



# Problematization of Teaching Practices and Teaching Contextualization

## Problematización de las prácticas docentes y contextualización de la enseñanza

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## Summary

This article is a reflection in three planes: the first one, how teachers problematize their own practices given the complexity of the scenarios that they must face daily in classrooms; the second one, how teaching problematization is perceived in the academic and school world and the third one, how many and how contents, methodological tools and training forms, which are necessary to strengthen teachers' abilities and attitudes prone to problematization, have been assumed by continuous teaching training programs. It is concluded with a joint reflection that tries to establish the link between these planes.

**Keywords:** Problematization of teaching practices, teaching research, research-action, continuous teaching training programs, teacher's beliefs.

## Resumen

El artículo es una reflexión en tres planos: el primero, sobre cómo los docentes problematizan sus propias prácticas dada la complejidad de los escenarios que deben enfrentar cotidianamente en las aulas. El segundo, sobre cómo la problematización de la docencia es percibida en el mundo académico y el escolar. El tercero, sobre cuánto y cómo los contenidos, las herramientas metodológicas y los formatos de capacitación, que son necesarios para fortalecer en los docentes las capacidades y las actitudes proclives a la problematización, están siendo asumidos por los programas de formación docente continua. Se concluye con una reflexión conjunta que trata de establecer el vínculo entre los planos.

**Palabras clave:** Problematización de las prácticas docentes, investigación de la docencia, investigación-acción, programas de formación docente continua, creencias docentes.

## **Introduction**

Today's Latin American teachers face highly complex scenarios in their everyday classroom practices. Academically, schools are required to implement inclusion programs and teaching that addresses diversity (López, 2009). Politically, they are required to make minimum achievements in access, learning and retention (Fernandes, 2014), at least the same than those achieved by schools in other parts of the world. Societally, relevant and contextualized learning, principally in the field of science (Herrington, Yeziarski, Luxford & Luxford, 2011), plus an offer of quality services (Aranguren, 2007). These demands are different, but convergent that should be addressed in social environments marked by inequality, individualism and increasing manifestations of violence.

These scenarios are ostensibly far from those from which and for which schools were defined three or four decades ago. The changes which have occurred between these scenarios have turned teaching into an unpredictable, uncertain and complex activity (Perrenoud, 2004). At the same time, they have widened the gaps between what schools can provide and students' emerging needs. Teachers appear, consequently, as unarmed operators of processes they cannot manage (López, 2009).

The teacher profile needed by today's schools is that of a professional aimed at achieving a reflective and contextual practice (Chacón, Chacón & Alcedo, 2012). It needs to include a set of abilities and tools necessary for teachers to be able to prepare teaching proposals that ensure a minimum adjustment between school offers and local needs (Rodríguez-Sosa, Cáceres-Cruz & Rivera-Gavilano, 2017). Teacher continuing training policies have this challenge and so much work to do.

### **How Teachers Problematize their Practices?**

The exercises and statements we present in this section correspond to a group of 21 in-service teachers, participants of the Tutoring and Pedagogical

Accompaniment Specialization Program of the Ministry of Education of Peru (MINEDU, for the Spanish acronym), executed by the Education School of the Peruvian University Cayetano Heredia. The reflections on these exercises and statements are ours, and resulted from our experience in participating as a technical team in the action-research component implemented by the School in the said Specialization Program. A broader and deeper version of this experience, including a good part of these exercises and statements, as well as the reflections made on them, was presented in the article *Experiencia de innovación en desarrollo profesional docente (Innovation Experience in Teacher Professional Development)* (Rodríguez-Sosa, Lingán, Hernández & Alhuay-Quispe, 2017).

The objective of the Specialization Program was to certify the 21 teachers as classroom teacher supervisors, who would subsequently perform the same functions with more extensive groups of in-service teachers, as part of the National Program for Teacher Education and Training (PRONAFCAP, for its Spanish acronym), a massive public program for teacher training of the MINEDU. The action-research component was inserted into the Specialization Program and consisted of three modules executed in 10 weeks: a total of 120 hours, 48 hours of classroom instruction and 72 hours of independent studies. Classroom instruction was delivered in two formats: workshops to introduce contents, procedures and cases connected with the topics of each module, and reflection circles to openly discuss those particularly relevant topics addressed in the workshops. This component was intended for teachers to understand the importance of incorporating critical reflection and self-inspecting attitude from their practices. Also, in that context, it was expected to explicate and question their beliefs, which supported what they did, favoring the exploration of new ways of conceiving and doing things.

Teachers' statements were collected in recordings in the reflection circles and workshop sessions. A first analysis route for the statements was longitudinal. It allowed to compare "what opinions teachers had when they

entered” and “what opinions teachers had when they left” to determine the changes they went through as a result of their participation in the component. A second analysis route studied the convergences and divergences in the perceptions of the facts. In both analysis routes, double-entry matrices were used: in the vertical entry, the teachers, and in the horizontal entry, the statements regarding the addressed topics. Useless statements were removed from that mass of information to then apply the conventional procedures of qualitative analysis: data collection, presentation, and interpretation (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

The methodological exercises were part of the products required in each module of the component and worked in groups of three teachers. The aim of these exercises was to strengthen and assess skills in the problem formulation, the identification of the causes of the problem, the justification of how the problem is addressed, and the solution proposal plan, as well as skills in the use of evidence and information. It was assumed that these exercises showed the teachers’ understanding of the research in general and the problematization of teaching in particular. They were assessed in terms of pertinence, relevance and grounds, taking into account that a problem is pertinent when identifiable in everyday teaching practice and can be addressed from the practice itself (Rodríguez Sosa, 2005), relevant when it is justified by the potential introduction of benefits (and beneficiaries) and/or by its practical implications in problem-solving (Hernández, Fernández-Collado & Baptista, 2007), and grounded when it is based in evidence collected in the field research (Slafer, 2009).

The previous study reports that the teachers have little or none willingness to self-inspect their practice (Gonzalez-Weil, Cortez, Pérez, Bravo & Ibaceta, 2013). The statements collected from the 21 teachers show that they perceive classroom problems as facts which origins should be looked for outside the teaching practice. Some of the recurrent areas are students’ personality traits or supposed limitations in their abilities. In connection with the former, it was mentioned *teenagers who have very little or no motivation for study*, or

*children who have no curiosity for any topic, who are not inquisitive, who do not try to discover [...] their lack of interest is in everything. With regard to the latter, it was mentioned that: it is difficult that they can learn something if they only understand half or less of what they read, then how we expect that they can understand what they are asked to solve in a problem. Another recurrent area was family problems: this boy is condemned by the poverty of his family [...] he may have academic ability, but the most important thing for his family is that he works and brings additional income into his family.*

Using this conception, teachers identify problems that, with some variations, have a sense similar to the following: *manifestations of disorder and bullying among students when working in non-conventional spaces (collective, participative, playful) in the classroom. The causes would be associated with this problem are: violent social environments, everyday violence at school or high levels of family destruction which are detrimental to the transmission of living rules and the compliance with basic rules, with similar levels of occurrence.*

As it can be seen, it is a biased approach to the problem that looks for its causes in an “other” outside *what occurs in the classroom* (student’s traits, problems in his/her family, school’s social environment), to which is attributed the ability to influence what the teacher can do, and that would be explaining poor performance or any other deficit, while simultaneously it hinders the necessary reflection on the own practices, an exercise that could lead teachers to finding out the problems in what they do (or fail to do) in the classroom. Additionally, in doing the exercise of anticipating some answers to the identified problems (or action hypothesis, if desired), searching outside the practices continued. As a result of this, the proposed solutions had to be processed outside school, even under the responsibility of actors other than school actors. This approach made it difficult to know the real situations teachers had to face, besides limiting the possibility of anticipating effective solution strategies, since it was done using problems that did not exist at school or that were perceived as very distorted.

The situation was gradually reverted as the component was carried out, particularly during the moments shared in the reflection circles, which allowed excellent opportunities for group reflection and open dialogue. However, this process of changes was not fluid but rather resisted. The first thing noticed was that although teachers agreed that reflecting systematically was important, they also thought that it was a complex process that involved making changes in the way they do things according to their beliefs and their skills. Consequently, despite the desired changes did not succeeded in all teachers or they did not happen in the same degree or within the same period, in most cases the ideas changed from *we have this problem caused by issues unrelated to the school, but it limits what we can do as teachers* into a different approach that questioned *how does addressing this kind of problems change the ways we do things (because we were not willing or we did not have the necessary skills)?*. This new approach placed the problems straight away in the field of the classroom practices, returning educational purpose to the solutions and a leading role to teachers.

Once identified, the said problem was addressed from a different perspective and defined as *the need to reach a consensus and specify activities, rules, and agreements with the students in order to optimize the non-conventional spaces in the classroom (collective, inclusive, and recreational works)*. The causes of this new problem were found in what the teacher does: *lack of methodologies for working in groups, little knowledge of exercises that encourage the involvement of students, or not enough tools to awaken interest and motivation*. The new approaches show that the teachers found the explanatory factors and possible solutions to the problems in areas more related to their scope of work and practices. These new approaches also suggest that, referring to attitude, teachers took positions prone to self-inspection of such practices.

The re-defined proposal -better said re-made, with a new approach- implied a drastic change: the approach where the teacher's role was not active: *signs of disorder and bullying between students during the work in*

*non-conventional spaces (collective, inclusive, and recreational works) in the classroom*, became into a one where the solution was part of the teacher's activity. Likewise, the causes of the problem were placed in the practice itself, identifying them as the lack of tools *for working in groups, students' involvement or motivation*. Thus, the intervention strategies should be focused on strengthening those abilities: *carrying out a workshop on inclusive exercises with teachers, the organizational redesign of the classroom, taking into account a dialogue space, agreements and decision-making; and allowing students to choose the key topics to be addressed during the non-conventional spaces*.

These changes show that the teachers no longer took these problems as situations coming from "outside" the school, but rather caused by what they have been doing and what has to be done, according to the characteristics and needs of the groups. Thanks to this, the teachers not only regain the ability to take part in the improvement of their practices, since they placed the problems within their scope of work, but they also expand the possibilities of involvement with solutions that, once implemented, should improve the education process at the same time.

The Insights of the Research (and of the Problematization of Teaching Practices) from Academic and School Perspectives

The critical theory in education claims that the education research is such if in the practice the teachers' abilities to produce educational knowledge is valued -and they are taken as leaders in the processes-, and main goal is the ongoing improvement of their practices (Elliot, 2010; McKernan, 1996; Carr & Kemmis, 1988). It is a paradigm that integrates the research into the teaching practices and the professional learning (Zeichner, 1993).

If these principles of the critical theory were taken into a real research program, it would imply a different kind of studies which would need a new researcher, a collective one involved in the situations about which it problematizes, observing from its own perspective, and that complements the



methodology with the teaching practices in order to create new understandings of the practices where these practices take place (Montecinos, Solis & Gabriele, 2001). This new situation would not exclude the academic researcher, but its involvement would be limited to strengthen the initiatives of the teachers, who would lead the different phases of the process: in the identification of problems (those considered by the teacher to be the most serious and urgent), in the selection of intervention strategies (those considered to be suitable and viable), in the assessment of the work (valuations and re-significations), and in the institutionalization of the changes (Rodríguez-Sosa, 2005).

Over the last three decades, this paradigm of critical education has raised as the hegemonic paradigm in the content of teaching programs in Latin American, while the real practice of these programs remains stagnant on the traditional models (Messina, 1999). In a similar way, the real Latin American education research has not gone through the path proposed by the research based on the practice, but it is still subject to the standards of conventional academic research.

The opinion of the researchers of the university sphere about the researches with inclusive methodologies and qualitative analyses may largely explain the separation between the academic research and the teacher education system (Molinari & Ruiz, 2009). As a result, the research has held an exceptional role in the school, a practice that also came from “outside”, with no links to the teaching practice (Imbernón, 2007). It was a research mainly carried out by academic researchers, professionals unrelated to the school (psychologists, sociologists, economists, among others), who covered topics selected based on their own perspectives and particular interests, putting aside and without systemic reflection the extensive field of the teaching practices (Molinari & Ruiz, 2009).

At the same time, or perhaps because of this, teachers conceive the problematization of their own practices as a unique and different fact unrelated to education, which could eventually be applied to what they do if there is a reason to do so. The self-inspection of what is done is not seen as a need

or as an essential component of education. There is not much willingness to add problematization elements into education, even less if those elements involve changing the processes that are part of the practices.

Some of the opinions given by the teachers at the beginning of the component show reasons based on skepticism about the contribution of the problematization of the practices in the improvement of the education: *If I do not have the knowledge of what I am going to teach or do not have the necessary methodologies, I am not going to teach well, even if I am aware of the problems and restrictions I have [...] I think that is the key issue. I could raise questions and challenges, or reasons to prioritize the develop of contents: A deep knowledge of the problems the students may have is important, but the priority is the contents [...] In a short time period, I prefer to develop all my contents and do it well.*

However, these opinions changed, at least partially, although based on them it was not possible to expect some level of change in the practices: *I apply the problematization. I speak for myself, not my colleagues. I question myself. I identify problems, obstacles, the so-called "bottleneck", while I am teaching. I always try to do things better, to seek solutions, and to pose challenges. Of course I do it informally, out of work time, when I am at home [...] I think it is useful somehow [...] You do this (problematize) if you are aware and committed to the teaching practice. I do not know if my colleagues do it, sure some of them do, but I do not know how they do it. Each of them must have its own method.* The statements on this point led to the conclusion that the teachers were not able to submit general ideas on how to apply the problematization to the teaching practice, whether during the exercises, the contents development, or the improvement of the activities or work materials.

## The Need for New Approaches in Teacher Continuing Education

Several studies in Latin America report realities where the curriculum designs are fragmented and have a weak connection with school contexts where teachers practice (Vaillant, 2009; Rodríguez, 2004). This disagreement between what schools want to do or can do -as expressed in the curricula- and local needs is one of the manifestations of the existing gaps between teacher initial training thought for other scenarios, in-service training aligned and supplementary to the former, and real schools' current needs. Naturally, the existence of these gaps, and the need to close them in the short term, is one of the main concerns of governments in matters of teacher training (OECD, 2005).

In response to this, Latin American governments have been easing their monopolies in continuing education programs gradually, opening to the participation of new operators as universities and other institutions (ONG, education institutes, reflection groups), which brought with them a discourse promoting the use of participatory methodologies and local actor empowerment programs (Flores-Kastanis, Montoya-Vargas & Suárez, 2009). However, unfortunately, the new operators did not incorporate into their programs the necessary pedagogical and organizational changes. On the contrary, they kept the traditional schemes, those limited to strength disciplinary contents and/or teaching methodologies, using remedial approaches and prescriptive logics (Fernandes, 2014; González-Weil, *et al.*, 2013). Training neither had nor has as priority teachers' strengthening in abilities and tools necessary to face the situations (problems, conflicts, dilemmas) that occur in the classroom, especially if what is sought is to respond to the needs from diverse groups using a contextualized teaching (Montero, 2011).

Fullan (2002; page 122) ironically claims that “teacher education has the honor of being, at the same time, the worst problem and the best solution of education”. In other words, training itself does not guarantee

that afterwards teachers will express what they learnt, introducing changes into their practices, and less so they will do it in the expected direction. The adoption of new ways of thinking and doing things need a belief basis aligned to those directions, as a condition to support teachers' willingness to change (Herrington, et. al., 2011). The literature on the field reports that change in teacher beliefs, which due to their nature are implicit and unconscious, is only possible with processes which support their explanation (Pozo, Scheuer, Mateos & Pérez, 2006). In that sense, training processes would have the necessary effects if they consider to operate with spaces where teachers can question their own beliefs, from reflective, open and self-critical perspectives, as an indispensable organizational condition (Chamizo & Garcia-Franco, 2013; Park Rogers, *et al.*, 2007; Vezub, 2007).

Ibernón (2001) states that the most appropriate teacher training is that delivered in groups which systematically use deliberative reflection in the methodological framework of action research. In this sense, a documentary review of experiences of this type conducted by Zeichner (2005), besides other specific studies (Chacón, Chacón & Alcedo, 2012; Yamin-Ali, 2010; Herrington et al., 2011; Megovan-Romanowicz, 2010; Ruiz-Mallen, Barraza, Bodenhorn, de la Paz Ceja-Adame & Reyes-García, 2010; Blanchard, Southerland & Granger, 2009; Maarof, 2007), reports findings that associate action-research with changes in teaching.

## **Conclusions**

The experience of the action-research component in the Specialization Program allowed to observe that teachers radically changed their perceptions on the typical problems in their practices, going from understanding them as situations that come from outside school to assuming them as something necessary to make changes in what is done, to align teaching with the needs of the addressed groups.

The teachers recovered the abilities of investing in their practices by situating the problems in their area of influence and associating the solutions with the introduction of teaching improvements. Even, the intervention proposals became understood as learning and professional development processes, while the use of academic research supporting those strengthening processes became making sense for teachers. These changes are consistent with that reported in the experiences that used action research methodologies in the strengthening of classroom problem identification and exploration skills (Yamin-Ali, 2010), or in the development of teacher's thoughtful reflection to improve their practices (Halim, Buang & Meerah, 2010).

Another important area of changes reported by the experience was referred to how to teach, what to prioritize and how to manage time available for that. The statements show movements from a conception of teaching referred to the transmission of contents as the essential purpose to a conception which values the fact of assessing the levels of efficacy of the different ways of teaching. The importance of these changes is that the said conceptions represent how teachers build their desired teaching models and support decision-making.

Finally, the experience of the component shows us that training would have to be understood as continuing educational processes pursuing changes in teacher practices, understanding that their achievement would mean necessarily going through previous changes in teachers' beliefs, perceptions and attitudes regarding teaching, while situating teaching as a constant object of problematization (Rodríguez-Sosa, 2005). It would not be a stochastic training far from (aligned to) practice, but a permanent training that would occur in the context of the same practice.

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