



Action research as a school-based strategy in intercultural professional development for teachers

Auxiliadora Sales^{a,*}, Joan A. Traver^a, Rafaela García^b

^a Universitat Jaume I, Dept. Education, Campus Riu Sec, 12071 Castellón, Spain

^b Universidad de Valencia, Dept. Theory of Education, Avda. Blasco Ibañez, P.O. Box 22110, 46071 Valencia, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Teacher professional development is a key factor for transforming professional and school culture. This article describes a case study undertaken in a Spanish school during the 2007–2008 academic year. Our aim is to explain how action research methodology was applied to encourage professional and school culture towards an intercultural and inclusive approach. Our results show that the training process challenged teachers' pre-existing deficit theory perspectives and empowered them as leaders for school change. The conclusions identify the key factors that enabled teachers to engage in critical reflection, and to implement strategies for collaborative work and community participation in school.

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1. Introduction

In the field of 21st century education, cultural diversity represents a challenge for teachers' professional development and transformation of schools. As teacher educators, our aim is to develop professional learning processes that encourage transformation in schools towards an intercultural, inclusive educational approach.

This approach implies a conception of education and culture as an open, dialogical and dynamic process (Holliday, 1999), and therefore calls for an educational model that understands diversity as a value and a norm rather than a deficit or a problem; a model designed to combat racism and exclusion through dialogue, cooperation and democratic participation (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton, 2000; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; McCarthy 1990). In summary, what is needed is an intercultural, inclusive model that encourages citizens' cultural enrichment, by acknowledging and respecting diversity, through exchange, dialogue and critical active participation in a democratic society based on equity, justice and solidarity (Sales & García, 1997, p. 42).

Teachers are a key factor in school improvement and this improvement can and must be encouraged through teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In many cases the

success of educational changes is shaped by teachers' critical capacity, professional self-esteem and degree of autonomy to innovate and be creative (Gale & Densmore, 2003; Skrtic, 1995).

In Spain, however, teacher education and professional development still continues to be grounded on deficit theory, which justifies the implementation of compensatory educational programmes (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007; Lloyd, 2008) and segregation measures in schools (Escudero, 2009; Sleeter, 2009). Spain's most recent Education Act (*Ley Orgánica de Educación*), passed in 2006, addresses student diversity through two specific regulations: compensatory education for ethnic and immigrant minorities, and special programmes for pupils with "specific support needs", implemented by the Spanish autonomous governments. Schools in which more than one third of the pupils are considered to be at risk of social exclusion are known as Compensatory Education Schools (CAES in Spanish) and are allocated extra human and material resources.

Professional development for practicing teachers in Spain is organised through Teacher Training and Resource Centres, publicly funded bodies that attend to requests for training and organise what are known as 'in-service teacher training programmes'. Two types of programmes involve the participation of external facilitators: a) scientific and didactic in-service training (CDIT) programmes and b) school-based in-service training (SIT) programmes. CDIT programmes are run outside school premises and teachers request them on an individual basis. Evaluation of these

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 96 4729808; fax: +34 96 4729264.

E-mail addresses: asales@edu.uji.es (A. Sales), jtraver@edu.uji.es (J.A. Traver), Rafaela.garcia@uv.es (R. García).

programmes has shown that they do not have a significant impact on school practices (Walters & Vilches, 2000).

The second type, school-based in-service training (SIT) programmes, take place in the school and are designed on the basis of needs and demands previously identified and agreed on by the staff. They aim to bring together and consolidate the school's staff as a unit. School-based professional development can provide the right environment for change in the school culture and strengthen the impact of innovations in the classroom (García, 2003; Gale & Densmore, 2003). It was first promoted in Spain in the 1980s through critical pedagogy models (Martínez Bonafé, 1989), but in the last two decades it has been neglected in favour of more transmissive, technique-based models, which generate a dichotomy between the university and the school, theory and practice, academics as experts and teachers as practitioners (Sáez, 2004). Furthermore, the compensatory and technique-based model precludes the development of intercultural and inclusive professionals and cultures, since teachers are socialised into schools as a workplace where they expect students to be sorted and divided by a variety of categories –including age, ability, race and gender (Young, 2008).

The purpose of this study was to develop action research processes that would help to construct intercultural, inclusive schools through the professional development of their teachers within the context of a SIT programme in which we participated as external facilitators.

In Spain, antecedents to the intercultural and inclusive approach of SIT programmes can be found in the network of Learning Communities (Elboj, Puigdemívol, Soler & Valls, 2002) (www.comunidadesdeaprendizaje.net), based on the Accelerated Schools Project (Levin, 1998). The school transformation process begins by taking a community approach to raise teachers' awareness about the principles of dialogical learning. A second model, the inclusive schools network (Echeita, 2006), is based on the IQEA (Improving the Quality of Education for All) Project (Ainscow, 1999) and the subsequent publication of the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2000) as a self-evaluation tool for schools. This model applies action research as a strategy for school improvement, designed to reflect on school cultures, policies and practices.

We therefore start from a conception of professional development within the framework of school-based in-service training (henceforth SIT) programmes that considers school as a privileged place to learn about interculturality, inclusion and democratic culture (Darling-Hammond, 2006). This approach must recognise teachers as leaders for change in school (Essomba, 2006; Muijs & Harris, 2006), and provide the resources and strategies to transform it into a quality school for all (Ainscow, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Stoll & Fink, 1996).

The implications for teacher educator practice can be seen in the new role of 'critical friend', a figure that encourages and accompanies teachers through the process of creating a professional learning community. As teacher educators, we "draw on our personal and professional journeys towards our understanding of inclusion and interculturality in school" (Hink, 2005, p. 121).

The strategy that we consider to be coherent with the intercultural and inclusive professional development approach to transforming school culture is action research, because as O'Hanlon (2003, p. 25) points out: "the action research process itself models democratic procedures that are fully inclusive and gives a voice to all participants, especially marginalized ones." According to the multicultural and social reconstructionist approach, critical consciousness can be nurtured through the examination of systemic inequities in school (Grant & Sleeter, 2006). Hence, action research provides the strategy for a professional development model: inclusive, collaborative, democratic, focused on learning,

critical and transformative (Carr & Kemmis, 1993; Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 1999; Whitehead, 1989). Action research can provide the resources to deconstruct teachers' professional identity when it emerges as a racist and exclusionary construction, and favours empowerment of teachers and the school community (Kailin, 2002; Magos, 2007). It takes the school as a learning unit (Elliott, 1993); it encourages collaboration between teachers (Dooner, Mandzuk, & Clifton, 2008; Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, & Bolhuis, 2007) to create inclusive learning communities in schools as part of a planned process (Busher, 2005; Perrett, 2003). The literature therefore demonstrates that, firstly, action research is a channel for developing the capacity of school communities to expose and challenge deeply entrenched deficit views of 'difference', which define certain types of students as 'lacking something' (Ainscow, 2005; Trent, Artiles, & Englert, 1998). Secondly, because it is collaborative, participatory, democratic and designed to develop critical community learning (Armstrong & Moore, 2004; Elliott, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), it opens the way for changes in the school culture by activating the levers for change (Senge, 1989) and encourages participation, understood as the shared experiences and negotiations that result from social interaction within a purposive community (Wenger, 1998). This participatory nature, based on a long-term commitment to working together, takes teachers out of their traditional isolation towards a new, collaborative school culture (Vulliamy & Webb, 1991).

Following the action research phases proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) and the school transformation models, the research team structured the SIT programme in four phases: a) Raising awareness for change: initial stimulation of teaching staff to question how they view school-related challenges; negotiation and commitment to change; and community involvement in the process; b) School self-evaluation, exploring the school reality with the whole community and discussing the common vision of school culture; c) Decision making and implementation: teachers motivate community participation in decision making and learn to manage decisions from a position of shared leadership; and d) Reflection and future proposals: teachers appraise the entire process and draw their initial conclusions about the training process and the changes that have occurred in the school culture.

The focus of the research was to analyse how the action research strategy applied in a SIT programme led to changes in the teachers' perspective that contributed to transforming the school culture towards an intercultural, inclusive model. By analysing the process as a case study, we were able to identify the key factors that helped to empower the teaching staff and develop a more democratic, participative school culture.

2. The case study

We used a qualitative case study methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Stake, 1995). This enabled us to understand the complexity of the education process, starting from the context and perceptions of the agents involved. The case study explores the role of action research strategy in a SIT programme that responded to the demand by the teaching staff of a primary school in the Autonomous Region of Valencia, Spain. Aspects revealed in the case study enable us to learn from what is a unique and valuable case in its own right (Stake, 1995), and at the same time increase knowledge about teacher training that helps managers take decisions on a larger scale (Zeichner, 2007).

The research questions proposed were as follows:

- a) What changes occur in the teachers' perspective as a result of the action research strategy applied to the SIT programme?

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