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Gender Violence and Prisoners: Action Research and Pedagogy

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Abstract

Action-Research Methodology and gender sensitivity linked to solve gender violence expression in prisons. The curriculum negotiation is a principle that allowed prisoners to engage in the activities in a voluntary way. Six months of field qualitative implementation – contrary to Blitzkrieg Ethnography– allowed us to get a real change of abilities as team trust, cooperation skills, decision-making process to avoid violence and to recognize the need the prisoners have to express their sentiments. Results show a success of critical Action Research and active participation of all the actors as well as the construction of a peace culture and a new field of work for pedagogues.

Keywords: *gender violence, hegemonic masculinities, prisoners education, critical action research, quadrangulation, peace culture*

Introduction

Our educational programme developed in prison experience for the first time when a long-term action research centred approach innovation educational programme was developed in the Spanish prison. Long term implementation means six months in prisons and a new function or role for pedagogical professionals and so the learning results and the change of attitudes are better than when you work in short-term programmes, for only one or two weeks.

“There were days when the small courtyard – the only place with direct sunlight - literally had a testosterone smell to it, and you could always hear footballs

bouncing against the walls, and also sometimes people yelling and the constant interruption of the out-of-tune and coarse PA with information on the working staff that, however expected, turned into a sort of aggression against tranquillity. In short, surveillance and peer harassment. This context gives the term “technologies of self”, according to Foucault (1978; 1988), its full meaning. This refers to the conceptualization of masculinities as “a set of effects generated in the body, behaviour and social relations” (Foucault, 1978, p. 125)

(Prison Research Field Diary).

Theoretical framework

Violence, masculinity, and expression of sentiments

Explaining the origin and build-up of violence is no easy task due to the complexity of contextual, cultural, social and experiential factors that may be involved. Taking into consideration that the social relationships of friendship occur in prison, as well as in the compulsory periods of stay in the army in some countries, these are only functional in such contexts. Friendship in the context of prison may have special and unique connotations. Patriarchal societies generally promote the use of violence in order to perpetuate themselves as an oppression mechanism for women and other men. However, we have always preferred calling them cultures of resistance against the hegemonic model, which can be clearly seen thanks to the rise and power of homosexual communities, to give but an example.

“The belief that violence is a male thing is not a trait stemming from any chromosome embedded in the neuronal network of either the right or the left hemisphere, nor is it originated from testosterone -half of the guys does not engage in fights, the majority of them do not carry weapons and almost none of them commits murder: Are they not boys? Boys learn to be violent. “Violence – as written by James Gilligan (1997, 223) – has much more to do with the cultural construction of manhood than it does with hormonal substrates of biology” (Foster, Kimmel & Shelton, 2004, pp. 218–219).

Education fosters boys and girls to use violence to solve conflicts instead of the construction of a peace culture. The meaning of what a man is changes through culture, history and even time along their own life.

Methodological approach

Problem and main objective

There is a lack of effective prevention programmes in prisons as they are focused on short educational practices with no deep changes of attitudes and knowledge.

Analysing and understanding the scope and consequences of using violence in daily life through the development of basic skills that help enhance communication, respect and cooperation –favouring the resolution of conflicts by means of negotiation.

Design and Implementation as negotiation

The critical action-research ensures three fundamental principles and concepts: a practice educational problem that they cannot solve for themselves alone as educators (as well as prison staff and other professionals groups) and the problems must be designed by people engaged and living in the problematic situation; to improve the life context conditions, the place where they are living to be able to understand their reality better and third, to make them free from oppression or wrongful practices empowering the research group to the decision-making process (McKernan, 1999, pp. 52–53).

Curriculum Implementation (Snyder, Bolin and Zumwalt, 1992) focused on working together in the construction and adjustment of the curriculum: “This implies a certain amount of negotiation and flexibility on the part of both designers and practitioners” (Snyder, Bolin and Zumwalt, 1992, p. 410). As prisoners become active actors of the implementation system, their collaboration and expression of needs was a key to engaging them in the whole process: activities and evaluation.

We want to highlight that we had been doing field work for a long time as we stayed in the prison for six months (Including preliminary negotiations with the Head and National Authorities of Home Affairs). This is completely unusual in prisons.

Contrary to “Blitzkrieg Ethnography,” Rist (1980, p.8), our process of research included “multiple interactions, visits, contact over a substantial length of time”.

Following the action-research model of Hutchins (1992), there are four phases: Phase 1: Orientation and Negotiation with the prison group; Phase II: Identification of Needs and Action Planning; Phase III: Implementation, Monitoring and Adjustment, and Phase IV: Reflection, Review, Evaluation and a new process.

Orientation and Negotiation

Our first day of contact with the inmates made us feel a mixture of anxiety, uncertainty, and oppression; it made us feel odd. Three meetings were held aimed to negotiate the proposed training work we wanted to do. The first two groups were heterogeneous in terms of offences committed, cultural backgrounds and age.

In the evening, the head of the programs suggested we visited what they called the “therapeutic educational unit”. One of the officers (female), when hearing about this group, interceded: “Are you going to work with the sissy guys?” The unit comprised a set of inmates on a re-education programme including, in some cases, those who were in the process of drug abuse detoxification.

It also included an agreement to work with two groups of volunteer inmates two days a week -Mondays and Wednesdays- for a period of five months and approximately sixty hours of direct work. However, the implementation time in prison was extended up to approximately one hundred and twenty uninterrupted hours, including holiday periods that do not apply in prison for obvious reasons.

The selection of research group

Identification of Needs and Action Planning

The selected group consisted of 17 inmates, none of whom dropped out except for a prisoner who completed his service time and another one that was transferred to a different unit following drug use. The multicultural backgrounds of the prisoners were several countries: Colombia, Cuba, Italy, Senegal, Spain Algeria, Nigeria, Venezuela, Morocco and Sierra Leone. For ethical reasons we considered it better not to know their sentence reasons and to solve our own conflict by our intention to stay in the prisons for a long time. Anyway, we asked the Head of the Prison to send to our first meeting all the prisoners convicted of gender violence and sexual aggression and some other harmful practices.

We chose the action-research-education programme Education for a Violence-free Society: Constructing a Peaceful Culture as reference, which had been designed and successfully tested in Germany, Italy, Denmark and Spain (Barragán et al., 2006). It included masculinities, gender, homophobia, peace culture, multiculturalism and sentiments education as curricular contents.

Additionally, some contents proposed by the group of men in prison never ceased to surprise us, due to these being sometimes unusual, idiosyncratic and

always a challenge to prepare given their immediacy and the fact that they had not been anticipated. We started off the programme with activities focusing on masculinities and violence, but early into the sessions the need for touching on emotional aspects such as guilt, affective dependence or the loss of affective autonomy was raised, as well as self-control issues linked to violence and ways of conflict resolution, which was less of a surprise to us. To be able to understand the deep meaning of the changes we must explain that the filming was about the last workshop, called education for pleasure, with activities as dancing, massages, play with chocolate, caress blindfolded with some coloured Mexican handkerchiefs, lift and rock in small groups (It was an hour and a half session after a period of nearly six months and more than some fifty activities).

Evaluation Methods

We chose qualitative methods because prisoners know how to respond to a traditional or conventional survey and a new approach was necessary. Mckernan (1999, p. 208) suggested **quadrangulation**, which “is at the same time a data collection method and a way to monitor such data, so that the key actors in the environment can consider it through various research approaches”. It holds certain similarities with the “triangulation” method used by Patton (1990), as well as visual data collection (Banks, 2008) and qualitative research (Flick, 2002).

“Quadrangulation (Mckernan, 1999, p. 210) can be understood as a four-sided box [...] the first side or wall representing the external researcher and professor-researcher studying a story video of the action; the second side involves the external researcher and student researchers discussing the action without the professor; the third side consists of the projection of the video for other practitioners in the school or involved in the project, with the professor-researcher explaining what has happened and what has been learned about the resolution of the curricular issue data”.

The procedure was filming approximately one hour and a half of the final sessions of the programme, done by an expert in pedagogy. The professor-researcher, the observers-researchers and prisoners were simultaneously asked: What changes have occurred since the start of the intervention that can be noticed in the film? The activities description is crucial to share a construction view, even to improve the curriculum that we made with the system actors: researcher teacher, external observers and prisoners. We can compare the quality

of this observation tool according to Hook (1985), who talks about the *diary*, where you are supposed to express your feelings, attitudes, perceptions, reflections and critical comments.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the quadrangulation shows here the most relevant and interesting opinions, values, knowledge and attitudes according to the group methodology. Dimensions created were: the way they arrived at the meeting, atmosphere, space, expression of feelings, task development, team work, understanding the tasks, transcending the boundaries, elements of distortion, interpersonal relations, verbal and non-verbal communication and the prison courtyard.

The way they arrived at the meeting

[They come in groups and smiling]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 1

[On our way toward the prison we talked about sex education and observed the deserted landscape surrounding the facilities. We talked about the institution. Every day we could feel some tension before entering the premises]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 2

[I feel really upset and concerned about the expectations of the possibility of filming. Entering the building was troublesome as they were not willing to let us film. It is really hard to restrain myself from telling the official to go to hell. As usual, the inmates arrived in small groups. It really gets under my skin. Inmates continue to slowly arrive at the session. Spontaneous and warm behaviour when arriving by car at the prison]

Prison Research Field Diary, teacher

Atmosphere: the way we feel and live in the prison

[The final scene was very emotional, one could really see the bond that had been created between the participants in the workshop]

Prison Research Field Diary, prisoner

[Despite it being the last day, they had a smile on their faces, but you could see Fernando's accumulated tiredness of the activities]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 1

[In contrast to the atmosphere of violence of the courtyard, the classroom-dining hall is dominated by tranquillity in terms of how we feel and stand. One can feel "good vibes" in the way we relate to each other. There is mutual respect among the inmates as well as between the inmates and the external researchers. Happiness, laughter and good time prevail. All the prisoners engage in all the activities with great enthusiasm]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 2

[David arrives and blends in. There are seven inmates who are relaxed, joking, laughing, they become involved in the activities openly. There is an atmosphere of absolute confidence, I put the silver ring on a table and forgot all about it. Their faces expressed satisfaction]

Prison Research Field Diary, teacher

Space as an expression of power and the prison courtyard

Control of space and its use and layout is one of the fundamental oppression functions of patriarchy. Paradoxically, men who control space as a means to oppress women also use it to punish other men as a form of violence – we refer to men's prisons at all times: limiting its use, reducing it as well as preventing privacy. These forms of power have been reviewed (Buchbinder, 2013).

The relation between space and guilt concerns prisoners.

"I made him aware of the fact it was my first sentence. He replied that the sentence had however not done away with my sin. I had only been told that I was guilty. I was guilty, I was paying for it, more could not be asked from me. He then stood up again and I realized that he could not possibly move about in that narrow cell. One could only sit down or stand up." (Camus, 2012, p. 118).

[It seems that the group barely holds any apparent prejudice towards each other, therefore activities are quite dynamic]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 1

[The space for the development of the activities is quite small and not quite appropriate...very uncomfortable, in a rectangular shape that hinders the development of the activities]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 2

[I felt oppressed because we were in a corridor in a dining hall of the prison unit. However, throughout the session I forgot where we were]

Prison Research Field Diary, teacher

Expression of sentiments

[It has broken through the shield that we need to put up in order to survive the prison and not be trampled upon]

Prison Research Field Diary, prisoner

[They have come out of that shell they initially were in toward us and the rest of the inmates and are now showing more feelings]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 1

[One can feel the friendship and/or comradeship between some of the inmates. All of their faces show a satisfied expression, they leave reality and their problems behind for a while, whilst the activity is carried out. At these moments it feels as if one was not in the prison]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 2

Seidler (2006, p. 106) points out that:

“feminism was able to recognize the connection between power and emotional life, acknowledging through the practice of awareness that women’s individual emotions must be understood in the context of power and gender relations. But it was harder for men to notice the implications the radical and transformative concept of “personal is political” had on their own self-understanding.”

However, experience clearly contradicts theoretical assumptions, because men are indeed able to face contradiction and the cognitive conflict by learning to “cultivate, control, and express” feelings and use them positively. Breaking “*the shield*” is not only possible but desirable. Our analysis shows that Fisher’s (1999) prejudice about “the silence of men” is not true.

Transcending the boundaries

The metaphor of “boundaries” as presented by feminist, mixed-raced and post-colonial theories transformed in the way in which inmates of diverse cultural environments accept, negotiate and compare the divergences and convergences of masculinity characteristic of their own communities (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1999).

The ability to communicate effectively with different cultural groups and within them has been called “transcending the boundaries” (Schensul, Schensul, Gonzales y Caro 1981). Given that ethnographers almost always study groups that are different from their own, the ability to transcend the boundaries is critical to the success of a research project. Transcending the boundaries resembles, in a way, the task of the cultural broker, insofar as ethnographers often act as such in several groups whose actions and motivations need explaining for others” (Goetz and LeCompte, 1988, p. 118)

[Fernando looks relaxed and is completely calm when talking and joking with them. He even puts his silver ring away and is not watching over it. None of the inmates even tries to get closer. Fernando seems to share more things with David than he does with the rest of the inmates]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 1

[They like dancing music. I took part in the activity as if I were another inmate. The inmates get moody because the door is not shut – it’s against the rules. Positive communication and total involvement on the part of the teacher as a member of the group]

Prison Research Field Diary, teacher

Elements of distortion

[Inmates would tell other inmates off if they interrupted the activity or were caught looking through the window. A certain atmosphere had already been created amongst them and they did not want anyone to disrupt that]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 1

[Distortion, noise, constant PA announcements... It infuriates me, I can feel chaos. We had not wanted to read about potential side effects prior to the start of the project roll out. Symptoms such as headaches, insomnia, nervousness, lack of concentration and irritability gradually appeared and we would discuss them]

Prison Research Field Diary, teacher

Interpersonal relations

[Do away with prejudice concerning relations between men. In brief, we have become more fragile and affectionate in a positive way]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 2

[José was quite close to Yoslen and Cristo, and so they would always be joking, which created a nice atmosphere. Even the person recording the session seemed to fully blend in with the rest]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 1

[Intergroup relations – external researchers and the group of inmates - clearly suggest mutual trust that has been building throughout the duration of the relationship established as researchers]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 1

Verbal and non-verbal communication

[It was surprising to see the toughest guy in the unit turn into an affectionate and vulnerable person capable of hugging and kissing a prison mate]

Prison Research Field Diary, prisoner

[Cristo never lost his smile. You could see in his eyes he was at peace with everything surrounding him. At the beginning, Yoslen was a little reluctant both towards the other inmates and to the activities, but towards the end we saw a change in him and he seemed more cheerful]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 1

[Constant physical contact between the inmates can be seen]

Prison Research Field Diary, observer 2

Conclusion

The first conclusion is confirming the efficiency of a continued intervention programme from the inmates' perspective, who highly valued the effects it had had on their changes: group cohesion, violence-free conflict resolution strategies, previously inconceivable friendships as well as the unexpected expression of "feelings".

Secondly, we would like to point out that the qualitative methodology appears to be appropriate when working in extremely difficult contexts and adverse conditions that we would not normally find in other educational contexts or that would be seemingly easy to control and handle in a constructive manner, as was the case in the above-mentioned research.

Thirdly, it is important to highlight the high degree of satisfaction achieved in all the participating groups; particularly among the prison authorities, who passed onto us indirect comments of the inmates who took part in the activities and requested that we continue to carry them out. Critical action research is the best methodology for prisoners.

In conclusion, we can say that all the prisoners wanted to continue this type of educational programme as they felt respect and they were active members of their own peace culture construction. Educational programmes in prisons used to be made from a technical point of view, which promotes exclusion and invisibility. One main conclusion is that this significant omission of certain groups (e.g., in the process of decision making) implies they are of less value, importance and significance in this society as well as in the world. A new field for pedagogues is now open.

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