



Teachers' Expectations of Peer Tutoring Program: Initial Explicit Representation

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author VVZ was the lead investigator for the research, under Fondecyt Project 11130216. She was responsible for its design, theoretical foundation and data collection. Author DDG was the project's international cooperation researcher and contributed data analysis together with the lead researcher, as well as discussing the results and conclusions. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of teachers' explicit representations about peer tutoring and teacher collaboration at the start of the implementation of a cooperative learning program to improve reading competence. The qualitative study was designed consisting of a focus group and semi-structured interviews, focused on a group of 13 teachers participants prior to the start of the program and during the implementation of its first phase (1 semester). The representations of the teachers indicate that they evidenced opportunities and developed a support group for implementing peer tutoring in the classroom, with repercussions on the following areas: socio-emotional (self-control, characteristic valuation, self-esteem), cognitive (reading competences, learn to teach and learn) and from a teacher's perspective (school engagement). The obstacles that arose included external factors, the teacher's tasks and the project (school absenteeism, low family involvement). With regard to collaborative learning between teachers, this was visualized as an opportunity to learn from others, compare experiences, and solve doubts and difficulties.

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We suggest that a transformation of representations is possible and feasible if teachers are able to adopt and include collaborative and inclusive practices among their common cooperative practices.

Keywords: Explicit representation; peer tutoring; collaboration; cooperation.

1. INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade education systems have been seeking more effective ways for their main protagonists to achieve significant and contextualized learning. The adoption of common objectives, the exchange of experience and the building of shared meaning result from collaborative networking between teachers, which has a direct impact on the construction of students' learning. The education centre is understood as a community of learning that also responds to the challenges of the knowledge society. Students, teachers, head teachers and families build learning from social interaction, duly planned and guided to achieve not only the pedagogical objectives but also instil the competencies needed by 21st century citizens.

In this sense, the implicit representations of educational agents play a fundamental role in promoting change and providing opportunities to learn.

1.1 Social Interaction and Cooperative Learning in the Classroom

From a constructivist point of view, a course group is understood to be a set of heterogeneous individuals, as distinct from the former homogenizing vision [1]. Moreover, peer interactions now are valued, whereas traditionally they were minimized and it was considered that only the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student generated learning [2]. In recent decades, research has supported the generation of learning from the richness of classroom diversity and from interactions between the pupils themselves, above all when these interactions are adequately structured, as is the case with cooperative learning methods [3].

"Peer tutoring" is among the cooperative learning methods. It is understood as a peer learning method and defined by Topping [4] as people from similar social groupings, who are not professional teachers, helping each other to learn and learning themselves by so doing. Experts from Unesco and The European Agency

for Development in Special Needs Education have recommended it as one of the most effective practices for achieving quality education [5]. There is good evidence of peer tutoring in reading [6], and some programmes that have shown good results in fluency and reading comprehension [7], which is the subject this research takes in consideration.

While cooperative learning is a methodology that has been widely researched and has strong support [8], many difficulties come to light when it is used and even Sharan [9] has pointed out the paradox between its recognized pedagogical value and the problems of putting it into practice. This makes it necessary to research teachers' representations on cooperation.

1.2 Changing Explicit Teacher Representations on Collaboration and Cooperation

In order to understand a classroom that generates knowledge from the natural resources contributed by its members, transforming it into a community of learning, cooperation at a higher level between the educational agents is necessary.

To this end it is necessary to understand the explicit representations of teachers, in this case with regard to collaboration with other professionals and the cooperation which could be structured in their classrooms to manage the construction of significant, contextualized learning that could be transferred to other situations, and which is contrary to traditional teaching with a long career path that has been implemented in the country for decades.

For this study, it was necessary to define two types of representation to be addressed. Firstly implicit representations are understood as unconscious implicit learning, nourished by personal experience and the product of an informal education, and which are discovered through their procedural nature. Meanwhile, explicit representations are the product of deliberate, explicit and conscious learning, which involves reflection and social communication of

the experience rooted in the verbal and declarative nature of the subject [10]. Changing them would therefore imply changing the principles or assumptions on which they are based and that is no easy task, as Limón & Mason [11], Atkinson & Claxton [12], Schön [13] have shown. The conceptual change does not mean abandoning the implicit representations, but instead a hierarchical restructuring takes place [14,15]. Achieving this change with teachers would require explicit induction, training and instruction, with objectives and programmes designed specifically for this purpose [10]. In order to produce a conceptual change towards collaborative approaches, it is necessary to create spaces for reflection which have people with greater expertise.

1.3 Research Project and Setting Up of a Teacher Network

This study pertains to a research project which entails the implementation of an educational design based on peer tutoring in order to stimulate an improvement in fluency and reading comprehension in children from vulnerable contexts in Chile, who are in their third year of primary school. In all these schools, teachers did not know the conceptual basis of peer learning and used them only in an intuitive way, often with ineffective results.

The teachers from the schools were trained together in cooperative learning methods, which had not previously been used on a regular basis. This involved looking at the implications of such methods, planning work situations in their educational contexts and developing materials for use in their classrooms. After that, a network of schools, with a pairs of teachers from each one, was created. These pairs of teachers received training to put in place a peer tutoring programme to improve reading competences [7]. The teachers started the pair reading sessions in their schools, and discussed the difficulties, facilitators and guidelines in fortnightly meetings in which all of the teachers participated.

The following specific objective is proposed:

- To find out the initial representations of the teachers about peer tutoring and teacher collaboration, before starting the peer tutoring programme in the classroom and teacher collaboration during network training.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research focus is on describing and interpreting social and educational phenomena and studying the meanings and intentions of human actions from the perspective of the social actors themselves, as proposed in the qualitative/constructivist methodologies [16]. Thus the characteristics of this study present a phenomenological design, as it will centre on revealing how people (teachers) understand the meanings of events (in this case the representations of the peer tutoring and teacher collaboration), just as they are presented and in the manner in which they have experienced them.

The sample is composed of 13 teachers from 6 schools who started up a peer tutoring programme in their classrooms with children from the 4th year of primary school. They were selected from a universe of 15 schools, as they were the only ones that met the selection criteria (vulnerability, poor reading comprehension results, willingness of the teachers to volunteer and parental authorization). In parallel, they also took part in network training with the other participating teachers.

Two focus groups were held with the 13 teachers. The first was at the beginning of the experience and the second at the close of the first year of the project implementation. A sample of 7 teachers was selected to find out their opinions by exploring explicit representations about the regular implementation of language class strategies (especially in fluency and reading comprehension), and perceptions about cooperative learning between pupils and teacher training in conjunction with professionals. Following the principles of phenomenological research, an attempt was made to get to know the subjects' interpretation through the experience described in personal interviews and focus groups (before and after implementing the teaching strategy in the classroom). The study also sought to identify the representations through a process of reduction of the information gathered.

The triangulation methodology was used, in the form of interviews and teacher focus groups (before and after the teaching strategy was implemented in the classroom).

2.1 Data Analysis

The data obtained were analysed with the Atlas.ti 6.1 software.

The system for categorizing them was developed on an adhoc basis using the data analysis and by seeking consensus between the two researchers. Initially two dimensions for analyzing the representations regarding peer tutoring and teacher collaboration were pre-configured. For each of them, an analysis emerged based on the themes consulted, which led to the identification of research sub-categories related to habitual educational practices in the areas of reading, cooperative work in the classroom, peer work at school level (between teachers) and work among the teachers in the network in forming the programme. For the results, some clarifying testimony about the teachers' representations were used.

3. RESULTS

The results are presented in two parts: representations concerning peer tutoring and representations concerning teacher collaboration.

3.1 Peer Tutoring

For this aspect two dimensions for analysis were established which show the explicit teacher representations. Firstly, an analysis was made of the *discourse based on their habitual teaching practice in the classroom for the subjects addressed by the project (fluency and reading comprehension)* with the objective of indirectly visualising their representations about collective, cooperative and peer work in the classroom. Secondly, an analysis was made of their expectations (before and after) regarding peer tutoring.

With regard to the first dimension, (*teaching practices in fluency and reading comprehension*), prior to the intervention, a predominance of reading comprehension practices can be seen which centred mainly on individualism and had a tendency to a traditional positioning of the teaching-learning process. While the teachers were implementing varied activities and methodologies, they tended to have an individual connotation with regard to the knowledge-building process (for example individual work sheets, reading a book per month, daily

individual reading with an answers key, the Education Ministry Structured Programme –PAC-), which is consistent with this assessment. There was evidence of a minimal amount of group and collaborative work at the beginning, seen only through activities or strategies targeted at the general class and organized in turns to develop student participation.

However, following the initial teacher training and implementation of peer tutoring for a term, the teachers said they had transferred pair working to other activities unlinked to the project, such as joint book reading, reading comprehension activities and other small group activities. The teachers positively assessed this and saw it as a powerful resource, both for themselves and for the pupils.

With regard to their teaching practices for boosting reading competence, the teachers initially said they had no defined strategy for their work, as is made clear in the following testimony:

“We would have to put all our efforts just into that, looking for methodological strategies that would get them to enjoy reading. For instance, in the class assignment preparation it says that you should take the kids to the library. But the teachers generally don't do that - I don't - firstly because the library is closed and secondly because you have to prepare the class and it doesn't always work. They should look for other ways” (Teacher 2, initial focus group).

The teachers also spoke about implementing some activities which involved developing reading, such as: reading aloud together (class choral reading), silent reading, model reading and reading out loud; which, according to their statements, all work towards the ultimate goal of enjoying reading.

In relation to the second dimension of *analysis, expectations with regard to peer tutoring and their assessment of its implementation in the context of the classroom*, three categories were articulated through the teachers' statements: *facilitators, obstacles and neutral elements*.

With respect for the facilitators identified by the teachers, these refer firstly to the strengthening of socio-emotional aspects, such as recognition and evaluation of the characteristics between peers; broadening of expectations in terms of

knowledge, achievements and new experiences (the teachers link this sub-category to the context of vulnerability from which the pupils come); strengthening of values (solidarity, sharing, respect) and cooperation between classmates in the classroom; which is linked to behaviour control and self-regulation (in working with disruptive students), so the teachers also expected it to have a positive impact on the school atmosphere. Secondly, facilitators were identified linked to learning, particularly referring to the opportunity to develop reading comprehension strategies that enable pupils to gain the competencies of autonomy when reading and understanding a text, as well as monitoring and evaluating this process (metacognitive strategies). Thirdly, the teachers saw an opportunity to strengthen the development of reading comprehension among those pupils considered to be "good readers" and also for all the pupils to take on a leading role in their teaching process. As one teacher explains:

"I think the fact that they learn in pairs is interesting, because working with a colleague brings them closer to the antenna of knowledge. It is different to that view that the pupil has from his/her seat with the teacher at the front, who is further away. So I think that a classmate could be a facilitator or at least help him or her with their learning process" (Teacher 5, initial interview).

In spite all of the facilitators, the teachers' practices were a long way off from cooperative-group work. Several of the facilitators predicted by the teachers met their expectations. For instance, making a commitment towards the assumed role, which was viewed by the teachers as taking responsibility for preparing material beforehand. Another example is in relation to the socio-emotional facilitators, empathy, valuing of their own characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. Classroom diversity was also seen as positive and necessary for the tutoring to have an effect, in contrast to their stance at the beginning.

However, the participants mentioned some obstacles to the implementation of peer learning (initial statements). With respect to "external elements", the teachers referred to the physical space of the classroom; the high number of children per class; demotivation of the pupils with regard to learning activities; school absenteeism as a negative element for achieving continuity of learning with some students and the course

group; and, finally, the intrinsic characteristics of the pupils. On this last point, this position is understandable prior to the start of formal teacher training in cooperative learning, as one of the advantages of working with this type of methodology, especially peer tutoring, is to take advantage of classroom diversity to generate cognitive gains resulting from the differences and strategic distribution of the pupils with respect to the roles they assume. However, it is understandable that the teachers perceived diversity as one of the barriers to implementing the proposal prior to being fully armed with the theory and practice of peer learning.

With regard to the "internal obstacles" said to have a direct relationship with the tutoring activity, the lack of time for preparing the teaching process (in the case of the teacher), low family involvement in school activities; and role repetition in the tutorial (being a tutor or tutee for a whole semester; boredom of the pupils). While these elements were included in an initial stage, the desire was to enable the educational establishments themselves to fine-tune the experience to their needs. Currently the most evident transformations of the explicit representations mentioned relate to the vision of new opportunities with respect to the difficulties expressed at the beginning: namely the physical space, dividing a large group into two shifts for team-supported reading implicit in the project; reorganizing the pairs when some children are absent, requesting some tutors to adopt tutees without affecting the dynamic of the session and especially seeing the characteristics of the pupils as an enriching factor in the process.

3.2 Teacher Collaboration

Two analysis dimensions were established. The first was related to the teacher collaboration generated within the education centre as a form of indirectly exploring the explicit representations. The second dimension relates to the teachers' expectations with regard to training in a network with other teachers within the framework of the project, delving more directly into their predisposition towards working collaboratively with others.

The collaborative dimension in the school was identified as a "facilitator" element, specifically the coordination established between primary teachers and special needs teachers, thanks to the implementation of integration projects and

the legislation, as can be seen from the following testimonies:

"We work collaboratively, by decree the establishment must have a timetable for planning between the subject teacher and the special needs teacher, between Monday and Wednesday, so it's about us all doing a job together" (teacher 1, interview).

Another teacher also remarked that:

"The special needs teacher gives support in the classroom twice a week. We meet outside of the class timetable and talk about how to work with the children. We often make appointments with parents and guardians to explain to them how we are working and how she needs to give support in order to get good results. In class, the children sometimes ask her why they can see her supporting me in the classroom and I keep on doing the class" (teacher 4, interview).

The "obstacles" to achieving teacher collaboration in the school are to do with Education Ministry programming in the reading promotion program –PAC- (the rigidity of the programming rather than the adjustment of elements between teachers, because everything is pre-ordained); lack of time for teacher coordination; and resistance to shared teaching, in reference to the situation experienced by some special needs teachers who participated in the study in the context of working with other centres' teachers, as seen in the following testimony:

"More than anything, the establishment knows it has an integration project. I don't know if this is just my impression, or if all special needs teachers feel the same way but I feel like we are a separate entity. They often don't give importance to the work which you can do with a special needs teacher. Also sometimes the primary school teacher doesn't accept them because he/she is difficult. When you say to him/her or suggest that a pupil has a particular diagnosis, so that such and such an approach would be appropriate...he/she says no, this pupil is mine and I have to apply the test to all equally. So then we are at odds and situations arise which are not ideal" (teacher 1, interview).

In this dimension, a discrepancy is seen in relation to interdisciplinary work between

teachers at the same establishment, not only resulting from external factors such as the PAC programme and the lack of time but also to internal factors, such as beliefs with regard to collaborative working between teachers.

With respect to the dimension of expectations regarding the network training for the peer tutoring programme, the teachers referred to positive elements such as boosting the intra-centre coordination of teachers (referring to the teams participating from each school), and socialization of the experience with other participants, as can be seen through the following testimonies:

"I find it excellent because you can share with other teachers and, like she said (another teacher), that is you can share experiences here about how the work went in your school, in your class, if it worked out or not and why. Look at alternatives, causes, whether there is some reason or not" (Teacher 9, final focus group).

"It's good to take advantage of all that helps us to share experiences; it's beneficial to improving our practice, sharing strategies, the pedagogical reflections we can make of our practice, critically reflecting on what we are doing there" (teacher 5, final focus group).

The teachers' testimonies showed that they valued the socialization of the experience with other teachers as an opportunity for reflecting on their teaching practice. It must be emphasized that all the expectations regarding the socialization through the follow-up meetings have been met. Moreover, the teachers have been involved in preparing and reviewing collaborative material between themselves. With respect to other experiences, the teachers said that the periodic follow-up meetings have been essential for resolving queries and enabling them to keep building this strategy. They see themselves in a new role, in which they have ceded the monopoly of teaching and now see themselves as articulators and in a role of monitoring their students.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study clearly shows the importance of teachers' representations on the educational practices implemented. Although the teachers' educational practices were far removed from

cooperative formats and logic, being more traditional in nature, and despite the existence of obstacles that are commonly recurrent in other educational contexts and underdeveloped countries [17], the teachers' initial expectations of peer tutoring were positive. They perceived it as having the ability to generate socio-emotional, behavioural and cognitive changes in their students.

The process of mentoring the teachers during the implementation of the program was seen to be a facilitator for overcoming or finding solutions to the obstacles detected and which arose from limitations in educational practice and the school context. The search for alternatives to the difficulties revealed a representational change in the teachers with regard to the limiting factors which had previously been part of the educational context and which they transformed into opportunities for cooperation.

Teachers' collaboration also seems key to helping sustain this value of cooperation. For years [18], this has been seen to be a powerful element for in turn introducing cooperative learning practices in classrooms and centres. As the results seem to indicate, training and mentoring teachers in systems based on teacher networks, where the teachers collaborate both with colleagues from their own centres, putting innovation into practice, and also with colleagues from other centres, seems an interesting way to go. While there is already some evidence supporting this training system which simultaneously promotes learning between pupils and between teachers and centres [19], it is assuredly worth exploring in greater depth.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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