RECONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE COMMUNITY: A PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper reports a pedagogical experience carried out with ninth semester students from the Modern Languages Program at the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia. The experience was conducted while the students were taking the English Language Seminar course. The main objective of this pedagogical experience was to identify future student teachers' perceptions about sociocultural factors in different schools and neighborhoods in Tunja, as a way to sensitize them for their upcoming teaching practices. The data was collected by means of surveys, unstructured interviews and students' reflective journals with the aim to determine socio cultural factors that influence students' learning processes. Lastly, this pedagogical experience was an approach to characterize funds of knowledge identified as the understanding that students and teachers have about their own community as a social environment, from which learning processes

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una experiencia pedagógica llevada a cabo con los estudiantes de noveno semestre del programa Idiomas Modernos de la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia. La propuesta fue desarrollada en la clase "Seminario de la Lengua Inglesa." El principal objetivo de esta propuesta fue identificar las percepciones de los futuros docentes sobre los factores socioculturales de diferentes colegios y barrios de la ciudad de Tunja como una estrategia de sensibilización en sus futuras prácticas de enseñanza. Los datos se recogieron por medio de cuestionarios, entrevistas no estructuradas y diarios de los estudiantes para considerar y determinar los factores socioculturales que influencian los procesos de aprendizaje de los estudiantes. Finalmente, éste fue un acercamiento a la caracterización de bases de conocimiento identificado como la comprensión que tienen los estudiantes y docentes de su propia

can be better contextualized and made relevant to a determined educational setting.

Key words: funds of knowledge, critical pedagogy and cultural understanding in the classroom.

comunidad como medio social, desde los cuales los procesos de aprendizaje pueden ser mejor contextualizados y hacer relevante un determinado centro educacional.

Palabras clave: bases de conocimiento, pedagogía crítica y comprensión cultural en el aula.

INTRODUCTION

Critical pedagogy is an education concept that has been spread in many educational settings. This perspective stated first by the Brazilian educator and social activist Paulo Freire, has led us to reconsider the role of teachers and students in the classroom, promoting equality of power, listening to students, gathering information about their expectations, life stories, and problems. In this kind of pedagogy there is no place for discrimination or marginalization. Thus, from funds of knowledge as a position of critical pedagogy, while doing their practicum, students studying to be teachers can recognize many sociocultural factors that influence students' lives and shape their learning process This greater understanding will make the teaching learning process more meaningful and contextualized for them.

Inserting students' socio cultural practices in the classroom leads to a more meaningful class environment, because students and the community are encouraged to accept each other, to be tolerant, to respect other's opinions and to reaffirm their identity. By starting to recognize who we are, we are able to create a clear vision of how we are positioned within the cultural and social dynamics that operate in such a context.

Including students' out of school sociocultural practices in the classroom is not easy but rather a challenge, because they require moving feelings, thoughts and ideas which seem to have fossilized throughout the time and that have been passed from generation to generation. Today, teachers need to be open-minded, perseverant and invite students to follow their lead, leaving behind passiveness and becoming active agents along the way to change in the classroom. Students must also bear in mind that problems come from the outside and need to be negotiated and discussed inside the classroom.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While carrying out this pedagogical experience in which the main objective was to identify students' perceptions about sociocultural factors in different schools and neighborhoods in Tunja, it was necessary to look into the following constructs: funds of knowledge, critical pedagogy, and cultural understanding in the classroom.

Funds of knowledge

One of the key aspects in the development of this project was the concept of "funds of knowledge" which, according to Zanoni, (2009, p. 2) refers to the analysis of social knowledge through meaning-making networks, cultural practices, and activity. Students come into class with previous knowledge which has been socially constructed through the interactions they have in their different social networks and physical spaces where they socialize. For this reason, teachers should incorporate in their repertoires the knowledge students bring into the classroom and elements that are meaningful to them and part of their daily lives and history over the years. As stressed by Zanoni, (2009, p. 2): "A funds of knowledge approach employs culturally relevant social processes to enhance the work and life trajectories of educational participants…"

This "funds of knowledge approach" can be incorporated into the curriculum to create pedagogical units that are more appealing to students, recognizing who they are, their expectations and their previous experiences that enhance or affect their academic lives.

Another concept of funds of knowledge was proposed by Moll (1992, p. 133), who stated that "funds of knowledge' refers to these historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being." It means, when teachers and students have a better involvement with the community, they are able to design and implement more appealing teaching and learning strategies.

It is also important to highlight some considerations regarding how to conduct an analysis of "funds of knowledge" in a community. Genzuk (1999, p. 3) states five central activities:
1. Training teachers in ethnographic methods of collecting information.
2. Conducting ethnographic analysis of the transmission of knowledge and skills in the home and the community.
3. Analyzing the contents and methods of typical school lessons.
4. Conducting collaborative studies by teachers/researchers of ethnographic inquiries and classroom practices in which teachers can use community information to experiment within the classroom and instructions.
5. Developing instructional units that use the content and methods of home knowledge to inform the content and methods of school learning.

All of the aspects above can be considered when teaching a foreign language in the wide variety of educational contexts that exist.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy looks to transform power relations in school and in society by presenting various ways of tackling teaching and learning. This type of pedagogy is offered to disrupt the norm of groups or individuals who have been oppressed or marginalized throughout history. Then, Critical pedagogy is a main construct in this project since it helps us understand what the needs and fallacies in a specific location are and what issues affect the appropriate dialogue and awareness in a classroom in

order to get a balanced learning environment.

According to Canagarajah, (1999, p. 17) "critical pedagogy offers perspectives that serve their challenges, aspirations, and interests more effectively". This definition means that critical pedagogy responds to students' needs and wants, and to interrogation practices done inside and outside of the classroom. The relationship between teacher and learner goes hand in hand with the critical perspectives presented in pedagogical practices in which the learners identify, recognize, and determine social and cultural factors from the community. Likewise, it is relevant to mention that with critical pedagogy student teachers start thinking about their roles and the importance of integrating meaningful activities into the classroom. Then, Canagarajah, (1999, p. 18) also points out that "knowledge is intrinsically social, and constructed through interaction between community members."According to this description, knowledge is not seen as an abstract idea, but rather in motion, in constant change, in short, learning from others. The construction of knowledge through critical pedagogy is the teacher's task; the teacher must question teaching practices and eliminate outdated ones.

Furthermore, critical pedagogy encourages students to develop their own voices and as Pennycook (2001, p. 130) claims "this voice is understood as far more than just speaking; rather, it is a broader understanding of developing the possibilities to articulate alternative realities." Voices are heard from student teachers when they express their points of view, take a position or become aware of offering better teaching options and being sensitive to what is going on in their particular classroom contexts. The point that critical pedagogy makes, is that the way the interaction and knowledge exchange happens should be less asymmetrical and less power based. Also this form of pedagogy works for social transformation, and new ways of teaching that explore students' experiences and points of view.

Paulo Freire, as the main contributor to this type of pedagogy, looks for a pedagogy of freedom, which has a more collective component, in that critical consciousness is positioned as the necessary first step of a larger collective political struggle to challenge and transform oppressive social conditions and to create a more egalitarian society. Pennycook (2001, p. 131.) states that "Critical pedagogy seems more concerned with just letting everyone "have a voice" and it is unclear how this enunciation of marginality can actually bring about social change". Thus, social and educational changes occur when we as teachers or educators apply and critique our teaching methodologies and we encourage our students to change the status quo of teaching and learning. By doing that, educators empower students to become social agents of a new world.

Cultural understanding in the classroom

Teaching a foreign language goes beyond teaching grammatical rules and explaining how a language works. Thus, teaching a foreign language implies considering cultural understanding in which that language is developed. Every language has a cultural

load that makes students reflect upon the way people use language in real contexts.

The first concept to bear in mind is culture which is characterized by Zanoni (2009, p. 23) as the foundation of communication. That is to say, a language is a means to learn about different cultures, it is not the end itself. When students know their culture first, they can strengthen their identity and open their minds to the other cultures. The relation between language and culture is pointed out by Furlough (1989) "language is, or should be, understood as cultural practice… language is not an autonomous construct but social practice both creating and created by the structures and forces of social institutions within which we live and function." This relation between culture and language could be explored in the EFL classroom by promoting the understanding of the L1 culture, taking into account the real situations students go through in their daily lives and the experiences they have had. On many occasions, students are affected by different social issues such as poverty, violence and drugs among others which are left behind by the EFL teachers because the focus is to develop language competences.

On the other hand, teaching a foreign culture implies teaching about a foreign culture as stressed by Kramsch (1993, p. 8): "to learn a foreign language is not merely to learn how to communicate but also to discover how much leeway the target language allows learners to manipulate grammatical forms, sounds and meanings, and to reflect upon, or even flout, socially accepted norms at work both in their own or the target culture."

Offering students a cultural understanding in the EFL classroom is crucial in order to recognize the students' native culture and all the inside and outside local aspects that influence their learning process before exploring other cultures.

THE PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE

Contextualization

This pedagogical experience was developed at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia with the objective of identifying future teachers perceptions about sociocultural factors in different schools and neighborhoods in Tunja as a way to sensitize them for their upcoming teaching practices.

The participants in this study were 30 nine-semester students from the undergraduate Modern Languages Program, at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica of Colombia. The students ages ranged between 23 and 26 years old and belonged to a medium and low socio-economic status. The group consisted of 9 male and 21 female participants who agreed to participate in the project (they signed a consent form). They came from different regions of the Boyacá department, although there were a high percentage of students from Tunja. This city is the capital of the department and it has a population of approximately 160.000 inhabitants.

The researcher played an active role as a participant observer in the project. Equally, in order to develop this pedagogical experience, ,in the context of the English Language Seminar, as a researcher I established the following conditions: First, to modify the syllabus of the subject by

means of encouraging student teachers to develop a project related to sociocultural factors that influence teaching and learning processes; second, to get information from the community by using some instruments such as: unstructured interviews, surveys and journals; third, to report student teachers' experience in the community and lastly, to write a journal as a mean of getting deeper reflections about this experience into the community.

The following instruments were utilized to collect data:

Non structured Interviews

According to Merriam, (2009, p. 87) non structured interviews "are particularly useful when the researcher does not know about a phenomenon to ask relevant questions, thus there is not predetermined set of questions, and the interview is essentially exploratory". These interviews were designed by the students to gather relevant and useful information to fulfill the objectives of the observation done around the school and the neighborhood (See annex 1)[1].

Surveys

The survey is a data collection tool used to gather information about individuals. A survey may focus on factual information about individuals or it may aim to collect the opinions of the people surveyed. Through this instrument the students found out about the socio economic level the kinds of professions, the schools children were

going, and the length of residence of the dwellers of the neighborhood. The information collected served as the ground base for students to get acquainted with the community in which they could be involved later in their practicums.

Journals

Journals as another instrument to collect information were helpful since student teachers developed a short reflection on their project carried out around the neighborhoods. It was done in the classroom after they reported to their classmates the socio cultural practices in the areas of Tunja. The questions were: What cultural factors were new about school and neighborhood? How would those feed your future pedagogical practicums?

CONDITIONS OF THE PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE

The importance of this pedagogical experience came from the idea of making students reflect about their upcoming teaching practices which they must carry out in tenth semester, taking into account the sociocultural factors they face in the community (neighborhoods and schools from Tunja).

The procedure used in this pedagogical proposal was done in the way that student teachers of the ninth semester from the UPTC went to different neighborhoods in Tunja and collected information about socio-cultural aspects that influence the education

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[1] Protocols for interviews and surveys were mainly used to gather information about history of the neighborhood, school and people's socio economical and socio cultural factors.

settings and which are important to be considered by those students before doing their teaching practices. In order to do so, teacher students got the map of the neighborhoods and interviewed people from the area about the roles in their jobs, the way people see the community they live in. Then, they visited one of the schools in the area and interviewed or surveyed some of the people of the community including teachers and students about socio-cultural factors that surround and influence the educational practices in every school. At the end, they reflected upon their findings of each neighborhood. The neighborhoods described were: Santa Ana, La Fuente, Cooservicios, Maldonado and Centro Histórico.

FINDINGS

The outcomes of this pedagogical experience were mainly obtained from the surveys, non structured interviews, and student journals. Two main findings emerged: community voices and students' voices.

INSTRUMENT	FINDINGS
Surveys Unstructured interviews Student Teachers' journal	Community voices Students' voices

Community Voices (people, students and teachers)

Concerning this pedagogical proposal, the experience student teachers had was significant, interviewing or surveying students, teachers or people from the community since it provoked a reflection upon their own role as future teachers.
Funds of knowledge were reflected when student teachers took parents, students, teachers and people's voices from the community about the historical and sociocultural factors that somehow influence the learners' desires or needs because of the presence of some social problems such as violence, insecurity, lack of meaningful educational policies and a truly cultural behavior. High school student 1 wrote:

"*We see strange people in our school, people who steal and do not allow students* *to feel comfortable. I think they are people who do not study, and I think the Ministry of Education should pay better attention to it and offer greater conditions.*"

"*I think they are bad people who only come over to the school to damage, to steal and extort students.*"

Student teacher: Is your neighborhood safe?

Interviewee: "It is very regular; it needs more security, more police...."

By means of transforming people's lives and take a more critical position concerning this commonality of social needs; future teachers mirror themselves as changing agents of the community since the government does not provide enough paths. This resonates with the aims of critical pedagogy which "seeks for more inclusive

classrooms and tries to design curricula as in accordance with the needs of their surrounding communities." (Palmer, 2004, p.1)

Students' voices

This pedagogical experience was also meaningful since it highlights the importance of getting close to the community in which parents, teachers and learners are involved. It is relevant to work on educational concerns, such as social and political problems, and to think of possible ways to make learning environments rich and productive by approaching learners' needs and expectations. These student researchers who went to the neighborhoods recognize that almost every single institution and neighborhood has different needs, but most of the schools have the same problems. Student 1 wrote:

"I think there is nothing new about La Fuente neighborhood since every neighborhood is sort of the same in the city. The school has the same problems as every other school here. It is good to know where we are going to work or do our practicums. Schools and neighborhoods have different population and also different needs".

Based on what is mentioned above, it is highly relevant when they reflect upon changing teaching practices, recognizing the community and the reality behind language and culture. Student 2 wrote:

"When we are in our practicums, we don't know the families' thoughts, we only have contact with the students and sometimes we don't even speak with our students about

their beliefs, only talk about the subject because we don't have enough time to speak with them".

Equally to the students' recognition about the lack of proximity to students and parents, they also found out that technology and policies change their behaviors and ways of thinking. In that way, policies and the educational system must definitely change; at least being more practical to the needs of the community.

Student 3 wrote:

"As I said before, technology, globalization, politics and family are the factors that will influence our students. I would like to say that the education system in Colombia has to change. Teach how to live in a better way is more important than focus education only in theory".

Nowadays, teaching is not easy and supporters of critical pedagogy are trying to push it through, but governmental policies make it harder to fulfill it. However, the awareness that future teachers have of offering a better education and a better life for their students exists in their minds too. Student teacher 4 wrote:

"I would learn from my students, in fact I think they will be my teachers. I don't matter about transmitting knowledge. The secret of teaching, I think it is building a better way of life for everybody, easy? It is not. But it is not impossible. A teacher can change the life of their students".

One of the suggestions that students provided for future pedagogical practicums

is to sensitize about the reasons of studying, getting a profession and having a different life vision. This suggests that students are aware that they could do a lot to open up life possibilities to their future students, which clearly connects with the emancipatory ideals of critical pedagogy.

"I expect to change students' visions, in terms of their school, the reasons why it is good to study and also the visions about their professions. I hope to show them different perspectives in order for them to grow".

Lastly, according to the objective of this pedagogical intervention, it is relevant to characterize who our students are, their contexts, the areas from which they come, what resources are available to them and the reasons to get in the community.

"Those cultural practices would feed my practicums, in order to know how the environment is where the students live. It is important to me what kind of values the students receive from his or her family or even from his or her neighborhood".

In conclusion, interacting with the community is a step from critical pedagogy in which teachers and students work as a team and try to identify how the environment influences and possibly how the learning that students get in schools drives changes in the communities.

Pedagogical implications

This pedagogical experience looks forward to be applied by future teachers who may have other possibilities of building knowledge with students through the involvement with the community. Thus, identifying future student teachers' perceptions as far as sociocultural practices is one way of leading future teachers to design meaningful lessons for their practicums that mainly respond to the students' needs.

Secondly, the integration of funds of knowledge in the classroom is relevant because teachers and students act as co-constructors of it. According to Genzuk, (1999, p. 2) funds of knowledge are "matter, that is, they are authentic. It is when the content of the interactions is significant or necessary that people are motivated to establish the social contexts for the transfer or utilization of knowledge and other resources." From this point, gathering information from a community's daily life strengthens the classroom practices since they become more real. Besides, something that makes student teachers aware of being agents of the community is that they have realized through this pedagogical experience that, although there are the similar social problems in each one of the schools and neighborhoods, they determine the specific needs and wants they have and which could be considered to make pedagogical decisions that fit the expectations of these communities.

Finally critical pedagogy opens possibilities for educators to take other paths when teaching and intends teachers to instruct on the materials that are appropriate to the learners; it is a pedagogy of rights, of challenges and voices to be heard by the school. It is the possibility of breaking with the mainstream methods and offering new educational choices to supply the needs

presented in the context where teaching and learning take place.

Conclusions

According to Zanoni (2009, p. 2) the term funds of knowledge refers to "the analysis of social knowledge through meaning-making networks, cultural practices and activities". Students come into class with previous knowledge that has been socially constructed in their lives, including not only the previous knowledge they have from past experiences, but also the positive and negative aspects they have to go through as part of a their actual community. As reported by the student' teachers, this knowledge comes from the activities students do as a community such as: bazaars, entertainment activities, and games. The information students bring to class also stems from the social issues they have to face: violence in and around the schools, poverty, drug use and vandalism.

On many occasions, socio-cultural factors are neglected in the EFL classroom. They are not given enough importance due to the contrived practices some teachers promote. For example, some teachers do not try active schemata on their students or do not appeal to what the students experience in their daily lives. Knowing more about our students and their environments is crucial in any educational process; it is necessary to go beyond the superficial part to make learning a more meaningful and a desirable experience.

Awareness of the conditions of future pedagogical practices seems extremely important for teachers to be since they are aware of what kinds of situations surround students in their neighborhoods and schools. Likewise, they feel very committed to changing students' life visions starting by offering values and by emphasizing the importance of studying, having a profession and becoming helpful to society. Thus, critical pedagogy is reflected by means of future real actions, by taking a more critical position in front of education and teaching where students and teachers pose and solve problems themselves.

Pedagogical freedom values when a teacher establishes and gives the chance to experience another way of living, teaching, and creating new worlds. Future pedagogical interventions look to offer meaningful and more appealing activities in which culture is used as a broad path to help students be tolerant and to accept others. Finally, this pedagogical proposal permitted to question, reflect and sensitize future teachers who have not been involved in a community.

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ANNEX 1

UNIVERSIDAD PEDAGÓGICA Y TECNOLÓGICA DE COLOMBIA
FACULTAD CIENCIAS DE LA EDUCACIÓN
ESCUELA DE IDIOMAS
TUNJA, BOYACÁ

Encuesta No1.

1. ¿Cuáles son los trabajos o profesiones más representativos de las personas que viven en el barrio?
2. ¿Cuáles son los mitos, dichos, historias o leyendas que se mencionan en el barrio?
3. ¿Cómo define a las personas que viven en el barrio?
4. Cuáles son los eventos, tradiciones y costumbres que hacen parte del ámbito cultural del barrio?
5. ¿Qué instituciones son próximas al barrio?
6. ¿De qué forma la institución se ha vinculado con la comunidad?

THE AUTHOR

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