom and even the school when I had a class (which she was supposed to observe) [JJ Nov. 27-53].*

Besides, she did not want to give me an interview and it was only in August, after having made numerous requests, that she accepted answering some questions on a piece of paper. There she showed that she had not reflected on her practice and that her beliefs remained the same. Asked about what she thought of the new syllabus she wrote:

> Sincerely, the process that is being carried out in the teaching of English this year has nothing new to me. (Everything) has been as it has always been in previous syllabi [IE Aug. 6-1].

When asked about what was missing in the syllabus, she wrote: "We should emphasize grammar", and regarding what she had observed in my classes she just said: "Discipline is a very important aspect to carry out any activity. How do you manage to work with such indiscipline?"

I could not influence her teaching principles although she was improving her performance in the classroom and in the meetings. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1997) mention that we tend to underestimate teachers' difficulties with learning new concepts and at the same time with unlearning old practices. Changing our teaching and our methodology implies deep modifications in our pedagogical conceptions and this is a hard process which requires time and implies risks. "Changing is a process, not an event" (117). In my school, some teachers, parents and students did not perceive the process we were experiencing, and compared Esperanza and Amparo. I was aware of the two different processes and was patient, but unfortunately, due to the fact that two teachers were going to be transferred to another school, the administration decided not to give Esperanza more opportunities and sent her to another school for the following year. They judged her performance and how it was

affecting the school, but they did not take into account the process of change that she had started with the other teachers. I tend to think that we would have affected her beliefs if we had continued working with Esperanza for another year.

Raz (1986: 372 in Benson, 2000: 112) argues that there are three conditions for an individual to lead an autonomous life: "appropriate mental abilities, an adequate range of options, and independence (from coercion)". We think that Esperanza had no options—in fact, she was coerced. She accepted the imposition because as Breen and Mann (in McGrath, 2000) state, accepting is less demanding for teachers than questioning. Esperanza's behavior can also be associated with anomy (Gimeno, 2000), the lack of initiative to propose something new, to exercise autonomy, which is a personal disorientation characteristic of those who lack goals and who lack motives to carry out projects.

On the other hand, as Gimeno (2001) states, it is difficult to say to what extent teachers are autonomous or not, because autonomy depends on their responsibility for the quality of the service that they provide and which they are in charge of. Esperanza was having problems with students and teachers who complained about what and how she had been teaching. So we had a dilemma: to what extent could Esperanza be completely free to work on her own, putting the quality of education at risk? How could the administration deal with that situation without violating her autonomy? From a liberal-humanist point of view "the more one is able to direct one's own life, the greater the degree of one's autonomy" (Young, 1986, cited in Benson, 2000: 113), however, from a critical perspective, an individual's actions must respond to society's demands, and in a democratic process of social transformation everyone has a role to play. In fact, we cannot limit autonomy to choosing how to shape our individual lives; our choices must also involve shaping the lives of others, i.e. we are socially responsible human beings (Freire, 1974, cited in Benson, 2000: 113).

6. REFLECTION

Doing action research has been an enriching process for me. I had the opportunity to propose an innovation and could see the effects on students, on teachers and

in the institution in general. In the same way, I could see my personal and professional growth. This reflection will be divided into three parts: my experience as a language teacher, as a novice teacher researcher, and as a person.

6.1. My Experience as Language Teacher

I finished my undergraduate studies a year ago, and having the opportunity to propose materials, activities and new approaches for language teaching gave me the chance to put into practice what I had learned as a student and to improve as a language teacher. Furthermore, redesigning the syllabus with the English teachers helped me to be more flexible when accepting that Amparo and Esperanza's expertise had to be taken into account and that my new ideas could and should be adapted to them. As many authors maintain, I have seen that action research is useful to solve practical problems encountered by teachers in the classroom, and doing action research in order to improve the curriculum collaboratively leads to a better understanding of our reality and an improvement in teachers' practice (Hopkins, 2002; Selener, 1997).

Besides, the teachers in the school have accepted the proposal and value what English teachers, student-teachers and students are doing in class, and they also admire the way students show their interest towards the language when they participate in school celebrations. We have received support from the director of the school and her comments have always been constructive. I think action research can be the means to improve our working conditions and build academic communities, which directly affect the quality of education given to our students. I have learned that it is necessary to involve as many teachers as possible if we want our innovations to have a big impact in the school (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1997).

6.2. My Learning as a Novice Teacher-Researcher

Reading about research may be difficult, but doing research is nothing compared to it. I had read about action research and I thought that I was prepared to face the challenge of conducting a whole project. I tried to follow the different action plans that I proposed and I tried to be systematic when collecting and analyzing data, but I was not used to being so organized. I have learned that some abilities and skills mentioned by Boyatzis (1998) such as planning, critical thinking, reflection, critical analysis, flexibility, and interpretation, among others, are required when doing

research. I know the enormous effort I had to make in order to change my habits, sometimes even against my will. However, I am aware of the fact that after doing this research I have improved in many aspects: I am more systematic and try to organize the information for the research, I try to set the time and accomplish my tasks, and I am aware that my prejudices affect the way I analyze what happens in the classroom and that I have to be objective if I want to be a good researcher.

Satisfaction, tiredness and frustration were the feelings that I had while carrying out this action research project. Satisfaction arose when I observed teachers working together and sharing ideas in order to plan their lessons. Tiredness was due to the excessive work I had and the little time to accomplish all the tasks that I had as a language teacher and as teacher researcher. Frustration appeared when I knew that the Esperanza was going to be transferred to another school and the changes she was showing had not been enough for the administration to keep her in the school. Besides, I felt bad because I knew about that decision before Esperanza did and I was not permitted to inform her about it. Despite all those feelings, I understood that public schools require systematic processes of innovation, which will produce a big impact on the quality of education that is given to our students (Gimeno, 2001).

I knew that action research is the most relevant approach to promote changes in schools, but unfortunately many research evaluators, who are still traditional researchers, consider action research as simple pedagogical interventions which do not require financial aid, affecting the amount of time we can devote and the consolidation of our research groups. Now I know that we need to be consistent with the endeavor of doing action research. Furthermore, I learned that our practical and theoretical knowledge has to be made public and that publishing is the best strategy for the teaching profession to have a better status in our society. Publishing our research and knowing what others are doing is required for a better understanding of what happens in our classrooms, and for teachers to be convinced that our practical knowledge can enrich the professional community (Altrichter et al., 1993).

6.3. My Learning as a Person

Participating in this project enabled me to be more aware of the need to be analytical and critical with the different situations that I see in the school, and in the broad social, political and economical reality that we currently face. This awareness has permitted me to have a voice in the different settings where I have been working,

and to propose other alternatives to the world we live in, in order to construct a different reality working with others. I am aware of the fact that we can live in a different world, but to do so, we need to imagine it and be persistent when constructing it collaboratively.

I learned how to work collaboratively with other teachers and with my peers in the research group. Collaboration requires taking the opinions of others into account, understanding where others' ideas come from and negotiating in order to reach a consensus. I learned that patience is required as well, especially if we aim at helping other teachers to adapt their teaching to the new demands. I learned that we need critical friends who can show us our strengths and weaknesses. They can be a personal and professional support and their perceptions and knowledge can focus our actions and help us to correct what is wrong.

CONCLUSION

The educational innovation in the school was successful in general. English teachers began to develop the ability to work collaboratively, the syllabus was redesigned and students' performance improved. Teachers grew personally and professionally since they knew and worked with new methodologies and took the risk to promote students' productive skills instead of continuing to emphasize grammar. The school administration supported the project and gave it continuity in the sense that this year teachers and student-teachers are working as a team with the content, methodology, materials and evaluation of the English syllabus. Nevertheless, some issues have emerged and have shown that developing autonomy is very complex and is associated with many external factors, which can impede or foster its development:

- Although innovation, collaborative work and autonomy are interdependent, one cannot wait to have the ideal conditions to start changing the reality we see in our institutions. Having the ideal conditions, i.e. everybody willing, prepared and convinced of the convenience and feasibility of the process of change in high schools, is almost impossible. The process of working collaboratively on educational innovation and developing teacher autonomy itself can be the scenario to create the ideal conditions for working and succeeding. "From a critical perspective, therefore, autonomy is less a

matter of shaping one's own life than of shaping the collective life of the society in which one lives" (Benson, 2000: 114, referring to Freire's critical pedagogy).

- Collaborative work is the way to assure that the process of change has a big impact. Collaboration can improve teachers' relationships and lead to a big impact on the school, which can raise teachers' self-esteem and commitment towards their profession.

- The role of the facilitator is essential in educational innovations. When participant relationships are problematic, the facilitator can act as a mediator who negotiates and adapts the proposal to the teachers' specific conditions, making everyone feel comfortable with participating actively. Besides, when teachers' preparation, expectations and receptiveness towards the new proposal differ, the facilitator can be more aware and sensitive of how slow, painful or enjoyable the process of change can be for every individual, easing the process and improving the way the educational community perceives it.

- I also have some questions for which I do not have an answer:

- How long should a process of working collaboratively with teachers be, so that it can produce improvements not just in their actions but also in their beliefs about teaching and learning?

- Which personal characteristics and problems affect a teacher's receptiveness and engagement in the process of change, and the way she interacts with other colleagues?

- How can we access teachers' personal characteristics and problems without violating their intimacy?

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Appendix: Guide for the Interview with Teachers

1. ¿Qué es para usted un profesor autónomo?
2. ¿Cómo se manifiesta la autonomía del profesor en su salón de clase?
3. ¿Cómo se manifiesta la autonomía del profesor por fuera del salón de clase?
4. ¿Qué actividades realizadas durante este trabajo considera usted que fueron de ayuda para el desarrollo de su autonomía? Explique por qué?.
5. ¿Qué opinión tiene sobre el proceso que estamos llevando en el colegio este año?
6. ¿Cree que este trabajo le ha aportado a usted en su desarrollo como docente?
7. ¿Cree que le ha aportado en su desarrollo como persona?
8. ¿Cómo ha visto la respuesta de las estudiantes hacia el proceso?
9. ¿Qué cree que falta y deberíamos tratar de conseguir en lo que falta del año?
10. ¿Cuáles son los principales avances en el proceso?
11. ¿Cuáles han sido los principales tropiezos o dificultades en el proceso?
12. ¿Qué espera que se haya conseguido al final del proceso este año?
13. ¿Qué diferencias encuentra entre su forma de enseñar antes de iniciar este trabajo y la actual?
14. ¿Ha notado un cambio positivo o negativo en los otros colegas a lo largo del proceso?
15. ¿Cómo ha visto la respuesta de la administración del colegio hacia este proceso?
16. ¿Cómo ha visto el papel de Jaime en este proceso? ¿Qué le falta? ¿Qué debe mejorar?

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