

# Between the management and the circulation of pedagogical ideas: a biographical-narrative approach

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## Abstract

As part of the Curricular Processes and Accompanying Practices research project, we show how, in search for good practices in the educational field, a primary school teacher undertakes the task of trying to implement the educational policies of increasing the quality of education. We adopt the biographical-narrative approach to produce knowledge about the subjects and their practices, as well as the knowledge they generate in the performance of their work. In this text, we show both part of teacher's journey and instances of the experimentation of pedagogical ideas in the classroom, in order to highlight the tension faced by elementary teachers to manage and circulate pedagogical ideas in daily life when they adopt in their classroom the project-based method to generate innovative educational processes. We describe how concrete individuals carry with them pedagogical ideals that must face a complex network of relationships in which teachers try, day by day, with the development of materials, tensions with parents, principals and educational regulations, to do quality work in a city school that affects the training processes and teaching practices. We close the text with some reflections on the management of innovative projects in basic education in the current educational context.

**Keywords:** Biographical-narrative approach – primary education – teaching innovation – project-based method.

This paper is part of the “Curricular Processes and Accompanying Practices” Research Project, whose aim is to generate knowledge about the curricular processes and practices that support the construction of the formative trajectories of people who go through schooling environments. In this text we trace how, in her pursuit of good practices in education, an elementary

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school teacher undertakes her work as she tries to adopt the educational policies of increasing the quality of education.

Methodologically, we have adopted a biographical-narrative approach to learn about the individuals, their practices and the knowledge they generate in conducting their work. We have organized this document in three sections. First, we outline the theoretical and methodological presuppositions that guide us in the search for this knowledge. Then, in the development of the text, in the form of scenes, we follow four moments through the journey of becoming a teacher and adopting the project method as an innovative strategy in basic education: between prose and poetry; school journey; the project-based method and its avatars; the school cycle and the visit of an author. We end with some reflections on the role of teachers and innovation in a rigid educational environment.

### **Theoretical/methodological presuppositions in the production of knowledge**

As we have described in other texts, we began our work in the field of biography with a certain degree of naiveté in 1987, in a teacher training program academically organized by DIE-CINVESTAV and financially supported by the Technological Education System of Mexico's Ministry of Public education, the SEP (Serrano, 2012). As time went by, our work was nourished through our approach to the foundations of the philosophical and social traditions that struggled against the Cartesian ideas held by positivism, which imposed ways of understanding and organizing human life that had an effect on the institutional mode of research (Serrano, Ramos, Ballesteros and Trujillo, 2015). Normative approaches to evaluation were added to a controlling view of academic work in the painstaking endeavor of the construction of knowledge over our practice.

As professionals of education in search of new comprehensive frameworks, we began our critique of macro-structural determinism and we followed the legacy of the new sociology of education. That explains our encounter with two pillars: experience, always reflexive in Dewey – more clearly, aesthetic experience – (2000; 2008) and narrative inquiry, broader than research, which tends to be canonical, linked to specific criteria incorporated from tradition to the use adopted by the researcher, the group of scholars or the institution (Becher, 2001).

Breaking away from an empirical position in which experience is the result of sensations and perceptions which are the product of our place in the world, Dewey (2008) points out that experience is contextualized in the frameworks in which the subject interacts and is not underpinned by the sensitive, is not entirely dependent on the senses. At any rate, experience is reflective: it is the search for the meaning of what has been experienced. It has a passive side, the reception of the world, and an active side, the meaning produced based on the qualitative relationships that the subject establishes in it. There is experience when sense is made out of the qualities experienced in a world of people and objects with meaning. That may be the grea-

test contribution of pragmatism: objects are not things, but objects with meaning. We must remember that, among other aspects, for this tradition:

1. Human beings are active, creative actors.
2. The world people inhabit is one in which they are involved in what they do, and this in turn shapes their behavior. Thus, they recreate it.
3. Subjective behavior does not exist before experience, but flows from it. Meaning and consciousness emerge from behavior. The meaning of the object does not reside in the object itself, but in the behavior directed towards it (Reynolds, 2003:45-46).

Experience is realized on a background where “imagination is the conscious adjustment of the old and the new” (Dewey, 2008:307). For Dewey, experience allows us to make the sense created conscious and is thus “a fusion of old meanings and new situations that transform both (the transformation that defines imagination)” (Dewey, 2008:310).

Experience does not produce representations or copies of reality. If anything, what characterizes experience is the creation of the new, the interaction of the subject with the world, where there are others – real or imaginary – marked by the uncertainty, unrepeatability and singularity of the interaction of life itself. In existence one cannot go back to what has been done but only go on towards the future: the adventure of becoming over the background of the knowledge constructed. Thus, the search that characterizes inquiry is constant.

Therefore, we think of individual experience in temporal coordinates: the previous, the current, and the future. We extend these coordinates to assess the subject’s interaction with his context: the link, real or imaginary – or, as Marías (1990) would say, illusory – with his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors (Schutz, 1979). Detached from empiricism, for Dewey experience has a narrative structure. According to him, experience

is singular and has its own *beginning and end*, since the march and stream of life are not uniformly interrupted. They are stories, each one with its own argument, its own beginning and its particular rhythmic movement; each one with its own *unrepeatable qualities* that impregnate it (Dewey, 2008:42, our italics).

Experience acquires meaning after it has happened: it is an elaboration (Contreras y Pérez de Lara, 2010). Experience has the characteristics of stories: arguments, temporal frameworks, rhythms of its own and its own qualities in a unit in a particular whole. In experience the parts take their own place in the course of the personal novel framed within the social context; buzzes, whispers, personal murmurs are, in the act, echoes of the social with their own stories. Thus, we link Dewey’s experience with narrative, and especially with the biographical-narrative.

Narrative is embedded in the structure of life. Telling stories is inseparable from human experience. It is the creation of meaning in hindsight, so it is linked – inevitably – to the realm of the biographic. It tends to arrange our own experiences and those of others in temporal coordinates. Biographical reflection is a search for links. Thus, narrative has effects on interactions with oneself and with the others: it lays the foundations for the self. Also, narratives are always particular and are made based on the objectives pertaining to the task of the inquiry. On the other hand, the narrative is linked to the analysis of the inquirer's implication about the issues addressed. Researchers “see *themselves* as narrators because they develop interpretations and find ways to present and publish their ideas about the narratives they study” (Chase, 2015:71).

Narrative, like Dewey's experience, is elaborated *a posteriori*. Temporally distant, what is narrated acquires a sense of cohesion, it is a coming and going that achieves unity in the moment the material is presented. In the story elaborated, subjects adhere to each other, near or far: narrator, predecessors, contemporaries or successors find their place. Narrative elaboration is commonplace in the establishment of social links, in the configuration of the self, in the continuous search for the word that will account for the experience. In Gadamer's words, “It is not that the experience occurs without words at first and later becomes an object of reflection by virtue of the designation, for example, being subsumed under the generality of the word. To the contrary, part of the experience itself is to search for and find the words that express it (1988:501).

Narratives show the aesthetic side of culture (Clandinin, 2007). The idea of beauty in fictions is put in circulation in the text made: “Beauty is the corkscrew that steers us towards the set of ideas that encourage us to better understand the world, our fellow humans and, of course, ourselves” (Volpi, 2014:23).

Besides, narratives show us the rites that subjects follow to be part of the groups to which they affiliate themselves in a real, illusory or imaginary way. In the rites shown in biographical narratives “objects, body movements or anodyne words mutate into symbols” (Sennett, 2012:134). Other than that, the texts produced express the modes of social recognition their authors seek. A biographical-narrative text displays the meaning of life as a work of art. “Life cannot be a work of art if it is a human life, the life of a being endowed with free will and choice” (Bauman, 2009:68).

Narratives show rites as part of social taste. Rites are a bridge that tends to articulate the past, the present and what is yet to come. Rites unveil the structuring character of the interest that subject place in their actions. Individual interest is not isolated: at any rate, it is built in relation to others, with a strong desire to join social actions with others. Interest, *illusio* for Bourdieu, cannot be not reduced to a motivational explanation. “*Illusio* is the fact of being involved in the game, absorbed by the game, believing that the game is worth it, that it is worth playing” (1997:141). It is the motor that drives subjects to participate in the strategies that belong to spe-

cific groups. The subjects' incorporation in the game includes the apprehension in active, creative terms, of the set of arrangements that allow him to be part of the game. The assimilation of the presuppositions implies adhering to the social rites through which the subject outlines his life. When a life is narrated, the mechanisms of insertion and the positions of the subjects in the social fabrics are on display.

In the same sense that life is a whole to come (Dewey, 2008), we incorporate the perspective "with its notion of a narrative unit" (Clandini and Connelly, 2000:18). Biographical narratives show the transactions made by the subjects with their contemporaries, related to their predecessors and structured with illusion to their successors (Marías, 1990). Narratives tell about the ways of being a subject in a given region and under the basic parameters of the anthropological explanation (Serrano and Ramos, 2014).

After linking the narrative to experience, we adopt Delory-Momberger's approach. For her, the narrative is a product of memory:

In the biographical narrative the individual takes shape, elaborates and experiences his life. Through it, the subject interprets, constructs, and places himself, unites and gives meaning to events in his life. It generates knowledge in the subject [...] Each experience finds its place and acquires meaning throughout his life [...] Experiences and life meanings intervene in the unique relationship with oneself [and] find their first networks of permanence in the community (Delory-Momberger, 2009:57-69).

Based on the idea that the subject produces meaning when he reflects on the experience, and that experience, when it is elaborated to be told to the subject himself or to the other – "primary group, groups, social norms, rules of the game, values" – (Serrano, 2016), has the effects of personal and social organization, we have arrogated ourselves the narrative inquiry in our research work, as well as in the actions of intervention.

To produce knowledge, we have relied strategically on the interview (Serrano, 2015) and on the writing of texts about oneself: biographical trajectories, reflective diaries, logs (Serrano, 2009), linked to the research project "Curricular processes and accompaniment practices", heir of another project: "Formative practices".

We argue that the interview goes beyond the communicative acts that are evidently at play. In the interview, the whole self is at work. In Freudian terms, the encounter between two selves in the interview sets off a number of drive movements. The interview is an experience that as a juncture tends, in the communicative act, to articulate "*logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* [...]" includes cognition, affection, and is inscribed in cultural frameworks" (Serrano, 2015:271). To sum up, the interview is a strategy for the production of knowledge, for the search of the meaning inscribed in enunciations, verbal emissions with a full balance of subjection and creativity, the sway of being a social subject.

In the research project mentioned above, which to a large extent has focused on the craft of being a student, we have used other strategies. We encouraged the production of written narrative biographical texts and created the conditions for their production. We have focused on topics such as school memoirs: the role of schooling in the family, the organization of the ego and drive movements, the use of metaphors: writing, organization and presentation of texts (Ramos and Serrano, 2017; Serrano and Ramos, 2017; Trujillo, Ramos and Serrano, 2016; 2017).

In this text we present the story of a professional teacher who, as far back as she can remember, wanted to be a teacher.<sup>1</sup> She invested part of her life on training to be an “exemplary” teacher, with the illusion of innovating in her classroom by putting into practice the educational policies of the Comprehensive Reform of Basic Education (*Reforma Integral de la Educación Básica, RIEB*) under the *project-based method*, subscribing to the idea that subjects in the educational environment are active and that they creatively assume their school project, ideas that she put to work in the context of an elementary school in Mexico City. Faced with the uncertainty of the teaching practices, of the families, and of the supervisors, she enacted ideals of coexistence and participation. It is a particular story, like that of many teachers in Mexico’s educational system. As Dalmau says, “one’s life is already the life of all men” (2004:46).

## Teaching trajectory and the project-based method

### *Between prose and poetry*

Coco was born in the late 1980s in a Mexico City family in which both parents work. Her father studied two semesters of a major in psychology and her mother is a nurse. She is the third child, and her siblings are more than ten years older; she is the baby sister. Her grandmother, “a hard-working, demanding and strict woman”, took care of her for several years (Chavira, 2017:2). Her strictness had good results in Coco’s personality: constancy in doing homework, dedication linked to a search for perfection, care of her personal items... and a dislike for vegetables.

Like her other classmates in pre-school and elementary school, yearned for her parents’ presence, which for reasons of their work was not possible when she came back from school. In its place, individual games took an important place in her everyday life: “I enjoyed playing Memorama, Turista, playing to be a teacher with my stuffed animal toys, or imagining I was a famous singer in front of the mirror, using a brush as a microphone” (Chavira, 2017:3).

As time went by, books took the place of her parents’ presence. Because of her association in identifying words from the alphabet, linking her father to waiting for her mother to get off work, titles like *Pinocchio*, *From the Apennines to the Andes*, the *Children’s Encyclopedia of Sea Animals* and *Learning English with Disney* remain in her memory. However, her favorite books

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<sup>1</sup> Teacher Coco’s career has been retrieved from the work she did in her formative process during her graduate studies at the UPN through several conversations and interviews, as well as drafts of texts written about the development of educational projects for basic (elementary) education.

were coloring books, because they let her write her “name (almost always in blue) and the word ‘teacher’”. After coloring them, she graded them. With a somewhat teleological eagerness, she says “Thus, I expressed a dream of what I wanted to do as an adult: teach” (Chavira, 2017:3).

She divides her life in two sides: prose, and poetry. The former is linked to the normative, to repetition, the absence of pleasure, the side of everyday family life. Poetry is associated to the space of school and the activities linked to it.

She describes the school space as a world that gives rise to various emotions tied to the actions conducted in it. Activities such as “exams, readings, homework, papers, presentations: [they awoke in her] joy, sadness, surprise, nervousness, challenges” (Chavira, 2014:9). It was a social space that urges her to make a career choice at an early age “I recognized the desire for what I wanted to dedicate my life to: being a teacher” (Chavira, 2014:9).

### *School trajectory*

Coco invests the school space with positive attributes. The materials, spaces, people with whom she spends time, are part of the poetry of her day to day. She confesses that from the beginning of her time at school she distinguished “good” teachers from those who were not. Characteristics such as “smiling, being kind, singing, playing and talking with the children and, importantly, not yelling” [not being like her maternal grandmother] (Chavira, 2014:10) configure an early approach to her interest in becoming a teacher.

She observed her teachers carefully, and the ones in her elementary school were not an exception. From her time in elementary school she recalls experiences that provide a glimpse of the strategies used by teachers, and she wondered why they did that. Several things called her attention: the arrangement of the group in rows, the existence of a row of “bad students”, the control of the group by the teachers by demanding silence with actions like “pulling the children’s ears”, writing pages to learn letters *m, s, l*, and the decoding of texts by measuring the number of words read in a minute, are some of the experiences she describes as an unpleasant journey through school. But she also describes other ways of organizing the classroom: teachers who “included everyone (not ‘bad’ or ‘good’ students), never disrespected them, made them participate, listen to each other, organize in teams, share an environment of respect and camaraderie, distribute responsibilities among all of us” (Chavira, 2014:12). She associates the two different approaches to teaching with a move in school work: “from yelling and physical violence to control students, to giving them an increased role and searching for organization strategies to lead the group” (Chavira, 2014:12).

Social relationships built in her childhood by belonging to a club with five girls of the same age were for Coco a factor in strengthening her self-confidence, communication, and empathy: “my friends, without knowing it, helped me to face my problems, to know myself, and thus they helped me to live within the school environment” (Chavira, 2014:11). As she says, the school was

poetry because it led her to build links of sisterhood, gave her a place in a group of contemporaries, and encouraged her desire to inquire: “[my friends and I became] explorers of clues to learn whether the school had been a cemetery” (Chavira, 2014:11).

In her passage through pre-school, elementary and secondary school, she learned to follow the rules established, to obey, to do her homework in time and to act in a certain way, according to each teacher’s personality. But high school was a big change. She describes it as a place that tested her decision making, time management, organization, and autonomy, all of which at the beginning scared her to the point of not wanting to go back: “I was not used to listening to myself and making my own decisions. That freedom terrified me, having to decide. The first night I thought about not going back to the school. But the next day I was right back” (Chavira, 2014:14). It is in this place where she recognizes the emergence of some questions about her as a human being, “Who am I? Why am I the way I am? What makes me be like this? Is it all a dream? Is life a dream? And if it is, is it the dream I want to live?” (Chavira, 2014:15). Adolescence, with its questionings, hit her suddenly through the dynamics of the school, her approach to philosophy, poetry, and falling in love. In this moment of her journey, Coco invests school with a plus: “Why had the school not generated this curiosity, sensibility, joy of living before?” (Chavira, 2014:15).

When the time came to choose what to study in her higher education, Coco persisted in her interest to be a teacher. She took advantage of her automatic admission to Mexico’s National Autonomous University (UNAM) and chose to study Pedagogy. The UNAM admitted her to its main campus, Ciudad Universitaria, in the School of Philosophy and Literature, in the afternoons. Although in her freshman year she was interested in the ideas of classical authors like Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi or Dewey, she was troubled by a teacher’s random comment: “to be a teacher, it is a mistake to study Pedagogy”. That felt, she says, “like a bucket of cold water. Did I make a wrong choice? Am I not in the right place even though I enjoy what I study?” (Chavira, 2014:17).

Through other people, she heard of the Benemérita Escuela Nacional de Maestros (BENM), a school for primary (elementary) school teachers. She asked for information and registered for the admission exam. “Months later, I was so happy to learn that I would be part of the 2006-2010 class in the mornings!” (Chavira, 2014:17). When she was admitted to the BENM in the mornings, she had already been studying the major in Pedagogy in the afternoons for a year. “The schedule allowed me to study both majors, so I did not think twice and accepted the challenge” (Chavira, 2014:17). She studied both majors simultaneously. From this position she “reflected continuously about theory and practice” (Chavira, 2014:17).

In her time at the BENM, one of the subjects that attracted her the most was Civic and Ethical Education, which made her deliberate on the ways of organizing and acting in school: timing, school activities, even how to talk or stand before a group, “are messages for students about how to be and live [...]; the contents of school education [are] a mere pretext for the educa-

tion of a *human being*" (Chavira, 2014:17). In this space she learned about William Kilpatrick's methodology of project-based work, which requires globalized planning and utilizes "strategies to work in the classroom: diary, school calendar, living journal, live corner, school correspondence, assembly. Many of these were techniques suggested by Celestine Freinet" (Chavira, 2014:17), which she recognized as a previous stage to project-based work with students.

Coco began to work with the project-based method with the support of her teachers at the BENM in the last two years of her major:

Projects gave me the opportunity to experience as a teacher what I once experienced as a student. I also noticed that working with the project-based strategy allowed students to participate, make decisions, listen to each other, solve conflicts, and not have to start high school like me: without knowing how to behave (Chavira, 2014:19).

Also, an academic exchange stay to do her professional practices in the city of Toledo, in Spain, allowed Coco to observe how pre-school children who used the project-based methodology "took responsibility for coordinating activities, [spoke] without fear in front of their classmates about famous painters or musicians, [respect] each other's turns and worked enthusiastically" (Chavira, 2014:20).

In 2010 – during the Comprehensive Reform of Basic Education (RIEB) in Mexico, which included a nationwide curricular restructuring for pre-school, elementary and secondary education – Coco finished her major in Primary Education at the BENM. In August of that year she began to work with what would be the first of her groups as a teacher: Second Grade C, in a public elementary school in Delegación Álvaro Obregón, in Mexico City.

### *Adopting educational policies*

The Comprehensive Reform of Basic Education was implemented gradually in the three levels: in pre-school in 2004, in secondary school in 2006, and in elementary school starting in 2009. The Reform to basic education finished in 2011.

As a teacher in front of a group, she experienced feelings of nervousness and enthusiasm. In 2012 Coco began to use the project-based methodology with her students: "They selected several topics through assemblies: whales, Monarch butterflies, earthquakes, the universe. It was a year of learning, work, research, closing projects and inviting parents to include them in the activities" (Chavira, 2014:20). The main challenges she faced in that year were, on the one hand, the group's behavior, which "was characterized by excessive restlessness, lack of boundaries, some [children] not working and others disrespecting their classmates or teachers" (Chavira, 2018:1). She was also faced with the demands of some parents, who after learning that their children were working in teams asked her to return to individual work because "their children

got distracted and this had repercussions in their grades” (Chavira, 2018:2): “that was the first time I realized that what was most important for some parents was their child’s grades, regardless of their development of attitudes and skills” (Chavira, 2018:2).

Throughout the school year she observed significant changes in her students: more participation, better self-regulation, and autonomy. She also found a closer relationship between parents, their children and project-based work, especially in those who always believed in the methodology:

In that school year it was never necessary to explain to parents the project-based methodology. I believe that, since it was the first year of the new plan and curriculum, they took for granted that it was part of the changes. Besides, the Word ‘projects’ was featured in the Spanish class textbook (Chavira, 2018:2).

In the following school year (2011-2012), Coco was assigned to teach a first-year group of elementary school. In the week before classes began, the teachers in the whole system met to work in the Mexico City Teacher Training Workshop, one of whose aims was to “transform the teaching practice to move from an emphasis on teaching towards an emphasis on the generation and accompanying in student-centered learning processes” (SEP-SEB, 2011:59).

Working in teams, teachers “[shared] the organization and sections [they found] in the new textbooks for each class [...] Questions [began] when in several classes [they detected] two terms: project-based work and transversality” (Chavira, 2014:25). That was one of the moments Coco considers to be key in her professional career. Teachers and administrators knew that she worked with projects. As she recounts,

a teacher, Lupita (the teacher Lupita you always find in every elementary school) said “Frankly, I don’t know how to work by projects, and speaking with my fellow third grade teachers I found that they don’t either. That worries me because, then, how am I going to start working with this new proposal in the program? I hope you can give us some orientation, since you have just finished Teacher’s College”, she told me with a voice full of concern (Chavira, 2014:25).

Coco, faced with the educational policies that expect the teacher to bring the ideas of the reform into the classroom, and with the needs she observed among her fellow teachers, decided to start a workshop course for the teachers in her school on the project-based methodology, and to seek admission to a Master’s degree program in order to have better educational foundations. Meanwhile, she had to deal with the development of the strategy with her first-grade class.

### *The project-based method and its avatars*

In the plans and curricula of the RIEB, a project is defined as follows:

Planned activities that involve sequences of coordinated and interrelated actions and reflections to attain the learning expected, which in the case of the Spanish class, will foster the development of communicative competences [...] in the Natural Science class, the social and personal sense of scientific knowledge [...] and in Geography the concepts, skills and attitudes to achieve geographic competences (SEP-SEB, 2011:31).

The RIEB distinguishes three kinds of projects: scientific projects, technological projects, or citizenship projects. In the curricula of the Natural Science, Spanish and Geography, some projects can be identified with the learning expected, the aims, the questions, and the products to be obtained; that is, in the RIEB projects are given and addressed with the possibility of correlating their topics with those of other classes.

In this framework and with the training Coco had had since Teacher's College, she perceived a distinction between the SEP projects and Kilpatrick's pedagogical foundations:

Joint work of teachers and students to solve problems is apparently the most important educational endeavor of the whole school. The feeling of a collective adventure in this activity is an encouragement to the best each one has to offer. It is in this context that we wish the teacher and the students plan their own curriculum. The curriculum then belongs to them at a new level and in a new sense (Kilpatrick, 2011:115 in Chavira, 2014:93).

A genuine project arises from the students' interest, accepted by them: "the more they accept in their heart what they want to know, the more solid their learning will be. What they accept reconstructs them" (Kilpatrick, 1936:29 in Chavira, 2014:94).

Using Kilpatrick's approach, Coco fosters work with project-based methodology in the groups she teaches, both in the two years previous to her Master's degree in Educational Development (which she studied between 2012 and 2014), as in the years after that. They are not projects that have been pre-established in textbooks by educational plans and curricula, but that arise from the interest of students and teacher. The projects she has conducted in her work as an elementary school teacher have been:

| 2010-2011                      | 2011-2012                      | 2014-2015                      | 2015-2016                      |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 2nd grade of elementary school | 1st grade of elementary school | 4th grade of elementary school | 4th grade of elementary school |
| Projects developed             |                                |                                |                                |
| Whales                         | My life story                  | The history of mankind         | The rise of man                |
| Monarch butterflies            | Autonomy                       | The universe                   | The human body                 |
| Earthquakes                    | Music                          | A trip through Mexico          | The universe                   |
| Cooking recipes                | Famous painters                | Children’s lectures            | Oscar Brenifier’s visit        |
| The universe                   | Experiments                    |                                | Campin-pijama party            |
| Turtles                        | Animals                        |                                | In search of treasure          |
| Ants                           | A ride around the city         |                                | A trip through Mexico          |
| Children’s lectures            |                                |                                | Celebrating Mother’s Day       |

Coco says that along then years, through different experiences and her Master's degree studies, she has developed a project-based methodology in which children, in the last school year, had a greater voice:

Giving students the power of choosing what they wanted to do and study in one or two weeks was entirely centered in their interest. Even planning along with them the activities, strategies and forms of evaluation [...] I discovered that it was possible, provided that work has been done in the group to develop listening, teamwork, self-regulation, responsibility [...] through inculturators [which help to change the cultural referents established] (Chavira, 2017:10).

The innovation did not affect only Coco: it changed her relationship with her students, and modified the tensions with parents and the school's administration. Some of the projects developed were:

#### Famous painters (2011-2012)

On a sunny morning in the first grade classroom of an elementary school, six-year-old students can be seen talking excitedly, asking questions, listening and moving around the classroom. They arrange their seats and glue their paintings for the gallery they will later show their parents: "I'm going to put Picasso's *Guernica*", "My favorite is *Starry night*. I hope it sells", "That one is a Botero!", "Frida Kahlo was so sad!" [...] they say. At the same time one can notice their nervousness. They help each other to write information cards and rehearse how they will convince people to buy their paintings. They all get involved spontaneously, naturally, and time seems to stand still. For two weeks they have been preparing this exhibit, studying about four artists and their painting styles, and finally setting it up.

When their parents enter the classroom, each and every student knows their role. They know the responsibility they have and share with the others. They are quiet without having to be told to be quiet. They know how important that moment is because they have prepared and worked for it. They take turns to speak. They are not intimidated. Their parents enjoy seeing their children express themselves naturally and also learn from them: the painters, a little of their biographies, where they were from, and where that place is on a map. Their support was also important in these two weeks. With bills and coins that imitate real ones, they “buy” the paintings from their children, who must learn to handle money well and give change. At the end, the children say goodbye with a group poem.

The description above corresponds to the last stage of the “Famous painters” project of the first grade group “A”, whose teacher I was. I could see all the skills developed by my students, their self-confidence, coexistence, empathy, collaborative work, initiative and autonomy, to name a few. It was enormously satisfying to see the conclusion of each project the group worked on. As a teacher, I can say that I gradually also developed some knowledge, attitudes and skills that gave meaning to my day-to-day work: reflecting, asking myself questions and living my teaching with greater motivation. What I once read or heard about as an ideal in the classroom (self-regulated, engaged, responsible, respectful students) I could now experience and observe in them, and it gave me great satisfaction. Form and contents gave meaning to my teaching.

I think that project-based work allowed me to, on the one hand, approach my way of learning, working, inquiring, doing research and reflecting on different ways to address a topic of interest or need for my students, and to inquire about myself continuously. On the other hand, it was a strategy to make my students develop the same skills at the age of 6 or 7. This approach to work, proposed as an innovation in the elementary school educational plan and curriculum, allowed me to use my creativity, experiment, learn and share with fellow teachers my experiences and reflections on and about my teaching practice, about discovering different children’s books and other books, about sharing different kinds of readings with my students, about writing and creating new materials such as stories in which we ourselves were the protagonists, about using what we already have in different environments of our life to develop reading and writing skills. Project-based work allowed me to give another meaning to my teaching, to endow the world with strangeness and my days with harmony, for as Bécquer (2002) said, “as long as the wind in its bosom carries perfume and harmony [...] as long as there is still a mystery to unveil, there will be poetry!” (p.72). Project-based work allowed me to discover that school can be experienced in a naturally poetic way (Chavira, 2014:21).



Photograph 1. Parents listen to and record their children in the presentation of the news program, as part of the closing of the project "The rise of man".

From the beginning of the school year to Oscar Brenifier's visit (2015-2016)

I can still remember it. It was a warm morning of August 2015. It was the first time I had worked with all 30 students, 15 girls and 15 boys in that group. My emotions went from enthusiasm to joy, from nervousness to expectation. The students saw me enter the classroom and listened attentively to my welcome to class. I introduced myself, expressed my feelings, promised to learn their names by heart by the end of the week, and we began the activities for that day. Their eyes were attentive and full of light, which I took as great eagerness to learn and to fill their fourth grades with memorable moments. From that moment on I knew that what I wanted to achieve was to create a group united by their cooperation, participation, initiative, creativity, camaraderie, dialog, democracy. Some teachers who had worked with them in previous years had warned me about the situation with this group: violence among themselves, aggression, lack of boundaries, constant changes of teachers due to labor issues... and later I would notice some challenges: lack of interest in teamwork, rivalries, passiveness in some and aggressiveness in others. So one of my first activities was to establish some group agreements. The children proposed, listened to each other, wrote in their single notebook (the one in which we link all the classes) the guidelines for our coexistence: respect, listening, teamwork, being good classmates, responsibility.

In the first two months, their parents were not very confident, nor did they trust a way to work which they had not known in previous years. Although in the first meeting I had explained the reasons, motivations, and results achieved by other students through project-based work and they expressed no doubts about them, a few days later the school principal and supervisor went to my classroom and told me that some parents had complained about the little work being done in the classroom. "Little work?" I asked. I suddenly felt disillusioned. Sometimes the fear of the unknown leads us to address only the surface, what is apparent to the eyes. The notes that my students had begun to take were only their ideas, reflections, and conclusions after a few activities in the classroom. They were not the notes that teachers used to dictate, or a copy of what had been underlined in a book. How could I make parents

realize that, far from writing mechanically, their children were actually building their own ideas? How could I help them learn about some of the activities in the classroom? The answer turned out to be an open class in which they participated together with their children. On that occasion we worked on several subjects in two activities. At the end I explained to them the foundations of project-based work, what could be achieved, how work was organized, and told them that if they had any questions they could ask me and I would gladly answer them. They were months of resistance, of letting the children and their parents know about a new way to experience school. Fortunately, in previous years and through project-based work, the principal and the supervisor were already familiar with it and supported that way of organizing activities: without a schedule, without one notebook for each subject, working with the pages required in the book. Little by little, the parents lost their fears, especially after seeing their children participate in closing the projects: news programs, plays. The children organized themselves, made decisions, took on their roles, and showed what they had learned. Those were without a doubt special moments for the group (Chavira, 2018:82).

By November, we had gone a long way. Every morning we had what I called the "Literary moment": While they had breakfast I would read to them. The books we looked at in those months were selected by them: *El bien y el mal, el amor y la amistad* ("Good and evil, love and friendship"), *El gran libro de los opuestos psicológicos* ("The big book of psychological opposites"), *¿Qué es el conocimiento?* ("What is knowledge?"). They all agreed on two things: the books were an invitation to think and participate, to listen to each other. They were all written by Oscar Brenifier, a French philosopher and pedagogue. One day, after discussing a book, Francisco asked: "Teacher, why don't we invite Oscar Brenifier to our class?" "What a good idea!", I answered. The others listened without imagining what that comment would lead to. In those days I had read a text entitled *"Facebook, mucho más que fotos y vida social"* ("Facebook, much more than photos and social life"), in which teacher Elizabeth Camacho González narrated her experience of inviting a news reporter to her classroom through Facebook. This convinced me that I could do something. I looked for the author's name on Facebook. It did not work, he was not there. So I made some inquiries and looked for his email address until I found it. I made a note of it in my teacher's diary, which I will include verbatim.

Mexico City, November 3 2015

"Teacher, this feels like a dream! I am so excited!" "Woow, I loved the surprise!" "That wasn't initially my goal, but it's great that it's going to happen!" "It is true that, as Walt Disney said, everything is possible!" Those were some of the things they said after reading the letter I wrote to them and left on their chairs, personalized, so they could open it after recess. On the board I wrote "I hope you like your surprise". That morning I had said something about a surprise, and it was part of the day's schedule. What was in that letter that excited them so much when they read it? This:

Mexico City, November 3 2015

Dear Mirelle:

I hope you are very well. I want to tell you that I have been very happy to be your teacher in the first two months of the school year. I am pleased to look at your learning process in every aspect: attitudes, knowledge, and ways to do things. There are still many challenges ahead, one of them being teamwork, because that is how you can achieve many common goals, some of which will take you very far, as far as you want to go. And not only you, all of us!

I am writing to share with you a surprise I have been preparing for my 4<sup>th</sup> "B" class, and which became concrete last weekend. Do you want to know what it is? Keep reading.

As you may remember, from the beginning of the fourth grade we have been reading books in the classroom, some of them written by French philosopher and pedagogue O \_\_\_\_ B\_\_\_\_\_ (I am sure you could easily complete his name). Well, I decided to find out about him, and especially contact him. After a few days of search, guess what? I found his email address and wrote to him to introduce myself and tell him about you! I told him about your participation in class, your insights, how you have learned to listen to understand your classmates on many issues like love, friendship, the meaning of life and that game of opposites that we humans always play. In short, I told him that you, as well as your classmates, have also become a great philosopher.

Best of all, I got an answer. This is it:

Dear teacher Coco:

I am very thankful for your email and your interest. I would love to meet your 4<sup>th</sup> "B" class. I am traveling to Mexico next week, and the only day I can be with you is Friday, November 6, at noon. Would that suit you?

Oscar Brenifier

So, as you can see, we are going to have a visit, someone who we have been reading all these months in class! Did you like the surprise? I hope you are as pleased as I was! Do you remember one of Walt Disney's phrases, "If you can dream it, you can achieve it?" That's what this visit means to me. Do you have any suggestions to welcome him?

Love,  
Teacher Coco.

The children felt close to this author because we began reading his books since the first day of the school year. *¿Por qué venimos a la escuela?* ("Why do we come to school?") was the first book that allowed us to discuss about the place in which our lives would coincide. We agreed with his ideas: we go to school to learn to ask questions. That was the beginning of our journey together to learn through inquiry. After that we also read *Los contrarios* ("The opposites"), *El sentido de la vida, el amor y la amistad* ("The meaning of life, love, and friendship"). Thus, day by day every morning the children have been

philosophizing about profound issues that have humanized us further. In each activity I learn more about my students. Some of them hesitated to open the letter, despite the fact that it was addressed to each one of them (the ones who always wait for the teacher's indication). Some of them did not fully understand the letter, some said that they had read it although they had not, and some got excited and began to share the news with others.



Photograph 2. Oscar Brenifiere signing autographs in his visit to our classroom.

Reading comprehension work now has an experiential meaning for them. They anticipated, asked questions, verified, made comments. And all thanks to having philosophical texts read to them every day. Without a doubt, this experience was very important for all. It was a project developed in one week to welcome our favorite author. In that moment I fully experienced project-based pedagogy. The children decided what to do, organized themselves, set responsibilities and dates (Chavira, 2015:85).

Her project-based work and her Master's degree studies positioned Coco as a teacher who, beyond following pre-established guidelines, questions her meaning as a teacher and builds through teamwork alternatives to work according to the context. She associates the role of the teacher with the responsibility of "creating a community of teachers to construct the purposes of our work, reflect continuously on the meaning of each one of the actions asked of us in the school, taking responsibility for the decisions made with solid foundations" (Chavira, 2018:6).

In spaces such as the meetings of the Technical School Board, Coco questioned her fellow teachers about their roles as teachers, the lack of companionship, the bureaucratic and senseless workload. In her own words:

In the Technical Board meetings I questioned several times the roles of teachers, first as coworkers and then with parents, children, and school authorities, the bureaucratic and senseless work that we sometimes did: reading aloud to count words per minute, formats for mental calculations or mathematical operations, formats to work with children assemblies, just to meet quotas of formats filled out (Chavira, 2018:6).

After the implementation of the Educational Reform in the school year 2015-2016, Coco perceived a number of actions and tensions between teachers, who seemed to have been left “without a voice or a choice” (Chavira, 2018:6). She also noticed that family dynamics in our times leads parents to overprotect or pay little attention to their children and look for someone to blame, generally the teacher, and finally, that some fellow teachers, after the tensions, forget about their role as co-workers and become a “panopticon” of school life. In these circumstances Coco, rather than ceasing to enjoy teaching at this level, preferred to stop teaching elementary school for a while. She sought other spaces to continue her beloved work as a teacher, and has started to embark on and collaborate in innovative training projects in civil society organizations and higher education.

### Final thoughts

From all of the above we may argue that introducing innovations, changes, modifications or transformations into the classroom is no easy task for everyone involved in public education. Although educational policies place the teacher at its center, the classroom is an interwoven stage in which the whispering of many actors put representations of “good performance” at odds, conflict, and all sorts of appraisals. From the perspective of policies and school administrators, the teacher is at fault: lacking in interest, not trained in techniques and approaches. Or else the teacher is required to be a passive agent, the one who “applies”, “executes”, “adopts” reform. For parents, as can be seen in the case above, teachers who innovate are easy targets for appraisals of their performance, usually negative.

Other changes to professional culture would be desirable. The school is, and is not, a microcosm of society. Subjects enter it with different kinds of ideals that clash, are modified, altered, mutated, turned upside down after the first institutional document is given to teacher’s college alumni. The beginning of their professional career goes hand in hand with the conjunction of different kinds of knowledge: the instituting one, and the instituted. It is amid this tension that any teacher begins his or her work. Learning to recognize what is possible, desirable and legitimate in his or her professional performance is a lifetime endeavor. The institution’s task involves acknowledging what the subject may do, or not do, with others. The diversification of institutional roles puts tensions on the practice. Wishes or interests come from many sides: supervisors, principals, sub-principals, technical advisors. New and more varied ways to renew institutional relationships are required in order to propose new practices. It is necessary to learn to be professional, with autonomy and a good dose of reflection.

It would be advisable to draw new lines to create a culture in early education. Education will have to oscillate between its contents and building strategies to relate to the contents. Three ways of reflection that would be needed to foster the drive to learn would be pre-active

reflection, reflection upon the action, and post-action reflection, within the framework of building learning communities in public education, allied to parents' work as builders of citizenship.

The school needs changes, but changes are also cultural. Accepting new forms of pedagogical work requires mobilizing new emblems for the actors in the process. Blaming problems on the teacher is easy and commonplace. It would be necessary to mobilize the teachers' professional dependence, their tensions with parents, their relationship with teachers' unions, the prosaic modes of regulating the teachers' careers, their salary, and the conditions in which they perform their work with so little infrastructure, to make a change in their work. For some time now educational policies have been more on the side of controlling teachers than on fostering their autonomy and flexibility in pedagogical experimentation, which are so badly needed to cultivate the image of the teacher as an agent of social change.

From an educational research perspective, it is necessary to make visible the commendable practices of teachers interested in producing textbooks and educational materials that are invisible for an editorial market that sees them more as receptors than as producers of *ad hoc* materials for concrete work in specific situations, as is Coco's case.

We have adopted a biographical-narrative approach because we have seen its potential to show the carrier of knowledge that eludes other approaches. Giving individuals a voice is an ethical imperative that leads us to create communities of practice and foster the autonomy and creativity of teachers, those teachers that will pass the baton to future generations. Qualitative research has referred to individuals as "referents", "collaborators", "participants", but has not placed them as authors in published materials. In this text we have tried to break away from that self-imposed limitation in scholarship.

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