

# Emancipatory action research with young schoolchildren: experience report

*Pesquisa-ação emancipatória com jovens escolares: relato de experiência*

*Emancipadora investigación-acción con jóvenes de la escuela: relato de experiencia*



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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To report an emancipatory action research experience and discuss its potentialities as a way to problematise the realities of the young participants. The aim of the action research was to create a drug awareness media programme.

**Method:** Experience report of emancipatory action research with 13 young students of a public school, in São Paulo, from February to September 2014. Research was conducted by means of 13 workshops in five stages: exploratory; topic outline; theoretical and practical orientation; expression of new knowledge; and preparation and validation of scripts.

**Results:** It became clear that problematization, which is inherent to the action research method, allowed the young students to seize the discussion process as a right to critically reflect on the relationship between capitalism and drug use.

**Conclusions:** The research enabled an emancipatory educational process and the construction of educational drug awareness media programmes, based on the way of life of young people who live in the outskirts of the city.

**Keywords:** Health education. Adolescent. Street drugs. Health communication.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Relatar a experiência de utilização da pesquisa-ação emancipatória de modo a expor suas potencialidades para problematizar a realidade dos jovens participantes. A finalidade da pesquisa-ação foi a de construir programação midiática de educação sobre drogas.

**Método:** Relato de experiência de desenvolvimento de pesquisa-ação emancipatória, com 13 jovens de uma escola estadual de São Paulo – SP, no período de fevereiro a setembro de 2014. Foram 13 oficinas demarcadas por cinco fases: exploratória; concretização do tema; instrumentalização teórica e prática; expressão dos novos conhecimentos; elaboração e validação de roteiros.

**Resultados:** Evidenciou-se que a problematização, inerente ao método da pesquisa-ação, permitiu que os jovens tomassem o processo de discussão como direito importante para refletir criticamente sobre a relação entre capitalismo e consumo de drogas.

**Conclusões:** A pesquisa permitiu o processo educativo emancipatório e a construção de roteiros de programação midiática de educação sobre drogas, baseados no modo de vida de jovens da periferia.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação em saúde. Adolescente. Drogas ilícitas. Comunicação em saúde.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Presentar la experiencia de la investigación-acción emancipadora con el objetivo de exponer sus potencialidades para cuestionar la realidad de los jóvenes participantes. La finalidad de la investigación-acción fue el desarrollo de programación mediática de educación sobre drogas.

**Método:** La experiencia de investigación-acción emancipadora con 13 jóvenes en una escuela pública de Sao Paulo, de febrero a septiembre de 2014. Realizamos 13 talleres, marcados por cinco fases: exploración; aplicación del tema; instrumentalización teórica y práctica; expresión de nuevos conocimientos; elaboración y validación de guiones.

**Resultado:** El cuestionamiento inherente al método investigación-acción permitió a los jóvenes entender el proceso de la investigación-acción como derecho, importante para la reflexión crítica de la relación entre capitalismo y consumo de drogas.

**Conclusiones:** La investigación permitió el proceso educativo emancipador y la construcción de guiones mediáticos de educación sobre drogas, basado en el modo de vida de los jóvenes de la periferia.

**Palabras clave:** Educación en salud. Adolescente. Drogas ilícitas. Comunicación en salud.

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

This work is based on the theoretical-methodological construction of collective healthcare that analyses the phenomenon of drug use as a social process that occurs in different ways and specific contexts<sup>(1)</sup>. Consequently, educational drug awareness messages consider the needs and particular language of the target groups. However, drug education is lacking the participation of young people, which makes these messages almost insignificant for this group in general. This form of communication becomes effective when young people participate in the creation of educational messages<sup>(2)</sup>.

Emancipatory action research (EAR), of a critical nature, conforms to the foundations of collective healthcare by proposing the participation of young people in the creation of drug education programmes. To conduct this research, the researcher invites participants – researchers from academia and social groups that face the problems – to critically problematise the reality they face. The participants are encouraged to seek information and other tools to understand the problems and relate them to the social context. They can then uncover the social network of causality that involves such problems and create proposals to mobilise and strengthen the groups involved, and transform the causes of the detected adversities. The aim of this process is to understand the problems by questioning their natural character or functionality, and reveal what is involved in their determination and contradictions<sup>(3-4)</sup>.

Internationally recognized authors extol the importance of action research to promote different forms of social change<sup>(5-6)</sup>. From this perspective, the EAR operates in different stages that are consistent with the historical, critical, and pedagogy stages of Saviani<sup>(3-7)</sup>, as discussed in other spaces<sup>(3-4)</sup> through emancipatory workshops, or a methodological group technique that includes the exploitation of participants and data collection in participatory investigations<sup>(8)</sup>.

The aim of this study is to report the experience of using the EAR as a resource for creating a media drug education programme, and its potential to problematise the reality of life of the young participants.

## ■ METHOD

This is an experience report of a study that used the EAR to create a drugs education media programme with youths. The report is from the doctoral thesis<sup>(9)</sup> entitled "*Comunicação em saúde: pesquisa-ação para elaboração*

*de programa midiático de educação sobre drogas direcionada a jovens*".

The research was conducted after approval of the research ethics committee of the Escola de Enfermagem da Universidade de São Paulo under #403.385 of 17/09/2013, and approval of the project by the principals of the school. It occurred in February and September 2014, with a recess in June and July due to school holidays and the World Cup.

The study was conducted at a public primary, secondary and adult education school in the region of Guaianases, São Paulo (SP), Brazil. The study subjects were 13 secondary school students interested in the subject, between the ages of 15 and 17, who resided in the district where the school is located.

Four meetings were preliminarily held before the start of data collection. At these meetings, the researchers and the school agreed on the following requirements: a teacher would be responsible for the outcome of the proposal in the school; the school would provide the physical space for the workshops and each event would be approved by the teacher in charge of the project at school; if possible, the school would offer materials to support the educational process; and all activities would follow a previously approved schedule.

The participants of the group were selected after divulging the educational proposal and clarifying the research objective in the classrooms of the secondary school students. The students who were interested were invited to the school auditorium to clarify any further queries and to resolve ethical issues. They were advised to ask their parents or guardians for permission to participate in the study. The persons responsible signed an informed consent statement, and the underage students signed a consent form.

The data were collected through emancipatory workshops<sup>(3-8)</sup> in 13 meetings with a duration of 2 hours each. The students recorded and filmed the workshops during the presentations of the dramatisations and synthesis.

## ■ RESULTS

The workshops occurred in non-stagnant stages that were inexorably interconnected. The group participant made all the decisions regarding the sequence of workshops after a needs analysis at the end of each event.

The first exploratory stage consisted of identifying the problem and establishing the first contacts with the research participants by means of a situational dialogue and

identification of the specific problems they would address. This stage comprised four workshops.

The second stage consisted of establishing the theme and questioning the investigated phenomenon. The third stage included planning and submitting answers to the problems and the theoretical and practical instrumentalisation of the participants so they could obtain the tools needed to confront the situation, hence considered the process of politicisation for the social movement. The second and third stages of the workshops were held concurrently and completed in five workshops. At this stage, the EAR is presumably reviewed, but the students reported that some of the teachers were not releasing them from class to participate in the project. At this point, the researchers tried to make a new agreement on the days of the project at the school. Thus, the workshops were alternately distributed throughout the week so the students would not miss class. The teacher who represented the project at the school and the students were always present and constantly offered their support. The fourth stage, which consisted of expressing new knowledge and monitoring the action research, and the fifth stage, which is when the participants express the new synthesis, aim to merge formal and informal knowledge when everyone involved in the educational process acquires the new knowledge constructed by the group. The new synthesis is grasped through the different concepts and reports of new social practices presented by the group of participants. The fourth and the fifth stages were concurrent and completed in four workshops.

Throughout the process, there was concern in elaborating strategies to exploit the collective construction of knowledge, while never losing sight of the importance of the effective participation of the students. To this end, a group created a social network where they exchanged information with the students and the teacher responsible for the project at the school.

The following describe the themes, goals, strategies and outcomes of each stage of the workshops. Outcomes are the results that synthesize the workshop stages. Each outcome triggers the realization of the following workshops.

### First stage

From the discussion of the central theme – media drug education for youths – it was possible to synthesize the following themes: being young and living in the suburbs; the needs of the suburbs; representations of the suburbs in the different media vehicles; and leisure activities of young people in the suburbs.

The objectives of the workshops were: to grasp the reality of the lives of young people from the suburbs; recognise the place occupied by consumption, especially drug use; and understand the role of the media in the lives of young people.

The adopted strategies were: create a group in social media to maintain contact outside the workshops; group preparation of panels on the region; draft journals highlighting the region's social needs, and photographic survey of the places where young people circulate; dramatize and elicit the possibilities of new forms of media programmes; and search for information in newspapers, magazines and on the internet about the region. All the activities were concluded with a group conversation.

The outcomes of the first stage were: the periphery is meant for the poor, a place where the state is absent due to precariousness and lack of public services; and it is stereotypically represented in media with emphasis on negative factors, such as violence and drug use.

### Second and third stages

In these stages, the references of collective health were brought into debate to understand drug use. The themes of these two stages were: mode of production; representations of needs for social reproduction, participation and socialization of young people; influence of the media in the suburbs and in the socialization of young people; and the representation of the suburbs and of young people in the media.

The objectives were: to discuss with the young people the reference of their knowledge of the problems surrounding the phenomenon of the themes in these stages; and to search for the cultural tools that enable the social struggle.

The adopted strategies were: show and discuss the film *"Quanto vale ou é por quilo?"* a production written by Eduardo Benaim and Newton Canitto, and directed by Sergio Bianchi, released in 2005. A text was posted on social media to support the discussion of the film. In a group conversation, the participants selected the topics for discussion based on the film and the public institutions in the region to understand their role in the geosocial suburban universe.

An additional activity included selecting, listening, creating, and discussing the music genres rap and Brazilian funk. The youths selected songs with lyrics that they believed portrayed life in the suburbs, consumption in general, and drug use in particular. Cartoons were used to encourage the youths to create their own cartoons to portray

their reality. Other means were photographs in the media of the south region of the municipality and photographs taken by the youths. At the end of this stage, the youths presented their work and compared it with the things that appear in the media.

Developments or outcomes of the workshops were: the oligopolistic media incentive for a consumer-based socialization; the exploitation of poverty, isolation from the periphery; and the repression of participation.

#### Fourth and fifth stages

In these stages the discussed themes were: the neoliberal state and the public social protection system; the need of active state presence in the suburbs; and juvenile strategies as a strategy of participation and social transformation.

The objectives were: to produce a new synthesis of the issues discussed in the workshops, and create scripts for media drug education programme that targets young people of the suburbs.

The adopted strategies were: choose songs that critically depict the suburbs; create songs that address the possibilities of youths in the suburbs; and prepare a script for a radio programme and revalidate the programme with the youths. In the script, the words that the youths considered unusual were changed to better express their day to day.

The outcome of the workshops was selection of songs that address the problems of the suburbs and the consequences of drug use. The young people expressed the need to present themselves in mainstream media as creative, and mentioned alternative media as an open space for youths of the suburbs to express their ideas regarding health education and culture.

This stage included the preparation of five scripts for radio shows on the following themes: being a suburban youth; the importance of media in the lives of young people; untruths disseminated in the media about the suburbs; institutions of socialization beyond the media; and proposals to transform marginality in the suburbs. All the workshops were preparatory for script creation. The students decided which topics, content, language, and style they would use in the scripts, and the accompanying music. At one moment, they consulted radio professionals, who proposed some adjustments that were subsequently assessed and approved by the youths.

The difficulties encountered in this study were: inappropriate room for the workshops and the non-inclusion of the workshops in the school timetable, which would

enable the participation of teachers and guarantee other spaces for student participation. Considering that this is an interdisciplinary study involving health, education, and communication, the participation of these other professionals would further benefit the students. The conveniences include involvement of a teacher who was responsible for the developments of the proposal at the school and the interest of the youths, who seemed eager to participate and enhance the activity.

Although a radio professional helped the students prepare the script and record the radio programmes, they could not rely on this professional throughout the process.

#### ■ DISCUSSION

The operationalisation of the EAR through the emancipatory workshops allowed the students to claim the group space as their own, as their right to space, which agrees with literature on effective participation<sup>(10)</sup>. All the statements of the students on the investigated phenomenon were collated with their social reality, that is, with forms of work, life, and sociability<sup>(11)</sup>.

One must look at the EAR as a way to communicate in a language that is established between the participants, given that communication is a social relationship that mutually influences the participants. It is also important to acknowledge that language and thought are the result of historical and social conditions<sup>(12)</sup>. There was mutual influence between the researchers and the young participants. This mutual influence was only possible because there was dialogue and all the persons were interested in being equal.

Participation requires dialogue and mutual influence, and a project that makes sense to the parties involved, or in this case, the students. In this study, participation was essential for breaking the silence of the students, which agrees with critical literature that stresses that individuals should not be considered mere objects for an action, with ready-made instructions and manipulation, which only denies individuals as conscious beings. Ready-made decisions and instructions are generally ineffective since they are not the product of critically analysing the reality of the participants<sup>(13)</sup>.

Real changes occur throughout the processes and not mechanically. As individuals expand their awareness of reality, they also increase the possibility of participating, of making decisions regarding their needs, and of exerting some control over the social institutions. When individuals become a member of a group and make joint decisions, they slowly expand their knowledge and leave the position

of object-individual and enter the realm of conscious, critical participation that can transform their reality since they are now incapable of being mere onlookers<sup>(13)</sup>.

Effective participation produces satisfaction since individuals perceive that their messages and issues are being respected. This process can support the critical choice of representatives, from the classroom to parliament. The establishment of the democratic state of law and the possibility of participation were and are important to guarantee the social rights of young people and answer to their social needs<sup>(14)</sup>.

In this process, it is essential to recognize that youths are socially formed. Young people move from the primary socialisation process, which aims to prepare them for life in society, toward the secondary socialisation process. This re-socialisation process prepares young people for adult life and widens their socialization spaces<sup>(15)</sup>. In primary socialisation the main institutions are family, school, community, peers, and the media. In re-socialization, youths are prepared for productive work. Often, the forms of socialising young people are not observed in the formal work qualification process<sup>(16)</sup>, which can lead to non-participation.

The educational process should not be restricted to the use of oral and written languages, and should present youths to various forms of expression that recognise and respect the language preferences of young people. It is important to be aware of the reasons young people choose to participate or not participate in their own development programmes.

The first stage, which addressed drug education in the media, presented the experiences of the youths in the suburbs. This presentation was marked by strong criticism that encouraged them to become personally involved in the topic and participate in the workshops.

In the second and third stages, they discussed the more general functioning of capitalism and the specific function of media as an agent of socialisation. It was the moment they expanded their horizons of knowledge and delved in the theory, which was previously addressed through recreational activities used as tools to unalienate<sup>(1)</sup>, that is, tools that provide a critical analysis of reality.

The fourth and the fifth stages, which culminated in the scripts for the radio programmes, were marked by intense discussion on state action and the reactions of young people, who resorted to "*rolezinhos*"<sup>(8)</sup> and other forms of protest.

## ■ FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The EAR enabled the participation and effective dialogue of the young students since it opened a space

for them to problematise their reality. During the extensive and critical discussion and analysis of the realities in their geosocial space, the students were able to use the language of their preference and dominion. The availability of "de-alienation" tools and other expression and communication resources was essential for the young students to communicate, express their convictions, and prepare the script for the media drug education programme based on these convictions and their social critique of life in the suburbs.

The preparation of the scripts for the radio programmes with the participation of young people proved crucial to ensure a result that was consistent with the lives of these students in the suburbs. Education and health practices, especially nursing, can benefit from this learning experience.

Drug education that targets youths should therefore enable access to a wide range of media vehicles, and the messages should be short, provocative and confrontational. The messages should also be intercalated with songs that are recognised in their cultural universe, that critically address their issues, and that reaffirm the importance of the political participation of young people.

The limitations of the experiment were the impossibility of testing the radio programmes during the process, which would have allowed live and continuous feedback and the possibility of restructuring of scripts.

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