



The meaning of the teaching practice: the voice of its protagonists

El significado de la práctica docente, en voz de sus protagonistas

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Abstract

This article stems from the education professionals' pressing need to bring up their experiences and knowledge at the discussion table in order to reshape their pedagogical thinking. In an attempt for the empirical sphere to inform what has been said thus far about the teaching practice, this document seeks to collect the educators' voices, thereby contributing new knowledge to the teaching field. Thus, the proposed objectives of this research are: To know the aspects that make up the essence and the tasks involved in the teaching occupation; to interpret the meanings that educators give to their pedagogical performance; and to understand their construction of their Own pedagogical knowledge in relation to their work. The study followed the type of qualitative methodology known as case study, which allowed for a detailed, in-depth examination of 43 student teachers from different generations who took the subject of «Teaching Practice Analysis» as part of a master's degree program in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. One of the results found showed that the subjects involved know that their praxis involves their way of thinking, reasoning and valuing the world and that it is also highly influenced by multiple interactions. The research concluded that critical and reflective analysis of teachers' actions requires both a collective dialogue and an interpretation of their actions.

Keywords: Teaching practice, teaching, case study, teaching knowledge, education professionals, qualitative research.

Resumen

La existencia del presente artículo obedece a la necesidad apremiante por parte de los profesionales de la educación de poner en la mesa de discusión sus experiencias y saberes, a fin de reconstruir su pensamiento pedagógico. El presente documento, en un intento por conocer desde la empírea lo dicho hasta el momento sobre su ocupación, busca recuperar su voz y con ello aportar conocimiento al área de la práctica docente, razón por la cual se plantean como objetivos de investigación: Conocer los aspectos que conforman el ser y el quehacer en esta actividad; interpretar los significados que construyen acerca de su actuación pedagógica; así como comprender la construcción de su saber pedagógico en relación con su labor. La metodología de investigación se aborda desde una postura cualitativa, mediante el estudio de caso, este posibilita la revisión exhaustiva de 43 maestros estudiantes de diferentes generaciones que cursaron la materia de «Análisis de la Práctica Docente» de un programa de Maestría en Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Uno de los resultados encontrados, rescata que estos actores en cuestión saben que su ejercicio involucra sus percepciones sobre el entorno que le rodea, entorno impregnado de múltiples interacciones. Como conclusión, el análisis crítico y reflexivo de

su actuar requiere tanto de un diálogo colectivo como de una interpretación de acciones.

Descriptores: Práctica docente, docencia, estudio de caso, saberes docentes, profesionales de la educación, investigación cualitativa.

1. Introduction and state-of-the-art

“Since Mexico joined the OCDE in 1994, education reforms have been constant... However, the educational crisis deepened, negatively impacting the Mexican population” (López, 2013, p. 61). As a result, in February 2013, Mexican education reform was declared constitutional by the federal legislature and in the same month it was enacted and published by the federal executive. It should be noted that such an educational crisis is not the sole responsibility of teaching, however, the education professional needs to analyze his/her performance in order to observe his/her part of the problem in the aforementioned crisis. In this regard, Rodríguez (2016) states that education cannot be addressed from the passivity and ignorance of the professor, because it requires greater responsibility from the professor.

Therefore, the review of the teaching work requires to study aspects that make up this practice to achieve it, but without forgetting that it is part of a whole. This analysis involves exploring its areas of opportunity and its strengths to be located and recognized within this educational act (Fierro et al., 1999, p. 26), which allows the understanding of this reality with a broader view of the educational process; reading that aims to generate a transformation and lead to personal and professional growth, which can be understood as re-resigning it, and thus recovering the value and meaning of the profession. In this sense, the presence of reflexive practice, which according to Domingo (2013), is the methodical and intentional attitude necessary for the professor. Such spaces and their dynamics generate the interest to address research that manages to understand this educational

exercise from the perspective of the faculty, through the review, analysis and reflection of their daily practice, as well as the construction of their pedagogical knowledge. Thus, it starts from the idea that this work is full of peculiar, different and unique interactions and situations, which makes it complex to understand. The participants in this inquiry process are 43 teachers who are studying the subject of «Analysis of the Teaching Practice» of a Master’s program in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, who according to Terrón (2019), read, write and reflect on what they think and do of their profession, in order to “be objective in their decisions about the profession” (p. 169).

According to El Sahili (2011) the educational profession is complicated due to all the aspects that revolve around it, and especially those that relate to teaching problems; additionally, there are “personal competences [conceived] as a cross-cutting axis of the competitive profile as they are associated with the ability of the teacher as a subject to mobilize and integrate the cognitive and motivational resources in the regulation of the quality of the professional performance” (González et al., 2017, p. 133); so that conducting this analysis leads to the confrontation of knowledge and convictions.

To carry out a conscious review, at first it is sought to recognize the teacher as an individual, with a particular life history where it is possible to address a reflection of the present and future of the teacher. On the other level, it is identified that the work of the teacher is a collective action, because in a reciprocal way, the professional of education brings to the institution — like that ideal space for socialization — is/her knowledge, ideas and experience.

Obviously, this exercise is imbued with interpersonal interactions, because relationships are made with students, other teachers, managers and parents, which by their very nature tend to be complex. The institutional climate is generated in an area where these relationships take place, impacting on the performance of the



teacher, since the performance and the decisions for the various activities are at stake. At the social level, “the teaching practice attempts to recover a set of relationships that refer to the way each teacher perceives and expresses his or her task as an educational agent whose recipients are various social sectors” (Fierro et al., 1999, p. 33). In other words, it is to reflect on the meaning of the work with regard to the historical moment the teacher is experiencing, a reality that places him/her in opposite realities in relation to other education professionals.

Inevitably, in order to address the teacher’s work, it is essential to consider the teaching practice, i.e., to think about how each teacher decodes and encodes the knowledge to be worked with and by their students, about how he/she conducts teaching situations in this educational space, such as the academic problems faced. In addition, the review needs to be addressed by the value aspect, as it is recognized that the work of this professional contains an axiological reference, since the professor puts into play his/her whole being (values, attitudes and knowledge) within the educational dynamics, recognizing the influence that the teacher has on the way in which he/she could interpret the realities lived by the students (Fierro et al., 1999).

In addition, the teacher has to do with the institutional values that define the guidelines of the educational system, which in turn are present in the curricula, which serve to design the teaching situations; in the same way it allows to examine the daily life of the institution with the intention of recognizing the type of values lived in the campus. On the basis of what is stated, it is necessary to theoretically address the following aspects:

2. The teaching practice and its conceptualization

It is important to state the concept provided by Davini (2015), who says:

When we talk about “practices” we do not exclusively refer to the development of operational, technical or “do” skills, but to the intervention and teaching ability in complex real contexts and in situations that include different dimensions and necessary reflection, decision-making and, often, even the contextualized ethical challenges or dilemmas in social and institutional environments. In other words, practices deal with genuine situations and problems (p. 29).

In this regard, the intention is to try to avoid it by reducing that activity to that simple “doing”; contrary to this, it encourages the recognition of the dimensions or elements that make it up in order to understand it in its entirety; in this regard, Fierro et al. (1999) state that “the teaching practice [is] regarded as a social, objective and intentional practice involving the meanings, perceptions and actions of the agents involved in the process” (p. 21). Vergara (2016) complements that in addition to being dynamic, contextualized and complex this practice has a characteristic aspect “an agent [who] carries out the activity on a certain reality” (p. 75). In addition to this, the current conditions in which education is developed, along with the subjective elements in the acting of each of the people involved in the educational process, make it a multi-determined social exercise. Therefore, this is “an intentional practice... which involves the actions taken by the teacher to “facilitate” the student to be taught” (Loredo et al., 2008, p. 4).

This work transcends the idea of thinking simply about acting as an education professional, because, in addition, it is imbued with nuances offered by the institutional, political, social, organizational and economic contexts; as well as the characteristics of the students, fellow teachers, managers and their particular way of being, all of this is interpreted as lives that converge, build and reconstruct the activity that is the responsibility of the education professional.



3. Meaning of the teaching performance

The action of the teacher transcends the four walls of the classroom, since the performance is also present in each and every institutional area where teacher works; the teacher is also involved with theoretical and empirical experiences, beliefs and knowledge, which allow him/her to understand the world where he/she lives; in other words, the teacher puts into play a series of personal and social constructs, as well as a theoretical framework of reference that underpins the decision-making. In this regard, Sacristán (in Vergara, 2005) states that:

When talking about meanings, there is no reference to theory, but to the knowledge, beliefs, values that help to prefigure the way a teacher performs the work, since it can be said that, according to how the educator “understands” his/her practice, it is the way he/she performs it. (p. 692)

For this reason, beyond being interested exclusively in the work, it is interesting to know the structure of beliefs, assumptions and intentions that underpin the teacher’s action; even if “to analyze the reality produced by the intervention of subjective processes and identify how teachers... [perform their] practice and how they bring their Own meanings, is not an easy task” (Villalpando-Sifuentes, 2015, p. 92); however, it helps to achieve an understanding of their work and the meaning of it. In this sense, the environment where the teacher works is assumed as a reference, because the institutional scenario, the circumstances that surround it, as well as the changes and uncertainty of the profession, are some of the many factors that build the essence of those meanings.

As far as can be said, the meaning of the teaching practice is intimately related to the aspects and realities that frame it, and as Evangelista (2015) says, teachers start from their work to link it with different aspects of social

reality, in order to build the representation of their exercise. This individual in his/her knowledge, know-how and motivation is immersed in a myriad of ideas generated throughout his/her profession and this is due to the subjective nature of the work and the social character of the aforementioned contexts.

Then, in an attempt to come to an understanding of the perceptions built by the professional of education, it is not only necessary to honestly review the beliefs, knowledge or intuitions that underlie his/her professional life, nor the way to approach the teaching (Montanares & Junod, 2018); but to be able to frame and connect the realities of his/her personal history, the historical context and the educational facts and pedagogical schemes aimed at bringing the work to life; these edges of education recognize the uncertainty and confusion generated by the teacher throughout the career.

4. Constructing the pedagogical knowledge

Undoubtedly, educational institutions are one of the main spaces where teachers create their pedagogical knowledge; however, there are scenarios that assist in such construction, which are reconstructed throughout the professional life by the various interactions the teacher experiences. According to Diaz (2006), “pedagogical knowledge is knowledge, constructed formally and informally by teachers, values, ideologies, attitudes, practices” (p. 95); everything that comes from their interactions. The direction that leads the creation of this knowledge is directed towards the scientific knowledge required to give life to the school contents, in the same way, to the development of the expertise necessary in the use of teaching strategies in the management of the curriculum; as well as the knowledge of their students and their learning processes. According to Diaz (2006), teachers, whether intentionally or not, daily create theory, which could contribute to the understanding of their professional practice.



On the other hand, one that arises from the exchange and professional reflection from processes of observation and discussion of the practice and which results in the assessment of the impact of educational practices can be called knowledge of the faculty” (Minakata, in Vertegui, 2019, p. 171); in this sense, it would be wrong to set aside the idea of conceiving pedagogical knowledge as a social construction of reality, which serves different interests both personally, politically, educationally and socially; because teachers, in addition to exercising their practice in front of the group throughout their professional career are immersed in different contexts –conferences, workshops, meetings, etc. – surrounded by people related to education. These interactions are potentially powerful spaces for the construction of pedagogical knowledge, as they represent an invaluable tool aimed at configuring and reconfiguring the latter (Hurtado et al., 2015).

In this same sense, Torres et al. (2014), state that in addition to the growing responsibilities of the profession, new challenges are being redefined, which are due to the constant changes that are being experienced; thus the knowledge generated enables a new understanding of educational reality, which is important in the teaching practice, whether in the decision-making at the pedagogical level or in action at the institutional level; this involves the development of a thoughtful process of knowledge based in each and every one of these spaces, creating the basis for understanding their actions.

5. Methodology

The intention is to understand teaching as a dynamic and multifactorial process, thus the qualitative methodology was selected “as a scenario of interpretive activities” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 55), along with the interpretative paradigm that is addressed from axiology, epistemology, ontology and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012), since its purpose lies in the knowledge of the individual in all its subjective

complexity; it is also sought to “recognize that knowledge of human reality implies not only its operational description, but the understanding of its meaning by those who produce it and live it” (Sandoval, 2002, p. 39); in other words, the understanding is sought from the other’s vision (Quecedo & Castaño, 2002). This investigation is guided through a case study, which “involves an inquiry process characterized by detailed, comprehensive, systematic and in-depth examination of the case of interest” (Rodríguez et al., 1996, p. 92). For this document, the cases to be studied are the total population — 43 teachers — of the groups that have taken the course “Analysis of the Teaching Practice” of the first semester of a graduate program in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, during a year and a half.

Due to the analysis that involves the review of the activity of the education professional through this methodology, dialogue plays a leading role. In this regard, Fierro et al. (1999), affirm that the dialogue carried out constantly generates criticism within thought, reason for which during the classes this activity is the protagonist in the development of the techniques used with the intention of retrieving information, for example from interviews and focus groups. These techniques were chosen because they aim to listen the teachers’ experiences and knowledge, reconstructing their pedagogical thinking, and always keeping in mind that “the teacher is a subject under construction” (Tovar & García, 2012, p. 885).

In the case of the interview, Rodríguez et al. (1996) mention that it is considered to be that relationship between two subjects who establish a communication on the basis of a particular topic; in this case, on the analysis of the practice itself. Such interaction takes place in different school spaces between researchers and participating teachers. On the other hand, a similar action is carried out, but in small groups, which Leiner (2005) mentions as a focus group; this is a kind of interview, but between the researcher (who serves as a moderator) and a dozen sub-



jects studied, who in addressing the same topic, provide information that is essential to the development of this research.

From the qualitative field, the researcher is attracted to the multiplicity of realities of the subjects studied, and the researcher uses the triangulation in order to address and know them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Therefore, with the purpose of understanding this practice from the point of view of the teaching, and in view of the need to guarantee the validity of this study, the triangulation of data is made, which as a technique allows to compare and balance the diversity of information collected (Rodríguez et al., in Aguilar & Barroso, 2015), because it is ideal to interpret and understand this reality.

6. Results

In order to address this paragraph, it is interesting to start from the idea presented by Perrenoud (2001):

A thoughtful practice is not only a competence in the service of the legitimate interests of the teacher, but is also an expression of professional conscience. Teachers who reflect only out of necessity and stop raising questions from the moment they feel safe are not thoughtful practitioners. (p. 48)

Because of the latter, the result of this inquiry is considered to be unfinished, since the complexity inherent in the exercise of the teacher is in constant movement and frames it in a reality of a subjective nature, so it acquires relevance in the field of education. The discussion can be enriched by the fact that the communicative process is favored from different directions, in order to establish a reciprocity of information among the actors of the educational event (Castillo & Montoya, 2015). In order to reveal what the teacher constructs around his/her activity, three specific approaches are made that allow to nurture the inquiry, because qualitatively the relationship between these meanings and the daily work of teachers is manifested.

7. Being a teacher and the performance in the teaching practice

For the teachers studied, their work represents this set of activities and actions that they develop not only in the classroom, because rather it has been developed from the design of the planning to the evaluation process of its action; in other words, the work is far from limit the “doing”, because it involves thinking, reasoning and the assessment of the world, as well as the notions and perceptions of what teaching and learning is, which determine the implementation of the work in educational environments.

The teaching practice is a fundamental element in education; because on the basis of the decisions made, education finds its way; however, it does not determine its success or failure, because it must consider that there are political, social and institutional aspects that affect it. Likewise, elements provided by the subjects with whom they work as the families of their students, their context, their life stories, are essential aspects in all school dynamics, as well as the curriculum, and administrative and academic procedures; therefore, it can be admitted: the work is interpreted as complex and multifactorial that gives life to various educational spaces. In this regard, Vergara (2005) states that, in order to understand the work of the teacher, it is necessary to connect the events that occurred in educational environments from a global perspective with the environments where these occur, in order to give them sense and know that there is a lot more beyond the teacher’s duty. In that same wording, one of the teacher states:

Our work is very noble, and I like it very much, but there are times when I am overwhelmed by the amount of things that we have to do; lot of things to do at the administrative level and another thing that has nothing to do with academics or the educational aspects; i.e., in addition to the curriculum, we must consider other aspects which have to do with new education policies. (D2)



In addition to the statement, the teachers in this research agree that being a teacher and their performance are essential aspects in the educational process, such as commitment, responsibility, dedication, updating, as well as love and emotional competence; they also recognize that their work has different nuances, typical of their personality and the educational level where they work; however, the practice goes beyond that, as it requires aspects of public policy and education reforms that have become inconsistent with school realities.

8. Meanings of pedagogical performance in the classroom

The practice makes sense and can give meaning from the experiences, history and personal perceptions of each teacher, along with professional decisions and actions; however, it is reconstructed when it is shared, regulated and reflected with other teachers, as stated in this commentary:

I think that our pedagogical performance has to do with the decisions we make not only individually in the classrooms, but with the colleagues, with the principal, and this includes the meetings that we have scheduled, the informal talks that we have in the corridors, which makes me think that this says a lot about the commitment we have to our students. It is just that we are always thinking about what to do with x person because constantly misses classes, or how to teach x problem to x student in order for him/her to understand. (D39)

To combine what was expressed, in the words of Vergara (2005), the teacher “bases his/her actions on the meaning of the things of his/her world; it is considered that it is there that the teacher “builds” the meaning from the social interactions the teacher has” (p. 685), without obviating the reflection and interpretation processes. Every decision that the educator makes to perform the role is due to the meaning that the teacher gives to his/her work, to education, to

learning, to the evaluative processes, as well as to the relationships developed in the classroom and in the institution; therefore, it can be said that these constructs determine his/her action with regard to the professional commitment, so the actions have a reason to be.

As already mentioned, the teaching practice is governed by the ideas and beliefs of teachers regarding what is taught and learned, what Zabalza (2012) believes “it is in the interest to consider not only what people do, but why they do it, what previous structures, knowledge or experiences support their plan of action” (p. 32); in this regard, the teachers in this study lack a solid theoretical base to make their decisions, since they claim that in most cases they ask for help from their peers to attend academic problems, and they implement actions that in the past were useful to them, leaving aside the contributions that theorists or professionals have offered. According to Vergara (2005) “the actions performed as a teacher are determined by their meanings, but the teacher is also fully aware of it... this is an individual act performed by the individual to appropriate experiences in a personal manner, without intermediaries” (p. 695).

In short, the decisions that teachers have made both for the development of their class and in immediacy, are supported by their experiences, knowledge and even by their intuition. It should be noted that these decisions, from the point of view of teachers, are considered appropriate to deal with each particular situation.

9. The construction of the pedagogical knowledge in relation to the teaching practice

Within the construction of the pedagogical knowledge of the teachers of this graduate program is present, in the first instance, the theory acquired by the teacher to base the teaching practice in the classroom, a theory that is related with the conceptions with regard to the learning of the students and the way of teaching, which



allows to design, organize, and evaluate the actions that drive those processes. According to Vitarelli (2005):

The field of knowledge is a space made up of discourse... the case of pedagogical knowledge and the concept of knowledge allows us to explore the teaching practice, the school and the teacher from practical situations to conceptual situations of the teaching practice. (pp. 11-12)

In this regard, the teachers of this research make a distinction between graduated teachers and those who have different profession, and say:

Graduated teachers are the ones that provide the foundations and the tools to train as teachers, with respect to the classmates who do not have the teacher training, because it is notorious that they lack of some didactics. (D20)

This reality is observed in the classroom; however, when it comes to giving life to school content, it is recognized that pedagogical knowledge has to do with how the teacher translates the «scientific knowledge» into «knowledge taught», in order to enable students to achieve their understanding; it should be noted that this also requires to identify the strengths and areas of opportunity in the teaching and learning process. They also recognize that pedagogical knowledge is built from experience; but it is hardly achieved individually, since socialization with colleagues is required in the different spaces shared, in order to support their work.

Whereas the education professional adapts the formal curriculum to the current curriculum in order to teach the academic content to the students, the full mastery of scientific knowledge – related to the subjects he/she teaches – in practice is not decisive for the success of the class; however, the techniques and teaching dynamics for working such content within the classroom are indispensable. It should be noted that this does not mean that it is acceptable to lack the scientific knowledge of the content being taught when teaching a class. On the other hand, mas-

tering the theory of the subject does not automatically imply the acquisition of knowledge by the student. In this same sense, Shulman (2005) states that the teacher retrospectively performs an analysis of his/her work, with the intention of reconstructing the events, in other words, this reconstruction is understood as the learning that the teacher acquires through the experience.

Discussion and conclusions

The teaching practice is interrelated with various elements, which according to Reyes et al. (2018), makes it complicated, and this is due to everything that surrounds the educational environment; however, this critical analysis requires the orderly and methodical exercise that has to do with the analysis and understanding of actions, as well as a collective dialogue, which helps teachers to understand the difficulties and challenges faced in everyday life, also to raise awareness of educational problems; otherwise, it would be an obstacle to changing the daily basis.

Thus, the teacher is in optimal conditions for the transformation and professionalization of the duty performed, in order to respond to the difficulties and unpredictability of situations that occur in the educational reality. In this sense, Guerrero (2016) considers that “the permanent and systematic transformation of the pedagogical practice is its purpose, however, guidelines to that restructuring are needed” (p. 17), initially by recognizing its successes and errors.

A specific set of relationships is presented in each of the spaces, characterizing the work of each teacher, which means that each practice is unique, particular and unrepeatable, due to the diversity of the personal and the professional history, along with the characteristics of the institutions and their members. Therefore, the performance of the teacher corresponds to his/her personal characteristics, the professional training, the institutional conditions where he/she works, the characteristics of the students and other educational agents. In consistency



with Tardif (2005), the exercise of the teacher is closely related to each of the interactions he/she establishes with the students during the education process.

The teacher faces his/her work as a being imbued with values, who throughout the work has constructed the performance by joining fragments of his/her personal life and the academic exercise and also including the experiences of other actors of education; so it is possible to recognize how complex it is to examine the teacher's exercise because of its multifactorial nature. In addition, Blanco (2013) states that the social relations developed in this field allow the opportunity to understand and reflect on this practice by recognizing the close connection between it and discourse.

With regard to the construction of pedagogical knowledge, the teacher requires having acquired, throughout the professional preparation, a series of knowledge obtained through courses offered by the various schools; but it is recognized that practice is what makes him/her an education professional; (Martínez et al., 2017). However, Tardif (2014) states that "teachers are not valued in relation to the knowledge they have and share" (p. 26). The above idea allows to visualize the teacher as the subject responsible for understanding and interpreting all the elements related to the classroom dynamics, in order to promote learning in students (Noguera et al., in Salazar, 2001).

The teaching process is not limited to the process of transmitting some knowledge, its action addresses situations related to the cognitive, affective, volitional and behavioral processes of the students; hence, it is necessary to recognize that the activity is physically and emotionally worn down; this reality is reflected in the contribution of El Sahili (2011), where the author states that its complexity is related to the weight of the commitments acquired from its work to those of a social type within it. In addition, Shulman (2005) believes that the objectives and subjects addressed in each grade, the environ-

ment where the class is developed, as well as the characteristics of the students who are part of each classroom are required to be considered.

Regardless of the history or training of teachers, their practices present a diversity of nuances that reflect the skills and knowledge required to meet the needs of social and educational changes in each school. The working conditions of each teacher characterize their work; however, they represent a great challenge since each group has its own personality, a level of education, a sociocultural context, etc.; characteristics that the teacher must interpret and understand to share the knowledge and design the spaces and conditions necessary for the students. However, from the vision of Herrán and González (in Rivera & Hernández, 2017), "teachers teach more for what they are than for what they know" (p. 99).

In order to conclude, the result of this research provides theoretical elements that allow to have an approach of the teaching practice, allowing teachers to recognize the meanings provided to the teaching process, in order to reconstruct the notions and actions of their work, thus obeying the new reality. It is suggested for future lines of research to address a comparative analysis of the perceptions and meanings offered by teachers at different educational levels.

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