

Teachers pro and con: Neoliberal educational reform in a rebellious and disadvantaged context

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Abstract

This article explores how the implementation of the education reform led by the federal government in México (2012-2018) took place in rural disadvantaged contexts and, specifically, in schools where an anti-establishment union movement has been developing for several decades. Based on semi-structured interviews and classroom-focused ethnographic analysis at 22 of 100 schools included in an official innovation project, we gleaned that dissident teachers adopted a somewhat flexible and tolerant stance regarding the official project. We gathered evidence about teachers' endeavour to learn a new educational planning strategy and enhance the students' digital skills promoted by the project. In contrast, they kept participating in public manifestations against the education reform. Regardless of how pragmatic this solution could be, the teachers' reflections in the interviews interestingly lay out how their struggle takes part in an ongoing state formation process and their position in the face of social inequality. We conclude that teachers consider the community context of deprivation and violence in willingly accepting the implementation of the Project.

Keywords: *educational policy, elementary education, teaching innovation, teacher unionism, neoliberalism*

Introduction

The central research question is what the teacher union's uprising against the implementation of the national education reform tells us about the Mexican state formation. Teachers integrated into the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE Spanish acronym), a dissident organization inside the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), led the resistance against education reform from 2013 to 2019. Section XVIII teachers affiliated to the CNTE movement in Michoacán took part in the national campaign against the broad reform acts. At the same time, teachers dealt with the local Education Ministry to go on the day-by-day work while implementing an official innovation project in disadvantaged rural communities (henceforth Project). From the very beginning, the participating teachers placed themselves in a kind of double-bind situation due to conflicts between the CNTE and the Project.ⁱ

Teachers in this double-bind situation have worked out a two-level action. On the one hand, they identify and try to partially solve the problems of the schools by participating in the Project. For this endeavour, one important motivation is the disadvantageous community context that they link to the harmful effects of the neoliberal political project. However, on the other hand, they owe loyalty to their national democratic movement and take action to achieve its objectives. As we will see, this case study also suggests that local and regional authorities (school principals, supervisors) and pedagogical advisers have had a crucial and ambiguous role in the reform implementation. Some of them share the double-setting vision of teachers and use it strategically to negotiate official objectives. We assume that the state is a political project that is always unfinished and under construction (Joseph and Nugent, 1994). Societies are defined as

structured social fields. State and market are two salient structuring forces (Roseberry, 1998). In the capitalist world regime, regional social classes are social formations in a hierarchical political-economic space (Lomnitz-Adler, 1991). State as a political project interweaves social class interests and regional political-economic conditions as much as historic symbolic mediations of conflict in a complex and national way.

Moreover, we suppose theoretically that regional relations and structures affect the reform's achievement and influence fundamental actors' reactions.

Therefore, the adoption of educational reform follows different paths depending on the country's region. Here, we intend to explain the shaping of the reform in the Michoacán State.

This neoliberal policy appropriation case study demonstrates that rural teachers engage in different battlefronts and under different roles to further their educational function locally and at the same time to resist the national reform implementation. Then, we propose to explain these conflicting goals based on three components. First, even though teachers as state workers have to follow the normative guidance of authorities, the state is neither a closed, territorially homogenous, nor whole-controlling political organization. Second, teachers as political actors are facing the regressive traits of the neoliberal reform that proposes labour-related administrative changes. And third, teachers as public pedagogical professionals are interested in the academic development of the most deprived children of the country, therefore, they accepted some academic actions drawn from the national reform. Correspondingly, some CNTE-affiliated teachers selectively took advantage of the reform implementation. Since 1982, the Mexican State has been undergoing reforms for the benefit of international financial capital. Teachers have organized resistance movements against such reforms. In this context, in 2013 a constitutional reform that

undermined their labour stability was approved.ⁱⁱ Regarding the broad context of the 2013 Mexican reform, experts have pointed out the consequences of the ‘regulated autonomy’ condition that currently affects the elementary education teachers’ work all around the world (Baltodano, 2012). State reforms applied in Mexico in the last decades have generated individual control mechanisms, an internal management of the school staff, as well as have promoted parental involvement in issues of collegial financing, all of which have generated indirect control mechanisms that impact on the classroom. Hence, the CNTE movement takes part in an international fight against the Global Education Reform Movement that promotes the standardization and measuring of skills through a global competitiveness discourse (Sahlberg, 2006).

Whereas recent research has identified the diversity of results generated through these reforms in different contexts (Bayhan, 2016; Zoch, 2017), neoliberal reform promoters suppose that their assumptions can be put into operation in the same way under all circumstances, based on a single vision of reality (Weiner and Compton, 2016). One fundamental criterion of neoliberal educational policies is the centrality of ‘quality’ of teaching measured by the individual performance of students in standardized tests (Connell, 2009). The 2013 educational legislation reforms in Mexico follows the same global neoliberal wave (Keck, 2015). Therefore, teacher evaluation became the axis of the 2013 reform, which has generated a national teachers’ mobilization with an intensity not seen since the 1980s (Aboites and González, 2014). Teachers insists that the reform jeopardized the stability of their employment. They refer to the constitutional text that included the term ‘suitability’ of teachers as an element of ‘quality.’ Moreover, it linked the school performance to a quantitative evaluation of quality: ‘It [education] will be of quality, based on the constant improvement and the *maximum academic achievement* of the students’ (Cámara de Diputados, 2017, p. 5 emphasis added).

Disconcertingly, the Mexican educative reform began without a curricular program nor a proposal of initial teacher education and seem to be focused mainly on their evaluation. It was until 2017 that the National Education Ministry published the Educational Model (SEP, 2017), which at the beginning could have been the baseline for the substantive evaluation of teachers.

Within the framework of this reform at the end of 2013 the National Education Ministry (SEP) issued a call for the funding of the educational innovation projects of the State Ministries of Education. Notwithstanding the absence of detailed pedagogical guidelines, the call referred to the priorities of the Basic System of Educational Improvement (SBME). The Ministry of Education of the State of Michoacán proposed an innovation project. It was approved and received the initial financial support of 15 million pesos. Although Michoacán is one of the states most opposed to the reform, it was possible to implement the innovation project in one hundred rural schools affiliated with the Section XVIII of the CNTE from January 2015 to December 2016. In this article, we analysed this implementation in a subset of the one hundred schools. Our approach is based on our experience of being responsible for its external evaluation conducted between November 2015 and December 2016.

The general framework of the innovation project

The general objective of the innovation project designed by the Ministry of Education of the State of Michoacán is defined as follows: ‘Raising the levels of learning indicators in the formative fields of language, communication, and mathematical thinking; improving educational accomplishment at the levels of basic education. Moreover, improving the performance of students from a high and a very high level of marginalization in Michoacán State’ (SEE, 2015, p. 5).

The Project's central mechanism is to provide ongoing training for teachers. The central training axis is an educational planning model based on 'learning cubes' which guide the teachers to prepare fortnight or weekly lesson plans related to different academic subjects, called 'learning nodes'. Teachers need to review the contents of subjects to create a unified two-week project. Typically, teachers should aim to unify three or four subjects around a common theme. Primary and secondary teachers found their previous experiences with project-based learning to be quite helpful. Preschool teachers declare they are used to design projects integrating different subjects.ⁱⁱⁱ The most unfamiliar practice for teachers from all levels was to match digital and physical activities and materials. A workshop about the 'Cube of Transdisciplinary Comprehensive and Active Learning' methodology (CTCAL) disseminated the planning model.

Pedagogical advisers proposed to apply the Project to one hundred schools: twenty-five preschools, fifty primary schools, and twenty-five secondary schools. It began in January 2015, when the resources became available and ended in December 2016. The advisers selected municipalities with a higher degree of marginalization, according to CONAPO (2010), and included those schools that voluntarily accepted their invitation. Michoacán ranks 28th of the states with lower human development and a schooling average of 7.4 years, below the national average of 8.6 (SEE, 2015). The municipalities where the Project was carried out have an unusually low educational average of 5.3. Most of the schools have less than a hundred pupils and are one-teacher or two-teacher schools.

More than half the budget funded laptops for third grade preschool-, fifth and sixth grade primary school-, and third grade secondary school students, one for every three students. Also, every teacher received a computer. The rest of the expenditure was devoted to implementation workshops and exchanging

experiences among teachers, and advice to schools. The computer equipment should promote academic information sources and free educational software and promote exchange of ideas on the internet between participating teachers. Nevertheless, the lack of connectivity and cell phone signal counter the latter aim.

Sources and analytical approach

The external evaluation of the Project provided us with the first-hand sources that support this paper. We conducted fieldwork between February and December 2016 in a sample of twenty-two schools in seven municipalities in four regions of the state, four preschools, eleven primary schools, and seven secondary tele-schools, keeping the demographics the same as the one hundred collaborating schools. We selected municipalities with a higher level of participating schools in remote regions. The sample of schools agreed to participate in the evaluation and to the provision of information to the external researchers. The legal agreement allows us to use the information for academic publications taking care of information privacy.

We carried out the following research activities that focussed on the academic improvement and project adaptation in every school mentioned above: Observation and recording with field notes the educational activities throughout a school day and video-recording of class segments. We did a micro-ethnographic analysis of the videos and observations in the classroom, identifying teaching practices associated with the proposed planning model. It was a focused ethnography that intensified the observation of specific communicative activities and gave an intersubjective foundation by collaborative data analysis, and took advantage of short-term field visits (Knoblauch, 2005). In particular, we inquired if the learning was linked to life

situations of students (comprehensive), was putting together different subjects (transdisciplinary) and was encouraging the initiative of students (active).

We also recorded an interview with the teacher whose class was videotaped. It was a structured interview with open-ended questions composed of four questions about the difficulties of applying the Project, the benefits for the students, the teaching innovations applying the CTCAL model, and the view about the training activities. Thus, we assessed how each teacher was putting into practice the teaching model. We did twenty-nine different fifteen minutes interviews. For the second question (student benefits), one of the co-authors organised the answers through a qualitative content analysis, and the lead author reviewed it (Forman and Damschroder, 2007). Two collaborative interviews near the end of the fieldwork allowed us to verify the level of saturation of the information. The resulting categories are organized in Figure 1. As can be seen, they are enough concrete to imply great difficulties to interpretation and the corpus enable close reading.

For our purpose, we investigated through the interviews and the school practices' records the relationship between the way the planning model was appropriated and the criteria every teacher took into account. As we asked them about the omission of some of the Project processes, we gathered the criteria that influenced the teachers' decisions about the benefits or disadvantages of adopting specific practices promoted by the project. Moreover, we made field notes while attending the teacher training activities of two regional workshops that pedagogical advisers carried out in Nahuatzen and Tuzantla. We conducted eighteen interviews during these workshops with an average duration of ten minutes. For this article, we only present the answers to the question: What do you think is the main professional benefit you receive in the Project? We classified the answers into three categories and presented their frequencies.

Interview transcripts are cited with the schooling level, municipality, and interview date.

Concerning teachers' participation in the CNTE national movement, we conducted three unstructured interviews at the schools and the workshops to gather the teachers' opinions about the ongoing conflict. Furthermore, we conducted four unstructured interviews with the pedagogical advisers responsible for the Project about its acceptance and with the Michoacán union leaders of the workshops. Additionally, we drew on news from national newspapers to describe some of the CNTE' strategies and discourses.

We adhered to an anthropological explicative model of historical change. Without denying structural conditions, the anthropological theory we adopted relates to disruptive action and its effects on social change. We analysed teachers' actions both in their role as agents of the state and in their identity as educational professionals (Keck, 2015). We understand social relations as a field where the actors have differential power (Roseberry, 1998). The spatiality of relations, actions, and material conditions are relevant. Previous studies about the recent cultural-political history in Michoacán point out the critical role of elementary education teachers in reconfiguring a regional state culture (Calderón, 2013). Hence, in our research, the regional-level is equivalent to the Michoacán state since the CNTE organizes its actions spatially at the state-level.

Specifically, we try to identify tensions in social fields when they become apparent in a conflict. In this case, the conflict is the struggle against the implementation of the reform. The analysis considers two modes of power: organizational power and power in signification (Wolf, 1990). The definition of social settings implies an organizational power that circumscribes the action of individuals. The conflict shows how the organizational power in the current

basic education field of Michoacán establishes some limits to both the union organization and the authorities. The evidence derived from teaching practices and interviews reveals how teachers struggle to do their academic duty and take an active part in their social movement in the contexts of the organizational power and in the precarious conditions of the localities where the schools are located.

The teachers' discourses and political actions are related to another form of power as well. We found evidence about the power that establishes the legitimate meaning of key terms, called the power in signification by Wolf (1990), which is key to organize the settings themselves. In the processes we study central concepts in the education field such as teacher, teaching and quality.

Democráticos as stakeholders inside the Michoacán Education Ministry

More than twenty years of federal administrative decentralization strengthen local sections of national union inside the education ministry in each state (Zorrilla and Barba, 2008). From 1993 to 2015 the federal government delegated the management of schools to the states. In this period, union supporters took positions as local or regional authorities or training specialists: principals, supervisors, and pedagogical advisers (García Chediak, 2017). In our study, the responsible administrator and the academic coordinator, both of them pedagogical advisers, identified themselves as 'democráticos' –teacher supporter of the CNTE principles– during a work meeting held with the external evaluators. At the Tuzantla workshop in February 2016, the Project coordinator expressed in an introductory lecture critical ideas about the current teachers' evaluation: 'A single evaluation cannot fully appreciate all the teacher capabilities and the complexity of the teaching process' (Tuzantla, 26/2/2016a).

This historical and personal background explains why the leader of the Project took into consideration the central problems related to the experiences of rural teachers in poor communities. First, the academic leader of the Project had his particular idea about transdisciplinarity. Simplifying, it means developing the same topic across different subjects such as language, mathematics, and history. It is a methodology of learning by projects. Secondly, the advisers recognized the rural teachers' demand for governmental attention. Three outstanding Project's elements agree with criteria for an innovation project teachers value the most: Teachers training workshops, regional teacher exchange activities and equipment, and the supply of educational material (computers and educational software). Thus, the educational advisers wanted to spread their perspective on the teaching model and at the same time to match the teachers' requests.

Furthermore, the procedure for planning and the information and communication sources and tools the Project provides are compatible with the reforms launched since the early 1990s all around the world (Schweisfurth, 2011). These reforms postulate the school as the basis for the improvement and promotion of learning-centered methods (Díaz-Barriga, 2006).

Nevertheless, despite these academic goals, the Project was forced to meet some criteria established in the reform. Specifically, the measuring of the 'success' of the Project on the basis of students' average performance. Hence, the priorities and goals set out in the Project coincide with those of the SBME in a way that a restricted vision of quality entails the focus on reducing dropout and improving performance, with an emphasis on language and mathematics.

The promotion of local educational innovations is considerably one of the most academic facets of the reform, and it is the one that allows teachers to control to a large extent the effects on their labour inside the classroom. This condition is

the reason that the Project allows teachers to deploy their pedagogical initiative. Teachers' lesson plans creatively interweave topics from different academic subjects. Additionally, Section XVIII of the CNTE has not ignored the academic and social needs which it has addressed since the nineties as we will describe below.

Expanding the scope of the public debate

We gleaned from the interviews and the documents about the CNTE uprising in Michoacán that CNTE teachers' discourses reflect three key topics that relate to their involvement in the state formation process: 1. Stressing social inequality and violence; 2. Teacher resistance to the reform; and 3. Relevance of intellectual work.

Stressing social inequality and violence

CNTE teachers attend to the most deprived population since high inequality produces a sharp educational segmentation. This context relates to the distance between the participant teachers and the Project's political orientation (Laurell, 2015). The educational reform does not take into account that the current conditions of social violence and the depletion of natural resources in rural communities are a consequence of the state reforms in the agricultural and energy fields that affected the collective ownership of rural land. Therefore, one task of the CNTE political action has been to evince that the foundations of educational reform are part of the same process that has generated the intensification of mining and impunity for organized crime across rural areas of the country.

With the latest structural reforms: energy, labor, educational, fiscal, social security, among others, the delivery of the country under the most advantageous conditions to transnational companies is legalized, which has led to the intensification of the

dispossession of lands, forests, waters, mines and biodiversity by large landowners, large mining companies, bottling companies, and various industries (CNTE, 2002, p. 3).

If neoliberalism entails the re-engineering of the state and not only a ‘thinning’ of it (Wacquant, 2012), then the escalation of inequality that benefits the creation of illegal markets is a consequence of the neoliberal reforms in Mexican rural regions (Maldonado Aranda, 2012).

In the interviews, teachers recognized the limitations of the benefits of schooling for the future of young people, mainly due to the lack of well-paid jobs and the offer of ‘easy’ jobs on offer by the organized crime in several regions. ‘Many of them don’t want to study; they see how others make money quickly working for the trafficker’ (Pátzcuaro, 11/24/16f). This disadvantageous context motivated teachers to accept the extra-workload required by the Project:

The preparation of weekly plans with the CATIA model implied reviewing the textbooks and materials that the Project offers us. It increased the workload. Still, we do it with pleasure because the communities are marginalized, and the Project gives them access, for example, to the microscope (Primary, Copala, 5/24/2016).

While the comprehensive education implies out-door activities, teachers are aware of the risk in rural areas: ‘But sometimes one doesn’t develop out-door activities because the responsibility of exposing the children to risks doesn’t allow me to take my students outside’ (Pátzcuaro, 11/24/16d).

In Michoacán, currently, state institutions reveal their weakness to guarantee a decent job, security, and a healthy environment. Unfortunately, this weakness is coupled with a strong wave of corruption that results in a regulatory element of social relations in conflict zones. In some municipalities served by the Project

armed groups control the mining resources. In others, the control of the agricultural activities serves the financial interests of organized crime besides its intervention in the municipal budget (Aguirre and Barbosa, 2012). As the self-defence groups in the region were in full apogee, the advisers started inviting schools:

As advisers arrived at the school, I saw them taking pictures. Suddenly when one of them knocked on the door and asked for the teacher I was scared because the regional situation was getting red hot, we didn't know who they were... We accepted the invitation because we thought we are too far; they will never go back, the authorities don't care about these schools.' (Primary, Chinicuila, 5/24/2016b).

In this way, teachers express the sense of neglect by the government ('they will never go back') and the feeling of danger in a risk context. In six of the fifteen municipalities attended by the Project, the presence of civil self-defense groups was documented between 2011 and 2014 (Aguirre, 2015). According to Binford (1999), the same process explains the popular justice reactions to the increase of the organized crime, that is, a reaction to the deepening of Mexico's incorporation into international capitalism. These conditions that the rural teachers are experiencing are a vital source of their political mobilization.

Teacher resistance to the reforms

Rural teachers are integrated into a rural society configured by the state according to market principles (Wacquant, 2012). Teachers also face the pressure of neoliberal reforms that weaken their labour rights (Cordero Arroyo and González Barbera, 2016). They also experience the pressure of organized crime that has developed through the re-engineering of the state. In these crossroads, the role of the teachers as a worker, educator, and citizen is

concretized (Street, 2001). In every school we visited, we found the central arguments the CNTE elaborated and systematically spread.

Because sometimes they [authorities] criticize the teacher, but they don't know the difficulties we have here in the classroom...we are not against evaluation, but we say that it is necessary to evaluate the whole education system, the government holds teachers responsible for all the failures of the Mexican's education system (Secondary, Nahuatzen, 4/27/2016c).

All along the field work, we observed first-hand the teacher experiences in the contested implementation of the reform. We collected evidence about teacher resistant discourses and actions. For instance, we observed during a school visit a banner that exhibited families' support for teachers' fight against the reform. We also collected teachers' statements about their refusal to take the recently instituted evaluation. In Chinicuila county, two teachers told us that they had not yet participated in the new teacher assessment scheme. Interviewed teachers with a high sense of professionalism told us they had challenged the system and withstood the pressure to take the mandatory evaluation: 'We didn't take the exam, and here we are!' (Primary, Chinicuila, 5/24/2016c).

We also gained insights into their disposition to reject the entrance into the league of the 'idóneos' (suitable teachers) which jeopardize their tenure opportunity. These are teachers with an ideal profile according to the reform criteria and the standardized exam scores. When they were talking about regional violence problems, they said 'Let the "idóneos" come! We're going to see what they do with that!' (Patzcuaro, 11/24/16d). With this kind of expressions, teachers display their position in the face of the reform.

Via the mockery of the new teachers labelled in the reform as '*idoneos*,' the teachers contrast their experience to the abstract definition derived from the

official evaluation profile. That is an example of the language of contention that frames the fundamental definition of teacher and teaching. It also evidences an existing tension in the social field. If the official definition of the teacher stresses the sense of a ‘monitor’ controlled by the state, the defiant definition highlights the sense of an autonomous teacher that judges the relevance of the official program for the local context. This tension expressed by the language of contention shows the conflict with the never-ending and spatially heterogeneous characteristic of the state.

We also got evidence about the teachers’ political position and resistance to the reform. The teachers called off a workshop in Tuzantla the night before the opening. Later, the Project’s coordinator explained to us that the reason for the deferral was that the participant teachers had planned to attend a trade union meeting at Morelia. At the start of the Project, the Ministry of Education and the union negotiated precisely that the pedagogical advisers would not schedule activities on mobilization days. Once again, advisers suspended an experience-sharing workshop in Pátzcuaro at the request of the CNTE leaders in Michoacán because of the rejection of the presence of high-level educational authorities. Even when the audience was already in the location, the participant teachers agreed and didn’t try to carry out the workshop. That means that participating teachers in the Project were taking part in the CNTE’s movement.

In general, the authorities of the Ministry of Education intend to apply the rules. In the case of Michoacán State, there exist a history of teachers’ political resistance with the result that the authorities could not always apply the rules. In turn, the teachers cannot wholly avoid some legal restrictions, but they manage to maintain the protest against the reform. After 15 May 2016, the National Minister of Education officially declared that teachers who had been absent from workplace during three consecutive days would be dismissed (León, 2016). For future actions, the teachers established a rotation schedule so that the

school would continue operating and, at the same time, the school teachers were participating in the trade union activity. These contradictory teachers' actions demonstrate that the neoliberal state is not a homogeneous and whole-controlling system.

Relevance of intellectual work

Whereas the Project limits innovations to its model which use standardized tests to improve learning and assessment, Section XVIII has created and implemented an alternative pilot model in 'Comprehensive Schools.' Even though the participating teachers in the official Project are not putting the alternative model of the CNTE into effect, the Section XVIII in Michoacán State, as a whole, is making efforts to support this broad educational proposal since the 1980's. Section XVIII teachers have argued that the government has not heard their alternative education model and that the academic proposals of the reform hides intended labour reform. 'The government only made a consultation when the official model was already made.' (Primary, Chinicuila, 5/24, 2016a).

In the interviews, teachers pointed out that the official discourse in favour of equity cannot be tackled in a non-problematic way in the classroom where the children live in contexts of extreme inequality and realize the limits of schooling for their lives. 'We go against the tide. The young realize that the studies do not guarantee a good job in the future' (Patzcuaro, 11/24/16b). For its part, the Education and Culture alternative project of Section XVIII of the CNTE pertinently heightens the value of community that houses the school. Rural communities maintain some bonds of sociability that rear children to respect solidarity, and teachers of small schools can establish a dynamic of social participation that takes advantage of such ties (Bryan and McLaughlin, 2005). A principle of the Democratic Program of Education and Culture of

Michoacán Section XVII of the CNTE precisely is about ‘the integration of the school into the community’ (CNTE, 2002, p. 15).

The CNTE has obtained from the Government of the State of Michoacán a specific recognition of the alternative project by granting the financing of the first Comprehensive Schools that try out the alternative program. However, there is no commitment to recognise it as a state project. Likewise, we identified that the participating teachers in our study do not know the Comprehensive Schools Project. Under these conditions, the participant teachers took from the government Project the support they considered beneficial (educational materials, equipment, training offer) without following point by point the pedagogical proposal that comes with it.

Notwithstanding the achievements of the CNTE such as the role of pedagogical advisers and a political fight inside Michoacán Education Ministry in favour of the CNTE, teachers are still forced to work according to the authority’s regulation and plans (Bocking, 2018). However, these teachers are able to take the unequal social context of their students into account in their academic decision making.

Educational innovation at disadvantaged schools

In this section, we present evidence of how the teachers appropriated the Project’s methodological elements. Several participating teachers were receptive to the pedagogical proposal of the Project even though it came from the reform and they are participating in a national political struggle against it. The following elements were fundamental to the Project appropriation although differently in each school: The previous teachers’ planning practices, the way the teachers anticipate the convenience of each element of the Project for

students' performance in official tests, the teachers' elementary computer skills, and the school infrastructure.

Benefits for teachers and students

As the teachers put into practice pedagogical aspects of the Project, gradually they appreciated the benefits addressed to teachers and students. According to the interviews held in the workshops (18 interviews), the three most important benefits are: managing new technologies since they did not have access to any equipment or digital resources so far; learning transdisciplinary planning; and updating teaching approaches. Teachers expressed a feeling of institutional abandonment as they thanked the advisors and us for monitoring their teaching activity in the classroom and for sharing our perspective on it. They even requested us to visit them more frequently. Only two teachers made clear that digital educational resources developed the students' visualization skills related to math problem solving. Notwithstanding, this is the most significant reflection because it derives from the practice and observation of subtle changes in the students' learning.

According to a different source, the interviews conducted during school visits (29 teachers), we made a first classification of the Project benefits for the students in two broad groups: benefits expected according to the Project aims, and the benefits detected exclusively by the teachers (Figure 1, inner circle). This second category demonstrates that teachers have been attentive to students' improved academic performance and therefore have detected specific benefits derived from the characteristics of the Project.

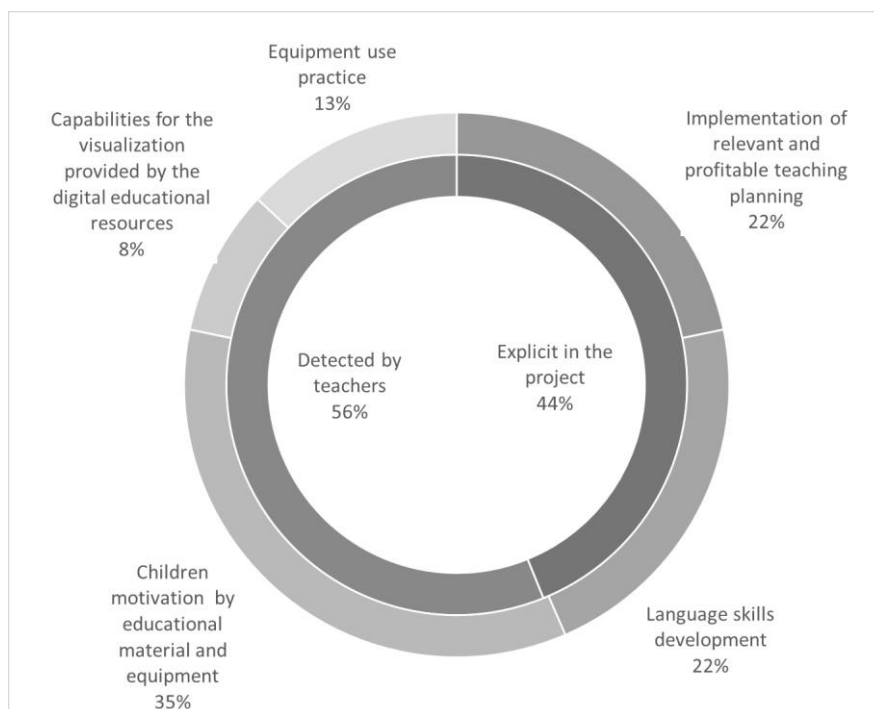


Figure 1. The diagram shows the classification of benefits for students. Source: Elaboration based on interviews.

Then, a second classification specifies the benefits (Fig. 1, external circle). First (22%), the application of valuable planning refers to the CTCAL model. Second (22%), the development of language skills was related to two conditions propitiated by the Project: 1. Children’s communicative strategies developed through presentations in front of their classmates; and 2. The digital resources they use, such as English translators, e-books or videos.

That they (students) had delivered several oral presentations allows them to analyse the problem and then express their ideas. They must understand what they read (Secondary, Quenchendio, 11/24/16).

Third (35%), the most recurrent answer was the students’ motivation. Teachers highlighted the children inclination toward the using of educational games (puzzles, skill or logic games, cooperation games, among others). Although originally computers were assigned to final grade students, some schools expanded their operation to the whole school. That was partly due to the

motivation and restlessness of the lower grades children to access the equipment. The most forceful evidence is that the students themselves expressed their desire to take advantage of the computers. In a sense, the most outstanding Project effect in all the schools was the motivation to attend class in a context of limited access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and the low income of children's homes, as well as the lack of bookstores and libraries.

The community doesn't have internet access. We do it [search for information] by the digital library that the Project CATIA gave us. We volunteer for the Project because we know the students' need for educational resources (Secondary, Quenchendio, 11/24/16).

Fourth (8%), we emphasize the teachers' observation regarding the potential of digital resources to stimulate children. For example, some educational programmes afford children the ability to create 3-D images that facilitate understanding. Teachers associated digital manipulation with a better understanding of simple spatial concepts and their mathematical representation. Finally (13%), the use of the equipment has to do with the operation of hardware. The Project provided the rural schools with means for children to develop necessary skills such as keyboard, mouse and cursor handling.

Degrees of Project appropriation

Regarding the degrees of Project appropriation, the focused ethnographic analysis of class activities and the interviews suggest three different degrees of appropriation of the planning model. This is a preliminary account based on the brief fieldwork we spent in each school. Despite their preliminary character, this classification distinguishes criteria teachers use regarding the political and pedagogical Project's traits.

We call the first one the minimal appropriation that keeps the ‘traditional’ lesson planning with independent activities in academic subjects and barely uses educational software or digital materials provided by the Project. In this case, we video recorded relevant features of the sessions: a teacher-focused interaction, an activity the subject book proposed, and an individual result. For example, in first grade at a secondary school, the teacher followed the fiction story writing review activity presented by the Language and Communication subject. To that end, the class watched a film adaptation of a tale from 1953 rural Mexico provided by the Project. Figure 2 present students working individually, teacher leading the activity and the use of a video.

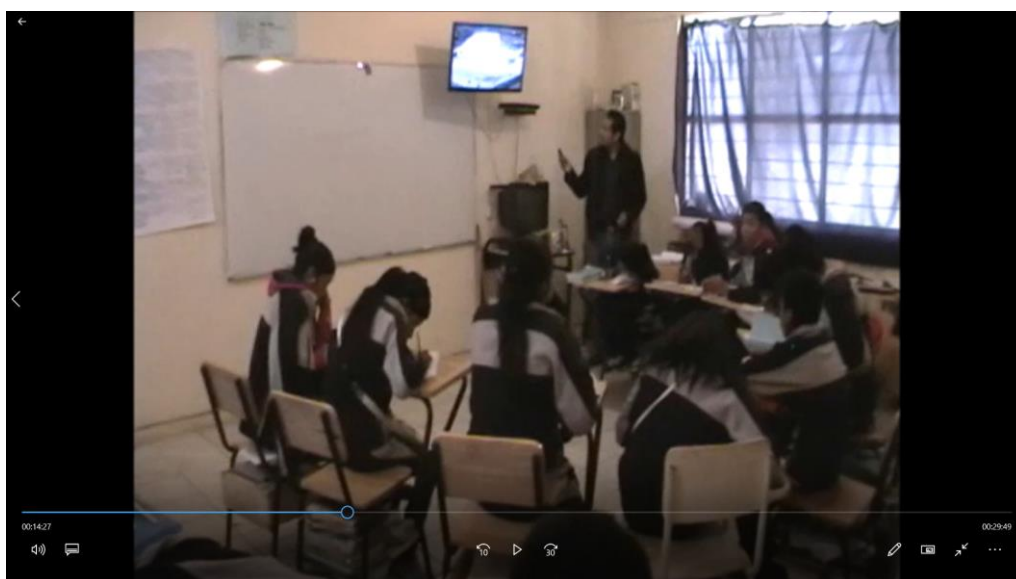


Figure 2. Traditional one-subject class.

The second degree of appropriation is the lesson planning according to the model proposed by the SEP for multi-grade schools or a kind of project-based learning teachers already knew (Gallardo, 2004). Multigrade schools have students from two or more grades in a single classroom. In this planning, the teacher develops the same theme in a single subject for two or more school groups of different grades at different levels of complexity. Then, there is a

sporadic insertion of a ‘learning node’ of CTCAL that integrates some of the already studied contents of several subjects ‘to reinforce’ learning.

These sessions stand out because of their free movement and relaxed environment. Teachers stay at their desks, and the students frequently call on the teacher or other students to seek advice. Figure 3 exemplifies two scenarios taking place simultaneously in this kind of class.

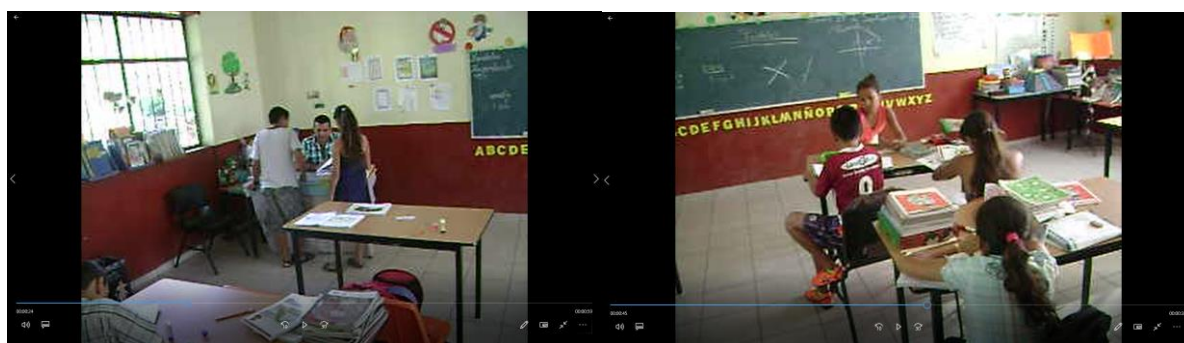


Figure 3. Two simultaneous activities and student independent activity.

The third degree of appropriation is really close to the ideal CTCAL model where ‘learning nodes’ are used for one or two weeks. The greater difficulty in strictly applying the model was integrating contents from different academic subjects into a single ‘learning node.’ A very time-consuming activity for teachers, especially in one-teacher or two-teacher schools, was the review of digital books and the learning of educational software provided by the Project. At the same time, the advisers had to respond to this review activity by searching for different materials and software as the teachers indicated unmet information needs. Given the lack of connectivity in almost all schools, advisers distributed digital materials and software with digital memory devices. However, it is essential to recognize that it is impossible to ask students to investigate freely without adequate information sources. Despite no internet access, the apps have allowed students to practice digital skills. For example, they use text-to-speech apps to reproduce traditional tales or design, record, and cast radio programs.

Regularly, this type of adaptation included activities that retrieved daily life experiences and the inclusion of some digital material or relevant software for generic or educational use. For example, a preschool learning node includes an observational activity on searching the community for snail specimens after which they were watching a video (Planning experience, Caracuaro, see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Two consecutive steps involving daily life context and digital resources.

Teachers that followed this third modality appreciate the Project's progressive character:

It is a very innovative project because it allows the student to learn by interacting with the community problems so that learning turns into a meaningful one. (Secondary, Quenchendio, 15/05/2017, 11/24/16).

We gleaned that multi-grade school- and intercultural bilingual elementary school teachers are prone to the second degree of appropriation . These teachers expressed some practical reasons to adjust the innovation Project to their conditions and experiences. For instance, one teacher that follows the planning for multi-grade groups, justified his decision by explaining the positive experience he had in his first years as a teacher in very small hamlets. In his opinion, his lessons were already active and comprehensive enough prior to the project. Active because students developed auto-didactic skills, and comprehensive because he has always considered their context. One indigenous

teacher assert: “We already used to design lesson plans by projects related to indigenous knowledge. The difficulty we had was modifying a classroom to include the laptops” (Intercultural Bilingual Primary, Arantepacua, 5/9/2016).

Thus, the degree of appropriation was uneven among schools and even inside schools. Nevertheless, teachers at the second degree of appropriation had reasons justifying their partial appropriation. For instance, some teachers made specific critiques in applying the planning model from their pedagogical point of view: ‘The teaching of mathematics and history could not be adapted to the learning nodes because they require a sequence, and the students must have antecedents about them’ (Tele-secondary, La Huacana, 11/24/16).

On the other hand, some teachers identified the political orientation that requires radical innovation as a key criterion of limited appropriation. According to these teachers, this severe limitation is the bimonthly examination that focused on strictly syllabic content and in disciplinary concepts that cannot always be acquired by students when they develop school projects. Teachers have identified this type of evaluation as ‘content centred,’ ‘evaluation of abstract concepts and formal definitions’ or ‘theoretic evaluation.’

If you use the planning of CATIA, you realize that you generalize, but it is not something specific regarding concepts and procedures that you need in both mathematics and natural sciences. There may be a concept to be asked in the bi-monthly exam. Then, the children are going to say, ‘Teacher what is this?’ (Primary, Aquila, 9/29/16).

As in other countries, the promotion of student-centred learning cannot be entirely free of evaluation-oriented forms of ‘accountability’ and competence (Sung, Lee and Choi, 2016). The predominance in the Mexican education system of standardised testing above assessment for learning is expressed as follow by one of the participating teachers

If we started the school year, and the authorities said: ‘Do you know what? This school year we are going to work only CATIA, and the tests will be from CATIA’. No, how comfortable! So I can teach both groups. That would be comfortable, really yes, not demanding, ‘Teacher, in fifteen days, I need the qualification for the first two months.’ So, what am I going to do! (Primary, Aquila, 9/29/16).

For the most part, these teachers decided to keep test-oriented teaching. Otherwise, students would not be able to succeed in the official tests. Even though this condition affects the whole Mexican education system and precedes the Project, the latter explicitly prioritizes standardized tests as a measure of success.

Conclusions

The most evident influence of organizational power on the Project implementation is that the CNTE related supervisors, school principals, and educational advisers eased the negotiation between superior authorities and teacher union leaders. However, information points out to two processes that stand out because they reveal how the structural power is acting upon the Project implementation.

The first is the contradiction between the pedagogical features and the political orientation of the Project. While the transdisciplinary, active, and comprehensive features of the Project seem to be progressive from a pedagogical point of view, the Project’s imposition of standardized exams and the focus on results as the only measure of success remains regressive. Some teachers realized that the second feature of the Project was according to the mentioned Global Education Reform Movement and was contradictory to the pedagogical Project proposals. Here is the power in signification acting on the

very definition of teacher and teaching through the control over evaluation of the students and the teacher as an instructor. In terms of the power to signify, since teachers' evaluation does not entail pedagogical autonomy, education reform endeavours to define the teacher only as a monitor of the learning that follows the curriculum demands. In turn, whereas the innovation Project proposes transversal and active teaching, disciplinary and theoretic evaluation persists. Even though the Project proposes comprehensive learning, two general goals focus only on Language and Mathematics. Therefore, the Project is locked up in a political agenda based on effectiveness measured through standardized tests and is part of a conflict about the meaning of 'quality' of teaching and the role of innovation.

The second process is the teachers' reflection on the school context of social violence. The Project fosters the teacher reflection on the context of violence that was the fundamental reason to accept the Project even when this required an increased workload. Teacher reflection on the context of violence triggered the idea that the teacher movement against education reform was based on their experiences of deprivation and social violence. Thus, teachers were bringing out the structural power involved in an ongoing state formation process. When teachers reflect on their work situation, they realize that the reform aims to undermine their labor rights. Whereas, when teachers reflect on the academic improvement of the young, it spotlights the structural relationship between a limited social function assigned to the school by the education reform and the social deprivation coupled with the violence experienced daily by the young, the latter related to energy and agricultural policy neoliberal reforms. In the meantime, teachers accepted training activities, educational material, and equipment, because they value the potential benefits for the children's educational development. Hence, we can glean that the value that the teachers

gain from these resources is relative to the rural school deficit and the unfavourable social context.

Even though the CNTE participating teachers were not fully aware of the alternative education project of Section XVII, the CNTE in Michoacán as a whole defends and experiments with an alternative education proposal in the Comprehensive Schools. Thus, CNTE teachers that work in deprived rural communities could have already a systematic way to deal with the broader structural problem: How school would contribute to the building of a more egalitarian society. Nevertheless, as the lack of awareness of participating teachers demonstrated, an extensive and systematized socialization of the experience of the Comprehensive Schools is pending yet. An important step would be to identify the strategies that the Comprehensive Schools themselves have developed by experience over time.^{iv}

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Proyectos de Innovación Educativa 2013. Secretaría de Educación Pública, Gobierno de México, through the Secretaría de Educación del Gobierno de Michoacán.

Notes

ⁱ CNTE is considered a dissident union branch since it split from official pro-government union in the final seventies.

ⁱⁱ By 2019, the President López abolished that reform and put forward a new, approved in May 2019. Experts state that even though it set aside administrative changes related to the tenure of teachers, it kept a formal definition of quality associated to standardized evaluation of students (Báez and Fernández, 2019).

ⁱⁱⁱ Mexican preschool organizes the curriculum into three broad learning fields: 1) language and communication, 2) mathematical thinking, and 3) knowing and understanding the social and natural world. Moreover, the curriculum considers personal development areas (artistic, emotional, and physical).

^{iv} By the time we had written the document, the federal government had abrogated the Educational reform and thus the rigid teacher evaluation. Nevertheless, in 2021 there were no clear national guidelines regarding a pedagogical aim for the National Education System.

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