Overcoming poor youth stigmatization and invisibility through art: A participatory action research experience in Greater Buenos Aires

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Abstract
Participatory Action Research (PAR) involves collaborative construction of knowledge among researchers and local actors. Collaboration is particularly challenging for researchers when working with subaltern populations, as we experienced in a PAR project shared with young people living in extreme poverty in the Greater Buenos Aires area. The objective was to promote educational rights, based on a participatory diagnosis of factors associated with school abandonment. The main challenge was young people’s reluctance to address their school experience, due to stigmatization processes associated with school failure. Video production and dramatization helped us to overcome this blockage and to make youth perspectives visible to other social actors in the educational field. The article discusses how this happened during the PAR process.

Keywords
arts, local emergent knowledge, participatory action research, school abandonment, subaltern populations

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**Introduction**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) involves a process of collaborative construction of knowledge between researchers and local actors, aimed at acquiring a deeper and more systematic understanding of their situation in order to transform it for the better (Ander Egg, 2003; Genat, 2009). However, our PAR experience with poor young people in Greater Buenos Aires showed us that such collaboration can be particularly difficult when working with subaltern populations. Indeed, subalternization involves an epistemic violence inflicted not only in the form of a negative representation of the ‘other’ from a dominant Other, but through the negation and obliteration of the signification and valorization frames of these others (Spivak, 1988). As a result of this process, according to Spivak, subalterns cannot speak, since they lack a locus of enunciation. In this article we want to discuss how art can play a fundamental role to overcome the silence produced by subalternization.

The effects of epistemic violence and symbolic power asymmetries on data construction have been discussed by Bourdieu (1980a, 1993). For instance, he asserts that unequal distribution of refusals to answer survey questions among different social groups (defined by class, gender or educational level) reveals that not every group considers itself competent to speak on certain topics. For a person to feel competent or legitimately entitled to make a statement regarding a certain topic depends on social recognition of such rights and duties, which is associated with individuals’ specific social position and resources (Bourdieu, 1980a).

We consider that such reflection is also appropriate to analyze the conditions under which subaltern groups participate in PAR. We adopted PAR approaches that specifically deal with the question of asymmetries in symbolic power, aiming to make visible and bring into the public arena the experiences and perspectives of subaltern groups ‘whose experience and knowledge is unknown or perhaps subjugated’ (Genat, 2009, p. 105). To achieve that goal, researchers try to develop techniques and tools which encourage local actors’ effective participation, emphasizing the need to favor the appropriation of tools for action, such as participative group processes for addressing conflict, social analysis, and organization and planning instruments (Ander Egg, 2003).

Nevertheless, our experience with young people living in slum neighborhoods in Greater Buenos Aires made us aware that this was not enough: we had to specifically address social misrecognition and epistemic violence, which blocked expression and participation.

The principal objective of our PAR project was to develop effective actions for the promotion of the right to education in these communities, based on a participatory diagnosis of family, cultural and educational aspects which are obstacles for young people to remain in school. For our approach, it was very important to recover the school experiences of these young people. Nevertheless, from the beginning of our fieldwork, this objective proved to be very difficult to achieve, as it involved confronting them with the painful memories related to ‘school failure’.

To overcome this blocking, we drew on arts, especially dramatization and video production. This is the process we want to discuss in this article.

In our presentation, we first introduce the research context. Then, we discuss how arts can help to express and bring subaltern voices into the public arena. Finally, we analyze how incorporating expressive languages such as dramatization and video contributed to our PAR project.

**Research context**

Our research was conducted in the Reconquista Area, in the District of San Martín, Greater Buenos Aires. This area comprises a group of slum neighborhoods in the vicinity of Buenos Aires’s main landfill. In the context of Argentina’s deep socio-economic crisis in the late 1990s, this zone attracted new population not only because of land availability but also because refuse collection was a potential source of income in the face of increasing unemployment rates. The inhabitants of these neighborhoods partially live on the sale of recyclable materials gathered from the landfill.

We, Ada and Cecilia, are part of an interdisciplinary research group from the Center of Labor Studies and Research, which is interested in (unemployed and employed) workers’ collective identities and actions. In 2004 we started to develop some projects jointly with grassroots organizations. One of them was Proyecto Comunitario 8 de Mayo (May 8th Community Project), a Reconquista Area organization, formed by neighborhood leaders and activists. They initially required our help to organize a cooperative productive project for urban solid waste sorting and recycling, aimed at creating jobs opportunities for the inhabitants of the neighborhood (Cross & Freytes Frey, 2009; Freytes Frey et al., 2007).

Our May 8th collaborators repeatedly mentioned their concerns about young people in the area. Many of these young people have participated in waste gathering or performed informal unskilled jobs in order to help their families from an early age. School drop-out rates are high among this group. In a context in which a secondary school diploma constitutes a basic requirement for any formal position in the labor market, school abandonment is a sure path to poverty reproduction. May 8th members’ concern was ‘getting young people out of the landfill and back to school’. They were already working in the first aspect, through the creation of jobs opportunities. We proposed to conduct a PAR project in order to explore the different social dynamics related to school abandonment and, therefore, to design strategies to cope with it.

Our initiative was well received and May 8th members arranged for us to work with a group of young people – aged from 15 to 18 years old – which met every Saturday at the Community Center. They also agreed to participate in the discussion of results in order to evaluate the project’s development. These exchanges led us to define the research objective as that of analyzing family, cultural, and educational factors which are obstacles to young people remaining in school, in
order to develop effective strategies for the promotion of the right to education in this community.

Based on previous research on governmental and institutional strategies to improve educative inclusion in secondary school (Freytes Frey, 2007; Jacinto & Freytes Frey, 2004), our project had two hypotheses as points of departure. The first was that young people’s perspectives had no visibility in the social agenda on this issue. Thus, a key goal was the recovery of their views and their incorporation into public debate. The second hypothesis was that the different actors involved in the problem (teachers, young people, parents) had different – and often contradictory – views about it, which made it difficult to develop joint strategies. Consequently, it was important that they could state their points of view and confront any differences as a first step to reaching agreements on possible actions.

Our methodology was guided by these hypotheses. Our initial plan was to conduct in-depth interviews with young people, parents, teachers and neighborhood leaders, to learn about their experiences, representations, and values about education. We also planned to create a participant focus group with young people to reflect on their educational experiences. On the basis of such reflections, participants would work jointly to design a script in order to film a video. We intended that this video tape would trigger dialogue with other social actors. To this end, we would organize participative workshops, following the tradition of Freire (1970) in education for oppressed people.

The creation of the participant focus group required a first stage of constructing mutual knowledge with the young people. To accomplish this, we joined the work carried out by May 8th members aimed at consolidating a young people’s group within the organization. We also participated in local events and meetings. These activities allowed us to build a closer relationship with the young people in the group, learning their communicative codes. After this first stage, we conducted the first in-depth interviews. At the same time, the group started to redefine their objectives and activities, and we offered our help by coordinating participatory workshops to discuss these issues. These workshops allowed them to synthesize their experience as a group and to define new horizons.

In this framework, we introduced our proposal for the group and established the initial agreement with them. We would facilitate video workshops and implement a set of participatory workshops. Such workshops would focus not only on educational experience, but on those realities which prevent youth from enjoying their rights. This change of focus arose from the difficulties that we found regarding young people’s expression of their educational experiences. In the following sections, we discuss the obstacles we encountered during the PAR and how using arts allowed us to overcome them.

The contributions of art to our action research project

The main challenge of our PAR project was to generate the conditions for a collaborative process of knowledge construction. We expected that art could be
an appropriate tool to foster intertextuality between the participants’ different discourses (Finley, 2008). We based our expectations on the contributions of authors who have presented art as a way of tackling representational crises in social sciences (Eisner, 1998) and as a model for developing research skills (Seale, 1999). As Aldridge suggests, if ‘science is a creative doing of knowledge’, then ‘knowledge is something that can be sung, or played, or danced or acted’ (1995, p. 51). The practice of arts by the community is considered an effective means for ‘building connectedness’, in the sense of strengthening social capital (Thiele & Marsden, 2003, p. 86). In addition, art facilitates the expression of particular experiences by articulating both intuitive and rational patterns to understand symbols, images and metaphors (Finley, 2008).

Furthermore, art has been identified as an efficient tool for communicating the experiences of subaltern groups. Working with images allows expressing formerly occluded experiences (McNiff, 2008; Williams & Lykes, 2003). We thus expected artistic expression to be a suitable medium to communicate the feelings and discourses of young people within the community.

We therefore had many reasons to believe that it would be helpful to include art, mainly, dramatization and video production, in our PAR project. However, we became aware of the full potential of these art forms only when we were faced with unexpected difficulties in the process. We discovered that the inclusion of dramatization and video had three main effects: first, they favored the involvement of the young men and women; second, they allowed them to share their experiences, formerly blocked by stigmatization processes; third, they were a potent instrument to make their perspectives visible to other social actors concerned by this problematic (teachers, government officers, parents). In the next sections, we explain how this happened during the process of PAR.

**Constructing youth involvement**

The initial working agreements regarding the research problem were negotiated with the leaders of the May 8th Community Project. Therefore, when we started our activities with the young people, we had to establish new agreements with this group in order to transform it into a participant focus group. During the first period of constructing mutual knowledge with the young participants, when we also performed the first in-depth interviews, it became clear that their educational experiences were a difficult subject for them, because they had to think and talk about painful memories related to a perceived ‘school failure’.

Many of the young people with whom we worked had abandoned school at different levels of the educational system, experiencing a strong stigmatization due to a failure conceived as their exclusive responsibility. Nevertheless, during the course of the research, we found that not only those who had left school had these perceptions of incapacity. School abandonment is not an instant decision, but a process with different episodes of entering and leaving the educational system; a process marked by repeated academic, disciplinary and socialization
problems at school (Binstock & Cerrutti, 2005; Redondo, 2004). It is difficult to
draw a line between those who are in school and those who have left it, because the
negative labels are progressively incorporated along different quotidian episodes
that make school a difficult and hostile territory for these young people (Redondo,
2004).

However, the difficulties getting young people involved were not only related to
the issue of school abandonment, but also to the codes and languages used in the
communication between us, the researchers, and the young people. Resorting to
words and, on some occasions, to writing, as privileged tools of expression, reflection and debate highlighted the asymmetries in cultural capital, not only between us and the young people, but also among them. Those who felt less competent in these capacities resented their use. In the initial workshops, for instance, some young men told us: ‘We do not want to talk anymore’ or ‘Stop writing in those papers! We do not want papers anymore!’ (regarding the papers on the wall where we summed up the discussions).

Therefore, it became necessary to find new approaches which would allow us to surmount these difficulties. First, we negotiated with the group a working agreement which located the educational problems in the wider context of the discussion about youth rights. The participants agreed to launch a weekly working space called ‘Workshop about Rights and Realities’, oriented towards contrasting the rights set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child with the reality experienced by young people in the Reconquista Area. Our common goal was to identify infringements and to design strategies in order to modify these situations. This change of focus was important to achieve the involvement of young people; involvement later recreated through cooperative and continued work.

Second, we looked for alternative means of expression for youth experiences. This is where art played a privileged role: through the incorporation of image (photograph and video) and dramatization as ways to discuss and critically reflect on youth realities, and through the concurrent organization of a workshop for learning video making techniques. The young people found this course motivating because the audio-visual language was closer to their interests and modes of apprehending the world.

**Fighting against stigmatization**

Changing the focus from education to youth rights was a strategy to negotiate the involvement of young people in the PAR process. However, that decision confronted us with a dilemma: should we, the research group and community organization, renounce our initial concern with school abandonment given that it was seemingly an irrelevant issue for young people? What was the valid interpretation of their reluctance to address that subject?

Post-structuralist approaches (e.g. Bourdieu, 1980a, 1993; Spivak, 1988; and within youth studies, Mauger, 2006), were helpful in dealing with this dilemma. All emphasize the importance of analyzing silences and blocked issues. This kind of
analysis allowed us to conclude that those silences were not the result of the lack of pertinence of the issue but, precisely, a manifestation of self-blaming and stigmatization related to ‘school failure’.

To accomplish this analysis it was essential to relate spoken and silenced things. In the workshops, young people expressed that, for them, secondary education was related, first, to the possibility of getting a good job. Second, schooling was associated to the development of certain competences: for instance, skills to ‘manage oneself’, ability to ‘speak and to understand what you are told by other people’, capacity to ‘avoid being exploited or disrespected’. Finally, school was perceived as a source of recognition: finishing secondary school allows you ‘to be somebody’; otherwise ‘you are nobody’. This perception makes ‘people who haven’t finished school feel that they are inferior’.

With the background of these representations, it is possible to understand the dramatic meaning of school failure and abandonment for these young people. ‘Being out of school’ means to them an important handicap in their future job opportunities, as well as feelings of indignity and incapacity.

The feelings of inadequacy were re-created in the workshops not only because of the topic of discussion, but also because of some work techniques. The emphasis on discourse and writing (to sum up the discussions) implied a parallel with school dynamics. In that context, these young people felt that they did not have an
authorized voice to speak about school. They did not feel competent – in the sense of Bourdieu (1980a) – to express their points of view on educational institutions.

Our intention was not only to favor the expression of young people’s views, but also to question stigmatization. Stigmatization prevented them from imagining a different future or from seeing themselves as agents of social transformation. As Bourdieu (1980b, 2000) has stated, reproduction is due not only to the material conditions of life, but also to the closing of agents’ space of subjective possibilities, that is, their expectations and beliefs about what it is possible or even thinkable. Thus, PAR is already an intervention, because it opens up the opportunity for critical reflection about reality and builds capacities to act in order to transform it (Ander Egg, 2003; Brincker & Gundelach, 2005).

In our project, dramatization constituted a tool to break silence and authorize speech. We proposed to represent a ‘Trial to School’, in which young men and women assumed different roles. The group split into two teams: one prepared the accusation and the other the defense of the school, based on their experiences. Each group elected two members to present the case and conduct the interrogation of the witnesses (the prosecutors and the defense attorneys). The witnesses could be other members of the group, but they also could find other witnesses, young people or adults.

The initial indictment was based on a fact evidenced in the previous workshops: although the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every young person has the right to education, the reality was that many of the young participants in the workshops were not attending school anymore and had not completed their studies. Was the school, as an institution, guilty of this breach of rights? This formulation was purposely vague, as a trigger to help the young people retrieve aspects of their school experience related to dropping-out or, in the case of the defense, to identify other causes external to school.

The prosecution based its case on four aspects: first, the difficulty of studying in an unhealthy environment, due to infrastructure problems (broken roofs, no heating, frequent lack of water, broken desks); second, the indifference and lack of commitment of teachers (high absenteeism, loss of interest in young people’s learning problems); third, the mistreatment (verbal and sometimes even physical – that is, light blows, ear-pulling) suffered by the students; fourth, the repetitive and uninteresting character of many classes (‘The professor teaches the same as last year. You don’t learn anything new, it’s boring!’). These arguments were presented by two young men acting as prosecutors and they were supported through the testimony of several young people, who illustrated them with episodes experienced at school.

In turn, the defense attorneys highlighted the responsibility of young people for the damage in the school building and furniture. Without denying that violence permeates the daily school environment, they argued that such violence is not confined to school, but that ‘violence is everywhere’. They also mentioned child and youth labor as one of the main causes of school abandonment in the area. They highlighted the participation of the local primary school in a project led by the May
organization, aimed at improving education and eradicating child labor. Through their questioning of the young witnesses, the defense attorneys showed that sometimes students exert violence on teachers.

The prosecution called as witnesses not only young people from the neighborhood, but also two May 8th collaborators and the mother of one of the young participants. They provided further evidence of discrimination against young people living in slum neighborhoods and young foreigners (from Bolivia, Peru, or Paraguay). They also mentioned conflicts between teachers and parents. The mother reported that a teacher had called her to discuss her son’s ‘strange ideas’, after he had watched a documentary about the Zapatista experience in Chiapas (México). She said: ‘They told me he had read things that were not for a 14-year-old boy. It bothers them that kids think for themselves.’

Nevertheless, these adult witnesses introduced nuances in the discussion. One pointed out that not all teachers are indifferent; some do seek to improve education (by participating, for example, in joint projects with grassroots organizations). Another linked school violence with social violence, noting however that the episodes of discrimination and mistreatment by teachers (as those mentioned in the debate) contributed to increased violence inside the school. She mentioned teachers’ lack of adequate training as a cause for these situations. Another point discussed was teachers’ absenteeism: one witness distinguished between absenteeism and participation in strikes, defending the union struggle as oriented not only to improve teachers’ working conditions, but also education in general.

The defense also called adult witnesses, mainly persons related to the educational system. A local primary school headmistress and a member of the local school board emphasized that only at school can people learn necessary skills for their personal development: reading, writing, arguing. The headmistress mentioned the importance of the teacher–student relationship in the process of learning: ‘the guidance that the teacher can provide to the student is irreplaceable’. When the prosecution questioned her about the contrast between this statement and young people’s testimony about the mistreatment they perceived in their teachers, she emphasized the need to differentiate between good and bad teachers. Moreover, she referred to working conditions in these schools: teachers are responsible for so many students (between 30 and 35) that it is difficult for them to manage the different conflicts generated in the classroom. ‘I recognize that there are cases in which at some point teachers may lose patience and do scream. The school is not prepared for certain situations.’ She also mentioned teachers’ heavy workload: in addition to their specific tasks, in these schools they must supervise the school dining hall, look for solutions to infrastructure problems, process scholarships for the poorest students, along with many other tasks.

The member of the school board supported this view and mentioned teachers’ low wages and poor training. In line with defense attorneys, he also noted young people’s responsibility related to school violence and deterioration. However, he charged the state as responsible for infrastructure problems: insufficient room, poor
quality of construction, deficient maintenance. Most of the adults involved agreed that issues like improving overall school infrastructure and equipment and the expansion of teaching staff required the state’s intervention through educational policies.

The ‘Trial to School’ became a core activity in our research. This dramatization was a turning point in the whole process for three reasons. First, it permitted the young people to assume the activity as their own, through discussing ideas and searching for ‘witnesses’ to exemplify them. Second, in the initial indictment, poor young people were not under judgment. This permitted them to set aside self-blaming and stigmatization, favoring the staging of different aspects of the complex school reality in these slum neighborhoods. Dramatization – which involves playing and simulating – was fundamental in producing that displacement, which enabled expression and, later, analysis and debate. Third, the comprehensive discussion about school permitted them to analyze the role of different actors and elements of the educational system: of course, young people themselves, but also the work of teachers and school officials; the pedagogical relationships; the infrastructure conditions. In effect, when all the participants were discussing a final verdict, the research team asked: ‘Whom will we convict or acquit? Who is the school: the building, the teachers? Are the students a part of the school?’ Thus, we were able to deepen the debate, identifying different factors of school abandonment as well as the school actors involved in them. This was the foundation upon which to imagine proposals for improving access to education.

The interactions between adults and young people during the ‘Trial’, as well as the testimonies of the latter, brought onto the stage (and hence made visible to participants) the distance between young people’s and adults’ – particularly, teachers’ – perspectives. In daily interactions at school, these differences provoke misunderstandings, confrontation, and different forms of symbolic (or even physical) violence.

Therefore, when we moved from diagnosis to proposals, young people raised ideas for making these differences visible, in order to debate them and find points of agreement. This was the moment when dramatizing and video production activities merged: they decided to apply the techniques they had learned in order to produce a video that reflected the different perspectives of concerned actors (teachers, parents, and youth) in the Reconquista Area.

When we organized the video workshop, our initial idea was to recover the educational experiences of young people. However, when young participants took charge of the process, they decided to produce a video that showed the diversity of opinions highlighted by the ‘Trial to School’, a video that could become an instrument for reflection and discussion between different stakeholders. They formulated questionnaires to interview these different stakeholders and they identified persons willing to appear on video. They filmed several interviews in the neighborhood, with parents and young people who attended and who had left school. They also filmed different scenes to show everyday life in the neighborhood. Afterwards they recorded images of institutional life at school
and interviewed teachers. Finally, a group was in charge of the editing process. Along the journey, they were accompanied and advised by the research team and video teachers.

Video production was the conquest of a locus of enunciation for these young people, in which to express their own discourses. It was also a space to confront alternative discourses in interviews with parents and teachers. These discourses spoke to them and made them reflect. Moreover, the video presented an opportunity to bring their points of view out of the narrow circle of the neighborhood, and thereby, to confront others’ discourses. This is the last contribution of art to our research, analyzed below.

Making the perspectives of young people visible

From the young people’s perspective, video was a tool to communicate their opinions about school abandonment but also to confront their opinions with the points of view of teachers and parents in order to find common strategies to improve educational inclusion. At the beginning, the video intersperses the title [‘The school, the neighborhood and the kids. (Dreams and frustrations.)’] and credits with images of the dumps on which the neighborhood is placed, a burnt car emerging from the garbage, the poor houses. This part is enhanced with the

Figure 2. Interviewing and filming at school. Photo by Ada Freytes Frey.
music chosen by the young people: a popular song about survival. Afterwards, the people who will present their opinions are introduced: four young people, four Junior Secondary School teachers, a mother, and a father.

A first question appears on a black background: ‘Why is it important to study?’ The following opinions are remarkably convergent. Young people, parents, teachers, all highlight the value of education as a means to obtain good jobs and secure the future. A young woman also mentions her aspiration of ‘not being discriminated for being ignorant’.

A new question precedes a series of testimonies: ‘But then… why do so many young people not go to school?’ Here, the testimonies show clear divergences: young people interviewed in the neighborhood emphasize the difficulties of a school experience marked by boredom, confinement, and teachers’ indifference and mistreatment. One of them says: ‘It was impossible to stay four hours enclosed in a school where they treat you so bad.’ Moreover, they mention causes of dropping-out linked to their living conditions, including youth labor and family problems.

These latter factors are also emphasized by teachers (filmed at school), who point out their lack of training and resources to respond to these problematic issues. But they introduce other causes: young people’s lack of interest and motivation regarding studies and their incapacity to project into the future. As a consequence, they prefer a ‘fast way’ to consumption (work or robbery), even though these affect negatively their future opportunities. Teachers’ discourse is characterized by a deep feeling of impotence. Young people’s and educators’ opinions are illustrated by images that show different scenes of life in the neighborhood and at school.

A third part shows images of young people’s daily lives: teenagers looking for water in community taps (as they do not have running water at home), collecting materials in the dump, returning from school through the neighborhood’s dirt roads. The last part presents a final contrast: two teachers who believe that ‘one day’ the students who dropped out will understand the importance of education and will decide to return to school; a father who says that the educational system must guarantee the right to education and a young man who says: ‘I have to do something… we all do something in life.’

This video was later used in our PAR project for workshops with authorities and teachers of Junior Secondary Schools of the Reconquista Area for the purpose of thinking together about how to tackle the high level of school abandonment in this zone. It provided a trigger to discuss with teachers their perspectives about the factors related with school abandonment. In every workshop, the causes identified in this first moment were invariably located ‘out of school’: first, in families, their breeding patterns and living conditions; second, in the youth values and dispositions acquired during socialization in the slums; third, in economic, social and educational state policies, which are inefficient to meet the actual needs of people living in extreme poverty. This diagnosis, founded on real aspects of daily life in this area, blocked any possibility of generating change projects from within...
the schools: if the school has nothing to do with the problem, it cannot be part of solution. However, young people’s declarations in the video and in the ‘Trial to School’ showed that abandonment was also conditioned by diverse aspects of educational institutions.

Therefore, in the second part of the workshops, we highlighted these contradictions, inviting the teachers to pay closer attention to the young people’s voice in the video. We also delivered some fragments of the trial transcripts. On this basis, we proposed that they discuss in groups and then all together which of the identified problems could be addressed from the school and to design strategies for action.

The incorporation of young people’s perspectives into the debate questioned the teachers’ vision and opened new issues to reflect upon. Teachers were particularly moved by the living conditions shown in video images and by the fear expressed by the young people failing to complete basic education of being discriminated against and excluded. Other issues highlighted in the discussions were the young people’s feeling of confinement, boredom and mistreatment at school as well as their sensitivity to perceived inconsistencies between teachers’ discourses and practices.

These debates allowed the participative elaboration of a set of proposals to tackle school failure from within educational institutions. As examples, we can mention:

- generating opportunities for exchanges between teachers and students, to promote the expression of young people at school (i.e. delegates per course, student center) and to manage conflicts (i.e. tutoring, joint workshops);
- renewing teaching methodologies, through the incorporation of participatory dynamics and audiovisual materials, a broader respect of young people’s interests and prior knowledge, and the encouragement of students’ experimentation and creativity;
- convening experts to address sensitive issues such as addictions and teenage pregnancy.

Given the short duration of the project (a year), we could not work at the schools for the implementation of these proposals: this was a commitment assumed by the participant teachers. Recently, however, we were contacted by the headmistress of the school where part of the video was filmed. One of the workshops had been conducted there and had caused some concerns among teachers: how to know more about their students’ opinions and difficulties; how to favor young people’s involvement in the teaching-learning process, how to achieve greater understanding between teachers and students. Therefore, they were interested in exploring the possibilities offered by the incorporation of video production as a pedagogical tool. As a result, we have begun weekly video workshops aimed at the creation of a students’ ‘collective self-portrait’. In addition to the above objectives, this project intends to further develop young people’s narrative, aesthetic, argumentative, and critical skills.
In addition to the workshops with teachers, the video was shown in the Fourth Communitarian Festival of Youth Video, in grassroots organizations’ meetings and in the neighborhood’s Community Center. However, we consider we have not completely exhausted the possibilities that it provides to make young people’s perspectives visible in the public arena. A future objective is to play it for governmental officers and NGOs concerned with youth and education policies so that young people living in extreme poverty could conquer a – modest – locus of enunciation within important decision-making spheres.

Conclusion

Setting the conditions for a process of collaborative construction of knowledge is a challenge in itself when working with populations historically stigmatized and invisible. This is clearly the case with the young people with whom we worked. The impossibility of speaking is, according to Spivak (1988), a characteristic of subalternity. Subalterns cannot speak because they do not have a locus of enunciation. Moreover, their voices cannot be recovered; all that can be done is to highlight the silences hidden in dominant discourses and to construct alternative, but contingent, stories.

Our position is that Spivak’s thesis is theoretically unsatisfactory and politically paralyzing. Our research aimed at dealing with the symbolic violence which prevents young people from expressing themselves. In our experience, arts (dramatization and video production) were a powerful tool for these young people to overcome their feeling of not being competent to speak about their educational experience.

Our most important findings are that the introduction of dramatization and video production had several effects: first, they favored the involvement of the young people we worked with in the action research process; second, they provided new languages that facilitated the young people’s expression of their experiences and opinions, formerly blocked by stigmatization; third, they were a potent instrument to make their perspectives visible to other social actors.

Regarding the objective of developing effective actions for the promotion of the right to education, our PAR had some limits. The video permitted us to take into account young people’s perspectives in planning strategies with teachers to tackle school abandonment. Moreover, based on the knowledge produced, we planned with the May 8th organization new community actions to support young people’s schooling. Nevertheless, we were unable to work together with all the stakeholders to reach a comprehensive program against dropping out. In this regard, we underestimated the effect of social and symbolic asymmetries on the possibility of collaborative work among adults. We are now searching for further strategies in this regard.

To conclude, it was the connection between arts and PAR which made this project of value to those involved. PAR approaches made us aware of the value
of the experiential knowledge of all the actors involved in a process of social change and, therefore, the importance of making visible, through artistic, aesthetic endeavors, the silenced perspectives. Moreover, participatory methods allowed young people’s progressive appropriation of the PAR process. This leading role of local actors is a main principle of PAR, but our research experience showed us that this role had to be constructed along with the research process. Being flexible regarding our initial ideas and design was fundamental for this construction.

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Notes

1. Subaltern, a concept used originally by Gramsci, refers to anyone who has an inferior position in front of a more powerful other. Since it describes a relative position, it can be applied to any situation of domination. Every binary relationship in which one term is defined not only in opposition but in a disadvantaged situation – morally, economically, or culturally defined – with respect to another, is a relationship conceived in terms of subalternity.

2. This research project was financed with contributions by the Argentinean National Ministry for Social Development (‘Arturo Jauretche’ National Prize in Action Research) and by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research North–South.

3. For the purpose of this article, we use Adams’s definition (2002: 21): ‘[A]rt refers to representations of reality or an idea, created with a consideration for aesthetic conventions.’

4. Unless otherwise indicated, the expressions in quotation marks are taken from the organization’s documents, the interviews performed, or statements made in the workshops. The translation into English is ours.

5. Besides Ada (who coordinated the project), and Cecilia, the research team was formed by Karina Crivelli, Debora Gorbán and Florencia Partenio. Pablo Figueiro also collaborated in the field work. All the decisions regarding the research process were discussed and defined together by this group.

6. Many of these young people had not even finished junior secondary school (7th to 9th years of study), while others had dropped out of school before ending high secondary school (10th to 12th years). Only five of them were still at school.

7. During the project we conducted 39 in-depth interviews, 14 of them with young people (eight women and six men), 10 with mothers, 12 with teachers and three with neighborhood leaders.

8. The members of 8th May’s young people’s group, around 20 young people, participated in the participatory and video workshops. Most of them remained during the whole process; 12 of them actively participated in the video production.

9. This dynamic, taken from the repertoire of popular education (Freire, 1970), is oriented to analyze the different elements of a social problem and present the different perspectives about them. In our case, its playful and theatrical aspects were key elements to facilitate young people’s engagement.
10. The young witness had referred to teachers’ absences and strikes as causes of the frequent interruptions of school classes.

11. They were visiting the neighborhood in order to discuss with May 8th leaders some details of the project to eradicate child labor. Then, the defense team decided to call them as witnesses.

12. The prosecutors asked to the young witnesses if there were tutors at their schools who could counsel the students or help them with their learning problems. They also asked about special projects that take into account young people’s interests. The response was negative. The headmistress argued these kinds of activities required recruiting for new teacher positions in each school.

13. They also suggested other actions, such as the implementation of support classes for students in the neighborhood, a School Completion Program in the Community Center, and activities that enable them to improve their expressive skills (workshops, youth magazine). Some of these proposals were implemented by the May 8th organization.

14. We conducted seven workshops at five Junior Secondary Schools, with the entire teaching staff of each institution. Although these schools are located at the edge of the slums, many teachers have rarely visited these neighborhoods, because they think that they are dangerous places. The workshops at the schools were a strategy to ensure that most of the teachers would watch the video and participate in the debate.

15. We cannot reflect in a few words the richness of the discussions in the workshops. We have just mentioned the most recurrent points, which were the basis for change proposals. The same applies for those proposals, presented below.

References


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