

About the experience of the “Workshop for working children”

Taller de chicos y chicas que trabajan

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The experience of “Workshop for working children” was developed in the school N° 567, in the city of Santa Fe, Argentina. The workshop was part of the project known as “Infancia excluida. Por el derecho a ser quien soy” organized by Acción Educativa (Excluded infancy. For the right to be who I am.). In the year 2001 the project was promoted by UNICEF. Such a project also has the promotion of the Universidad Nacional del Litoral and the Resolution N° 0903/01, which is dated October 17th 2001. This resolution came from the Ministry of Education of the City of Santa Fe, where it was “resolved to declare of Educational interest the project known as “Infancia Excluida. Por el derecho a ser quien soy”, organized by Acción Educativa. It was also stated that “The project will take place in different stages during the course of the years 2001, 2002, and 2003”.

It was born, if it can be described in this way, from a very hard pain: the death of one of our first grade students. Walter was 6 years old, and in the third week of classes, he was run over by a motorcycle while he was “working on the streets asking for some change” (this is the way their fellow students describe it) in an avenue near the school. This death left an intense meaningless sensation in the school, and also to those –like us- that are not afraid to feel it. It was an emptiness in the school body that hurts and was an indication of an activity that most of the students were performing: work. Then, Gladys Dávalos, the educational teacher in charge of Walter’s class, and myself, teacher of educational music in the school, mobilized ourselves and started to look into the reality of working children in our school. We did some research and this showed us that 20 percent of the children were recognizing they worked either on the streets or at home (that is to say, that the real numbers should be much

higher). That was the reason why we started to conduct several workshops on this topic and many others that have to do with identity, family safety, discrimination, etc.

At that time, Acción Educativa offered us to be part of the project “Infancia Excluida. Por el derecho a ser quien soy”. This project is formed by a group of 13 people, from which 11 are grass-roots educators that work in informal spaces and in schools, with children of the most vulnerable parts of the population, particularly since the existing discrimination in learning and their gender. Their intention is to build group and individual identity initially from their exclusion, legitimizing in this way their own being, thinking, feeling, doing, desiring and dreaming. All of this is done in the context of grass-roots education as an ethical option – political and pedagogical.

Being part of this project gave us the necessary emotional and theoretical context needed to mark off and maintain our task. My partner continued working in these workshops with the children of this class, who really needed them a lot. In my case, it became clear the idea of having a specific workshop for working children.

This is how it was done, and this is how we called it: “El taller de chicos y chicas que trabajan” –Workshop for working children-. 11 girls and 21 boys from between the ages of 9 and 14 (4th to 7th grades) participated during these two years.

These children, during the years 2000 and 2001, used to clean windows, begged at stop lights, or entertained the people in the cars while they were waiting for a green light. Also they took care of parked cars or sold flowers or fruits in the streets. And especially the girls worked in their homes (although boys also work at home), “raising” 3 or 4 brothers and sisters, being in charge of all the cleaning, doing the laundry, or even cooking for the family. The difference in the year 2002, post devaluation, was that the main task of boys was to tour the streets in search of materials that they could sell: cardboard, glass, metals, etc.

Our task in the workshop was part of the general project of Acción Educativa (Educative Action), and that is why it was part of the basis of grass-roots education. It was coordinated as a therapeutic experience that included the arts as a vital element of work.

The idea was to create a space in school, capable of bearing the work of these children. Also, building a space with the dynamics of confidence that would allow them to speak up, share and process what they were feeling while working, as well as recognizing the causes, difficulties and risks. They were also encouraged to build new ways of relation with their fellow students, the learning process and their school. This was by being just mere students that came to school to learn or eat, but also by being accepted for their condition as working children, with the implied characteristics and difficulties. Another challenge was that children could be able to connect with affections and attitudes, although these might not be the ones expected from them, such as tenderness, anger, participation, doubt, pain, emotions, love, and the pleasure for playing and sharing.

How to do this? Only through words, questions, answers and “oral therapeutic interventions? The answer was no. I knew very well that these boys and girls were able to “talk” about what was happening while working. But this “talking” was something meaningless that didn’t seem to be helping them to process it. On the other hand, they had ways of reaction, like using the body as a defense or aggression to others, which were always present. What we were trying to achieve was a playing dynamic (flexible time and space), where their body and what they were experiencing could have a space to be heard too. On the other hand, what they were trying to achieve with the word, was instead of only speaking that it could also narrate, process and make history.

Again...How to do this? I found myself taking it from previous thoughts and experience.

For example, in my previous educational practice and the workshops I did with children with nutritional and socio-cultural needs, I've been introducing corporal elements of work that in other environments were very collateral or that I had developed in previous years (what I used to teach in a class to children 4 years old, now I was doing it in an intensive way with first graders). In these environments, it turned out to be indispensable for me to begin the work with the smallest grades. Each year, with a dynamic of very basic body practices aimed to build a body plan, that in most cases was somehow slower than what was expected. The results of choosing these types of dynamics were very remarkable.

Why was this happening? This question added to a more attentive observation of something I was witnessing of for quite some time ago now: these were the scenes usually called "aggressive" from children constantly "hitting each other" since the first grades. Looking closely, I was able to see in them something different from the regular intent of aggression, to cause pain or hurt others. Especially in smaller children, is more a matter of gathering their bodies, one on top of the other; or gestures that end up in a close contact and not in aggressive way. The sensation that can be observed in their faces at first is not of fury or pain, but of pleasure or joy. When they insist for a while on this, they end up crying or with rage.

Comparing this with some lectures of psychoanalytic authors (such as Donald Winnicott, Francoise Doltó, Sami Ali, Ricardo and Marisa Rodulfo, Silvia Bleichmar, and of course before all of them Sigmund Freud), I noted that these scenes account for the construction of their bodies as a difficult process. A deficit in the subjective processes of constitution appears, and that has its root on more or less severe deficiencies in the contacts of discipline, especially with the mother.

What they are looking for in those "gatherings" are the body limits of their fellow students. In this way they can discover their own limits: "until here it's me, from here on it's

no longer me”. “Until here means pleasure, from here on it means pain”. This process (clearly described by Freud) is expected at a younger age and with the bonds of the people that are closer to the children. In this case it shows that it didn’t happened, it tells there was no one with whom or when to do it before.

We are talking about boys and girls coming from families that live in very intense vulnerable social conditions. They have numerous kids, there is no time or conditions for hygiene as a game, and not even to mention time for caresses when they are not needed (like it would be the case of performing them with no reason at all). That is to say, for this type of contact that allows to develop a body as one they can count on for other than releasing energy, like for example playing and all the pleasures associated with games and/or physical contact. In these families, a newborn is what causes a previous kid to become unnoticed. In this way, the smaller daughters or sons pass from a non-stop relationship with the mothers, to being separated and practically without their attention or support in the developmental process. That is to say, a reasonable time and space to process the necessary distance for this growing baby and the mother, as healthy separate persons.

This theoretical sketch started to provide me with the answers to the question about why it was better to start this pedagogic work with children between 6 and 8 years of age. Start with body practices of movements that simulated rocking (each child itself or between them), playing games with mirrors or with their hands such as drawing, discovering in this way the parts of their bodies (like when someone tickles them, or when it becomes warm or cold). The same research work was being done with the voice. Only after working all these things, we were able to achieve certain concentration for listening, singing, laughing, working with another child, feeling that an instrument can be an instrument, and not something that is used to hammer another kid’s head.

These theoretical sketches were also added to the previous personal experiences, the clinical, artistic and pedagogic ones, as well as to the group work responsible of this project (Acción Educativa). We shared our experiences with them, reflected, researched, and asked questions, to come up with answers to help us support and give new forms to the workshops.

Since the beginning I presented a clear frame for the work: when and how much time we were going to be working. I was not going to mention to anyone what children were saying there, it was going to be a secret for myself. They were going to go to the workshop if they wanted to, because that was not a required space. I was not going to ground them if they didn't want to speak or work. They were going to be able to use the materials provided in this space as they wished. What we were not going to be able to do, was to shout or strike each other.

If I try to read from the workshop experience in terms of the children's experience of corporeality, I should say that in the beginning it was arduous.

At the beginning, the body appeared resistant. It was resisting the space location in the workshop (some boys always wanted to be in a particular space in a different way to what it was proposed); resisting the meeting time (they left earlier or even didn't come); resisting the punches or shouting of the kid that was trying to approach him or her. So the body was resisting by being presented as stiff and/or aggressive.

The corporal modality was the correlation of all the first times in which still there had been no time to establish a strong confidence bond between the boys, the girls and towards me. There was still no confidence, but *they* and *me* were giving the possibility that it could still appear. Although they were not able to take my proposals about playing games or making alliances in no more than among two or three of them (or between brothers and sisters); they were able to bring their presence, punches, shouts and stories. They were not able to listen between them, but they were not able to stop talking either. They were telling

once and again -as if it were the description that follows the vision of an image- the painful difficult experiences –if not tragic ones- that they had been part or witnesses while they were working or living in their neighborhoods.

It seemed to be a parallel between the stiffness and the corporal aggression, and between the stiffness of the working options and the cruelty of the stories. Evidently, this “almost-aggressive” style of corporal contact was the clear example of the emotional style of contact that boys and girls knew to establish.

This was what they had and what they brought. An inflexible attitude of discipline only would have cause the children to feel excluded or left out. The alternative was to resist this type of contact, offering them their my own body and the space for the workshop as a place were the closeness could be possible in a different way – either as bringing in or turning away. And with respect to the compulsive necessity of telling their story or their complementary version of not speaking anything at all, and instead bothering with physical aggressions (a verbal way of keeping attached or far away from others), my intervention was not to confront them with what they could not do, but to take it from what they were speaking and introduce them to small fixing activities at the end of each workshop.

If we finally built up a different bond, it was by bearing (them and me) those first moments of gathering and refusal. These were progressively transformed by the big amount of exchanges I had to offer them (in the proposition, the orders, the tone of voice, the bearing of limits in which they also participated) and in the group capacity of having and sustaining a space to share and up for changes.

When I say “bearing”, I choose this word because of its various meanings, because it was to all of their meanings that I had to appeal. Bear the weight, the heat, the smell, the flies, and the tears in their bodies that were stacked to mine, far away shouting or challenging me. Bearing lending them that space, that time and especially my body so they

could rest, being known in their school, in their double demand (an excessive demand for being a child yet) of having to go to school and work (in most cases so that they and their family could eat). Bearing to listen to the cruelty of their stories and their pain, which included the possibility of me crying, or being touched by them, or especially the obligation of not breaking up in pieces at that point. For me to provide them with a space so they could demonstrate and be able to recognize certain things as painful, be distressed and/or cry, it required taking them by their hands and making them feel relieved. If they were able to see that I could acknowledge these situations as being very painful, they were probably going to demonstrate more and recognize them. First I had to appeal to helping them rescue other – and probably nicer – experiences, and in the case that these were not present, I had simply to appeal to certain fixing activity to be done at the workshop.

Bearing this extremely pleasant and difficult experience, made me think at different moments if it was worth it, if by doing it I wasn't also hurting these children, and also if I was going to be able to continue. I was able to resist these moments, helped by an external space different from the workshop, but at the same time in the same project, were the ones that preserved me. These moments, were the encounters for collective reflection with the group of grass-roots educators of Acción Educativa. It was there where I could rework what was happening in the workshops, and in many cases, simply taking the time to acknowledge in front of a sensitive and attentive group of people, how painful the stories and experiences that these children were telling were. In some cases, I was also able to tell them how the stories turned the workshop into a painful experience itself. This was a similar process to the one I was doing with these children. At the same time, I had to listen to the difficulties, the discoveries and cruelty of experiences in other workshops conducted by my partners (they worked with children of different ages and neighborhoods). This was a rich and full process for all of us, providing new ideas and energy. The time designated to process the impact of

these type of experiences as well as making our own revisions, was what allowed us later to come back and pick previous experiences and concepts worked there, so each could build the activities for a new workshop.

That is how those questions were softening to the rhythm of the different encounters as well as in the children's workshops. In one of the workshops, we built houses, first with our own bodies, and then with the bodies of the other children. When the activity finished they said: "if we are many is easier and better to build a house were to live".

The process of the workshops became visible by adding up all these lines of observation, reflection, experiences and work that were appearing in a simultaneous and chaotic way at the same time. This was a process where the "aggression" was transformed to "aggressiveness" (conception of D. Winnicott), so it allowed boys and girls to build a body (unless here in the workshop) capable to enjoy, receive and give tenderness, defending themselves only when necessary, and finally able to play. It was a very slow-moving time. First it was from a framework of exchanges of words, stories and games – at the beginning very gradually, where "the corporal" part was the first thing to be acknowledged and that allowed the rest of *the space and time of the workshop as a whole*. Playing in circles, being able to lie down, sitting on the floor wherever they wanted, or remained separated of the rest, also a non-mandatory presence and a school schedule that was not rigid. Being able to feel that participation was not only defined from an oral point of view, but that the presence and actions were also valuable. The corporal supporting physical contact for those who needed or beard it was present (a hand shake, a caress, a hug, a kiss or simply feeling the proximity between one body to the other). For the rest it was a verbal thing, or basically of looks and gestures.

Only after months of workshops, a more spontaneous and less compulsive contact started to appear. The majority of the bodies seemed to have relaxed and did not feel

defensive in that space. It was then when I tried to introduce small sense perceptive practices (all of them starting from tickles, hugs, and a balance movement similar to be rocked), construction games of forms between 2 or more bodies, etc... This moment corresponded with situations where the boys were yet laying down among each others listening to a story; and the girls instead of fighting, were trying to fix their problems by putting some distance with whom they might have a problem. Girls were also being encouraged to work with new kids.

The process was from a “*body in the workshop*” – it allowed them to maintain a distance and the modality that they wanted – to a “*body of each one in the workshop*”. From this moment, we were able to acknowledge – with for example, different corporal workshops – the exhaustion that the work being carried out leaves in each body and how to “try” to take care of themselves.

In the rest of the workshops, the body was one more element of work. It was an important element not from the obstacle it presented, but as a presence of the possibilities of contacts and records. With the body they could play, dress up in costumes, act, demand spaces, and even rest. Also, something that is very important appeared as a common characteristic between boys and girls of the same ages: a place to feel comfortable at the beginning of puberty, as well as the place to express being a woman or a man. This was something that was starting to disturb them. Their bodies promised to be “grownups” in a couple of years, and with the one they would be able to “make babies”, “have a boyfriend or girlfriend” and work. Their bodies now found a place – both in space and in time – for the future.