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A Sketch of Reality: The Multigrade Classroom in Context of the Reform of Basic Education

Abstract

The Mexican educational reform is based on transformations towards the conception of a new world, as a result of technological advances and new knowledge communities, where the parameters are established mainly by various international organizations, and where countries implement, evaluate, integrate and describe the necessary conditions for education. The multigrade classroom and the elements that are developed in it are conceptualized. The critical pedagogy of Gramsci and Freire should be part of the teaching preparation.

Keywords: multigrade classroom, educational reform, critical pedagogy

Introduction

Mexico as a country is reforming its basic education system. This reform includes, among many other things, a new educational approach based on competencies and the specification of the entire curriculum at the basic level. Basic education consists of four phases: the first phase includes the preschool level, the second phase covers grades 1 to 3 of primary education, the third phase covers grades 4 to 6 of primary education, and the fourth phase includes grades 7 to 9 of secondary education lower level.

This reform arises from several studies and research of various international organizations such as: the World Bank (WB), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), which made recommendations for educational improvement, as a means to secure a good quality of life, ensuring the development of rounded individuals, with the necessary skills to face the challenges of life and contribute to national and global development.

To achieve this, it is essential to adapt the comprehensive basic education reform to the educational context of Mexico. Therefore, this text analyzes and reflects on the multigrade classroom, in the context of the comprehensive basic education reform, as a sketch of a Mexican educational reality.

The quality indicators of basic education have identified serious problems of effectiveness in the majority of Latin American education systems. The fact that education is of poor quality deserves immediate attention from governments, as it has consequences for many activities, especially as economic growth and democracy

need people with better training. However, many attempts to improve basic education have not been successful (Mora, 2009).

Conceptualization

Conceptualizing the “multigrade classroom is the starting point for analysis. In Mexico, where the distribution of wealth is uneven and there are still large economic and social gaps” (Branko, 2017, p. 2), multigrade classrooms are most common in rural communities (Gutierrez, 2004, p. 3).

According to Santos (2011, p. 5), the multigrade classroom is a group of children of different ages and grades who share, not only the classroom, but also the didactic situation and, therefore, the knowledge that circulates there.

In the multigrade classroom, the teacher works at different levels of basic education. Primary education may be unitary, where a teacher attends to all grades, either alone or in a team with up to three other teachers. This depends on the number of teachers working in the institution, which is classified as incomplete in the Mexican education system.

This implies that in the multigrade classrooms students of different ages coexist, with very varied educational needs. The role of the teacher is fundamental in the classroom work, and the construction of knowledge in current plans and programs.

Ezpeleta (1997, cited by Santos, 2011, p. 4) explains that:

The multigrade classroom, rather than a response and a pedagogical strategy, was the result of an administrative operation that, in order to provide the service, found the solution of reducing staff in accordance with the number of students. Teaching, curricular content and administrative obligations were subject to the regulations of another school setting, the urban one, with one teacher per grade.

Ezpeleta (1997, cited by Santos, 2011, p. 4) points out that the multigrade classroom is an administrative measure, which saves resources. At the same time, it implies an adaptation of conventional work in the classroom. The teacher teaches a level of understanding with some attempt to meet the development needs of students according to their age.

In this context, where students of different ages learn alongside each other, the classic educational formats are inadequate for the reality of multigrade teaching. This is where the current Mexican education reform will play a crucial role.

The reform of basic education

This reform has its antecedents from the beginning of 1993, when education focused on the learning of the student, favoring social practices. In 2004 the preschool curriculum introduced a competency approach. This continued in 2006 in the primary school and finally reached the secondary school in 2009. The result was a consistent content across basic education.

The objective of the reform is to promote the development of competences for life, achievement of the graduation profile, and the establishment of curricular standards for teaching and management performance (SEP-DGIE, 2003, p. 4).

But whether this objective should be dictated by the government, the citizens, the students, the teachers, the parents, or the unions is not simple. It can only be

resolved by taking up critical pedagogy, especially Gramsci's views on hegemony and culture (Broccoli, 1979, p. 3).

Globalization itself, a new knowledge society and the various international organizations with economic and political power have set the standards for the conception of the world. "Hence it is not possible to isolate the philosophy of politics, demonstrating that choice and criticism of a worldview is also a political fact" (Gramsci, 1984, cited by Suarez, 2012, p. 6).

The current Mexican reform is based on this transformation towards the conception of a new world, as a result of technological advances and new knowledge communities, where the parameters are established mainly by various international organizations, and member countries evaluate, implement and describe the necessary conditions for what should happen in the educational field. The starting point is often a comparison of developed countries with developing countries.

While it is true that the reform is designed to meet the goals set by international pressure, especially the World Declaration on Education for All made in Jomtien in 1990, where the Millennium Development Goals were formulated, including teaching universal primary education and gender equality in access to education, a rethinking of education in Mexico was already necessary, taking into account that:

If every state tends to create and maintain a certain type of civilization and citizenship (and therefore coexistence and individual relations), it tends to make certain customs and attitudes disappear and spread others; the law will be the instrument for this purpose (next to the school and other institutions and activities) and should be developed so that it is in accordance with the end, as well as having the maximum efficacy and efficiency for positive results (Gramsci, 2019, p. 119).

This educational task of the Mexican state underpins the comprehensive reform of basic education, where the various actors must interpret its proper application. Teachers are among the main actors, and will have to break with traditional ways of teaching, and introduce a pedagogical model based on competencies.

The teachers' reaction to this reform has not been entirely positive, not because its educational contribution is rejected, but because it is often imposed by the government, before it is analyzed and accepted, as the government is convinced that it is appropriate for the Mexican context, and not merely a pedagogical fashion.

The most important thing about this reform is the articulation and difficulty of the content, which can support work in the multigrade classroom.

Recommendations for the work of the multigrade classroom in the integral reform of basic education

Being a multigrade teacher is a great challenge, as well as an opportunity for professional enrichment. Teaching creativity is put to the test and there is a need for continuous innovation in educational practice.

Since the multigrade classroom involves a complex movement of knowledge, the teacher must plan his or her work, adapting it to the context. Since students will generally navigate between the knowledge of a grade lower or higher than their own, content organization is crucial.

In the multigrade classroom, the organization of the content is the foundation of didactics, as it is from this element that the rest is triggered (times, spaces,

resources, class organization, interactive relationships, evaluation), according to the degree of complexity involved in the simultaneous work of several grades integrated in the same group (Santos, 2011, p. 4).

Paraphrasing Santos (2011, p. 3), planning in the multigrade classroom should contain at least the following elements, which can be understood as a framework that will support teaching.

1. **Variety of learning forms**, including mutual learning, in pairs or in groups, collaboration, tutorials and work modalities: whole group, fixed subgroups, rotating subgroups, work commissions, and individual work.
2. **Interactive relationships**: communication and emotional ties between teacher and student, and between the students themselves, to foster autonomy, trust and delegation of responsibilities that are fundamental for an appropriate work environment.
3. **Distribution of spaces and times**: this should be optimized, so that the expected learning can be achieved. The very nature of the mobilization of knowledge means that students may need more time to be involved and participate.
4. **Curriculum materials or teaching resources**: the multigrade classroom has an important advantage in a rural context, with a rich diversity of flora and fauna, but where it has the great disadvantage of lacking access to information technologies.
5. **The sequence of didactic activities**, for the achievement of the expected learning. This tool is fundamental to the achievement of the objectives, despite the diversification of contents in each grade.
6. **The evaluation and development of relevant instruments**: this will allow constant monitoring of teaching-learning. The approach will mainly be formative and a wide variety of instruments can be used, including rubrics, a checklist, and portfolios.
7. **Organization of contents**: this is the main point of multigrade work, since it will be necessary to have clear the differentiation of contents for correct and efficient application in the classroom.

All these elements form an overview of what the teacher should consider in his or her work. For this reason, it is considered necessary to recap critical pedagogy, which is seen as:

But how to carry out this education? How to provide man with means to overcome his magical or naive attitudes towards his reality? How to help him create, if he was illiterate, the world of graphic signs? How to help him commit to his reality? This could only be achieved with an active, dialogic and participatory method (Freire, 2017, p. 101).

The multigrade teacher must carry that development of critical thinking in the blood, since various situations will require this analytical-critical competence if the goals of Mexican education are to be achieved, and traditional pedagogies, especially “banking education” (Freire, 2005, p. 75) and the “simple” lecture class, are to be left behind. Professional practice will start from the consideration of the environment.

For Freire (cited by Hillert, 2008, p. 6):

Evil is not really in the lecture class, in the explanation that the teacher gives. That is not what characterizes what I criticized as banking practice. There are lecture classes that really are not simple transfers of accumulated knowledge from the teacher to the students.

In this sense, the multigrade teacher is responsible for ensuring that the learning of students is appropriate, and this will reduce the waiting time between activities. For this, it is recommended to apply multiple teaching strategies and methods in multigrade teaching, and not just the traditional lecture class.

Common activities: “The key to multigrade work”

One of the strategies that has worked in the multigrade classroom, is described by the Ministry of Public Education:

Attention in the multigrade classroom involves working on a common theme with specific activities and / or content for each cycle or grade. It is intended to reduce waiting times, allow greater attention to students and deepen the topic, promote collaboration, mutual help and mentoring - older children support the youngest children - stimulate the sharing of knowledge acquired to support feedback on the topic and attend to the level of learning of the students by leaving specific activities for each cycle and / or grade (SEP-DGIE, 2003, p. 2).

Common activities imply a recovery of previous knowledge of the students of all grades and thus introduces them to the construction of the specific knowledge of their own grade, achieving the development of the expected competences. This generates a mobilization of knowledge, enriching the content and at the same time allowing multiple forms of interaction, which the teachers must use to support their practice.

Conclusion

Sadly, Mexico has implemented the educational reform due to economic pressure from various international organizations and derived from globalization, rather than to meet its own development needs. Even so, it is helpful that the reform develops the contents of education, because they benefit the work of the multigrade classroom, even if they are not designed for this.

Through the educational reform, the state should develop policies that favor equity, equality and inclusion. Multigrade schools cannot achieve this, because of shortages of human and material resources. If organizations do not have an effective manager, the teacher will have to perform the administrative tasks, as well as attending to several grades' educational needs. This type of school is denied the support and educational assistance required.

While it is true that multigrade schools require more attention, the responsibility for their success rests with the teacher. The critical pedagogy of Gramsci and Freire should be part of the professional preparation of teachers. Teachers must prepare for the challenges of their daily practice, and this, as mentioned, requires creativity and innovation.

This educational reform should address the seven elements described by Santos (2011, p. 3): the variety of forms of learning, interactive relationships, distribution of space and time, curricular materials and teaching resources, sequences of teaching

activities, evaluation and the development of relevant measures of performance, and the organization of contents. In addition, the Ministry of Public Education recommends the incorporation of common activities at the beginning of each learning sequence.

There are no magic solutions in the multigrade classroom, any more than in any other type of education. The correct formula will be one where the actors-subjects in education are aware of their work and responsibility, and that the public policies that are derived from educational reforms make sense, following critical analysis. We must never lose sight of the fact that every policy is steeped in various interests, which may or may not suit the development of the country.

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