

Autobiographic Essays of Teaching Experience to obtain the Master's degree at Pedagogical University of Veracruz, Mexico.

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Abstract

This paper argues that the curricular incorporation of autobiographical essays in the pedagogical formation of basic education teachers can:

- 1 Bring focus, determination, and improve the quality of their teaching practices through introspective analysis and the learning potential of dialogue in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).
- 2 Outline the ways in which an autobiographic approach may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of learning within the education system settings.

This paper presents the findings of a survey on the characteristics, potential and opportunities arising from a seminar course implemented with students of the *Masters of Basic Education* (MEB) and the *Masters of Special Education with Inclusive Approach* (MEEEI) at Pedagogical University of Veracruz (UPV), Mexico, in September 2016. In this seminar course (*Seminar of support for the Degree, SAT*), Masters students were asked to produce autobiographical analysis in order to graduate.

In this sense, this essay will begin by describing five of the theoretical concepts that underlie our researching practices on the education of adults, and in this case, the education of elementary school teachers. After that it will be described the characteristics of SAT, the problematic context from which it emerges, its articulation to the MEB and MEEEI curricula, as well as the characteristics, structure and methodological strategies employed in the production of the *Autobiographic Essays of Teaching Experience*. In a second moment I will present the characteristics of the study that I am reporting to this conference, on the autobiographical essays of teaching experience, questions, assumption and research objectives, the methodological strategy used and the findings. Finally I will present some conclusive comments.

1. Some key concepts

To address the complexity of the object of study, we chose an anti-essentialist or postmodern epistemological approach, which is identified with the questioning and denial, from different fields (sciences, aesthetics, politics, philosophy) of the absolute or universal character of modernity thought; a perspective that renounce to political, theoretical, ethical meta-narratives, absolute truths, globalizing strategies, the search for metanarratives or metahistorical truths. This perspective allows the construction of useful, valuable and rigorous knowledge.

Among the authors who contribute to erode the absolute character of the foundations of modern thought are Wittgenstein (1953), Rorty (1979), Foucault (1992), Vattimo (2009), Lacan (1994), Žižek (1992), Derrida (1989, 1985), Laclau (1990) Laclau & Mouffe (1989), Kuhn (1962) and Feyerabend (1987). Although each one of these authors works different study objects, certain shared lines or theoretical equivalences can be seen in their approaches.

From this epistemological perspective, tools of the narrative biographical approaches of Piña (1999), Denzin (1989), Bertaux (2005), Formenti (2009), Dominicé

(2006), Bolívar *et al* (2001), Bolívar (2002), Bolívar & Domingo (2006) and González (2015) are conceptually articulated, with theoretical perspectives that emphasize the formative value of the teacher's retrospective reflection on their professional experience. like those by Dávila, (2011), Perrenoud (2004), Trujillo (2012), De Lella (2003), Caporossi (2009).

From all the theoretical tools advanced by these authors, I will recover only six for this paper.

Overdetermination. The concept of overdetermination is introduced by Althusser who in turn takes it from Freudian psychoanalysis, a field in which it is defined as a process that is not a simple "fusion" or "mixture" (a situation that would make it compatible with any form of multicausality), but that supposes multiple forms of symbolic forwarding and a plurality of senses. Laclau and Mouffe (1989) argue that the concept of overdetermination is constituted in the field of the symbolic and lacks all meaning outside of it.

According to these authors overdetermination involves multiple symbolic forwardings and processes of condensation and displacement, two movements that occur inside.

- The *condensation* is the point that represents a multiplicity of meanings, implying a symbolic reentry and a plurality in which the specificity of the elements is not lost in the fusion.
- The *displacement* that alludes to the circulation of a meaning through different signifiers. In terms of political discourse analysis refers to the re-sending of a symbolic charge from one signifier to another, it is the transit, circulation, remission, transfer, step, of a significant load of one signifier to another or others.

This definition is very useful to avoid the temptation to explain social practices or relationships based on a cause or a determining essence ultimately.

Diachronic observation and synchronic observation . Regarding Salcedo and De León (2003),

The collection of data in social sciences can be done through several periods of time or in a single period of time. The first of these observations is called diachronic and the second is synchronous. In synchronous methodologies, time is not a relevant variable because observations and measurements are made in the same period. [...] On the other hand, in diachronic methodologies time is important because observations are made through several periods or instants of time. (2003: 376).

However I consider important to recover Laclau when he says that

Diachrony, insofar as it appears subject to rules, insofar as it tries to capture the meaning of a succession, is also synchronous [...] The 'spatialization' of an event consists in the elimination of its temporality, temporality it must be conceived as the exact opposite of space "(1990: 58)

Milestone (Fictus). Term that according to González (2015), comes from the latin *fictus* and has had different uses in geography, history, mathematics, but for the purposes of the SAT, designates a construction, event, process or extreme event (adverse or favorable) that is very significant for the autobiographer, since it marks in his teaching itinerary “*a before*” and “*an after*”. These milestones are relevant insofar as they trigger changes in the teaching identity (such as the decision to enter the teaching profession by

renouncing a previous profession, pursuing a master's degree or a specialization, seeking a change), they can appear at local, regional, national or international levels and may occur in an overdetermined manner in different contexts:

- a family (marriage, divorce, birth of a child, death of a family member or someone close to the autobiographer);
- b economical or labor (a financial crisis, unemployment, a promotion, a layoff, getting a job);
- c geopolitical (an armed conflict, the emergence of criminal groups, the entry of macro-economic policies that produce changes in national labor and/or educational policies, geographical, environmental, meteorological events that cause a change in the place of residence or work of the autobiographer).

Formation. Important for the argumentation that will be developed later is the way we conceptualize this notion, following Honoré.

Formation is a process that goes from an experience to its elucidation in common, from an originality to its deepening by a confrontation of a difference with the establishment of a reciprocal recognition. [...] It is the ability to transform the daily events generally lived on the horizon of a collective personal project into meaningful experience. (1980: 34)

From these concepts developed above, we can say that the formation of a teacher's identity is an overdetermined process in which it is possible to observe diachronically and synchronously, condensations and displacements between the different temporalities through which it transits and between different contextual elements and realms of social life, not necessarily related with school settings.

These theoretical tools and epistemological logics allow a device of approximation that considerably extends the field of objectivity creating the conditions for thinking numerous non-essentialist relationships, where discourses, identities, influences, subject positions, relationships etc. are not static or monolithic. The notion of overdetermination allows to delimit relational, precarious, open and unstable significant constellations (influences coming from family, school, theoretical discourses, social movements, labor, political influences, etc.) that propose models to follow, that is, they interpellate to the identities of the autobiographers, as the temporalities in which they disaggregate their narratives are passing.

1. The curricular incorporation of the *Seminario de Apoyo a la Titulación* (SAT)

My argumentation will depart from the recognizing of two of the most worrying and pressing problems of México's National Education System.

The first one is related with the fact that, as in Educational Systems of many other countries in the world, in Mexico there persists the problem of low terminal efficiency in postgraduate programs. That is, the number of graduates is significantly less than the number of applicants who enter these programs. The postgraduate programs in educational matters do not escape to this problem, and that has been the case in the postgraduate programs (masters and PhDs) in UPV, in Mexico.

The second one refers to the national debate on how to raise the quality of basic education, considering the low results that Mexico has obtained in the Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) undertaken by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The debate was ignited because the solution that the Mexican State gave in response to this problem was to establish an "Educative Reform" that, among other measurements has conditioned the permanence in the service of the teachers (and the improvement of their salary and working

conditions), to the results they obtain in a program of periodic evaluations to which they must obligatorily submit. The debate has grown worst because, despite the promise of improving the conditions of the entire National Education System, in reality this has not been the case. Not enough attention has been paid to improving the conditions of schools, to favor access to education for socio-economically disadvantaged students, improve or strengthen the curriculum of basic education, promote teachers training. The main part of the budget for public basic education has gone to establish the periodic evaluation for teachers. The effects of this debate have polarized the different realms of national life and have led to teachers' stoppages, strikes that have been object of military repressions, deaths, etc., effects that in nothing have contributed to improve the educational quality

The Autobiographic Essays of Teaching Experience to obtain the Master's degree, one response from UPV to the national debate.

In a similar perspective to the one raised by Honoré, the *curricula* of the MEB and of the MEEEI are based on the daily practices of the in-service-teachers-students, who have to study their own practices, to review and examine them in the light of pertinent theoretical tools, in order to understand and transform them, resignifying and systematizing their teaching work. These Masters programs seek to provide the students with theoretical-methodological tools that lead them to analyze their own professional practices, based on a process of reflection-action, aimed at improving their professional performance.

In this sense the last terms of both Masters programs include seminars that point to support the students to obtain the degree (SATs), which constitute the closure of the training path of these masters. So, seeking to increase the levels of terminal efficiency of the graduate programs of UPV, as well as to offer to students a final, deep, critical, hermeneutic and formative exercise of reflection on their teaching identity, Trujillo *et al* (2016) introduced the option of *Autobiographical Essays of Teaching Experience*, where the participant is required to review and recover, individually and in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), the *itinerary* of their teaching identity.

Here it is important to remember that the *itinerary*

reconstructs the life story of the subjects under a semantic perspective, that is to say, recovering the meanings that the processes, the events and the displacements of those subjects or their family have. [...] Its peculiarity lies, unlike the trajectory, in that the line it traces is not straight, nor in a circle but in a spiral, that returns without ceasing and without ceasing it moves away from the point of departure. [...] The itinerary responds to a temporal logic [where ...] past and present are not contiguous, but the one is included in the other. (García, 2000: 16)

The tasks developed in building these essays are coordinated in a double and simultaneous strategy:

- 1st : The work in groups of students that are in-service-teachers, working together in PLCs, sharing and discussing the way and the social influences that led them to become elementary school teachers. The questions to be solved are: Which influences (from family, historical and geopolitical contexts they lived, school spaces, groups of friends) shaped their professional identity? Which of those have favored/unfavored their decisions since childhood, adolescence, and their professional practice? Which of these influences are recalled as positive or negative, why? What did they have to give up to become primary school teachers?

2nd : The work of writing, both individually and in PLCs, with the support of the theory and knowledge built in their professional practices and in the Masters they are concluding,

- **In past time**, reconstructing their experiences: Which over-determinations (in time and space, and among the different realms) influence their professional identity, and are now present in the way they teach elementary school?, How conflictive or limit situations contributed to shape their professional identities?;
- **In present time**, recognizing the effects of their professional practices and of the decisions taken, in: their professional successes and failures, in their families and relatives, but also in themselves (do they feel symptoms of “teachers’ burn out”?), Do they feel their health has decreased? Was working in PLCs potentially useful towards learning about themselves, and towards enhance togetherness?
What have been the costs of their professional decisions and of everything to what they have renounced?
- **In a prospective way**, drawing on the routes they want to walk: professionally, in relation with their families and relatives and in relation with their own interests, their physical and mental health. Extrapolating Dominicé’s words (2006), the point here is to use autobiographies as a research practice for inventing tomorrow’s life.

In this regard and by articulating many of the intelligibility tools described above, the students prepare an essay integrated by three major sections:

Section 1. Starting point. Here it is required from the participants to re-read and process the theoretical sources to write a presentation of the theoretical methodological tools with whose support they carry out in their research: epistemological positioning, characteristics of the biographical narrative approach, the notions of experience, experience and teaching practice, as overdetermined practice, synchronic and diachronic observation, among others. And on the other hand, they must to describe the methodological strategy for the retrieval of information and for the interpretation of the information collected in doing their autobiographies.

Section 2. How we became teachers? To write this section of the essay the participants rely on two types of instrument that are first individually requested, and then discussed in PLCs. These instruments are:

- The Guide Questionnaires with which they trace the influences that along with their itineraries, were overdetermined in their teaching identities.
- The Formats for the tracking of condensations and displacements in the itineraries, with which they trace the genealogy of their teaching identity and the ways in which the influences have been overdetermined in it, along with 4 open temporalities (not fixed or monolithic), some of which can be overdetermined and/or overlaped with the others:
1st Childhood and adolescence,
2nd Bachelor studies and the stage of the decision to enter teaching,
3rd Teaching professional practice and
4th Formative stage when they were studying the MEB or the MEEEI

These formats allow the students to observe and

- **describe synchronously** how some elements of the context (family, school, geopolitical, etc.) of each temporality are articulated to the identity of each teacher, tracking the beginnings (Ursprung or

Entstehung, Nietzsche would say) of the teaching identity and the modifications that this one is suffering.

- **narrate diachronically** the ways in which the influence of certain aspects, events, events and/or milestones is displaced and persists throughout the four temporalities condensing, articulating, changing, re-structuring, resignifying, in what today they are like teachers. (González, 2016) . Here the corresponding format is shown in Illustration 1.

BIOGRAMA 2 RASTREO DE LAS CONDENSACIONES Y DESPLAZAMIENTOS EN EL ITINERARIO DE LA IDENTIDAD DOCENTE EN LA SEGUNDA TEMPORALIDAD DE LOS ESTUDIOS DE LICENCIATURA. NIVELES DIACRÓNICO Y SINCRÓNICO

TESISTA: _____

FECHA: _____



TEMPORALIDAD DE: _____ A: _____	HITOS O ASPECTOS QUE INFLUYEN EN LA FORMACIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD DOCENTE	ESTOS HITOS FAVORECE(N) LA IDENTIFICACIÓN/RECHAZO CON O LA TOMA DE DECISIÓN:	CÓMO SE DESPLAZAN Y CONDENSAN ESTOS ELEMENTOS A NIVELES SINCRÓNICO Y DIACRÓNICO	QUÉ RESULTADOS SE PRODUCEN
SEGUNDA TEMPORALIDAD: LOS ESTUDIOS DE LICENCIATURA			<p>Los elementos que se desplazan, condensan y re-articulan, desde la temporalidad anterior, son</p> 	
	EN EL PLANO DE LO FAMILIAR		 <p>Lo anterior, aunado a lo de esta temporalidad se condensa de este modo, o con estas características</p>	

Ilustración 1. The formats for tracking overdeterminations (condensations and displacements) in the itineraries. González (2016)

In *Section 3. By way of arrival: Closing and Opening Who are we today as teachers?*, the teachers must do a located metacognition exercise in CPAs, to consider their strengths and weaknesses, the formative experiences that the retrospective collegial exercise offered them and build a pending agenda and an improvement plan for their teaching identity.

In methodological terms, the autobiographical inquiry that gives rise to these essays, is based on a **strategy of gathering information** that triangulates

- a) Documentary research, where personal, professional documents, bibliohemerographic materials of theoretical, contextual and/or methodological content are analyzed
- b) Self-interviews, based on three types of questionnaires.
- c) Discussion groups in Professional Learning Communities

On the other hand, the **strategy for the analysis and interpretation of the information collected**, combined

- a) The use of theoretical tools
- b) The develop of synchronic and diachronic analyzes, based on formats as presented in Illustration 1, that is, one biogram format for each one of the four temporalities proposed (González, 2015):
- c) The production of metacognitive reflections on the constitution of the teaching identity and on the autobiographical experience.

Autobiographic Essays of Teaching Experience. The research.

In this section, I will present the characteristics of the study that I am reporting in this conference based on the autobiographical essays of teaching experience, the questions, assumption and research objectives, the methodological strategy used and the findings.

The methodological strategy to retrieve the information triangulated:

- a. semi-structured interviews to a non-representative sample of 20 students from both master's programs who completed their reception papers at the Xalapa headquarters of the SATs,
- b. interviews with 4 academics who work in the reference programs ; and
- c. review of a sample of completed autobiographical essays from both graduate programs.

Based on the above, the research reported here sought to answer two questions

- 1 How does the MEB and MEEEI graduates of the UPV signify the autobiographical experience of their teaching identity: what benefits do they recognize they have had, what difficulties, advantages and disadvantages identify in the process, what topics, situations and elements of the context are overdetermined in their narratives, what agendas are raised at the end of the exercise?
- 2 What is the productivity of the strategy of establishing the individual and collective re-construction, both of the professional trajectories and of the formative trajectory in the postgraduate course, through autobiographical narratives as a final integrative exercise to obtain the academic degree?

The following research objectives were derived from the previous questions :

- 1 Understand the meanings built by the professors-students who graduate from the MEB and the MEEEI, about the autobiographical reconstruction and collaborative work, the formation of their teaching identity: productivity, difficulties, advantages and disadvantages that they find when exercising , the themes, situations and elements of the context that are overdetermined in their

narratives, the agendas that are posed at the end of these reflections.

- 2 Assess the contribution of this type of seminar to the curricular purposes of the MEB and the MEEEI and to the challenge of increasing the terminal efficiency of these Masters programs and the challenge of improve the quality of in service teachers of the elementary level.

Results at the time of closing this work

As Dominicé (2000) says,

A learning process occurs through narrating, especially when a life history method is used consciously in higher education, it is the method which can facilitate construction of knowledge. Learning from our lives and through life story telling might also arise when the life story is used as research method.

In this regard and in relation to the first objective of the meanings built by the students along with the autobiographical exercise, it is interesting to see that the 20 interviewees value it positively, mentioning that it allowed them to

- Focus their pedagogical and didactic strengths and weaknesses (10 cases)
- Do metacognitive analysis on aspects to which they do not normally have access (2)
- Approach internal and external reasons for their feelings of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their profession (7) or against their positive or negative self-assessments (6)
- Value themselves more positively by seeing the obstacles they have faced and overcome (5)
- Value themselves more positively and develop resilience in the face of the complexity of the teaching profession (14)
- Learn to investigate (8)

In another direction, not all the academics interviewed rated positively this option as

- 1 of them thought that it is very difficult to believe that an autobiography has methodological rigor, due to the very nature of this type of research not yet consolidated.
- 3 of them pointed out that concepts such as *overdetermination*, *condensation*, *displacement*, *diachronic observation* and *synchronic observation* are very complex for the students of these kind of Masters, that do not offer strong theoretical formation.
- 2 of them affirmed that the very abstract level of these theoretical tools is the reason why in some essays it is observed that their use appears forced, incorrect, confused or disconnected from the topics that are addressing.

The main difficulties that the students acknowledge having faced when they were working in the autobiographical essays of their teaching identity are

- Having to face themselves (12) face aspects of their past that remained hidden for a long time (8) or discover aspects that were latent in their identities (16)
- Open and discuss their own itinerary to the LPC (6)
- Recognize with sincerity and honesty the successes and mistakes made in their itineraries (10)
- To do an exercise that can sometimes be complex and/or painful (11)
- Talk about themselves (10)

On the other hand, only one of the six professors interviewed mentioned that the

difficulties faced by the students had to do with the fact that sometimes the students did not remember or did not want to bring some events of their itinerary to the present, the other five pointed out that the difficulties faced by the students had to do with the complexity of the theoretical and methodological tools that they had to put into play when analyzing their itineraries.

From this, it is interesting to see how academics consider that the main difficulty that the students face in tracking their itineraries was the use of theory, while in the opposite direction, students do not consider this as a difficulty. Indeed most of the students recognized that it is because of the theories they have learned that many transformations took place in their identities. In the beginning the theories were very difficult for them, but later they stimulated their thinking.

Regarding the issues that circulate in the documents reviewed, strong imprints of the family context are perceived, in the way in which the students describe how they became teachers. In some cases it is obeying the paternal mandate, as they enter the teaching profession, but there are cases (2) in which the decision is in clear opposition to that mandate. In this sense, the influence of the father figure (both in narratives of male and female students) is perceived with a strong interpellating power that displaces diachronically along the temporalities. Secondly, the mother figure or other close relatives appear. It is important to note that 12 of the 20 interviewed come from families with at least one family member of the previous generation, was or is a teacher. 8 of the 20 wanted to study another profession but they had to enter the teaching profession, because it was cheaper and because they considered the job to be safe when they graduated.

The family influence does not come only from the temporality of childhood and adolescence, because the members of the families that the students formed when become adults (wives, husbands, partners, daughters and sons), have an important force. Among the milestones that marked a *before* and an *after*, overdetermining with the educational itineraries, the birth of daughters and sons has a great weight, which motivates in 11 cases the need to study a postgraduate course to improve the family income or to train better to educate them. This milestone is overdetermined with another one that appears in practically all the narratives and that has to do with the insufficient salary of the teachers and the reduction of the purchasing power.

At a third level, elements that are overdetermined with the itineraries are coming from the training course in the master's program that they studied, as well as the influence of the co-workers.

Regarding the elements that are overdetermined in the pending agendas or in the professional improvement plans of the students after obtaining the master's degree, we can find:

- In the first place the students want to keep on studying to become better teachers. 18 of them announce that they will apply for a PhD program, 6 want to get another master's degree.
- 4 of the cases talk about recovering "their lost vocation", that is, the vocation that they had to renounce to enter the teachers profession.
- All of them spoke of the reforms to be made in their teaching practice, one of them proposes to encourage the autobiographical exercise with his students for the productivity he saw in this kind of research.
- 5 emphasized the need to reinforce and intensify their family life that has become deteriorated and in many cases canceled because it is very difficult to study a graduate program and work at the same time.

- Although the issue of teacher discomfort or the symptoms of “teachers bur out” was studied in the SATs and they detected symptoms of this condition in their own bodies, none of them mentioned in their agenda the desire to treat those troubles professionally.
- Finally, 11 assured that they will continue the retrospective tracking exercise and 1 of them said that he wants to comment on what he found in his retrospective exercise, with his family.

Regarding the 2nd research objective of "Assessing the contribution of this type of seminar to the curricular purposes of the MEB and MEEEI, as well as the challenge of increase the terminal efficiency level of both postgraduate programs", it is important to emphasize that all the students who participated in the Autobiographies SATs of the different campi of UPV, concluded their autobiographies, several of those works have already reviewed and/or are in the previous stage to the corresponding degree exams. This situation speaks of the potential of this modality in relation to the terminal efficiency level, which constitutes the bottleneck of the national postgraduate program. However, it must also be recognized that the quality of the documents varies significantly between them in terms of the depth of the analysis and in terms of format (writing, syntax and argumentative capacity and content).

Conclusions

In spite of the many challenges and detractors that face this option to obtain the Master's degree, the Autobiographical Essay of the Teaching Identity can be seen as a productive option. Productive for high-quality training that involves having students reflect personally and in CLPs on the itinerary of their teaching identity, since through the exercise of critical reflection that takes advantage of practical knowledge, the teacher can become aware of the conceptions and Assumptions that have been built in their professional practice and that recover their experience in a self-critical way and not just justification. This reflexivity on the praxis itself is becoming a source of new proposals and innovations that, in turn, should continue to be rethought in a personal and academic position.

The proposal is also productive because it offers multi-referential elements for the assessment of the internal and external curricular congruence of Master's programs that, like the MEB and the MEEEI, intend that the teacher-student make a deep and meticulous reflection on the complexity of the teaching professional practice.

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