Praxis, Pedagogy, and the Life of Being

Weaving with Bricolage in Self-Study

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Pedagogy   Self-Study   Education   Praxis   Teaching

This self-study examines Carlos's journey of shifting from Brazil as a qualified and experienced teacher to become a teacher in a primary school in New Zealand. Using bricolage (Rogers, 2012), the study weaves together the disparate threads involved in being from 'somewhere else' as he navigates language differences, curriculum differences, schooling differences, and cultural differences. This rich tapestry of experience is then examined using the concept of praxis to better understand the tensions that emerge between how he thinks about teaching (formed through biography, experience, and formal education) and how he enacts teaching (as it is constrained within schooling contexts). Praxis is a useful lens through which to understand teaching because it captures the dialectic process by which theory becomes enacted, embodied, and informed by practice (Freire, 1987). Rather than positioning such tensions as problematic, the study examines how the differences experienced can be generative for questioning how we reposition, reframe, and re-imagine possibilities for assembling praxis formed from the bricolage of our teaching past.

In this paper praxis is considered both a pedagogical process and an educational approach; indeed, they are interconnected. Praxis acknowledges the influences of social and cultural contexts on a teacher's practice in the classroom (Canada-Phillips, 2014). As the same author reminds us, a teacher's praxis includes personal experiences, values, morals and ethics, emotions, theories, and feelings. Therefore, praxis as a theoretical concept for framing Carlos's experience of being a new immigrant teacher enables a blending of rational life experiences with moral, political, and historical consequences. Also, it embodies a strong impact on the way teachers enact their teaching, which is related to social-political contemporary policy regimes (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2015).

Literature Review

Teachers bring their praxis, histories, and their cultures to the inside of classrooms (White et al., 2005). This provides a rationale for the importance of studying teachers' lives in order to bring rich descriptions from an insider perspective to better understand the process of teaching (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; LaBoskey, 2004). This is amplified when attempting to understand the conflicts that naturally happen when crossing nations as an immigrant. However, moving into a new culture as an educator and enacting teaching in this new context is not something readily discussed or addressed in the research literature. This is in spite of the fact that teaching is regarded as a social and political dynamic act (Freire, 1987; Edwards-Groves, 2017) and has many nuances and particularities mediated by cultural and social norms. These nuances and particularities have to be considered when teaching in a new country (Brown et al., 2010).

Commonly, moving to a new country, and the feeling of belonging, are related to cultural identity in teaching (White et al., 2005). Teachers are representatives of their own culture and the one they are immersed in (Kennedy, 2000). Furthermore, our identity is a combination of a diversity of elements that are not always easily identified. Jasman (2010) raises an interesting concept when writing that international teachers take their knowledge, expertise, and professional experiences as their background. Yet, their passports, VISA, and other documents do not describe them as a live person; and neither does it define who they are personally or as a teacher (Jasman, 2010). In addition, supporting teachers' identity is important to support the development of teachers' settlement into the schooling system within which teachers are located (Martin, Tarnanen & Tynjälä, 2018).

Cultural identity can also be described as the feeling of belonging to a group and mediates how we engage and make sense of the world. Cultural identity is characteristic of one individual but is also shared with others identifying with the same culture. Furthermore, it is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception. For immigrants, cultural identity is experienced as an open construct, continuously adjusting, and evolving.

By crossing geographical borders, it is expected adjustments between the teacher and the new country and school educational system. These adjustments include the teachers' praxis, with their own values, cultural background, past pedagogical experiences, expectations, and understanding of high-quality teaching. Being from somewhere else as an immigrant to a new culture will generate a dispute between the parts involved (Kennedy, 2000; Brown, et al., 2010; Jasman, 2010). With this in mind, it is possible to state that teachers pass through stages when adapting their teaching to a new culture.

According to Kennedy (2000, p. 63-83), there are three stages involved in immigrant teachers adjusting to teaching in a new country. First is the stage of understanding and applying previous teaching concepts. Second is the stage of "preparation for teaching," when the educator works to understand the expectations, contents, and the way the new country enacts the modus operandi of teaching. Third is the stage of what the author called "learning by doing", when teachers adapt their praxis into the new educational system, including previous knowledge, reflections, and reconstructions in an on-going process. At last, teachers need to be flexible and their assumptions should not be made only by previous experiences in order to construct a positive adaptation. Conversely, trying to organise and balance the importance of the multiple voices that come from all sides is a continuing challenge in education (Halicioglu, 2015).

Objectives

This study is part of a larger PhD project that aims to examine and support the journey of Carlos, a qualified and experienced teacher in Brazil, as he immigrated to New Zealand and takes up a position as a primary registered school teacher. The objective is to foster a deeper understanding of the critical relationship between teaching theory and practice in a different cultural context, which can be understood as a form of praxis (Kemmis, 2012).

Method

A bricolage design was used in this self-study research in order to investigate, challenge, engage in a dialogue and illuminate Carlos's teaching (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Rogers, 2012). Bricolage is the process of adopting different research methods according to the fluidity of situations, and theoretical frameworks needed (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2011).

Based on this, data were drawn from three sources. The first were a set of narratives generated through memory work (O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2002). The second were Carlos's teaching artifacts, such as lesson plans and resources, that were collated into a developmental portfolio (Samaras, 2010). The third was a journal in which Carlos recorded his experiences, insights, reflections, questions, and meetings over the entire course of the study. The journal also included writing produced in response to triggers posed by his critical friends as well as discussions with supervisors and colleagues (Garbett et al., 2018). The two supervisors are also authors of this paper and do not act as critical friends. There are two different critical friends that are part of Carlos' research and in consequence of this paper, one university

lecture and one teacher from the school which Carlos teaches. Furthermore, these critical friends were chosen by their critical approach in their teaching and the previous knowledge around praxis. The combination of these different methods produced a rich data set from which it was possible to examine and re-examine Carlos's understanding of the context of the study and the data collected. This combination includes the deep exploration of assumptions that reflected Carlos's beliefs, practices, theories, and finally, his praxis as an international teacher period (Garbett et al., 2018; Brandenburg, 2008).

In order to support the trustworthiness of this paper, a verbatim of Carlos's journaling has been used and highlighted in the analysis of the outcomes of this study. Dialogues with the critical friends and between the authors were also held regarding these themes in order to build consistency and raise reliability related to this data analysis. In addition, the credibility of this thematic analysis has been addressed by the steps outlined by Nowell et al. (2017). Moreover, these steps guided this paper though the definition of the codes and themes adopted; see table 1. By using thematic analysis, the authors debated, judged, and determined the meanings, and are responsible for, throughout a transparent and open data analyses, coding and theming the data (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014).

Table 1

Defining codes and themes using the scheme of (Nowell et al., 2017)

Phase 1 – Familiarising with the data

Phases 2 and 3 – Generating initial codes and Searching for themes		*Phase 4 – Reviewing themes*
Initial Codes	**Initial Themes**	*Reviewing the themes*
Personal values and understandings	Cultural differences	
Language	Cultural differences	
VISAs and required documents	Cultural differences	*Cultural differences and conflicts*
Feeling of belonging	Cultural differences	
Feelings, emotions, and fears	Cultural differences	
Theoretical approach	Teaching	
Curriculum	Teaching	*Teaching*
Language	Teaching	
Being a teacher and not being a teacher	Teacher	
Becoming a teacher	Teacher	*Teacher*
[Re]being a teacher	Teacher	

Phase 5 – Defining and naming themes

Themes	*Naming themes*
Cultural differences and conflicts Cultural clashes	
Teaching	

Teacher	*Enacting practice*

Phase 6 – Producing the report

Outcomes

The following findings represent an analysis of Carlos's early experience when immigrating to New Zealand and teaching in a primary school. These early experiences were important to capture since this was a period of time when the differences and difficulties were very real for Carlos. It is a period of time in which he transitioned from the comfort of being a cultural insider to living the explicit identity of being from somewhere else. In making sense of this, two themes are foregrounded by the authors. The first theme is the *cultural clash* and focuses on the unsettling nature of being immersed within a teaching culture and school setting that is very different from one's previous training and employment. The second theme is the *enacting practice* and focuses on the experience of dealing with the unsettling nature of being a teacher in such an unfamiliar context.

Cultural Clash

In one sense, any new immigrant knows that adapting to a new culture will be a challenge and that cultural clashes are to be expected not only between two completely different cultures but also between cultures that are considered to have similarities (Halicioglu, 2015). Carlos arrived in New Zealand with his wife and two young children knowing that Brazil and New Zealand were linguistically, economically, politically and socially quite different. While he had some English proficiency neither his wife nor children could speak English. Such issues were expected and something that they, as a family, were prepared for. However, in a professional sense, these differences were, at times, quite unsettling. It was in the complexity of teaching, where the process of enacting teaching emerges from one's experience and background as an educator, that the differences related to culture were most evident. As he commented in his journal,

> Some days it is so hard to be in the daily routine in the school, and what is the hardest for me? It is hard to say specifically, however, I think is the fact of not being able to touch people in the shoulders. I know that sounds funny, and I will probably find weird when I read this in the future, but I realised touching people, like colleagues and students, it part of how I am as a Latin educator, and not being able to do the same in the new environment, makes me feel that I don't belong here... If I don't belong here, can I be a good teacher in a place where I am an outsider?

Sometimes the differences were small and subtle. What may not seem complicated or significant from an outside point of view brings strong and significant stress for those who are living the situation (Halicioglu, 2015). In another entry, he stated that,

> My communication goes beyond only the spoken language, the way I use my body, touch people, and use expressions interfere in the way I communicate with my students. Because of this necessity of adaptation, I need to change the way I give classes. Indeed, Definitely, communication skills are essential to being able to make my daily decisions related to the content that I need to teach. Sometimes, I have to re-create ways of teaching the content or even change the way I teach according to the environment that I am in. For example, if I am in an open noisy space, I have to change my pedagogical strategy in order to achieve the objective of the class.

It is possible to see in Carlos's journal writing that he acknowledges that a large aspect of the complexity of praxis in teaching is the way it is mediated by culture and social practices, including sociocultural consciousness (Freire, 1987; Kemmis et al., 2013; Edwards-Groves, 2017). As he said in his journal,

> I had the immediate challenge of understanding and applying the New Zealand educational system, as well as insert elements from my theoretical background and my own cultural values... I don't really know

how a PE teacher is valued at school. Would be the same as in Brasil, a little bit under-estimated by other areas?... Also, as a Brazilian, I understand that teaching can also be a pedagogical action, that means that pedagogy can be involved to help the students into the NZ (New Zealand) "design process," what they call in education the "spiral of inquiry.

In the work of Darder (Freire, 1998), education is considered an action of love and a social-political action; and also has to follow the norms of current society. With this in mind, education on school sites, as a pedagogical act, should be well balanced among the values of the educator, students, and schools and what is currently happening outside of school, in a larger social context. With this in mind, Carlos stated

As a Brazilian educator, I bring the idea and the concept of disharmony in society, a culture of deconstruction because of violence and other elements from Brasil. By arriving in NZ (New Zealand), the external world from school is extremely organized, in that case, a more unstructured educational approach within the school context would be needed to confront the current model outside of school, in the society that we are in?

Enacting Practice

During his work as a teacher in New Zealand, Carlos has faced challenges related to different areas. Halicioglu (2015) suggests that the challenges and difficulties that new teachers face during the process of fitting into the new education system include: unfamiliarity with the curriculum, its delivery, academic and pastoral, and the school's philosophy; unfamiliarity with the student body; unfamiliarity with staff cultural norms; and unfamiliarity with leadership styles. In his own journey, Carlos has experienced conflicts in these areas.

The self-study process helped to make explicit how Carlos navigates these challenges by identifying and reflecting on his assumptions embedded in the journal entries. As Brandenburg (2008) has noted, there is value to becoming more conscious of the factors that govern one's teaching. As Carlos observed,

Now, sometimes I question myself should the students have so much freedom in their learning process? Sounds even funny to hear myself talking about this, thinking in this way. I am normally considered, back in my culture, an extremely unstructured teacher, but in the New Zealand educational setting I am not sure how positioned I am, would I be structured in Aotearoa New Zealand education? In addition, How engaged my classes are with the NZ (New Zealand) curriculum? I am studying to better understand the curriculum and its specificities, however, there are so many extra documents in the NZ educational system that I doubt myself once in a while if I am doing my teaching in the correct way.

When such assumptions and cultural perspectives are identified, they can be analyzed, challenged, and better understood in respect to how they shape and govern how one enacts teaching (Garbett et al., 2018). Additionally, accepting that children will think or behave differently according to their cultural background is important (Halicioglu, 2015). Also, the understanding of teaching as a complex human activity raises the necessity of considering past experiences and considering purely theory or practice without the teacher or student contexts hardly work on teaching (Gay, 2002). These can be noted in Carlos's statement,

Not only my cultural background diverges from other teachers in my school, here in New Zealand. I have students from many different ethnicities, different cultural and religious backgrounds, with individual past experiences, which makes it hard for me to plan, and enact my teaching with the specificity that each student requires from me. I am trying, it is being hard, but at least I am feeling that my teaching is fitting differently each student, which makes me understand that my teaching approach is embracing my students and different cultural expectations and needs, into the same country. I am happy with it.

When educators are enacting their teaching, it should involve four domains: physical, social, cognitive and affective and the development of these domains should be balanced and planned (Casey & Goodyear, 2015). Related to this, and as

can be read in his writing, Carlos is enacting his teaching considering and reflecting his praxis toward the four domains in education,

> *I understand that students need a balance between the domains. In Brasil the cognitive domain is over-emphasised by the schooling program. Brasil is such a social country and human interaction is common among our people, and maybe that is why we are focusing more in the cognitive area, to balance school and society. By shifting to NZ (Aotearoa New Zealand), my understanding of my new home-schooling system and the teaching approach is to focus more on social, physical, and cognitive domains. This makes me question myself: Is NZ balancing what I observe in society (outside of school) with what is happening inside the school? For me as an educator, NZ needs more affection, more connection between people and a higher need for it into the education system. Is NZ doing it? For me, NZ is focusing more on three domains: cognitive, physical and social, and less in affective. Yet, both of my countries are not focusing on affection, or maybe I am not being able to observe this domain into schooling.*

A core aspect of Carlos's paradigmatic assumptions related to the complexity of praxis in his teaching, raised by pedagogical situations, questions, conversations and critical analyses of his work, was to understand how teachers, and himself, enact their praxis in agreement with their students. This teaching emerges from the unique socio-material networks of power that constitute the students, who they are, or who they are becoming (Garbett et al., 2018). As Carlos noted,

> *Education in NZ is considered a worldwide reference model, regarding quality in education, and maybe I am wrong with my thoughts and feelings. I feel that I could do more, I could do better with their own time. But now, reading (revisiting) my own writing, I re-questioning myself, could I? Maybe that is how they are developing a great side of creativity. By doing nothing we could associate it with leisure, with creativity, productive leisure time. Maybe, by developing more social skills, and learning how to balance free time with work time, they are becoming more prepared for their future.*

As his comment demonstrates, Carlos is trying to understand the way other teachers perform their teaching and how the new educational scenario operates. Simultaneously, he is adapting his teaching and in consequence his praxis in this complex educational tapestry.

Conclusion

The self-study is helping to support Carlos's professional adaptation to a new educational system. In particular, the way it requires a weaving together of content knowledge, curricular expectations, pedagogy, students' needs and abilities in ways that both challenged and reaffirmed his prior education and experience. For Carlos, choosing content, understanding, and applying the English language and fitting his own pedagogies and reflections into a new professional and personal setting requires him to both adapt and reframe his perceptions and expectations of teaching. His feelings at this stage are that it is a long journey to fit into a new cultural-educational system, and the necessity to prove himself as a teacher (and as a person) is an ongoing process.

The data highlights that being a teacher is neither a static condition nor is it some fixed state of being. The simple fact is that being an experienced teacher in one country does not translate easily to being an effective teacher in a different country. What the study helps to highlight is the effect that cultural influences play when one enacts teaching, particularly in the way language, national priorities, and social funding all impact on how schooling and teaching emerge as educational practices. For Carlos, the self-study helps give him a sense of how teaching, and being a teacher, is highly situated in temporal and cultural contexts, and that becoming a teacher in a different country than your home country can be a long and unsettling experience.

This self-study highlights the need of the teachers to understand the new educational system and themselves, and figure their identity and their feelings of belonging to a new country. This understanding normally happens simultaneously teachers [re]configure their teaching style into a new cultural and teaching system. In telling Carlos's

story, we allow the self-study, teachers, and teacher educators community to have an inside view of the cultural aspect into the teaching. In addition, that may support the way we shape our teaching preparation at different levels. We have revisited the importance of analyzing and understanding teachers' feelings, as the feeling of belonging for example, in order to shape their pedagogical actions into their students.
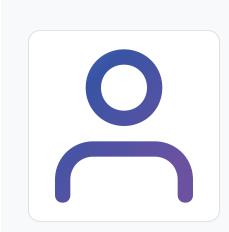
In telling Carlos's story, this study suggests that learning experiences can be enriched with cultural awareness. Moreover, promoting opportunities to the students using their cultural backgrounds is a process that may be strengthened and facilitated from the fact of Carlos being an immigrant teacher. In this paper, we intend to allow a dialogical interaction within the picture of Carlos's teaching and the readers of the self-study community. Within the course discussed in this study, it may be stated that having different cultural knowledge and background can contribute to the objective of enriching the education system and teaching at different levels.

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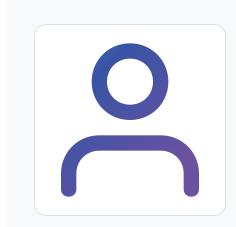
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