

Adjusting to my School

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Abstract

This action research project intended to explore how the English class favors both first graders' learning of English and their adjustment to elementary school. This study was conducted at Institución Educativa Normal Superior de Envigado in a first grade class. Data were collected through class observations recorded on a reflective journal, two focus group interviews to students and an interview to the cooperating teacher. Outcomes revealed that through the creation of routines and setting rules the students adapt better to the new change they experience when they turn from preschool to elementary education. Moreover, the development of a democratic classroom contributes to the creation of a favorable atmosphere necessary to facilitate student's learning and improvements on their behavior.

Keywords: Adjustment to school, Rules, Routines, Preschool, Elementary School, Democratic Classroom, Sense of Belonging

Degree Requirements

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

ADJUSTING TO MY SCHOOL	4
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Table of Contents

Preface	5
Description of the Context	6
Statement of the Problem	8
General Objective	11
Specific Objectives	11
Theoretical Framework	11
School Adjustment	12
Democratic Classroom	14
Action Plan	16
Data Collection Techniques	18
Development of Actions	19
Data Analysis, Findings and Interpretation	21
Conclusion	30
Reflection	32
References	34

Preface

Adjusting to my school is an action research project conducted in a group of 38 first graders from La Institución Educativa Normal Superior de Envigado from February to November, 2016. The way in which the students displayed behavioral problems that interfered with the normal development of activities in the classes and affected their relationships among them at the beginning of the school year, demonstrated me they were experiencing some issues to adapt to school. For that reason, this project was carried out with the purpose of exploring strategies to support first graders during their adjustment to school and to facilitate their English learning process. The strategies implemented consisted of following routines, setting relevant rules, and the creation of a democratic classroom in which the students played important roles in the group. Through the project the students participated in all of the English classes which had a variety of activities that favored their learning and contributed to improve their behavior.

The following part of this paper contains the description of the Action Research, the theoretical framework that supports what is stated here, the strategies implemented, the techniques used to collect data, and finally the outcomes taken from the analysis.

Description of the Context

The Institution where I conducted this research project was Institución Educativa Normal Superior de Envigado (hereafter IENSE). Founded in 1956 with the name Normal Departamental de Envigado, this institution is a coeducational school that offers preschool, elementary, secondary education and *complementary cycle*¹. It has more than 1800 students who live in Envigado and its surroundings and belong mostly to a low socio-economic stratum.

The IENSE pursues a mission that consists of educating teachers on the pedagogical, scientific and research fields so that they can use knowledge to create and re-create themselves. As for its vision, this institution looks for becoming a pedagogical center for the service of the educative community from the Valle de Aburrá in the future. Moreover, the school follows four institutional principles described as: First, a philosophic principle that refers to the love for wisdom. Second, a pedagogical one, that ensures students an academic and affective support during their process. Third, sociological, which consists of developing respect for difference, and finally the axiological principle that alludes to the responsibility in the institution's members in general.

In its search for maintaining the quality of education which characterizes this institution, is committed to the teaching English as a foreign language as part of the education of future teachers. This subject is taught in all grades in the school, namely, from first grade to eleventh grade and the complementary cycle. Following its curriculum that looks to develop the linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences as the main goal to achieve, first graders are involved with the language through the understanding of short stories in simple language about family,

¹ *Complementary cycle* allows graduate students from high school to continue their education at the IENSE during two years to become elementary school teachers.

friends, games, and known places. The curriculum is divided into four units that are structured around basic vocabulary such as family members, feelings, greetings, parts of the body, colors, shapes, numbers, and animals.

This institution educates its students in a structure that counts with three buildings: one for the elementary and preschool, one for the secondary school, and one for the complementary cycle. The elementary school building facilities include a computer room, an auditorium, a cafeteria, a playground for preschoolers, a sports field, a restaurant, fourteen classrooms and a kitchenette for teachers. This building is exclusively for elementary students.

The classroom where I conducted this research is located on the first floor of the elementary school building. It is equipped with 42 school desks, a white board, one fan, the teacher's desk, a loudspeaker, a TV set and a small closet to keep toilet paper, books, and school supplies.

The students who participated in this research project were a group of 39 first graders, 16 boys and 19 girls, whose ages range between 5 and 7 years old. These children belong to a social stratum 2 or 3 and they all live in Envigado. Some of them come from incomplete or poor families; others live with only one parent; parents who are drug addicts, or do not have time to share with their children. They live in poverty, sometimes neighbors oversee children, and in most cases, there's a lack of rules at home. Despite all this, they are a very energetic and happy group; they enjoy talking and playing and they get bored easily. They also have difficulties following rules and they often misbehave.

The homeroom teacher of that group accompanies me as my cooperating teacher (CT). She holds a bachelor degree in preschool education from Universidad de Pamplona, and two specializations, one in "Administración de la informática educativa" that allows her to teach the

technology subject, and the second one is on “Informática y telemática”, that permits her to develop educational software and participate in the inclusion of ICT projects in the classroom. Moreover, she has a diploma on Environmental Education. She has been teaching for over 30 years and she has been working at this school since 2008. According to an interview I conducted in March 4th, her experience teaching has been agreeable, but she feels that as time passes, students become more difficult to educate because parents are more permissive and do not allow teachers to correct children. She thinks that problems such as poverty, unemployment, drug addiction and the lack of rules at home have an impact on the teacher’s job and make it harder.

Being part of this context, allowed me to analyze the issues that are taking place in the classroom. Consequently, it helped me to know better the classroom environment and the students’ needs in order to design and conduct a relevant research for the children’s benefit in their academic and social processes.

Statement of the Problem

After having observed the group for about two months and analyzed the journal in which I have kept the information concerning their performance being first graders, I found some situations that called my attention as I consider that they might be a signal from my students of a need to adjust to the school life and its routines. These issues are presented mainly through the two following situations: the children’s behavior and their disregard for the rules in the classroom.

According to Berne, Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, Gregory, and Linke, “Children may experience stress during the transition period and respond by regressing to bad behaviors, subsequently they may need more attention and comfort” (as cited in Hirst, Jervies, Vesagie,

Sojo, & Cavanagh, 2011, p. 120). I could say that these children are just responding to the new change they are going through. They are coming from Kindergarten and beginning elementary school and this might be one of the reasons why they are breaking rules and misbehaving. They need support from teachers and parents in this process of adjustment to this change. As an evidence of this, during a short talk we had at the beginning of the school year most of the children expressed they do not have rules at home, so I think it is more difficult for them to adapt to school because they are not related with rules. So, for these children the support from teachers is essential.

The children's behavior is one of the most notable issues in this group and it is very difficult for the teacher to have their attention in order to give a good class. The following quotations from my journal show what I just stated: "...the kids became wild..." (Journal Entry, February 1st, 2016), "...at that instant students were running again..." (Journal Entry, March 1st, 2016), "...at that moment the classroom was again a chaotic place where kids stood up on their desks..." (Journal Entry, February 16th, 2016).

I could also witness some moments in which children presented aggressive behavior or responded violently to their classmates. For instance: I saw many times children fighting between them without a reason, students saying rude things to others, students being selfish with classmates. The following excerpts were also situations that can evidence this point "...I found a kid crying because a girl had kicked his neck ..." (Journal entry, February 16th, 2016), "...The doorman took them inside the classroom because they were fighting outside..." (Journal Entry, February 16th, 2016), "...when he was telling us what had happened, a kid took advantage and hit his partner..." (Journal Entry, February 16th, 2016), and "...during the break I could observe a

kid from my group hitting other kids; he also took a kid's snack and threw it to the garbage can..." (Journal Entry, March 1st, 2016).

All these examples showed me that the students were developing aggressive behaviors and they might need a classroom environment where they could build better relationships among them. It is a fact that they need support in the process of learning how to live together as friends and classmates.

Regarding the children's attitude towards the rules, it is very common to see how the children disregard them frequently. For instance, one of the most important rules taught by my CT was the importance of listening to the person who is talking in front of the class. However, during most of the classes they did not listen to her as I expressed in journals, "...the teacher was introducing a topic but they were not listening to her so she yelled at them for a second time..." (Journal Entry, February 1st, 2016), and "...the teacher scolded the kids who were disrupting her while she was talking..." (Journal Entries, February 1st, 2016, August 30th, September 6th, September 29th)

Another rule that they must have complied with was not leaving the classroom without permission. However, in most of the classes observed from February 1st to April 5th, students left the classroom every time they wanted without the teacher's permission.

The above situations may have been presented because the idea of following rules, taking responsibilities, having academic tasks and developing autonomy in these children were new concepts that they needed to adapt to. It is important to remark that these children's behavior and their disregard of the rules did not allow them to develop a good adjustment to school. So, my challenge as their English teacher was to go beyond teaching the language in order to help them in their adjustment process. For that reason, I decided to explore the following research question.

Research Question

How does the English class favor both first graders' learning of this subject and their adjustment to elementary school?

General Objective

To analyze how the English class contributes to first graders' learning of this language and adjustment to elementary school.

Specific Objectives

- To explore strategies to favor the children's relationship with peers, the teacher and the school.
- To provide children with tools that allow them to adjust to elementary school life.
- To contribute with the creation of a better class atmosphere through the development of appropriate activities that promote learning and enjoyment.
- To create a democratic classroom in which all the students feel that they make part of the group sharing the same rights and opportunities that contribute to a better living together.

Theoretical Framework

When teacher researchers conduct investigations, they are making an interesting connection between theory and practice, they need theory that may help them to understand why some events are taking place in the classrooms, and to support the changes they want to bring to their classrooms. In this case, I started by revising the concept of school adjustment, and then I explored how the adjustment processes can affect children's academic and social development;

and finally, I read about some strategies teachers can use to help children to adjust to school. Those are the themes that will be developed in this part of the paper.

School Adjustment

Most people believe the adjustment to school is a simple process that depends mainly on time; they assume that children can adapt easily to a new place, new routines and new people within a certain amount of time. However, adjustment is a complex process that involves more than that because children are beginning to interact in a new world in which they are asked to do things they are not used to doing such as: following routines, respecting rules, being responsible, and being seated during six hours with few chances to play.

Herndon, Bailey, Shewark, Denham & Bassett (2013) define school adjustment as “young children’s behaviors and attitudes associated with learning in the classroom environment and their skills associated with successful interactions with peers and teachers” (p. 642). Those authors perceive the school adjustment not only in terms of the academic progress, but also in connection to social relationships which is finally the most important aspect when trying to adapt to a new situation that implies interaction with others. However, when these social connections are not developed correctly, children can experience different behaviors that may affect their adjustment to school. As some researchers found out: “Children that demonstrate behavior problems during the adjustment to school develop externalizing behaviors such as impulsivity, anger outbursts, hitting, stealing, threatening and disturbing others due to the weakness of their emotions and behaviors; and internalizing behaviors include such things as shyness, physical complaints and anxiety problems related to fear and distractibility” (as cited in Yoleri, 2013, p. 219). In the same way, the lack of adjustment can affect the student’s performance at school leading to negative issues such as behavioral problems, lack of good relationship with teacher

and peers, and a negative attitude towards school. These types of behaviors were often presented in my classroom where it was normal to witness problems related to anger, tattling, complaining and distractibility. Furthermore, when children do not have the abilities to interact with others or to respond correctly to their academic pursuits, they will experience a negative adjustment. This situation seemed to be happening in the group where I conducted my research considering that the students fought and argued most of the time, and I had evidenced they had not developed good relationships among them. So, it was necessary to start working to promote the building of nice relationships among classmates and foster a positive learning environment.

Teachers play a very important role in children's adjustment to school offering them accompaniment, guidance and a proper classroom environment. In this sense, Pianta states that "Positive teacher-child relationships provide children with the emotional security necessary to engage fully in learning activities and scaffold the development of key social, behavioral, and self-regulatory competencies needed in the school environment" (as cited in Baker, 2006, p. 212). The teacher plays a relevant role during the children's adjustment because s/he works as a connection between the students, knowledge, the school. Thus, being a teacher not only implies teaching content, but supporting students during their academic and social development processes.

As previously mentioned, the creation of positive teacher and peer relationships is essential in children's adjustment to school; for that reason, it is necessary to create a proper classroom environment where these relations can be easily built. In this regard, Anderson states "the classroom environment is comprised of both physical and psychological environments, and the psychological environment, which includes the classroom atmosphere and community climate, has been found to have a major influence on what students learn and achieve". (Cited by

Fariba, Hamid, Jason, Hossein, Dreikurs. (2015). 2015, p. 441) these authors declare that the way the students perceive the classroom will help them to adjust better to that place. So, if the classroom is unsettled and it lacks dialogue it will be difficult for students to have a positive adjustment, but if the classroom offers a comfortable environment students will have success in their social and academic pursuits.

To conclude, the transition to school is an important change in children's life since they are exposed to new situations, rules and routines. In many cases the adjustment to this new structure can be harder for some children who can experience behavioral problems because they come from places where the routines and responsibilities were different. For that reason, several authors have proposed some strategies that can favor this adjustment. Some of them are following routines, respecting rules and the creation of democratic classrooms. Since the focus of my research was to know how the English class could favor first graders' adjustment to school, I consider that the following strategies were the ones that suited better my expectations and the characteristics of my context:

Democratic Classroom

It makes part of a social discipline model created by Dreikurs (1999). This author sees the classroom as a setting that not only provides academic learning, but also as an arena in which personality, beliefs concerning one's self-esteem, and values and beliefs about human relationships are constructed. His model consists of the creation of a classroom where students experience cooperation, freedom, and responsibility that are shared with the teacher. In that space, Dreikurs declares, "teacher and students can plan, organize, implement, and participate in the business of teaching, learning, and thinking. It means that students are involved in maintaining rules, and in participating in making decisions" (as cited in Edwards & Watts, 2010,

p. 20). Moreover, the classroom promotes cooperation rather than competition and encouragement and consequences rather than rewards or punishments.

According to Dreikurs, the first step to take into account for the creation of a democratic classroom is to know and understand the motives of behavior that children experience in the schools (as cited in Edwards & Watts, 2010, p.98). There are four motives: the first one is gaining attention, children misbehave because they want to get attention. The second one is seeking revenge, children misbehave because they are mad at somebody and they need to revenge. The third one is exercising power, students misbehave because they want to get power. And finally displaying inadequacy, in which children show they are having trouble developing activities or building relationships. He states that once the teachers recognize these type of behaviors, they can proceed to apply the following procedures in order to correct and prevent misbehaving. First procedure, logical consequences, “these generally express the reality of social order and are the results that can be expected whenever an individual fails to abide by the rules of living that all humans must learn in order to function effectively” (Edwards & Watts, 2010, p.114). In this way, the students learn how to live as a group in the classroom and learn how to assume the responsibility for their actions and be good citizens. Second procedure, discussions in the classroom, become fundamental since they are helpful in preventing discipline problems. “Discussions not only provide an excellent atmosphere in which the students can learn an effective communication, but also it allows students to know their roles in the group and to accept their responsibilities and consequences”. (Edwards & Watts, 2010, p. 116).

Regarding the routines and rules Fink & Siedentop (1989) suggest, “The establishment of managerial and instructional routines and class rules ensure appropriate student behavior and the smooth operation of class activities” (p.211). The implementation of routines and rules at the

beginning of the school year facilitate the easy development of the classes. Although just introducing them is not enough, Fink & Siedentop (1989) declare that there is a system in which the rules and routines should be taught. In this sense, those must be presented as part of the curriculum allowing the students to practice them (p.199). For that reason, it is necessary to work on this issue not only at the beginning of the school year, but also throughout its development and as an integral part of everyday activities.

In the same vein, Hoffman (n.d.) states that “Classroom routines can positively affect students’ academic performance as well as their behavior” (p.1). Thus, it is necessary the implementation of routines in a classroom to support students on their academic pursuits and avoid misbehaviors. Taking into consideration that this group was not used to practicing routines and abiding rules, it was essential to start following routines to offer them the opportunity to succeed on this issue and become aware of the structure of school life.

I implemented those procedures since I wanted to offer students the opportunity of being part of a group in which everyone played an important role and their decisions were necessary for the correct living together in the classroom; furthermore, these strategies were selected with the aim of helping us to create an environment that contributed to children’s learning and construction of positive relationships.

Action Plan

To achieve my objectives, I proposed the following action plan based on the theories previously presented and the characteristics of my context. This plan which was developed during the second semester of the year.

What?	What for?	When?
1.Stories to reflect about behavior	To promote students' reflection on their behavior so that they try to behave correctly.	Every month. During the whole semester.
2. Creating rules together. (The teacher and the students)	<p>To make students aware of what is acceptable and was is not in the classroom.</p> <p>To teach them that people need to follow certain rules to have a better living together.</p> <p>To provide a sense of belonging, so that they feel they are part of the group and their voices are heard.</p>	At the beginning of the semester.
3. Creating logical consequences	To make students aware that all actions bring consequences and those can be positive or negative.	Every time they break rules.
4. Creating and following routines	<p>To give students the opportunity to know what happens next and allow them to follow an agenda.</p> <p>This is with the aim of making students aware how the classes and the school work. Besides, having routines make easier the activities and the living together in the classroom.</p>	Every class.

5. Dialogue circles	<p>To express what they feel and think about issues that occur in the classroom; it may help to solve conflicts between partners.</p> <p>To start solving conflicts together and sharing that responsibility with the teacher.</p>	Every time a conflict or an issue arises.
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Data Collection Techniques

In order to analyze the impact and the results from the implementation of the strategies, I used the following three data collection techniques to obtain the information I needed.

What?	What For?	When?
Observations (Recorded on my journal)	<p>To analyze how the strategies have an impact on the student's behavior.</p> <p>To track their learning process.</p>	Every class
Focus group (10 students chosen randomly)	To know the students' feelings, and perceptions about the strategies implemented, and their adjustment to school.	Twice (At the beginning and at the end of the semester)
Interview to the CT	To get more information about the students' performance and behavior since the strategies were implemented	At the end of the semester.

Development of Actions

Considering that the main goal of this project was to find ways to help students during their adjustment to school through the English class, I implemented the strategies previously proposed in the action plan. All along the semester the following five strategies were developed: creation of rules, creation of logical consequences, creation of routines, stories to reflect about behavior, and dialogue circles. During the implementation of those strategies the students were willing to cooperate in the process and their attitude contributed to the correct development of the activities. It is necessary to remark that the placement in which the strategies are presented in this paper does not represent exactly the order of their development. Some of the strategies were applied in the moment in which an issue took place.

Regarding the lack of rules in this group and the necessity of having them to create a positive atmosphere to study, I decided to set up some rules with the students' support. After a short talk, we chose the following five main rules which were displayed on the wall during the whole semester. First, listening to the teacher or the person who is talking in front of the class. This was the first option taking into consideration that my CT and I had to talk so loud to be heard. Second, raising hands to speak. This was established because the group was very participative and they all used to talk at the same time. Third, forming a line to get in and out of the room. There were lots of disagreements between them while they walked outside the room, so they needed to be organized in their way out and in the classroom. Fourth, avoiding fights with friends. And finally, keeping the classroom clean.

To guarantee the follow up of the rules above mentioned, we also created a system of logical consequences in which the children had to be responsible for their choices. The consequences were related to the behavior in such a way they tried to change incorrect behaviors.

So, the intention was not to establish a punishment, but a logical consequence of their actions. Those consequences were established when the rules were broken. For example, if a student threw trash on the floor, he may pick up all the trash around the room.

The third strategy, consisted of routines that made students aware of the existence of an order in the institution and in the classes. In the English class, for instance, we started by singing the hello song and the goodbye song to finish it. Moreover, the students had to make a line to get into the classroom for the class, and keep all what they had on their desks to start the class.

Another strategy implemented was telling stories in which they could learn about appropriate behavior in different situations. In this exercise the children had some time to reflect about behaviors. I told them the following three stories: “The butcher and the carnivorous plant” by Pedro Pablo Sacristán; this story was about the importance of listening to the teacher and to understand that teachers want their well-being. The second one was “The greatest treasure” by Robert Morse Edsel; it was about friendship. This exercise allowed students to think about the importance of having and taking care of friends. In this way they would have a better living together and diminish fights in the classroom. The third one was “A color of his own” by Leo Lionni; I wanted students to become aware that every person is unique and we need to accept ourselves and others as they are. This exercise would lead to feelings of tolerance.

The other strategy was dialogue circles. It consisted of the creation of spaces in which children and the teacher talked about the issues that took place in the classroom and needed to be fixed. Moreover, in those circles children talked openly about their interests, worries, recommendations, opinions, etc. The first dialogue circle was developed in the second class of the second semester in which some children had some fights. So, we went outside to create the circle, and talked about this situation. They explained the reasons why they fought and I gave

them some suggestions to manage difficult situations and reminded them of how they were expected to behave in the school, considering that they were not preschoolers anymore.

The second dialogue circle was developed in September. In one of my classes I could evidence that the children were touching their classmate's private parts. I know that children can experiment, but they need to be guided in that matter. So, I talked seriously with the children and gave them some suggestions on how to deal with that and I emphasized on the importance of respecting our bodies. After implementing those strategies, I had found positive results taking into consideration that there has been a notable change in children's behavior and attitude since I started applying them.

Data Analysis, Findings and Interpretation

In order to answer the research question and to analyze the accomplishment of the objectives set for this research project data were collected through three instruments that allowed me to analyze the results of my project. One of the most useful instrument was my teacher journal, I used it with the aim to report everything that took place in the classroom during the whole process of the implementation. I recorded the strategies that were implemented and my reflection about the impact they had, the student's attitude towards those strategies and the effectiveness of the activities that helped them with their learning process. Moreover, my process of learning to become a teacher was also recorded in the journal.

As for the other two instruments, I developed two focus groups with some students, one at the beginning of the semester, and the other one at end. The objective for the focus groups was to know the student's perceptions about the activities, rules, routines and their roles as first graders.

Regarding the third instrument, I interviewed my CT at the end of the semester to know if she evidenced some changes in the students' behavior, her opinions about the strategies implemented in the classes and their impact.

During the semester, the students kept all their English work in a portfolio which helped me to gather information about their English process. I collected the worksheets and I could compare their performance at the beginning and at the end of the semester.

All the information gathered was categorized and analyzed through the inductive process proposed by Burns (2010) who suggests to follow some steps to analyze data. The first step was assembling my data, it consisted of collecting all the information from journal entries and interviews. The second was coding the information into categories. The third one was comparing data. In the fourth one, it was necessary to come up with interpretations. And finally, to report the results. After having developed this process, the categories revealed that there were gains in three aspects: the students improved their relationships; they displayed a considerable improvement in their adjustment to school; and they successfully obtained the objectives established in the English syllabus.

Students Improved their Relationships among Them

One of the most positive results in this project was the improvement of children's relationships. The children diminished the amount of fights they used to have not only in the English classes, but during the school day in general. At the beginning of the year it was very common to report on the journal several disagreements that led to fights inside and outside the classroom, but at the end of the school year there was a change in the way they relate to each other. As my CT expressed in the interview: "Aún hay algunas peleas, pero no se presentan tantas como antes. Pienso que están aprendiendo a ser amigos" [There are still some fights, but

there are not as many fights as before. I think they are learning how to be friends] (CT interview, November, 8, 2016). This can demonstrate how students have started to build good relationships that allow them to interact with each other in a less aggressive way. This new situation also helped them to solve conflicts through the support of adults and avoid fighting. This relevant achievement might have been the result of the type of activities developed in the classroom in which they all could participate and work cooperatively. In that way, the students began knowing each other and getting used to sharing with others, not competing against each other, and this contributed to the creation of strong and agreeable relationships.

The following are two of the several samples from my journal that show what I just stated: “During the development of the activity just a few of the kids had trouble but there were some others that offered their help” (Journal entry, October 4, 2016). “The students started looking for classmates, most of them got a classmate to share the glue with” (Journal entry, September 13, 2016). “All the kids were open to help others and to be the winners. I did not have to ask them to help others because the idea was theirs” (Journal entry, September 6, 2016). In this regard the students demonstrated they started caring about others and they began to support each other on difficult tasks. The positive relationships also helped the students in their learning since they were so motivated to participate in class and make part of the group when they were working together. As it is shown in the journal “in that activity all the children were committed to the game and they were very active in helping the group to win” (Journal entry, September, 6, 2016). As the time passed, the students started being more tolerant with others, when a disagreement emerged in the classroom the students tried to talk to the teacher or ignore the one with the problem to avoid fighting. Additionally, in the focus group when the students were asked to say what they should do when they are arguing with others some of them said: “No

podemos pelear, debemos decirle a la profesora lo que está pasando”. [We cannot fight, we should tell the teacher what is going on] (Focus group # 2, November 1, 2016). This new awareness of the importance of avoiding fights brings a comfortable atmosphere necessary to have a better living together which is one of the issues necessary to have a nice and correct adjustment to school. The CT also stated: “Se ha notado que los niños se apoyan más entre ellos y que el ambiente ha sido un poco más calmado. Ellos ponen muchas quejas de los compañeros, pero creo que es normal” [It has been noticed that the children are supporting each other and the environment is a little calm. They tattle on each other a lot but it is normal] (CT Interview, November 8, 2016). Although there is still work to be done on this respect, children have started to learn how to deal with problems.

Students Improved on their Adjustment to School

Considering that the main objective of this research project was to support students in their adjustment to school through the English classes, most of the activities developed in the classes aimed at the achievement of this goal. Through the implementation of the different strategies mentioned in the Action Plan, the students experienced a necessary process that supported and helped them to adjust to school in a smooth way.

Once the students started following routines without having me asking them, I realized that they started becoming aware how a school works and their role in that routine that school life implies. According to Baker (2006) “when the students start displaying positive habits in the classroom those are summed to measure the degree to which they are getting adjust to the norms, routines, and expectations of the classroom environment” (p, 217). One of the most notable exercises they took as a routine was making the line to get inside and outside the classroom. As it is evidenced in my journal, “Once the break was over, I stood at the door to find out if they

understood what I wanted them to do having me at the door. I discovered I didn't have to tell them anything because they got the message and formed a line to get into the room" (Journal entry, August 9, 2016). And "I began the class at 9:00 a.m., most of the students made the line and got into the classroom in an organized way". (Journal entry, September 20, 2016). From the interview to my CT I found out that that the most relevant improvement in their behavior was "Las rutinas, porque desde que ellos hacen la fila al entrar y al salir del salón, no hay tantas peleas y el salón se ve más organizado en ese momento" [It was following routines because when they started making the line to get in and out of the room, there were not many fights, and the classroom seemed very organized in those moments] (CT interview, November 8, 2016).

Another achievement that shows the students were displaying improvement in their adjustment to school was that at the end of the school year they understood the rules as something to be respected in the classroom in order to have a favorable environment for them to be in. Although they had some troubles to respect all the rules established, there was a significant progress having children raising hands to ask for turns, throwing the garbage in the trash can, avoiding fights and trying to listen to the teacher. At the beginning of the year the CT introduced some rules just once with no evident results, so I decided to present the children the rules in a different and constant way to allow them to perceive the rules as something positive and necessary for living together. I introduced the rules by means of drawings and explanation of the bad and good consequences that breaking rules could bring to them. I consider that this strategy worked very well. For instance, students learnt that when they wanted to say something in the class they needed to raise their hands. As an illustration of this I reflected on my journal: "Some raised their hands and I gave them turns" (Journal entry, September 13, 2016). "I showed them the image of a bear, they raised their hands and I gave them the turns". (Journal entry, October 4,

2016). This makes evident that respecting rules not only depends on the students, but also on the way in which the teacher presents the rules to them and is consistent in their compliance.

Another factor that favored their compliance with the rules was the application of logical consequences. For instance, “The S1 was running around during the class, she did not want to sit on her chair. So, I asked her if she wanted to work on feet and she agreed, that was why I removed her chair out of the room, after a while she asked for her seat and she promised to be sitting the rest of the class.” (Journal entry, October 18, 2016) I consider the students started to become responsible for their actions and not to respond to threats or external rewards. In this regard the classroom was turning into a favorable place to learn and to adjust to the school.

It is important to remark that the dialogue circles implemented in the classes also contributed to the important behavioral changes my students were experiencing. According to Edwards and Watts (2010), “Classroom discussions are helpful in preventing discipline problems. Group influence can have a positive impact on the behavior of almost all children”. (p, 116). That was the reason why we had some talks in the classroom that helped the students to express their worries, feelings, ideas, and opinions, and to accept suggestions. Since we started developing discussions in the classes, the students seemed to be more committed to their performance. As some students said in the focus group, S1: “Me gusta cuando hablamos en los círculos porque podemos decir lo que sentimos” [I like when we talk in the dialogue circles because we can say what we feel], S2: “Me gusta porque podemos decir lo que sentimos” [I like the talks because we can say what we feel] (Focus group # 1, November 1, 2016). From those talks I consider they began to see the importance of dialogue when there were disagreements, and this was also reflected in the way they started solving problems because fights were not present any more. The CT expressed: “Cuando Ana empezó usando las discusiones, los niños

querían que nosotros también las tuviéramos pero yo no tenía mucho tiempo para hacerlas” [When Ana started implementing the talks, the children wanted to have talks with me, but I did not have the time to do it] (CT Interview, November 8, 2016). I consider that it is important therefore to give them the opportunity to talk, to express themselves to see other ways of solving problems. And it also provides the teacher with interesting information about children’s perceptions about and reasons for their behavior.

The Students Developed a Sense of Belonging

The dialogue circles favored two important aspects: on one hand, the solution of problems through ways other than fighting; and, as students’ voices were heard, they promoted a sense of belonging. As Edwards and Watts (2010) state group discussions are fundamental in the creation of a democratic setting since those provide an excellent atmosphere in which students can learn effective communication. Moreover, they can be used to create common goals and procedures so that class members know their roles and how to perform them; children learn to accept responsibility. And finally, students can learn more about themselves and others as they take part in discussions.

This means that one of the specific objectives of this project related to the creation of a democratic classroom in which the students could feel they were part of a group, was completely achieved. Students started to play roles in their classroom, each one had specific responsibilities that helped them to feel they were important in the group. As it is evidenced in my journal. “One leader of a group at the time and he was chosen by the members of each team”, “The assistants held the posters”, and “The assistants distributed the paper sheets”. (Journal entry, August 29, 2016). I think that this also contributed to their good behavior because all of them wanted to play a role and if they wanted to play roles they needed to behave correctly. Besides, it helped in the

organization of activities we did in class. The students also helped to make important decisions in the English activities, they could choose the topics, the items and the students to perform them. They learned they also could contribute to the development of the classes and their ideas were important for the group and thus, they were taken into account. These excerpts can be found in my journal. “After we watched the video, the students voted and chose 10 students to perform the ten bears. (Journal entry, October 4, 2016), “When it was the time to retell the story there was no problem choosing the leader from each group, everyone had the opportunity to vote for the leader”. (Journal entry, August 29, 2016). Moreover, Concerning this aspect my CT expressed: “Hubo un cambio positivo en su comportamiento gracias a la asignación de roles. Ellos se sentían importantes desempeñando un cargo en el grupo. [There was a positive change on their behavior thanks to the assignment of roles. They felt important fulfilling their duties] (CT Interview, November 8th, 2016).

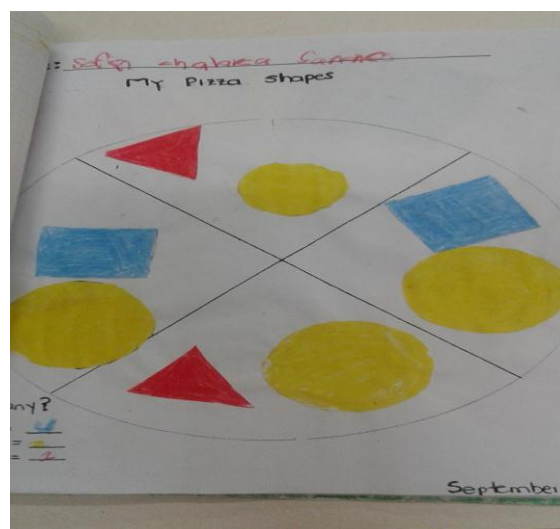
Taking into account the facts that took place in this group, I could say that once the students feel that they fit into a group, they felt accepted and loved by others. This way, they could have a closer relationship with their peers and this might have contributed to a smoother adjustment to school.

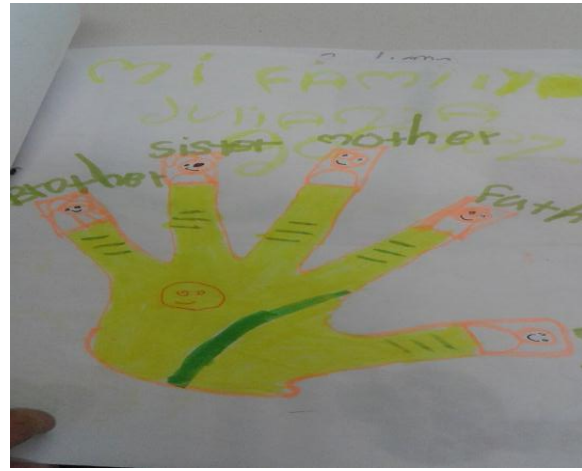
Students Learned English

Even though students just attended to the English class one hour and a half per week, I considered there were significant improvements in their learning process. As the classes developed, the children showed they were learning a lot and they were highly motivated. This was also perceived by the CT: “Los estudiantes aprendieron mucho, ellos estaban muy motivados- Ellos nunca se quejaron de la clase de inglés y participaban mucho” [The students

learnt so much, they were very motivated. They never complained about the English classes and they participated a lot] (CT, Interview, November, 8, 2010).

One of the reasons why they learned a lot might have been because the change in their behavior which contributed to the creation of a comfortable classroom that allowed them to learn easily. Moreover, as they were working on their adjustment to school, they were feeling accepted and valuable so they were more open to learn. In the same vein, (Edwards & Watts, 2010) “Children learn best in a safe and orderly environment”. (p. 239). According to my CT, “los estudiantes aprendieron mucho gracias a las actividades y a los cambios en su comportamiento”. [The students learned so much thanks to the activities and the changes in their behavior] (CT interview, November, 1, 2016). Some samples were described in my journal. “I asked them to show some parts of their body, and then I showed them the part of the body and they mentioned the names”. (Journal Entry, September 29, 2016) “All of the students participated from the activity, and at that point most of them demonstrated they had clear the vocabulary”. (Journal Entry, November 1, 2016). The following are some of the activities they made during the whole semester and that evidenced they learned so much English.





Finally, I consider that all my objectives were reached in this project. Although it was not a complete adjustment to school because children require consistency when dealing with rules and norms and the CT was not consistent with the proposals stated in this project. I consider that with a continuous work on the strategies proposed in this project, the adjustment to school will be easier and their learning will be better. In order to help children in their adjustment it is important that the whole school becomes a supportive system that welcomes children and helps them to know and comply with the rules as members of a community.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this project was to analyze how the English class contributed to first graders' learning of this language and their adjustment to elementary school. I can affirm that the creation of routines and the setting of rules were fundamental exercises in the achievement of such purpose. These strategies helped students to be aware of what is acceptable or not acceptable the classroom, and in the school context in general. Concerning the establishment of a democratic classroom, I consider that it was a useful model that showed children their place in the group, the importance of their participation and it contributed to a better living together. The

implementation of this type of classroom allowed the students in this project to feel more confident, talk about their feelings and give their opinions as well. Moreover, it helped the students to make decisions together in the class, to assign roles and to take responsibilities allowing them all to feel they were part of the group, thus developing a sense of belonging.

Regarding the specific objectives of this research, those were successfully achieved. Firstly, I wanted to explore strategies to favor the children's relationship with peers, the teacher and the school. I can say that there was a notable and positive change on students' relationships thanks to the development of group activities that allowed them to share and know each other better. Furthermore, when they began respecting rules such as avoiding fights and taking turns, they started becoming more tolerant and patient with others. The second objective aimed at providing children with tools to adjust to elementary school life. Once they became used to following routines and understanding responsibilities, they were getting familiar to the new issues and activities that are presented in an elementary school, and this contributed to the achievement of the third objective: the creation of a better class atmosphere. The variety of activities implemented in class also played a very important role in this accomplishment because children felt engaged to fun and different activities that contributed to the reduction of disruptive moments. Finally, I expected to create a democratic classroom in which all the students felt that they made part of the group sharing the same rights and opportunities. After having exposed students to this model, they learned that their votes, opinions and ideas were important and they started being in contact with democracy. I suggest teachers to implement these types of strategies in a constant way to offer students a chance to experience and practice them, so that rules, routines and democracy do not become meaningless words for them. . It is important to remark that although there were big improvements in my students' behavior, adaptation and learning, the

impact would have been higher if the homeroom teacher had implemented the same strategies in her classes. . Finally, the adjustment of children to school life requires support from teachers, parents, peers and the school system in general in a consistent way.

Reflection

This experience provided me with some insights regarding the implications of being a public school teacher. I know that if I had not had the opportunity to be a teacher in charge of 38 students with different needs, lacks and wants, I would be saying that teaching is just a matter of going to a classroom and expecting students to learn everything I teach. However, teaching is more than that, teaching is sharing your whole life with people that you do not know, but when you get to know them you end up loving them. Teaching students, especially to children, was sometimes stressful, however, but most of the time it was enriching since it helped me to become more patient and tolerant. When I saw my students all the time engaged and participating in my classes, I felt that all of my efforts were worthy. So, teaching is guiding learners to walk through a knowledge path that will help them to success in life.

As a teacher researcher, I learned that if there is something that is not working well in my teaching practice, I can try to change it or improve it. However, if at the first attempt it does not work, I have to keep trying and avoid giving up because a good teacher researcher always thinks about the welfare of his students. Moreover, I also should look for my colleagues' help since they can contribute with their different points of view. I state this because thanks to the ideas and opinions from my advisor and classmates, it was possible to find the correct ways to conduct this research successfully. Collaboration in research and teaching is fundamental when

conducting a project because the experience and knowledge of more than one person can facilitate the development of it.

To summarize, this experience allowed to me confirm the reason why I decided to become a teacher: because I love helping others to improve their quality of life and improve mine as well.

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