

Is Teaching Inside the Youth Mexican Prison System Inclusive?

Acire S. Gutierrez De Lucio; Hilda Hidalgo Avilés; Norma A. Espinosa Butrón

Universidad Autónoma del estado de Hidalgo

Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades (icshu). Pachuca de Soto, hgo. México

Email for correspondence: aciredelucio@gmail.com

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Director. PhD. Haydeé Ramírez Lozada. Phone: 2721459. Extension: 123/126

Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, Sede Esmeraldas. Calle Espejo, Subida a Santa Cruz, Esmeraldas. CP 08 01 00 65.Email: icdel@pucese.edu.ec. <http://revistas.pucese.edu.ec/ICDEL/index>

Abstract

In order to analyze if teaching inside the Youth Mexican Prison System is inclusive, a collaborative project was carried out with the participation of 17 pre-service teachers and 3 lecturers who participated in this study. The pre-service teachers taught English to 24 inmates in a Mexican prison adopting a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) using a one to one modality for 16 weeks. The three lectures observed the teaching performance of the pre-service teachers during this time. Using an auto ethnographic methodology, I analyzed my own process of teaching in terms of reading and writing to an incarcerated student and wrote weekly reflections to analyze my own teaching practice and two teachers who acted like mentors also wrote their weekly observations of our teaching process. Preliminary results show that teaching one to one in this context was a challenge for most of the student teachers, and some of them followed a “traditional” approach when teaching inmate students because of their beliefs. In terms of reading and writing, results are like the ones reported by Pérez (2001) who found that that reading is a socio-educational practice that incarcerated teenagers use to get distracted from their immediate reality. In addition, there is a notorious necessity of writing that comes with this reading, which is the opportunity to “show off” the knowledge inmates acquire within every book, magazine, article they read (Pérez, 2001). Inmates find learning English as a rewarding experience because it allows them to express their feelings and emotions as well as to imagine different worlds and escape from their reality. As a general conclusion, teaching incarcerated students allowed to build human relationships because learning English makes them feel included and accepted. And by doing so, their reality changes as they become active members of a learning community.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, auto ethnography, reading and writing practices, written reflections

Resumen

Para analizar si la enseñanza dentro del Sistema Juvenil de Prisiones Mexicanas es inclusiva, se realizó un proyecto colaborativo con la participación de 17 maestros de pre-servicio y 3 profesores que participaron en este estudio. Los maestros de pre-servicio enseñaron inglés a 24 reclusos en una prisión mexicana adoptando una pedagogía crítica (Freire, 1970) usando una modalidad uno a uno durante 16 semanas. Las tres conferencias observaron el desempeño docente de los maestros de pre-servicio durante este tiempo. Utilizando una metodología auto etnográfica, analicé mi propio proceso de enseñanza en términos de lectura y escritura a un estudiante encarcelado y escribí reflexiones semanales para analizar mi propia práctica docente y dos maestros que actuaron como mentores también escribieron sus observaciones semanales de nuestro proceso de enseñanza. Los resultados preliminares muestran que enseñar uno a uno en este contexto fue un desafío para la mayoría de los estudiantes docentes, y algunos de ellos siguieron un enfoque "tradicional" al enseñar a los estudiantes internos debido a sus creencias. En términos de lectura y escritura, los resultados son como los reportados por Pérez (2001), quien descubrió que la lectura es una práctica socioeducativa que los adolescentes encarcelados utilizan para distraerse de su realidad inmediata. Además, existe una notoria necesidad de escritura que viene con esta lectura, que es la oportunidad de "mostrar" el conocimiento que los internos adquieren en cada libro, revista, artículo que leen (Pérez, 2001). Los reclusos encuentran que aprender inglés es una experiencia gratificante porque les permite

expresar sus sentimientos y emociones, así como imaginar diferentes mundos y escapar de su realidad. Como conclusión general, la enseñanza a los estudiantes encarcelados permitió construir relaciones humanas porque aprender inglés los hace sentir incluidos y aceptados. Y al hacerlo, su realidad cambia a medida que se convierten en miembros activos de una comunidad de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: pedagogía crítica, auto etnografía, prácticas de lectura y escritura, reflexiones escritas

Introduction

It took many years to accomplish that children and teenagers can have mandatory education in Mexico. There exist some minorities that are claimed to be non-grateful people or to tend to be problematic are even more ignored by the system and treat as animals or objects. This means that the way in that they prefer to learn or the abilities the teacher may explode to their own benefit of learning are excluded or simply ignored, because their teachers prefer banking education rather than teaching them literacy. English teachers have the possibility of teaching to students who are aware of their world and free to use any resource possible, but when it comes to an isolated context in which neither the student nor the teacher has access to the most vain facilities, the strategy needs to change, and the focus stops being on the capability the student has to learn English, but the way in he/she learns and how well is comprehending it to use it in their future. The aim of this project is to clarify the perspective of education inside a jail to teens in Mexico, in addition to look up the domination of this oppressing system in which they learn what the system wants and how it affects an English teacher the difference of teaching “inside” jail learners and to teach with learners “outside” jail.

In addition to this, I emphasize my research to talk about the importance it has to and incarcerated student to be able to read and write about their feelings, life, emotions or simply their day, as a way of promoting their freedom and enhancing their critical thinking, in order to loop up for better opportunities and understanding of their lives, and the impact it showed in my own teaching. “Violence is not a problem linked to poverty or marginalization, but rather to the deterioration of life conditions, family disintegration, and the low expectations of teenagers and young adults about the future.” (Velazquez, M. R., & Mendez, J. 2015, p.2)

In 2014, 42000 Mexican adolescents were accused of committing robbery, property damage, drug dealing, and violent acts among others. Until this day, only 14% of them have been judged or completed their sentence, while the rest is still waiting for their trial. (Roldan, N., 2016). Yagoub, M. (2016) would argue that because of Mexico’s slow judicial process, many youths are kept in custody for years or months, sometimes in an unfair way. Only in that year, in four states, 16,000 were arrested by their participation in serious felonies. 78% of them were between 16 and 18 years old. 64% of these teens argued that they contributed their wages to be able to maintain or contribute to the maintenance of their families.

“Since they are denied from their legal rights and are constantly abused by the system that is supposed to help them and guide them towards reintegration, they fall into delinquency again” (Azaola. 2014). Regarding to abuse inside the institutions in which young Mexican delinquents were secluded, 76% suffered physical and

psychological abuse from the authorities, 62% were never told what crime they had committed and 47% did not even know they had the right to a lawyer (Azaola, E. 2014). In the worst situation, “Young delinquents are more likely to turn to crime as a survival option -- both inside and outside of prisons.” (Yagoub, M., 2016)

In Foucault’s view (1975) the prisons are organizational institutions with the absolute power to administrate people. In addition, prisons are aimed to produce discipline bodies, subjects to control through surveillance and regulation. “The more obedient the body, the more useful it is to society in terms of economic utility” (Foucault, 1975). Ortiz, A. (2014) divides education inside the Mexican prisons in the two terms of education, “Reintegration” and “Readaptation”.

On one side Ortiz gives us the concept of readaptation, which basically is reconstructing the negative factors of the convict in order to integrate them again in society; in other words, is to change the route of their life into one that is not deviated from the accepted behavior inside society. However, the term since to be too ambitious and is a too narrowed view of Foucault’s perspective because it roughly means to suppress some attitudes and replace them with others.

On the other side, Ortiz also says that reintegration sees the convict as real person who presents a lot of lacks in the fields of social life, health and personal issues. Griffiths, C., Dandurand, Y, and Murdoch, D. (2007) defines: “Social reintegration is often understood as the support given to offenders during their re-entrance into society following imprisonment” (p.6). A broader definition, however, encompasses several interventions undertaken following an arrest to divert offenders away from the criminal justice system to an alternative measure, including a restorative justice process or suitable treatment. In a more extensive definition, they mention that reintegration involves a series or number of different interventions undertaken that follow the arrest and sentence to include restorative processes during their imprisonment. For instance, it can include correctional programs and aftercare interventions due to issues with drugs or substance abuse.

Despite the effort of reforming the term of “readaptation” to “reintegration” in all the prison systems of Mexico, the duty of teaching inside a Centro de Reinserción Social (CERESO) is a hard goal to accomplish. As seen in the newspaper Animal Politico (2016), the conditions and the treatment that interns receive as well as teachers are the factors that retard the expect effect of this change in the law. Constant abuse from their partners or even the staff of the institution towards those adolescents looking for reintegration or finishing their school in an honest manner, simply stops the progress of them and demotivates them to keep going in the process. Similarly, the way in which teachers are threaten by staff or directives, makes difficult to other teachers to volunteer or accept a job as “Maestro Penitenciario”.

This kind of teachers must confront not only the way they are treated by authorities and staff, but they must deal with having to teach students of different academics knowledge who may have different gaps in different subjects. In addition, Flores (2012) says: “Teachers also argued that their students were intelligent in ways that were not measured by traditional academic metrics” (p.2). This means, that learners may present better

capability to understand certain subjects like math or science, rather than others like literature or history. In order to accomplish this, teachers are forced to improvise their classes and adapt materials to different kind of levels so they can fulfil the academic lacks of knowledge in the students of the group so they can achieve the scoring for the last-term exam of public education (Flores, 2012).

Teaching with love is a key component in liberator pedagogy (Freire, 1970). Flores (2012) discusses about the power of inspiring students and encouraging them with different academic programs that boost their self-confidence, and facilitates learning by self-expression, like poetry. Thus, exploding the areas in which they may have not been successful before but finding a common understanding by expressing themselves to the world and proving them “wrong”. Texts written by ex-inmates, novels about freedom and liberty as well as history narratives would help learners to inspire by using marginalized groups into their own culture and experiences.

Theoretical Framework

In the universe of incarcerated youth, I am using critical theory to, criticize and point out not only the fact that prisoners are seen depersonalized objects but is also used in recent times to criticize the attempt of changing this perspective of the law. In this specific context, those who are oppressed are mainly the youth prisoners who are not allowed or private to keep studying inside the CERESOs, or that are simply being treated as adults because of the weight their actions had in legal terms. The problem is, that because of the recent change and the surreality in which Mexican prisons are administrated, is difficult for citizens to understand an approve the change from Readaptation to Reintegration. The reason is merely the fact that it is not believed to be a useful strategy against who those teens that are being called convicts or “ingrate”.

Reintegration inside this kind of institutions is being constantly retarded by the same directives that are supposed to take care of the youth, the ones that are supposed to aim them to change the route of their lives and to make them feel that they are able to change and that there are more options than crime. Nevertheless, we land in the issue of not being accustomed to a system in which we believe, that allowing young criminals the rights they deserve by law, we are condemning them to a life of maintenance from the government without actually paying for their crimes.

As an oppressed group, inmates are neglected to express their feelings nor accept forgiveness from society. This means that even when reading and writing seem to be critical strategies to idealize a better road to follow, the prison system does not offer this opportunity of idealization to their students due to a lack of knowledge in the topic and how this expression can contribute to their internal freedom.

Method

In Mexico, there are 214 inmates for every 100,000 inhabitants according to a study realized by the newspaper “El País” in 2015. Azaola (2016) in a study realized for UNESCO states that there are 13,217 teenagers incarcerated in Mexico for diverse crimes. In Pachuca de Soto, Hgo, the System of Integrated justice for Teenagers

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is the actual house of 24 inmates which are fulfilling their sentence with society due to crimes related with murder, rape or kidnapping.

Unlike the CERESO from the same city, it does not offer workshops or working centers for the young inmates but does offer the high-school level of education which is from 15 to 18 years old. From all the students, only a 20% have the required academic level to complete a CENEVAL test, while the rest still does not have full knowledge on writing and reading in Spanish neither another language. The classroom setting is complemented by four classrooms with a whiteboard and a small desk for the teacher but not enough chairs for the students. The guards are in charge of dismissing the inmates from their chores during the hour of class and sending them to the classrooms, however, while this should took only one minute, it ends up taking up until 10 due to that learners are commanded to bring the missing chairs to the classroom so it is enough space for everyone.

Classes take only one hour and after that the inmates prepare themselves to see their relatives in the hour of visit. Students are assigned from one to two for each teacher. There are 17 teachers, all of them students from the B.A. on English Language Teaching from the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, for the 24 students, 4 of them which are girls, and the rest are young men. In my own personal case, it is only on one student referred in this paper as "Dael" which is 16 years old, only 5 years younger than me.

The general purpose is to attempt to prompt teachers to focus on their students' abilities like reading and writing in order to make them interested in English as a foreign language and promote the language as a tool for empowering them and a source for better opportunities in their near future. This purpose in my own personal view seems to lack from a full perspective of empowering them, because as it is true that we are giving them the opportunity of acquiring a voice this is not being fully explored.

Also, to determine a better perspective in this context, I'm using Freire's philosophy of education, in which he states that the domination of some by others must be overcome, in his view, so that the humanization of all can take place. The authoritarian forms of education constitute an obstacle to the liberation of humans, or in this case the inmates from the prison. The means of this liberation is a process of action and reflection, which simultaneously names reality and acts to change it. "To speak a true word is to transform the world" (Freire 1996, p. 68).

In Freire's view, the power of imagination to think outside the box is capable of a radical and productive vision of what has been given. It is in this capacity that everyone's humanity consists, and for this reason it can never be the gift of the teacher to the student. Rather, educator-student and student-educator work together to mobilize the imagination in the service of creating a vision of a new society. Such as the dialectical exchange between reading a text and writing one that reflects the own reality of an inmate in an incarcerated context.

This latter refers to the Problem-Posing pedagogy, which

“...Is an alternative that sees the teacher and the student both as active, transforming participants in the educational experience. The problem-posing model encourages dialogue and critical thinking, and it values the previous knowledge and experience of the student as important to consider as the student develops into a being with the potential to change the world.” (The waterhole project, 2013)

Finally, by using auto-ethnography, defined by Adams, Jones, and Ellis as: “a research method that uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences. Acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others. . . Shows 'people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles’” (Adams, 2015). I'm intended to look up for a critical strategy to change mi own view of teaching a language by using two skills: Reading and Writing. In order to accomplish that I am using self-reflections about my teaching inside the prison with one student, and allowing the possibilities for new methods of teaching English, by finding an intermediate point between acquisition, autonomy and teaching language skills and also focusing on what is really meaningful for the student, not to be interested only in the context nor the resources that surround his immediate world.

Results and Discussion

According to my information, taken out of my own reflections done in this project week after week (except for two weeks) after teaching in the Center of Integrated Justice for Teenagers in Pachuca, Hgo. I have categorized my findings in two main topics which are: The impact of teaching in an isolated context, & Reading and writing towards freedom. To analyze some of my results I made some comparisons with my own experiences as teacher outside the prison. In the first one I analyze how this context of isolation and low resources has affected me to teach in an outsider context which is rich in materials and resources as well as the way in which a critical strategy allows teachers to have a better perspective of their own work, in this case, me. In other hand, at the second category, I explore the implications of these two sub-skills on an incarcerated learner in order to help me as a teacher to adopt a better personality and method towards the external groups in my charge.

The impact of teaching in an isolated context

There is a huge difference between working with students that can search up for things or to have a little bit of autonomy, and with a student who has forbidden any time of electronic or communicational device from outside the installations. Moreover, the only way of acquiring some knowledge or to develop a greater level of acquisition is by the interaction with his teacher. As a teacher, this works hard because the classes are just one hour per week, in which we do not have plenty opportunity to look up for things as in depth as we would like to.

In the role of being a teacher, I can contrast this with my students from an elementary school, who have any kind of information source at the reach of their hands, or the teens I'm in charge of at the university center of languages. So, I had to adopt an emergency strategy so that he would go with me at the same pace of teaching-learning. For this, I asked what his best interests were, and it turned out that reading was his favorite activity, because it made him felt free about his context. In this way, I realized that reading would permit me to teach him

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English without using any kind of specific methodology, but more a system of proof and error, and to utilize a systematic analysis of the language that was use in the different readings of different genres.

By focusing on the interests of the learner I was indirectly analyzing the type of learner he is and what was going to be more useful than simply baking grammatical rules and commands or language functions. Moreover, I am considering his own necessities and his opinion towards their preferences of learning, which is in certain way a form of empowering.

This turned out to happen with me during the classes inside the prison, as I was teaching, since the beginning that I realized he was keen on reading, I never supposed he would know more than a few authors because he specified what genres he preferred to read. Then again, doing more questions and using some activities to find out what we were going to do in our final product, I realized he enjoyed even fairytales as when he saw a picture of Hans Christian Andersen he immediately recognized him and said: “This one was the one who wrote Cinderella and those things, I know because my mom used to give me that books when I was a kid.” (Gutiérrez, 2018).

During my teaching cycles inside and outside the prison, I started to use a method in which the student would be in touch with new things regarding their own personal interests, not only in the present but using a future perspective of their lives. For instance, if the students are into listening music, (all kinds or specific genres) I would bring to class songs that are related to the main like but with some variations. In addition, the lyrics would be meaningful, either to the topic we are learning in class or the recent events or topics we had touch. The results show that they are more interested students not only in the language or passing the exams but on the themes and the teaching material. With this, their motivation is increased, and they came to class in a better mood, with more open ideas and bigger expectative to accomplish.

Motivation towards learning is not only a matter of good grades. It means much more for the students than what the first sight gives. If we consider what it is going inside their minds, we turn their expectative not only to be able to “communicate”, rather we empower them to learn the language as a personal goal. Dael for example, during the last sessions of the project, asked me for more information about concrete phrases and expressions that he could use in a conversation. His reasons were that some of his partners, (also included in this project), were bragging about that during the recess times, and he wanted to prove he was able to speak to. It may seem like a vain reason, but this pushed him down the road during the last phases of the project. There is no great difference regarding this with the students outside the prison. Their principal goal is learning English to teach their parents, or to prove their family they can speak in English during at least a few times without committing big mistakes.

Reading and writing towards freedom

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Being able to read or being literate does not precisely mean a person does not commit mistakes in their life. Nevertheless, well exploited, it means an opportunity to look forward to a point of no return to delinquency. In this context, Dael confessed to me feeling alone at times but not quite regretful about his actions.

When I found out that Dael was into reading, I assumed that then he would like to write too. And I was right, he told me, that writing a diary and drawing on it was one of the things he enjoyed the most because it made him feel free about everything else.

So, in order to teach him the basic things of English, like words, phrases, the alphabet, verbs etc. I encouraged him to read towards his own learning, so he could achieve much more from the page of a book than from me just repeating him the alphabet once and again and again. When I did this, I noticed that the things I was teaching them he was remembering them the most than the first classes that I talked him about them. For example, from the reflection I wrote on February 8th, I taught him the alphabet using some phonetic symbols and also using the same letters with the Spanish phonology to teach him the right pronunciation and I believed it work as I wrote: He seemed to enjoy a lot to hear what the difference between the pronunciation in English and Spanish is. (Gutiérrez, 2018).

However, when I started to read with him and to analyze the language used in the context of the book, he seemed to forget the pronunciation and we needed to start all over again.

It worked better of course, because not only he remembered, almost everything, of the pronunciation that I taught him during the first chapter of the book we were reading together, but he also remember some grammar structures like the past tense with some regular verbs and the progressive with some verbs with the termination –ing. When I asked him about the verbs with the suffix –ing, he explained me accurately what the purpose of the termination in the verbs was. (Gutiérrez, 2018)

I preferred to start teaching reading techniques for comprehension rather than applying texts to teach grammar and vocabulary. And with that I noticed that there was a process of acquisition of the language, like it happens with a natural approach. By being in contact with the language, the learner acquires the word and remembers instead of just banking the information the teacher gives him/her and applies it to an exam.

Something similar I did with the writing skill. Instead of performing activities in which Dael had to fill in gaps or choosing true or false, etc. I promote him to write about anything he was concerned about. Then we ended up writing a story of his election, about the topic of his election. Of course, he chose to write about what happened in his life, so he was incarcerated.

The topic was not actually the important thing. It was my concern to see how he wrote about things, not only that but everything, and to confirm if he was learning something by reading. It occurred, that he began to feel more confident about their own abilities and started to receive even better the knowledge I was trying to share with him.

This turns out to be useful in my other class with my “outside” students, and it had a great impact in my teaching methods as well. By allowing and promoting my students to write a diary, a journal, a story or whatever, they feel empowered and with a voice, in which someone is willing to read their own reflections of their learning for example. This feeling of being empowered turns into a skill, and this skill transforms into an internal and external motivating factor. Having this feeling of being in charge, allows the mind of the learner to receive the language input in a more open way and with a critical perspective to analyze it rather than just remembering.

Finally, by prompting the critical perspective of the language in the student, we allow the mind to think better, to feel better and part of the “class” or the “group” or even the society, because his/her voice is being listened and taken into account when planning a class.

Conclusions

Working inside a difficult context should be an experience any former teacher experiment. I believe that my work may show a different perspective about teaching and may suggest the use of different techniques to develop a lesson plan when it comes to difficult students. Instead of working with the same approach all over the time, I’m certain that looking further to critical pedagogical techniques helps not only the student but the teacher as well as the relationship they both share inside the classroom.

Apart from working in a prison, teachers may learn from my experience, that instead of assuming what students prefer to learn, they may have different tastes no matter if the vainest interest is, it can be useful for their process of learning. English teachers as me, may start looking at the learners like an important part or an active member of the teaching cycle, instead of just the receptor of a bank.

The Mexican prison system is unlikely to change soon, despite that, as we encourage the inmate learners to see beyond their own reality and to travel free from their own minds, we may be changing a little bit the reality of the prison system. With this, as we take part in the lives of the learners, we prompt their way out of delinquency as a form of problem-posing, as we confront their own reality by treating them as the inmates, they are but without the restrictions they face every day. We empower them like no one inside their nucleus does, we open the view of the world they have, and they may be able to understand that they are way better than what society makes them feel. But for this to be achieved, we as teachers need to be educated towards this critical pedagogy, so we are prepared to confront this context, or different ones.

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